

DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING IN
ATTAINING SPECIALITY SKILLS FOR ECOTOURISM
EMPLOYMENT: THE MEDIAL VIEWPOINT OF UNIVERSITIES OF
TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

THULILE PROMISE MOFOKENG

AUGUST 2024



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ATTAINING SPECIALITY SKILLS FOR ECOTOURISM
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THULILE PROMISE MOFOKENG

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APPROVED FOR FINAL SUBMISSION

Supervisor (Affiliation): (signature) Dr Themba Msukwini Date: 11/08/2024

Co-Supervisor (Affiliation): (signature) N/A Date: _____

APPROVAL

SUPERVISOR

Dr Themba Msukwini

DR THEMBA MSUKWINI

PhD, MTech (DUT), BSc Hons (UFH)

DATE

11/08/2024

DECLARATION

I declare that this study:

THE IMPLICATIONS OF WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING FOR ATTAINING SPECIALITY SKILLS FOR ECOTOURISM EMPLOYMENT: THE MEDIAL VIEWPOINT OF UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own work in both conception and execution. All the sources of information used or quoted have been duly acknowledged by means of complete references.



THULILE PROMISE MOFOKENG

08/08/2024

DATE

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the Almighty God, my Creator, whose boundless grace and guidance have illuminated my path throughout this journey. Mrs. Duduzile Abegail Ndlovu, my mother, whose unwavering love, support, and sacrifices have shaped me into the person I am today. Your strength and wisdom inspire me always. My beloved husband, Mr. Nyane Mofokeng, has been my rock, providing encouragement, understanding, and belief in me. Your presence in my life is my greatest blessing

ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify the discipline-specific skills in ecotourism using workplace-based learning (WPBL), evaluating its efficacy in the attainment of these skills. Ecotourism has been hailed as a key driver of economic growth, both globally and in South Africa. For this reason, a focus on ecotourism is essential to maximising its potential contribution to the country's economy. Nonetheless, there still exists a gap in the literature that specifically focuses on ecotourism discipline-specific skills, knowledge, education, and training in South African public higher education institutions (HEIs). This study is intended to fill this gap and further propose possible approaches to WPBL that can assist undergraduate ecotourism students in acquiring specific skills for ecotourism. The investigation has addressed the foundational research inquiries pertaining to discipline-specific skills crucial for ecotourism, the contributing elements to skills gaps within the field, and the potential of WPBL in mitigating these gaps. It has further scrutinised how WPBL could be tailored to address identified skills deficiencies in ecotourism, as well as contemplated the potential ramifications of curriculum enhancement for WPBL. Furthermore, the diverse understandings of WPBL among students, academic faculty, and ecotourism organisations were examined, as were the discrepancies in viewpoints among these stakeholders.

Employing an interpretive paradigm, the research methodology encompassed a single case study of the Durban University of Technology, with qualitative data analysis facilitated through NVivo software. The research participants included industry supervisors, ecotourism students, and academic staff affiliated with the Durban University of Technology. Data collection was carried out through both face-to-face and virtual interviews, employing purposive sampling method. Stringent ethical guidelines were adhered to, ensuring data confidentiality and preserving participant anonymity. The research findings revealed that WPBL is effective in enhancing communication, problem-solving, customer relations, leadership, and self-control skills in ecotourism students. Nevertheless, the WPBL programme has certain limitations, as it does not provide adequate emphasis on other important discipline-specific skills in other crucial aspects of ecotourism, including conservation, eco-friendly practices, green energy, environmental consciousness, nature guiding and safety proficiency, and knowledge of the natural environment.

To address the limitations emerging from the findings, this study recommends the inclusion of more diverse and engaging activities in the WPBL programme, namely a strong focus on entrepreneurship; student involvement in community-based initiatives aligned with the core pillars of ecotourism; and, more significantly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Further recommendations from this research stemming from the key findings include the re-evaluation of the WPBL programme to a duration that will allow adequate time for students to develop an array of discipline-specific skills. Higher education institutions (HEIs) should develop forward-thinking and innovative approaches to offset the adverse effects of catastrophic events such as the COVID-19 outbreak on WPBL learning outcomes by investing in alternative digital and remote learning tools and methods such as virtual internships and hybrid WPBL models that merge physical and online learning. In addition, knowledge generation and research output through academic-industry collaborations can assist in bridging the knowledge gap in ecotourism, which can ultimately contribute to the growth of the sector.

The contributions of this study encapsulate the multifaceted nature of research in its quest to advance knowledge within various domains. Researchers often prioritise enriching the body of knowledge within their respective fields, as it holds immense significance, both professionally and personally. This study makes significant theoretical strides by incorporating the General Systems Theory to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding workplace-based learning (WPBL) in the context of ecotourism. The Theory of Change is utilised as a guiding framework to pinpoint discipline-specific skills crucial in the ecotourism industry. Furthermore, the study explores how the evaluation of WPBL programmes impacts the acquisition of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. These theoretical contributions form the intellectual foundation on which this study builds its innovative insights and advancements. The integration of General Systems Theory provides a framework for analysing complex systems and their interactions, which is particularly valuable for comprehending the WPBL programme in ecotourism. This theory allows the identification and analysis of stakeholder interactions within the WPBL programme, including students, academic staff, and industry supervisors. It underscores the importance of feedback and adaptation in complex systems, directly relevant to the WPBL program. Through feedback from industry, academic staff, and students, the study generates recommendations to enhance the WPBL programme, encompassing diverse student placements, integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ecotourism pillars, entrepreneurship, and alignment with DUT's strategic direction.

The application of the Theory of Change offers a methodological foundation for identifying discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. It provides a systematic plan for achieving the intended outcome of WPBL, enhancing the precision of intervention planning, and underpinning empirical recommendations. This study promotes a systematic and iterative approach, integrating industry-driven research to bridge academic expertise and practical insights. Such an approach enriches the academic discourse and yields practical solutions to address skill gaps, enhancing the effectiveness of WPBL initiatives. This study conducts a comprehensive evaluation of the WPBL programme tailored for ecotourism students. Beyond mere evaluation, it critically examines the programme's strengths and weaknesses, offering empirical data to substantiate the efficacy of WPBL in fostering discipline-specific skills. This evaluation extends its impact to similar programmes within the field and offers a blueprint for refinement, adapting to the evolving demands of the ecotourism industry. Conceptual contributions are vital in research, shaping innovative ideas, frameworks, and theoretical perspectives.

This study introduces a conceptual framework aligning research objectives with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), bridging the gap between academic knowledge and industry insights. The alignment forms a cohesive approach for a more sustainable and equitable world, benefiting ecotourism and related fields. Methodological innovations in this study are exemplified using qualitative research methods, face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors, online interviews, and focus groups. Qualitative research offers in-depth exploration of WPBL in ecotourism, while face-to-face interviews establish rapport, provide non-verbal cues, and allow for real-time clarification. The interpretivist approach offers a more holistic understanding of WPBL, engaging stakeholders and acknowledging the socially constructed nature of reality. The use of online interviews and focus groups presents a contemporary approach, enhancing convenience, flexibility, and inclusivity. The proposed optimal WPBL approach addresses skills gaps in ecotourism and presents a comprehensive learning experience for students. Its implications extend to curriculum design, academic-industry partnerships, and policy development, contributing to the advancement of ecotourism education and sustainable development.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CHE	: Council on Higher Education
COVID-19	: Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DHET	: Department of Higher Education and Training
DoT	: Department of Tourism
DUT	: Durban University of Technology
HEIs	: Higher Education Institutions
HEQC	: Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	: Higher Education Qualifications Framework
IREC	: Institutional Research Ethics Committee
KZN	: Kwazulu-Natal
NDP	: National Development Plan
NQF	: National Qualifications Framework
NSA	: National Skills Accord
NSDS III	: National Skills Development Strategy III
NVIVO	: Qualitative Data Analysis Software
PPE	: Personal Protective Equipment
SACE	: South African Council for Educators
SAQA	: South African Qualifications Authority
SDGs	: Sustainable Development Goals
SETA	: Sector Education and Training Authority
SMME	: Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises
SSACI	: Swiss-South African Cooperation Initiative
TIES	: The International Ecotourism Society
TVET	: Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	: United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UoT	: University of Technology
USAf	: Universities South Africa
WHO	: World Health Organisation

WIL : Work-integrated Learning
WPBL : Workplace-based Learning
WTTC : World Travel and Tourism Council

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The tourism industry is significant for the economic advancement of many countries. Despite the abundance of employment opportunities within the tourism industry, its growth potential is often hindered by the persistent obstacle of inadequately trained professionals, which has been identified as a significant barrier to economic development (Liu and Park, 2019). The topic of tourism has received considerable attention in academic literature, primarily focusing on various aspects and skills associated with it. However, there has been a noticeable lack of emphasis on ecotourism as a distinct subset within the broader field of tourism. Consequently, the study primarily focused on ecotourism, with the objective of determining discipline-specific skills required for ecotourism and evaluating the effectiveness of workplace-based learning (WPBL) in facilitating the acquisition of these skills by undergraduate students pursuing a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management at Durban University of Technology (DUT). Furthermore, the study sought to ascertain the deficiencies in skills within the field of ecotourism and the underlying factors contributing to these gaps. The South African Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (1996) reported in the White Paper on Tourism that South Africa has the potential to become one of the global leaders in ecotourism and proposes responsible tourism as the key guiding principle for tourism development. Several factors limit the effectiveness of the ecotourism industry in playing a more meaningful role in the national economy (Wedekind, 2018). It has been noted that university tourism education has, in most cases, emerged from purely vocational training courses. The Department of Higher Education and Training (2013) states that universities should pursue strong partnerships with industry to promote the expansion of workplace training opportunities, particularly in areas where qualifications or professional registration depend upon practical workplace experience. These partnerships can assist in mediating university-industry collaborations as well as providing advice and resources to facilitate workplace-based learning (WPBL).

With increasing unemployment figures for tertiary graduates in South Africa, universities are called upon to provide graduates with the right skills for employment (Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom, 2021). Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QFLS) for 2021, published at the end of August, shows that the country's unemployment rate sits at 34.4%, pushing unemployment beyond the crisis level. The government acknowledged that current strategies need to be radically scaled to address the extent of the problem, in addition to seeking alternative approaches to building an engaged and economically active workforce. Furthermore, it must be reiterated that universities not only serve as sites for producing knowledge and skills for employment but also have a critical role to play as areas of cultivating human values, citizenship development, and promoting virtues for a healthy and democratic society (Fongwa, 2018). There is a growing need for more efficient and innovative forms of collaboration and networking between industry and higher education institutions (HEIs) to deliberate on the continuing skill requirements (Anderson and Sanga, 2019). A significant component of cooperation that could be promoted and enhanced is collaborative research. It has been argued that academia should concentrate on the issues confronting the industry and devise feasible solutions, while industry should reveal and communicate their needs and involve academia (Khan, 2019). The study sought to evaluate the efficacy of workplace-based learning (WPBL) in assisting ecotourism students attain discipline-specific skills for employment. The study adopted a single-case study method using DUT and further employed a cross-sectional research approach. Using a qualitative research methodology, the selected sample consisted of students who had successfully fulfilled the requirements of the prerequisite WPBL programme. Furthermore, the study included workplace managers and supervisors from the organisations where students were placed for WPBL, as well as academic staff members from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. Data was collected by means of face-to-face interviews, virtual one-on-one interviews, and online focus group interviews. Due to the remote locations of traditional ecotourism organisations that are part of the study, the researcher had to physically travel to these areas to offset the challenges of poor network connectivity. It must be noted that all participants, including the researcher, adhered to all coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) protocols. Additionally, to better prepare the respondents, the researcher made prior arrangements for interviews. The findings derived from the study will aid in developing an integrated WPBL framework encompassing viewpoints from students, the institution, and industry.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The tourism industry, by its very nature, is labour-intensive and geographically dispersed. These characteristics are a double-edged sword, bearing advantages of growth in various national economies while simultaneously inducing persistent challenges for the acquisition, retention, and development of human capital (Boella and Goss-Turner, 2019). Developing and improving human skills and capabilities through education, learning, and meaningful work experience are fundamental drivers of economic prosperity, individual welfare, and societal cohesion (Miró-Pérez, 2020). The needs and expectations of the tourism industry are rapidly changing owing to its dynamic nature, and it is therefore important for academia to aim for alignment with the changes that are occurring through adaptive teaching and learning. Tourism courses have largely adopted experimental learning techniques such as case studies, field trips, job shadowing, and various work-integrated modalities (Kim and Jeong, 2018). Industry requires students to be developed using practical approaches, with an emphasis on soft skills, communication, and employee relations. WIL programmes have been widely adopted and considered to be the best method to bridge the skills gap in tourism, but there is growing concern about the effectiveness of such programmes (Anderson and Sanga, 2019).

The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (2013) reported in The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training that WPBL is often unstructured and contributes very little to the outcomes of the qualification. The third National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS III) trails the integration of higher and further education and skills development into a single Department of Higher Education and Training, and its goal is to address the challenges of skills shortages and mismatches in the country and advance productivity in the economy (National Skills Development Strategy, 2020). Additionally, this strategy plans to achieve substantial increases in qualifications and skills to support priorities and initiatives such as the New Growth Path, the Industrial Policy Action Plan, the Human Resource Development Strategy, and sector development plans. According to the Skills Supply and Demand Report (2019), skilled labour in South Africa has been difficult to source in most skilled and professional segments due to the skill mismatches arising from the poor state of the public education system. The report further reveals that in South Africa, under-qualification is more prevalent than over-qualification, with 32% of the country's workforce mismatched by field of study. The country's tourism industry is not spared from the challenges highlighted in the report (Bhorat and Morné, 2019).

The geopolitical uniqueness of South Africa and its distinctive natural and cultural diversity support a globally compelling tourism proposition. The direct contribution of the sector to GDP in 2019 was R136.9 billion (2.7% of GDP), while it also generated 760 000 jobs (4.7% of total employment) directly in the same period (Department of Tourism Annual Report, 2019/2020, p. 27). Tourism has steadily increased in South Africa since the dawn of democracy and continues to create employment and remain resilient even during difficult economic times, as well as more recently during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

1.2.1 The impact of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on exacerbating the skills gaps in tourism

Globally, tourism suffered severe and far-reaching consequences due to the Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19, which is a disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARSCOV-2), is unique in various ways, including its global impact, longevity, aggressiveness, severity, and evolving nature, leaving organisations with very little to no control over the situation (Kim, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global emergency on January 30, 2020. Subsequently, many countries went into lockdown and enforced an array of travel restrictions. Most businesses suffered, but the impact on tourism was extremely severe. The COVID-19 pandemic affected all sectors of hospitality and tourism due to the lockdown restrictions imposed around the world (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). The impact on travel demand, supply, and policies has been devastating and has imposed a climate of uncertainty on tourism services (Alonso et al., 2020). The challenges faced by the industry have also had ramifications for tourism education around the world. Lockdown restrictions shifted the entire education system from physical contact learning to various online modes (Kapasias, et al., 2020). As a result of the pandemic, the development and exposure to practical knowledge have been directly affected, thereby presenting a “new normal” that both industry and academia must acknowledge (Krishnamurthy et al., 2020). Long-standing challenges of poor competitiveness in the job market for many tourism occupations add to these challenges. In 2020, 62 million travel jobs were lost, which represents a drop of 18.5%, leaving only 272 million employed across the sector globally, in comparison to 334 million in 2019 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2021).

In 2019, travel and tourism were one of the largest sectors globally, accounting for 1 in 10 jobs and responsible for the creation of 1 in 4 of all new jobs across the world between 2015 and 2019. In fact, between 2011 and 2019, tourism grew faster than the global economy and was projected to create 100 million new jobs over the next decade, which are now at risk (Wyman, 2020). While the demand for travel carries the potential for a significant recovery of the industry, staff shortages remain the biggest hindrance, as well as the recent emergence of the Omicron variant. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC's) latest economic projections from October 2021, the sector's employment is set to rise by 0.7% in 2021, representative of 2 million jobs, followed by an 18% rise in 2022 to reach 324 million jobs, only 10 million lower than 2019 levels. Nevertheless, recovering the predicted jobs will require a sufficient labour force. Hence the critical need to proactively address the current issue of staff shortages that the tourism sector is facing on a global scale.

As the sector grapples with mitigation measures to arise from the current crisis, there have been noticeable changes in the way people travel and engage with tourism. Some of these contributing factors are shown in Figure 1.1. Consequently, this will probably encourage new structures of work organisation and alter skillsets, while some jobs and skills may become obsolete and irrelevant (Ahmad and Carey, 2021). In addition to the changes, the pandemic has sparked environmental interest and awareness amongst consumers. This trend will stimulate a market that seeks to make tourism more sustainable and environmentally conscious. Destinations that protect fauna and flora are likely to attract a substantial portion of this market. In this capacity, industry must capitalise on this movement to highlight its ecological benefits and inspire an increase in visitor numbers. Furthermore, conservation efforts can become necessary to supplement tourism businesses in risk zones to compensate for harmful impacts. The trajectory that is likely to be adopted by many countries is the promotion of alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism.

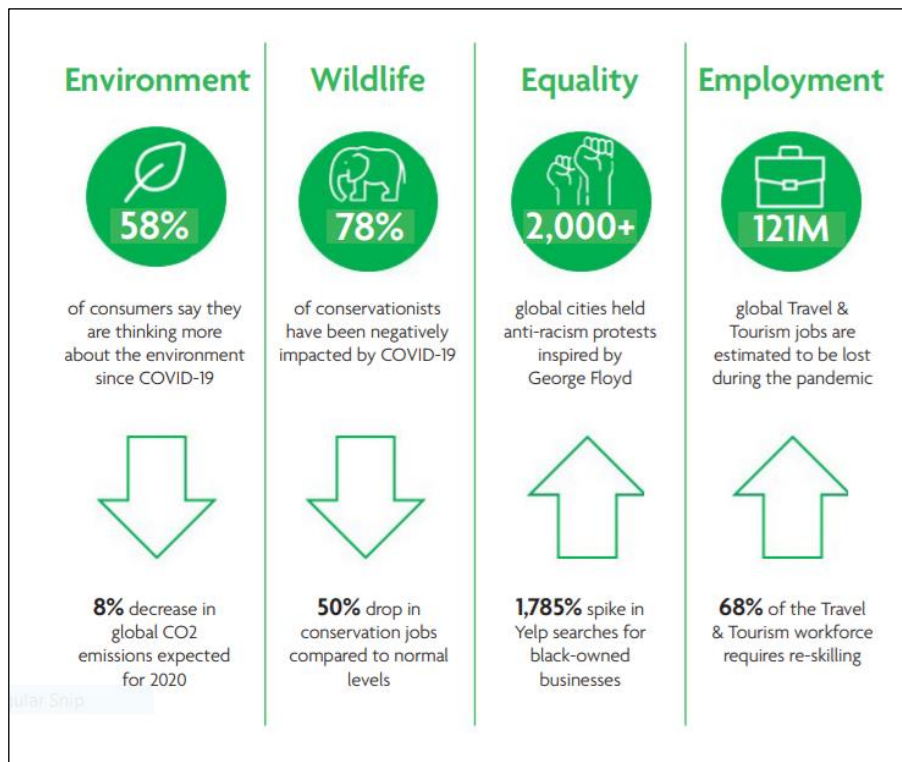


Figure 1.1: The contributing factors to change in consumer behaviour and trends in tourism induced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Source: Wyman, 2021)

The emergence of the term ‘ecotourism’ began between the late 1970s and mid-1980s (Pradati, 2017). The origin of the term and its meaning were coined by Ceballos-Lascurrián (1987), who defined ecotourism as travel to undisturbed nature-based areas with the aim of learning about and admiring the wildlife and scenery. Therefore, ecotourism is regarded as a solution for the protection of nature and a tool for the environmental conservation problems that affect the world. The term ‘ecotourism’ is often used interchangeably with various other terms such as sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, ethical tourism, ecological tourism, nature tourism, cultural tourism, and heritage tourism. The presence of overlapping characteristics with other forms of tourism complicates the comprehension of ecotourism. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of ecotourism, it is essential to examine the interconnected aspects of environmental conservation, local development, and tourism. Africa has been identified as having extreme potential for ecotourism due to its diverse wildlife and protected areas. As such, ecotourism must advance and promote sustainable development. The critical component for successful ecotourism is access to education and training (Acha-Anyi, 2018).

Ecotourism in South Africa has been incorporated into the agenda for employment creation and sustainable development. The White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in KwaZulu-Natal (2002) states that in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, ecotourism has been earmarked as a driver for economic growth. Despite the many benefits of ecotourism, its significance has not received the recognition it deserves. This is evident in the gaps in the literature on the characteristics of ecotourism employment in terms of the specific skills and knowledge that set it apart from other forms of tourism. The study will therefore attempt to bridge this gap, using WPBL as a means for identifying discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. The study will further evaluate the efficacy of WPBL in the attainment of skills for ecotourism employment.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Ecotourism, as a distinct and specialised form of tourism, plays a significant role in generating employment opportunities. Rural and isolated areas commonly serve as the primary foundation for the development of community-based initiatives, which are predominantly centred around the utilisation of local natural and cultural resources. Ecotourism in South Africa is part of the sustainable development agenda and is considered a mechanism to empower underprivileged communities (Wale and Motau, 2018). In rural areas, ecotourism is often adopted as a primary and alternative economic source. However, indistinct professions and skill shortages tend to hamper employment and economic growth possibilities. Moreover, educational and training choices are also limited. The White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in KwaZulu-Natal (2008) states that ecotourism has been earmarked as a tool through which economic growth is fostered by means of biodiversity conservation. Nonetheless, the significance of ecotourism is undervalued, primarily due to a lack of information on the financial and economic performance of ecotourism operations. As a result, this has led to an underrepresentation of the significance of ecotourism within the economic sectors of government (Wale and Motau, 2018). A plethora of literature has largely focused on the tourism industry in general, but there is limited literature focusing on skills gaps in ecotourism as a subset of tourism. Ecotourism is a growing sector globally, particularly in South Africa. While there are many studies researching the impact of ecotourism on environmental protection and sustainable development, little research has focused on the characteristics of ecotourism employment that are distinctive from tourism in general. Ecotourism is a very specific sector. Therefore, specific knowledge and skills about the sector are crucial.

The study aims to fill this gap and further propose possible WPBL approaches to assist undergraduate students in acquiring specific skills for ecotourism. Ecotourism is a specific sector; hence, possessing specialised knowledge and skills pertaining to the industry is imperative. The objective of this study is to address the existing knowledge gap and suggest potential approaches for WPBL that can support undergraduate students in developing discipline-specific skills related to ecotourism.

1.4 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The rationale and significance of the study serve as the fundamental basis and justification for undertaking the research. It outlines the specific problem and gap in knowledge that the study seeks to address. This section will therefore explain why this study is important and why it is worth pursuing.

1.4.1 Enhancing ecotourism for sustainable growth: A focus on South Africa's natural resources and competitiveness

The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2019) states that South Africa has, by far, the largest tourism industry in Sub-Saharan Africa, ranking second regionally and 61st globally on the index. The country's most important advantage is its combination and array of natural (15th) and cultural resources (23rd). Nonetheless, the country has several critical issues that weaken its overall competitiveness, reducing South Africa's attractiveness for visitors and investors alike. These issues include, amongst others, that the country still scores low on the Environmental Sustainability pillar (124th), which is characterised by significant deforestation (124th) and declining environmental enforcement and regulatory stringency (46th to 66th), posing a risk to South Africa's natural resource advantage (Calderwood, and Soshkin, 2019). The country also experienced drops in the attractiveness of its natural assets (6th to 32nd). However, a boosted number of world heritage sites (16th to 13th) and an ascending revision for protected land (100th to 74th) are helping to counteract this. To stimulate and highlight the importance of the conservation of natural resources through ecotourism, the study has the potential to illuminate the significance of ecotourism and its benefits, particularly in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The study will therefore have a significant impact on improving the potential for ecotourism to further grow and contribute positively to South Africa's economy.

1.4.2 Advancing the acquisition of discipline-specific skills for ecotourism through workplace-based learning (WPBL)

Furthermore, the understudied field of ecotourism in terms of the characteristics of employment will be identified. This will contribute towards giving the ecotourism industry the recognition it deserves. The findings from the research can be used to bridge the literature gap on the specific skills that are critical for ecotourism employment, as it is evident that much of the literature has solely focused on tourism in general. As a specific type of tourism, ecotourism is a crucial tool for environmental sustainability and is deserving of much more attention as an area that needs to be researched. The study will further contribute to the level of professional development of students, especially those enrolled in ecotourism qualifications. Among the intended outputs, the study will propose an all-inclusive WPBL model that will serve as a recommendation for how ecotourism training can be effective and beneficial for both higher education institutions (HEIs) and industry. The model aims to enhance the acquisition of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism, responding to the escalating demand for graduates with expertise aligned to the evolving needs and expectations of the industry. The beneficiaries of this pioneering approach are manifold. Higher education institutions stand to gain a transformative blueprint for refining their ecotourism curriculum, ensuring graduates not only possess strong academic abilities but are also equipped with practical skills vital for industry success. This study holds significant value for industry stakeholders, as it directly addresses the industry's pressing need for a skilled workforce. Policymakers will benefit from evidence-backed recommendations, facilitating the formulation of policies that promote sustainable ecotourism practices and economic growth. Furthermore, the proposed approach fosters synergistic academic-industry partnerships, prompting a collaborative ecosystem where education aligns seamlessly with the needs of the profession. Ultimately, the results of the study hold the potential to stimulate constructive transformation, enhancing the significance and efficacy of ecotourism education.

1.4.3 Aligning research objectives with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The current dialogue surrounding sustainability and the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to achieve a harmonious integration of economic advancement, social fairness, and environmental preservation, encompassing both developed and developing nations, with a commitment to not exclude any individuals or groups.

The framework of the SDGs positions education as a pivotal element that drives profound and impactful change (Mundial and UNICEF, 2016). According to Kestin et al. (2017), universities possess the capacity to significantly contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), given their historical track record of serving as influential catalysts for worldwide, domestic, and regional advancement in innovation, economic progress, and societal welfare. In addition, Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2020) conducted a study on the topic and found that educational institutions possess the capacity to make valuable contributions towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by engaging in various activities such as learning and teaching, research initiatives, organisational governance, cultural practices, operational strategies, and external leadership roles. The integration of research objectives with Sustainable Development Goals provides a strategic framework for addressing pressing global challenges.

Each objective not only contributes to specific SDGs but also illustrates the broader socio-economic and environmental impact of the study. This integration not only emphasises the significance of the study but also highlights its potential to drive positive change on a broader scale. This research has the potential to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the SDGs by promoting the education of ecotourism. The research findings can help shape a more sustainable and equitable world for future generations. The first objective stands as a key step, particularly addressing the essential need for discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. Ensuring that education precisely aligns with the requisites of sustainable practices exemplifies the core principle of SDG 4: Quality Education. This alignment signifies a profound commitment to nurturing a skilled workforce, a foundation for sustainable development. Objective 2 strategically examines the factors that contribute to skill deficiencies in ecotourism. It not only provides a pathway to enhance employment opportunities but also plays a crucial role in facilitating economic growth. This undertaking not only reflects the goals and ambitions of SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, but also highlights the wider socio-economic implications of the research. By enhancing the development of the ecotourism sector, this goal actively contributes to overall economic prosperity. The incorporation of WPBL in Objective 3 signifies a transformative shift. The WPBL programme effectively bridges skill gaps in ecotourism by creating experiential opportunities and providing students with immersive experiences that enhance their expertise and knowledge in the field of ecotourism.

This dynamic approach described resonates with the core of SDG 4, reaffirming the transformative potential of education in building a skilled and empowered workforce. Objective 4 directs its focus on the purpose of curriculum enhancement, especially in ecotourism education. This directly contributes to the preservation of natural resources and local communities, aligning seamlessly with the aspirations of SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. By emphasising sustainable practices, the study highlights the pivotal role of education in environmental conservation. Objective 5 emerges as an advocate for responsible tourism practices, acting as a steadfast guardian of natural resources and local communities. Ecotourism education serves as a means to impart knowledge and foster inspiration, thereby mitigating adverse effects on the environment and reinforcing a profound dedication to sustainability. This aligns with the overarching objectives outlined in multiple SDGs.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to achieve the stated objectives of identifying discipline-specific skills for employment in the ecotourism sector and assessing the effectiveness of the current workplace-based (WPBL) programme in assisting undergraduate students acquire discipline-specific skills for ecotourism employment, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the requisite discipline-specific skills for ecotourism, and what are the areas where these skills are deficient?
2. What are the factors contributing to deficiencies in discipline-specific skills in ecotourism?
3. How can WPBL be designed to address the identified discipline-specific skills deficiencies in ecotourism?
4. What is the intention behind curriculum enhancement by the Department of Ecotourism at DUT, and what are the potential consequences for WPBL?
5. How do ecotourism students, academic staff from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT and industry supervisors understand and interpret WPBL, and how does this vary amongst these groups?

1.6 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aims and objectives of the study serve as provisional measures that may be usable as a means of identifying the discipline-specific skills needed for ecotourism.

Moreover, the study aims to evaluate the efficacy of the existing WPBL programme in preparing undergraduate students for ecotourism employment. In addition, the accomplishment of the study objectives will yield possible solutions to any discrepancies that may arise within the WIL triad, that is, the students, institutions of higher learning, and industry.

1.6.1 Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to determine discipline-specific skills for ecotourism and how WPBL contributes to the attainment of these skills.

1.6.2 Objectives of the study

Objective 1

To identify the requisite and lacking ecotourism discipline-specific skills.

Objective 2

To identify the factors that contribute to the lack of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism.

Objective 3

To ascertain how workplace-based learning (WPBL) can be developed to bridge the skills gaps in ecotourism.

Objective 4

To determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its foreseeable implications for workplace-based learning (WPBL).

Objective 5

To compare understandings and interpretations of WPBL by students, academic staff, and industry.

1.7 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

The section on the definition of key terms plays a pivotal role in establishing a comprehensive understanding of critical terminology within the context of the study. In academic research, precise definitions are the foundation upon which rigorous analysis and insightful conclusions are built. This section serves as a foundational reference point, ensuring that key terms are uniformly interpreted throughout the study. This section aims to clarify the definitions of these terms in a manner that is specifically relevant to their usage within the scope of this research.

For instance, terms such as ‘ecotourism’ and ‘work-integrated learning’ hold multifaceted meanings within various academic and professional contexts. This section aims to clarify these terms in a manner that aligns specifically with their application within the domain of this research. Additionally, concepts like ‘skills’ and ‘university of technology’ are central to the objectives and findings of this research. This section improves the overall coherence and clarity of the research by providing precise and carefully constructed definitions. Additionally, it strengthens the validity and reliability of the research outcomes. As a result, this particular section plays a crucial role in establishing a foundation for a more elaborate and accurate discussion in the subsequent chapters.

1.7.1 Ecotourism

The origin of the term ‘ecotourism’ and its meaning were coined by Ceballos-Lascurrián (1983), who defined ecotourism as travel to undisturbed nature-based areas with the aim of learning about and admiring the wildlife and scenery. In 1990, the first non-profit organisation for ecotourism, known as the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), defined ecotourism as travel to natural areas with the purpose of learning about the natural and cultural features of a destination and further contributing to the well-being of local communities. Definitions of ecotourism have been debated extensively over the past several decades, but most share three primary characteristics: (i) ecotourism attractions are primarily nature-based; (ii) visitor experience should be centrally focused on learning and education; and (iii) ecotourism projects should promote environmental, social, economic, and cultural sustainability (Walter and Sen, 2018).

1.7.2 Work-integrated Learning (WIL)

WIL is an all-encompassing term used to describe the pedagogic practices that are aimed at integrating theoretical learning and practical, work-centred practices. The principal aim of WIL is to enhance student learning, sharpen skills, and improve the employability of students (Council on Higher Education, 2011). Various innovative methods have been developed in response to industry needs. Examples include, but are not limited to, cooperative education, apprenticeships, experiential learning, problem-based learning, practicum placements, service learning, simulation pedagogy, and action learning. In essence, WIL is a collective term describing the different forms of learning that incorporate theory with practical experience in the work environment (Mala, 2019).

WIL is associated with educational programmes that are designed around experiences and insights acquired through practical engagement with the work practices and relationships of the world of work (Gherardi, 2021). The Guidelines published by Universities South Africa (USAf) in 2021 acknowledge WIL as a broad term that includes various methods. However, this study specifically examines workplace-based learning (WPBL) in relation to ecotourism. The objective is to identify discipline-specific skills required for ecotourism and assess the role of workplace-based learning in acquiring these skills.

1.7.3 Workplace-based Learning (WPBL)

There is a lack of clarity about the definition and extent of workplace-based learning in the literature (Ismail and Mujuru, 2020). Earlier theorists defined WPBL as a component of WIL that occurs when students are placed in work environments for the purposes of learning and acquiring discipline-specific knowledge and skills. WPBL therefore typically involves students in the planning and implementation of duties and activities (Kolb, 2014). WPBL includes programmes that are described by a series of terms, including apprenticeships, traineeships, learnerships, work placements, work experience, cooperatives, and internships (Cornyn and Brewer, 2018). These various terms constitute workplace-based learning and serve to fill the gap in transition between school and the world of work for both young people and adults (Wilson-Clark and Saha, 2019).

1.7.4 Skills

Skills are defined as an individual's ability to efficiently apply, and practice acquired knowledge to perform work-related tasks. This behaviour is demonstrated through behaviour or action during training programmes or vocational directives (Adeyinka-Ojo, 2018). In other words, a skill is the ability to successfully complete a task with predetermined outcomes. Skills are a crucial requirement in the application of knowledge in the workplace.

1.7.5 Employability skills

Yusof and Jamaluddin (2015) state that employability skills are a combination of achievement, understanding, and personal attitudes or qualities as indicators of an individual's potential to secure a desired job and career choice. Generally, employability skills are a necessity and allow students to be equipped to fulfil various employment demands in the labour market. Employability skills are also referred to as job-readiness skills.

These are requisite skills for students in preparation for meeting the needs of many different occupations upon completion of their educational qualifications (Phung and Khoi, 2018). The possession of employability skills enhances the marketability of graduates and their potential to become competent workers.

1.7.6 Discipline-specific skills

Discipline-specific skills refer to the pool of understanding, insights, knowledge, and capabilities that goes beyond the broad knowledge of a field. Rather, it is the category of knowledge that is specific to the discipline or profession and characterises a specialist in the area (Koehler, Ertmer and Newby, 2019). According to de Villiers, Hattingh and Visser (2021), discipline-specific skills are those abilities that are particular and unique to a given field of study and are often developed through formal education and on-the-job training programmes in that field. Furthermore, Yorke and Knight (2019) suggest that discipline-specific skills are necessary for effective and successful practice in a given field.

1.7.7 Universities of Technology (UoT)

Universities of technology came into being as part of the major re-configuration of the higher education landscape, which took place from 2004 onwards, arising from merged technikons (Badat, 2010). The term 'technikon' is distinctively South African and has existed for 25 years. Since a technikon was considered to lack university status, it was therefore perceived to be inferior compared to other institutions referred to as universities. Graduates from technikons were rarely recognised by professional associations and the public service and were commonly a second or third choice after universities. Consequently, universities of technology are grounded in former technikons that championed the provision of career-oriented programmes aimed at preparing graduates for the world of work (Mouton, 2010). At a university of technology, the emphasis and focus are therefore on the study of technology from the viewpoint of diverse fields of study rather than a particular field of study. Thus, technology refers to the efficacy and effectiveness of the application of the accumulated knowledge, know-how, skills, and expertise that, when applied, will yield value-added products, services, and processes (Council on Higher Education, 2010). What sets universities of technology apart is the strong emphasis on professional and vocational education (Mouton and Ramoroka, 2019). Education in universities of technology is focused on the attainment and development of practical skills

and producing graduates who are prepared to meet the needs of industry and address real-world problems (Visser et al., 2020).

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework was used as a tool to analyse and interpret the data in this study. To structure and support the research rationale, problem statement, purpose, significance, and research questions, the General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change were used. The theoretical framework served as the basis for the review of literature, research methods, and analysis. Not only did it aid the data analysis chapter, but it also questioned some ecotourism concepts and theories that had previously been studied and published in the field. The theoretical framework was used as a context to guide the research, identify discipline-specific skills, and address skills gaps in ecotourism. The General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change have been used as tools to help understand the implications of WPBL for gaining discipline-specific skills for ecotourism jobs. The study aimed to demonstrate how the theoretical lenses answered the research questions and how the study literature could be understood through the adopted theories. The General Systems Theory and Theory of Change were useful tools to promote coherence and the general principles of the field. The theories allowed the researcher to present a systematic description of ecotourism discipline-specific skills and were useful in constructing relationships between ecotourism variables and explaining and predicting the nature of the field in terms of the skills required to develop and sustain the ecotourism industry.

1.9 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research methodology for this study includes the research paradigm and the selected approach, as well as the principles of a research paradigm as they apply to the study, including epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology. In addition, the research approach, research design, data generation, data analysis, and ethical considerations are included.

1.9.1 Research paradigm and the selected approach for this study

This study has adopted an interpretivist research paradigm to determine what the ecotourism organisations that host DUT students for WPBL deem as discipline-specific skills in ecotourism and those that are considered lacking.

Furthermore, it was meaningful for this study to further understand how these organisations understand and interpret WPBL in comparison to students and academic staff, as noted in objective five of the study. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises understanding the individual and his or her perspective of the world. For this study, the researcher relied on the perspectives, interpretations, and WPBL experiences of the participants.

1.9.2 Research design

This study adopted a case study design. The research design indicates how data were generated, what instruments were used, how the tools were used, and the means of analysis of the data generated. This study used a single-case study of DUT with a focus on the WPBL programme that is offered to undergraduate students enrolled for a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management housed in the Department of Ecotourism. The initial intention of this study was to employ a multi-case study approach comprising three universities of technology that offer undergraduate qualifications in ecotourism. Nevertheless, as elucidated in Chapter 4, within the study limitations sections, it is worth noting that one of the institutions opted not to partake in the research despite having obtained ethics approval. As of the present time, no response has been received from another institution regarding its willingness to participate in this research.

1.9.3 Population and sampling

The target population for the study comprised 11 industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations that hosted ecotourism students from DUT for WPBL for a period of six months. Another target population were students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management who had completed their six-month WPBL programme. Students were categorised into four online focus groups, namely Focus Groups 1 and 2, which comprised students who undertook WPBL in traditional ecotourism establishments, with a total of 26 participants in each online focus group. Focus Groups 3 and 4 included students who were placed in conventional tourism establishments, including municipal local development offices, hotels and guest houses in urban areas, and city museums. Focus Groups 3 and 4 had a total of 17 participants, with 9 and 8 respondents, respectively. Lastly, the academic staff from DUT were part of the target population, with a total of 5 participants. The researcher employed purposive sampling to select all participants for this study.

1.9.4 Data generation

A total of 11 supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations were interviewed face-to-face using an interview schedule. The flexibility of a qualitative research methodology is crucial since it allows for the modification of the investigation focus based on ongoing experiences throughout the collection of data. In this study, both online focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews were conducted using synchronous platforms. Microsoft Teams was the virtual platform used to conduct online interviews with DUT academic staff and four focus groups with ecotourism students.

1.9.5 Data analysis

Data collected from respondents in the online focus groups and one-on-one interview sessions in this study are presented and discussed in Chapter 5. The data was deductively coded using NVivo version 12 software. The recorded information from the interviews was classified into several useful codes. The differences, similarities, and meanings emanating from transcribed data served as the basis for the development of the codes. The researcher organised the data into useful themes and subthemes using this method.

1.9.6 Ethical considerations

It is critical to note that ethical standards were followed and upheld throughout the research process. Before taking part in the study, the researcher made certain that all participants provided informed consent. All data collected was kept secure and anonymous, and confidentiality was maintained. Any potential risks or harm to participants were carefully considered and minimised. The research findings were disseminated responsibly while respecting the privacy and dignity of the participants. Overall, the researcher took great precautions to ensure that the study was ethical and responsible. Data collection only commenced after the formal issuing of ethical clearance by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) of the Durban University of Technology. In addition, the researcher ensured that she obtained gatekeeper's letters and full consent from all participants in the form of official letters and electronic mail.

1.10 SETTING OF THE STUDY

The original approach by the researcher was to adopt a multi-case study approach using the three universities of technology in South Africa that offer an undergraduate qualification in ecotourism. However, adhering to research ethical guidelines and principles, participation in the study was purely voluntary. For this reason, only one of the three universities of technology granted the researcher full permission to undertake the study, the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Hence, the research methodology employed a singular case study approach. Amongst an array of courses offered at DUT housed in various faculties, the programmes of interest for the purpose of the study are the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and the Diploma in Ecotourism.

During the course of this study, the Department of Ecotourism, housing the undergraduate ecotourism qualification, was undergoing the process of approval to phase out the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and phase in the Diploma in Ecotourism as per the revised South African Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2012. It is important to acknowledge that, as of the conclusion of this study in 2023, the phasing-in of the Diploma in Ecotourism has not yet been initiated by the Department of Ecotourism. The study focused on students who had officially commenced their WPBL programme as per the guidelines from the respective institution. It must be noted that WPBL in universities of technology is a compulsory requirement for students to obtain their qualification with varying durations. In the case of the Department of Ecotourism at DUT, the WPBL programme commences from the beginning of November every year to the end of April the following year, when students are in their second year of study.

DUT is a university of technology in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Figure 1.2 presents the map of the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The institution is a result of the merger in April 2002 of two prestigious technikons, ML Sultan and Technikon Natal. It was named the Durban Institute of Technology and later became the Durban University of Technology, in line with the rest of the universities of technology. DUT, a member of the International Association of Universities, is a multi-campus university with five campuses in Durban and two in Pietermaritzburg. The Durban campuses are ML Sultan, Steve Biko, Ritson, Brickfield, and City Campus.

The city of Pietermaritzburg has two campuses, that is, Indumiso and Riverside. The Department of Ecotourism, which is the division of interest for the study, is housed at the Riverside campus, based in the Midlands, as shown in Figure 1.3.

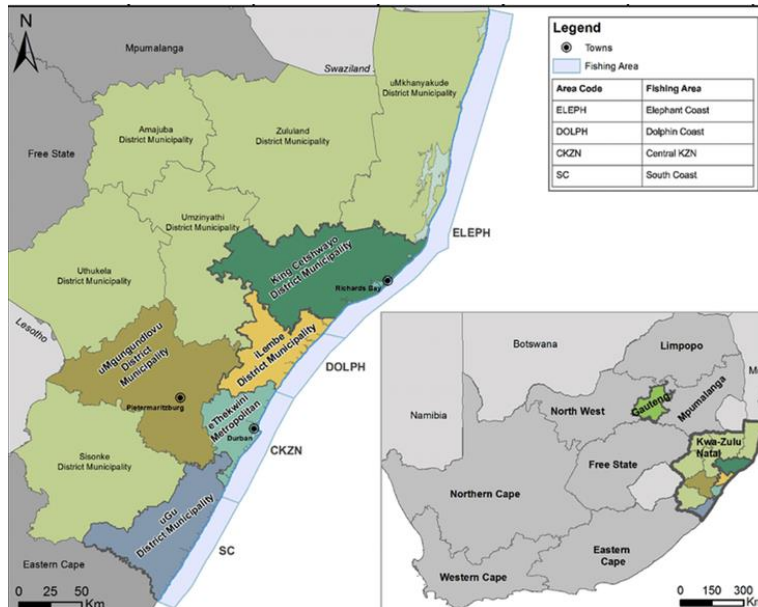


Figure 1.2: Map of KwaZulu-Natal, showing residence the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in South Africa are also shown (Source: Johan C. Groeneveld 2019)

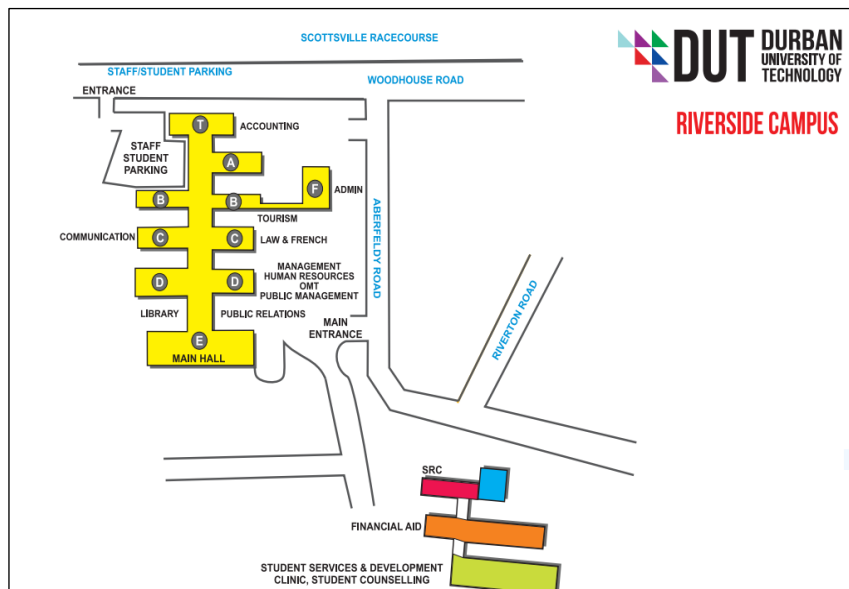


Figure 1.3: The map and outline of DUT Riverside campus in Pietermaritzburg (Source: Durban University of Technology 2019)

1.11 ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY

This study is structured in an academically acceptable order, beginning with the orientation and introduction. Thereafter, the conceptual frameworks, befitting methodology, data presentation, and analysis are presented, ending with propositions, recommendations, and conclusions. This study is presented in six chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction and orientation to the study

This chapter presents the introduction to the study. This includes the context of the study, research problem background and statement, aims and objectives, and rationale of the study, with specific research questions also stated. Additionally, the chapter highlights the effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and provides a description of the study setting.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section constitutes a literature review that covers the significance of ecotourism, general trends and needs for skills in the sector, and various notions of WPBL. This chapter further explores the modern expansion of ecotourism, with a particular focus on urban ecotourism. The disparities in skillsets within the ecotourism sector are discussed, and the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in bridging the skills gap in ecotourism is explored. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the modalities of WIL and the analysis of WPBL in preparing students for graduate-level employment.

Chapter 3: The adaptation of theories to the study- General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change

The theoretical framework is composed of the theories that inform this study, namely General Systems Theory and Theory of Change. This chapter is important as research cannot take place in a theoretical vacuum. The General Systems Theory and Theory of Change adapted in this study were focused on explaining how the incorporated sections provided for this study's theoretical setting and the research findings, as the researcher set the stage for the remaining chapters, which also present some relevant literature and theories.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

Chapter 4 begins by providing a rationale for the research paradigm and the chosen methodologies employed in this study. The study adopts an interpretivist epistemological perspective. The researcher employed a qualitative methodology and conducted face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations. The data collection methods utilised for the academic staff of DUT and the students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management who completed their WPBL programme were online individual interviews and online focus groups, respectively. This study adopted a single-case study research method using DUT. The study employed purposive sampling as a methodological approach, which facilitated the inclusion of respondents who were deemed most likely to provide pertinent data for addressing the research inquiries. Data collected from the sessions, interviews, and focus group discussions was deductively coded using NVivo version 12 software. Information recorded from the interviews was sorted into several useful codes during this phase. The differences, resemblances, and meanings that emerged from the transcribed data served as the foundation for the development of the codes. The researcher organised the data into useful themes and subthemes using this technique. This chapter concludes with an outline of the limitations of this study and the ethical considerations that guided this research.

Chapter 5: Empirical data analysis and decoding: Interdisciplinary discourse between industry and university respondents

This chapter provides an overview and description of the data collected through interviews and focus group discussions conducted with participants from the ecotourism industry as well as academic staff and students from DUT. During the analysis phase, the data obtained from structured interviews was transcribed in its entirety, and relevant quotations from this data were utilised to substantiate the discourse on various themes. In order to safeguard the confidentiality of the primary participants, the study refrains from revealing their identities. In its entirety, Chapter 5 is subdivided into four distinct sections. Section 1 presents an account of the face-to-face interviews that were carried out with 11 industry supervisors who were selected from ecotourism organisations where students were placed for WPBL. Section 2 comprises online individual interviews conducted with the academic staff members from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT.

In contrast, Part 3 and Part 4 entail online focus group discussions involving students who have completed a six-month WPBL programme. Section 3 of the discussion's centres on student placement within traditional ecotourism organisations, while Section 4 focuses on student placement within conventional tourism organisations.

Chapter 6: Discussion, recommendations, and conclusion

This chapter constitutes a summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations in relation to the research questions and literature review. The chapter presents the implications of the results, the lessons learned from this research work, and recommends strategies that can be implemented to advance WPBL to cater to the needs of the ecotourism industry. This chapter commences with a discussion of the key research findings and further provides recommendations based on these key findings. A discussion of the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study is also provided. In addition, this chapter further details a proposed model aimed at optimising WPBL to enhance ecotourism disciplinary skills. Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

1.12 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The chapter commenced with a discussion on the background and significance of tourism, with a channelled emphasis on ecotourism as a niche type of tourism. The literature reveals that a plethora of research has largely focused on the environmental impacts of ecotourism, while very little has been done on the identification of specialist skills, education, and training needs in the sector. The aims and objectives of the study were presented, along with a synopsis of the research methodology for collecting data and concluded with an outline of the structure of the research project. The subsequent chapter provides a comprehensive analysis and evaluation of significant scholarly works that are directly related to the research objectives of this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 was aimed at orienting the reader to the study by outlining the purpose, research problem, and objectives that the study sought to satisfy. This chapter commences with a brief overview of tourism, with the aim of enlightening the reader about the origins of ecotourism as a branch within the wide conventional tourism scope. Chapter 2 presents a review of the related literature underpinning the study. Therefore, Chapter Two gives conceptual meaning to the research objectives stated in Chapter 1 and contextualises the research problem. This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of ecotourism, its historical antecedents, and its current significance in the tourism industry. Following an exploration of the International Ecotourism Society's (TIES) concept and expanded interpretations, the chapter delves into the historical antecedents and early interpretations of ecotourism. The principles of ecotourism are examined, as well as recurring themes. The modern expansion of ecotourism as well as the emergence of urban ecotourism, which combines traditional ecotourism and urbanism, are outlined. The contemporary developments and recurrent themes in the ecotourism industry are examined, along with the concept of ecotourism and its importance to environmental preservation. The chapter further addresses the disparities in skillsets within the ecotourism sector and the contributing factors to this deficit. The role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in bridging the skills gaps in ecotourism is also discussed, in conjunction with the significance of universities of technology in the South African higher education system. An outline of a unified South African Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) for HEIs, followed by a global and regional view on the significance of ecotourism qualifications, is provided. The chapter then presents the notion of work-integrated learning (WIL), its early interpretations and approaches, and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. In conclusion, an exploration of the benefits of WPBL and the selection of organisations for WPBL are discussed, as well as the value of WPBL in preparing students for graduate-level employment and the application of disciplinary skills.

2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF TOURISM

This overview section aims to familiarise the reader with the significance of tourism as a global industry and its role in South Africa as a vital driver of the economy. However, the focus of this study is on ecotourism, which is a subset of tourism concerned with preserving the natural environment. This section is therefore crucial to highlight the distinguishing characteristics between tourism and ecotourism.

2.2.1 Understanding the significance of tourism from a global perspective

In a global context, tourism has become one of the key components of international trade and one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors (Seghir, Mostéfa, Abbes and Zakarya, 2015). According to Seghir et al. (2015), the tourism sector was the fourth largest source of export revenue, behind the oil, automotive, and chemical industries, in 2014 and 2015, contributing 10% to the world's GDP (UNWTO, 2016b). Scott and Gössling (2015) ascertained that the geographic footprint of tourism has progressed so much that it has reached an equal distribution between developed and developing economies. This resulted in tourism becoming one of the main income generators for many developing economies, including South Africa (UNWTO, 2016a). The emergence of tourism as an official and recognised sector began in the 1950s and has since grown significantly worldwide (Spenceley and Meyer, 2017). The World Travel and Tourism Council (2017, p. 20) reports that the tourism industry has highly significant economic impacts in countries around the world, and these are both direct and induced. In addition, tourism has been earmarked as a principal source of economic development and expansion in several developing countries (Velempini and Martin, 2019). According to Milano, Novelli, and Cheer (2020), the tourism industry is a key economic sector with considerable financial value, amounting to trillions of rands. This industry has a positive impact on numerous communities worldwide, creating more than 230 million employment opportunities and contributing over 10 percent to the global gross domestic product. The following section provides a detailed explanation of what tourism means from a South African perspective.

2.2.2 Tourism as a vital economic sector in South Africa

The expansion of tourism as a vital economic sector is no different for South Africa (South African Local Government Association, 2016). The nation has long been recognised as a prominent economic force within the African continent and has also established itself as a significant attraction for tourists (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2016). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2016) report, a comprehensive analysis was conducted to compare the tourism markets of various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The findings indicate that South Africa possesses the highest level of advancement and development in its tourism industry. The potential for tourism in South Africa is enormous due to the country's rich biodiversity, culture, history, attractive climate, and an array of tourism activities. Despite the eminent positive impacts of tourism, there are several negative impacts. These include increased carbon emissions, extensive carbon footprints from transportation and accommodation (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2013); land and water pollution (Xu, Mingzhu, Bu and Pan, 2017); inappropriate and irresponsible tourist behaviour (Lee and Jan, 2019); poor tourism management resulting in the degradation of biodiversity (Mayaka, Croy and Cox, 2018); and escalations in crime, which pose a threat to local cultures (Sood, Lynch and Anastasiadou, 2017). Tourism inevitably affects the environment, directly or indirectly. Therefore, reducing adverse environmental impacts is crucial. To enhance the benefits and reduce the negative impacts of tourism, sustainable tourism models, such as ecotourism, are needed. The next section provides a detailed description of ecotourism in terms of its definition, historical interpretations, key principles, and the introduction of urban ecotourism.

2.3 UNDERSTANDING ECOTOURISM

This section commences with the earliest definitions of ecotourism and further explores how it has evolved over the years. The historical context of ecotourism holds significant importance as it offers a framework for understanding the present condition of the industry. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2017) emphasises the growth of ecotourism and characterises it as a form of alternative tourism to mass tourism, which prioritises environmental sustainability. Ecotourism has experienced a surge in popularity in recent years. The primary aim of this study is to ascertain the discipline-specific competencies within the ecotourism industry and to assess any deficiencies in these skills.

Due to the heightened focus on the ecological environment and the growing consciousness regarding environmental issues, ecotourism has gained significant traction and witnessed a steady rise in tourism demand over the years (Centre for Responsible Travel, 2019). This section provides a more in-depth analysis of the fundamental principles underlying ecotourism and highlights their importance in differentiating ecotourism from other types of tourism. According to Titisari et al. (2022), ecotourism is a form of tourism that incorporates ecological, economic, and social considerations, aims to promote environmental awareness, and relies on resources derived from ecological, economic, social, historical, and cultural aspects.

2.3.1 Historical antecedents and early interpretations of ecotourism

Hetzer (1965) is credited with coining the term 'ecotourism'. The term first appeared between the late 1970s and the middle of the 1980s (Pradati, 2017). Ceballos-Lascurain (1987) defined ecotourism as visiting untouched natural places with the intention of learning about and taking in the fauna and landscape. Ziffer (1989) defines ecotourism as a form of travel motivated by the geographic region's ecological, historical, and cultural significance. This type of tourism encourages and arouses an attitude of engagement, sensitivity, and appreciation amongst tourists. The author further describes ecotourism as a non-consumptive interaction between people, wildlife, and natural resources, thereby promoting conservation and maintaining the well-being of the local communities. According to Cobbinah (2015), the concepts of ecotourism have been expanded to include ethical consideration.

2.3.2 Defining ecotourism: An exploration of the International Ecotourism Society's (TIES) concept and expanded interpretations

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), the first non-profit organisation advocating ecotourism, defined ecotourism as travel to natural regions with the goals of learning about the natural and cultural characteristics of a location and enhancing the well-being of local communities (TIES, 2013). In alignment with the TIES, the World Conservation Union defines ecotourism as "travel to natural areas that is environmentally responsible, with the purpose of enjoying and appreciating nature and other cultural features, as well as promoting conservation, reducing visitor impact, and positively impacting local people" (adapted from Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996, p. 301).

Honey (2009) stretched the description of ecotourism provided by TIES (1990) to incorporate and emphasise that ecotourism has minimal adverse impacts on host communities and the natural environment. Furthermore, ecotourism must contribute to the empowerment of host communities through the equal and fair distribution of benefits derived from ecotourism. Nonetheless, definitions of ecotourism have been debated extensively in the past several decades, but most share three primary characteristics: (i) ecotourism attractions are primarily nature-based; (ii) visitor experience should be centrally focused on learning and education; and (iii) ecotourism projects should promote environmental, social, economic, and cultural sustainability (Walter and Sen, 2018). Subsequently, TIES (1990) and Honey (1999) introduced equity into the definitional dimension of ecotourism discourse. While the study supports these definitions and characteristics as foundational to understanding ecotourism, the definitions alone do not address the practical skills required for effective ecotourism management.

The evolution of ecotourism continues to occur, and debates on this concept are prevalent. For example, after analysing the existing ecotourism definitions, Fennell (2001) recognised five common variables used to describe ecotourism: the natural environment, learning, conservation or protection of resources, preservation of cultural resources, and benefits for host communities. In addition, other researchers, such as Blamey (2001), have associated the ethical components of ecotourism with learning experiences and the conservation of both natural and cultural resources, which remain crucial to ecotourism research. The evolution of the concept, including the inclusion of equity (TIES, 1990; Honey, 1999) and key variables such as conservation and community benefits (Fennell, 2001; Blamey, 2001), highlights the complex nature of ecotourism but also reveals gaps in how these principles are operationalised in practice. Figure 2.1 depicts the concept of ecotourism's evolution from the 1990s to the 2000s.

In contrast, Drumm and Moore (2005) argue that the ethical or normative component of ecotourism is adopted recklessly, resulting in its misuse to attract environmentally conscious travellers. These authors further call attention to the reality that unrelated nature tourism programmes are disguised as ethical components of ecotourism, which bear the potential to have adverse environmental and social impacts. This critique resonates with the focus of this research, as it draws attention to the necessity of aligning practical skills with the ethical and operational standards of ecotourism.

Hvenegaard (1994) suggests that ecotourism alone cannot solve the issues of mass tourism, a view that this study supports as it acknowledges the limitations of ecotourism and emphasises the need for effective skill development and practical implementation. The author also claims that ecotourism encourages the introduction of new destinations into the tourism market. According to this viewpoint, ecotourism advocates are more concerned with perpetuating artificial concerns about natural and cultural resources than with addressing the issues associated with ecotourism implementation. Kiper (2013) argues that ecotourism must incorporate the pillars of sustainable development while also ensuring active participation by indigenous communities and environmental education for host communities, professionals, and visitors. This perspective aligns closely with the objectives of this study, which emphasise the critical role of environmental education and professional development. Addressing these needs through WPBL is essential for bridging skill gaps and enhancing the practical application of ecotourism principles. Therefore, this study supports the perspectives that advocate for the practical application of ecotourism principles and the need for effective skill development. By focusing on how WPBL can bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical implementation, the study aims to address the deficiencies in discipline-specific skills, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy of ecotourism management. This approach not only aligns with the foundational definitions of ecotourism but also addresses the critiques and limitations identified in the literature.

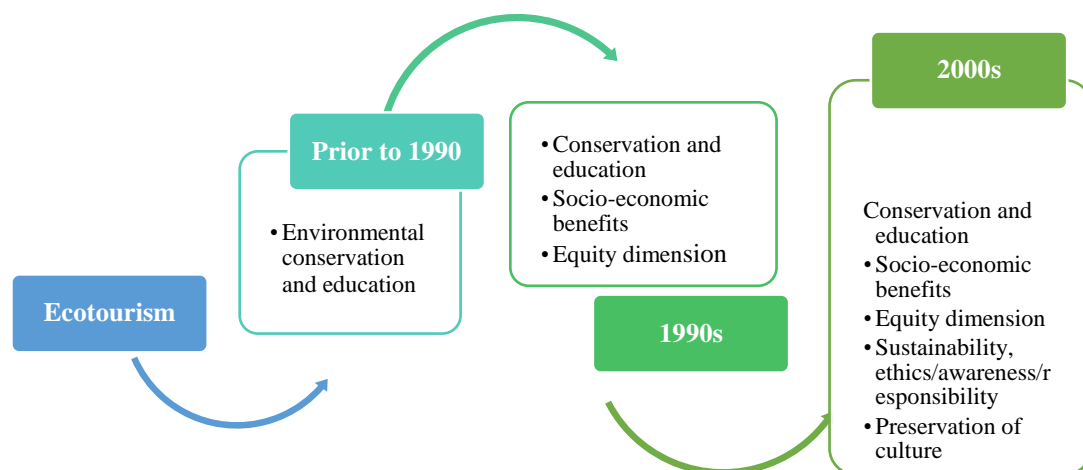


Figure 2.1: The evolution of the meaning of ecotourism (Source: Cobbinah 2015)

It is evident from the literature describing the origins of ecotourism that it has been in existence since the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The concept of ecotourism was popularised by the apparent negative environmental and social impacts resulting from mass tourism, which centres around income and growth with little to no regard for environmental conservation and the well-being of host communities (Ziffer, 1989). Due to rising concerns about the destructive impacts of mass tourism, ecotourism gained momentum as a means of sustainable development.

2.3.3 The principles of ecotourism

Ecotourism has dominated the past three decades in both the environmental and social spheres and academia. The degradation of biodiversity resources and poverty are challenges that remain global issues in the twenty-first century. However, 30 years ago, ecotourism became an exhortation among environmental conservation groups, tourism practitioners, and academia. Characteristically, the ecotourism setting is often in natural, fragile, and pristine ecosystems and tends to degrade the environmental assets on which it thrives through waste emissions, loss of biodiversity, and wildlife habitat (Lee, 2019). Therefore, the establishment of globally accepted guiding principles for ecotourism is crucial. This will aid in the sustainable development of ecotourism ventures, especially in developing countries.

Efforts to develop principles of ecotourism progressed prior to the 1990s as an attempt to curb the adverse impacts on the environment due to mass tourism. Ecotourism scholars and international societies have recognised and developed principles of ecotourism underpinned by various attributes of ecotourism (Donohoe and Needham, 2006; International Tourism Society, 2013). There are similarities between these principles. The ecotourism principles proposed by Page and Dowling (2002) are similar to those developed by TIES. Furthermore, Honey (2008) developed principles of ecotourism that expand on TIES ecotourism principles, resulting in seven key principles of ecotourism. Donohoe and Needham (2006) also identify six normative principles of ecotourism that are similar to those proposed by TIES, as outlined in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Ecotourism principles from selected studies

<i>Hetzer's (1965) principles of ecotourism</i>	<i>Donohoe and Needham's principles of ecotourism</i>
Hetzer in 1965 outlined four basic principles of ecotourism, including:	Donohoe and Needham (2006) identified the following as key tenets and associated elements of ecotourism:
1. Minimum environmental impacts	1. Nature-based;
2. Recognising and esteeming local culture;	2. Preservation/conservation;
3. Maximising economic benefits to the local communities; and	3. Environmental education;
4. Meeting and increasing tourists' expectations and satisfaction.	4. Sustainability;
Source: Hetzer (1965).	5. Distribution of benefits; and
The International ecotourism Society's principles of ecotourism	6. Ethics/responsibility.
ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:	Source: Donohoe and Needham (2006).
1. Minimise impact.	Honey's (2008) principles of ecotourism
2. Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.	Martha Honey broadened TIES principles by outlining
3. Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.	Seven principles of ecotourism, including:
4. Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.	1. Involves travelling to natural destinations;
5. Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.	2. Minimising impact;
6. Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.	3. Building environmental awareness;
Source: The International ecotourism Society (1990).	4. Providing direct financial benefits for conservation;
Page and Dowling's (2002) principles of ecotourism	5. Providing financial benefits and empowerment for local people;
Page and Dowling's (2002) identified five principles of ecotourism, including:	6. Respecting local culture; and
1. Nature-based;	7. Supporting human rights and democratic movements.
2. Ecologically sustainable;	Source: Honey (2008).
3. Environmentally educative;	
4. Locally beneficial; and	
5. Generating tourist satisfaction.	
Source: Page and Dowling (2002).	

(Modified from source: De Witt 2011)

The common features of the ecotourism principles shown in Table 2.1 have resulted in the development of consolidated, broad groups. These are environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community participation, economic benefits, and empowerment of indigenous communities, as shown in Figure 2.2.

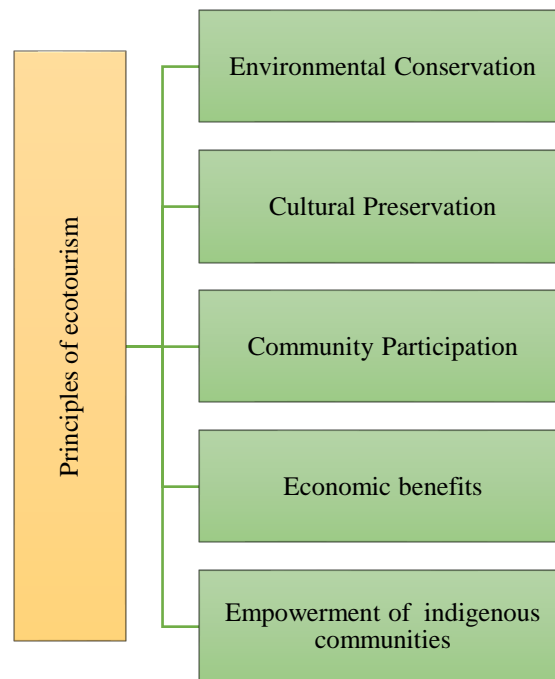


Figure 2.2: Principles of ecotourism (Source: Cobbinah 2015)

Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism that is a relatively small but growing portion of the international tourism industry because of growing dissatisfaction with mass tourism and environmental sustainability concerns (Conway and Cawley, 2016). Ecotourism has been promoted as a tool for economic development and conservation in several countries, including Nepal, a country with a wealth of natural biodiversity and cultural diversity. Nepal's protected areas (PAs) cover 23.23% of the country's total land area and attract more than half of the country's foreign tourists (Tiwari and Chatterje, 2017). Given that most tourist attractions in developing nations are naturally and culturally rooted, the socio-economic impact of ecotourism in the developing world is substantial (Stanciulescu and Felicetti, 2020). Considering this, ecotourism can be viewed as the world's largest and most effective transfer of funds from developed to developing regions.

Ecotourism is increasingly promoted as a viable form of tourism development due to its presumed advantages for host communities, the local economy, and environmental protection (Carr, Ruhanen and Whitford, 2016). The continued negative effects of conventional tourism are also compelling arguments for the consideration and acceptance of ecotourism (Wondirad, 2019). Consequently, numerous developing nations have begun to examine the potential of ecotourism to assist them in achieving their dual objectives of conservation and economic growth (Abukhalifeh and Wondirad, 2019). In line with these principles, the study supports the view that ecotourism offers valuable opportunities for conservation and economic development. However, it also recognises that the successful implementation of these principles is dependent on addressing practical challenges, such as skill deficiencies in the field. By focusing on workplace-based learning (WPBL), the study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical principles and practical skills. WPBL can play an important role in providing professionals with the necessary expertise to align with ecotourism principles, thereby increasing its effectiveness and sustainability. This approach acknowledges the potential of ecotourism while addressing the need for targeted skill development to overcome current challenges and optimise the benefits for both local communities and the environment.

2.3.4 Examining the existing policies and regulations governing ecotourism at the national and international levels

The previous sections have highlighted an increase in recognition and interest surrounding ecotourism as a viable and sustainable form of tourism. This is largely attributed to its potential to facilitate both environmental preservation and socioeconomic advancement. However, the establishment of effective governance mechanisms for ecotourism is indispensable to guaranteeing continued viability and mitigating adverse consequences. The purpose of this section is to analyse the current policies and regulations governing ecotourism at both the national and international levels, with a particular emphasis on South Africa. The country has introduced a comprehensive legal framework at the national level for regulating the practice of ecotourism. The primary law governing the management and development of protected areas for tourism purposes is the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (2003), as stated by the Department of Environmental Affairs (2003). Furthermore, the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (2004) serves to guarantee the preservation of biodiversity within ecotourism sites (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2004).

The above-mentioned policies give priority to the significance of environmental sustainability, community engagement, and equitable distribution of benefits within the framework of ecotourism operations. Numerous initiatives and agreements were established on the global platform to address the governance of ecotourism.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) developed a set of guiding principles to promote sustainable tourism practices, with the goal of fostering responsible conduct among both tour operators and tourists (TIES, 2021). Moreover, it is worth noting that the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) has devised a set of criteria that serve as the basis for certifying sustainable tourism. This initiative offers a globally recognised framework for evaluating ecotourism operations on a global scale (GSTC, 2021). The primary aim of these international policies is to promote cooperation and the adoption of optimal strategies across national boundaries, thereby promoting the transfer of knowledge and proficiency in the field of ecotourism management. South Africa and international bodies have demonstrated worthy efforts in the management of ecotourism; however, it is possible to discern various strengths and weaknesses in these efforts.

The national policies in South Africa have placed a significant emphasis on the conservation of biodiversity and the active involvement of local communities, with the aim of promoting the sustainable development of ecotourism (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2003; Department of Environmental Affairs, 2004). The South African government demonstrates a powerful commitment to establishing a society that is both successful and equitable, while also ensuring the preservation of natural resources and the protection of the nation's diverse biodiversity for the benefit of all its citizens. According to Snyman (2017), South Africa has proved to be a distinguished player in the fields of biodiversity conservation and wildlife management. The country boasts a well-developed network of protected areas, which has contributed to its reputation as a preferred international destination for ecotourism.

According to the Department of Environmental Affairs (2018), a certain minimum of 11.4% of national land is intended for conservation and protection purposes. South Africa is known for hosting several internationally acclaimed national and provincial nature reserves. However, there are continuing challenges in the implementation and enforcement of these regulations, which include insufficient financial resources, restricted programmes for capacity development, and a lack of collaboration among governmental entities.

The current debate pertains to the prompt examination of the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic as evaluated by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in 2020. In particular, the focus is on the implications for ecotourism and the rapid implementation of recovery strategies aimed at preserving the livelihoods of numerous individuals. There is a need for global initiatives aimed at enhancing compliance with the current guidelines and standards, which could be achieved by implementing compulsory certification procedures (Postma, Koens and Papp, 2018). This study suggests that in addition to enhancing global compliance to optimise the potential for ecotourism, it is necessary to facilitate knowledge-sharing and capacity development through collaboration among governments, HEIs, local communities, and the industry. Recognising and addressing these identified limitations and directing attention towards areas that require enhancement, it is possible to secure the enduring sustainability of ecotourism and its role in promoting the preservation of biodiversity and fostering local socio-economic progress.

2.4 ECOTOURISM IN URBAN AREAS AND CONFLICTING IDEAS

By definition, ecotourism entails small-scale operations with minimal environmental impact as well as a learning component. These claims are backed up by numerous authors since the term 'ecotourism' was first used (Fennel, 1999; Honey, 1999; Wight, 1993). According to Budowski (1967), the then-Governor General of the IUCN, the relationship between tourism growth and environmental protection may be one of symbiosis, coexistence, or conflict. Budowski noted at the time that most cases revealed a coexistence condition shifting towards conflict. Budowski's (1976) observations still hold true today, as the ecotourism phenomenon has experienced modern expansion. According to Fennel (2015), ecotourism was first described in 1965 as a type of micro-niche travel centred on protected and more expansive, pristine, and remote habitats that are regarded as vulnerable. In line with this notion, the focus of this study is on traditional ecotourism organisations. To reach these organisations, the researcher employed face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors as a method of data collection. During the six-month WPBL programme, these respondents were involved in the supervision of ecotourism students. By being associated with alternative niche travel, ecotourism has historically set itself apart from mass tourism.

However, over time, ecotourism developed in many other locations and is now expanding into a macro-niche or a regime that incorporates several sustainable tourism principles (UNWTO, 2020a), including minimal environmental impact, respect for local culture, and maximum earnings for local grassroots, with a learning and experience component. Following the release of the Brundtland Report (UN General Assembly, 1987) and the Rio Conference in 1992, a global political agenda with Agenda 21 as its focal point saw the emergence of ecotourism. In the United States of America, the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) was established (The International Ecotourism Society, 2017). The following year, it delivered several policies and plans for destinations to adhere to, turning ecotourism into a generic endeavour.

2.4.1 The modern expansion of ecotourism

Ecotourism is distinguished by its historical roots in untouched wilderness areas where travellers can seek out the world's deserted, unmodernised, and unindustrialised regions. Ecotourism's original purpose of preserving natural areas from commercial exploitation gives meaning to its unique focus on clean experiences and education, which thus justifies the upkeep of national parks as remote locations for travel. But the climate crisis has developed, and the unprecedented rise in tourism has greatly strained the climate and the environment, not just in pristine areas but also in cities (De Leon and Kim, 2017). As a result, the sustainability and ecotourism agenda cannot and should not be limited to wild and isolated areas. As a result, sustainable tourism today is an effort focused on all forms of travel worldwide, as shown in Figure 2.3.

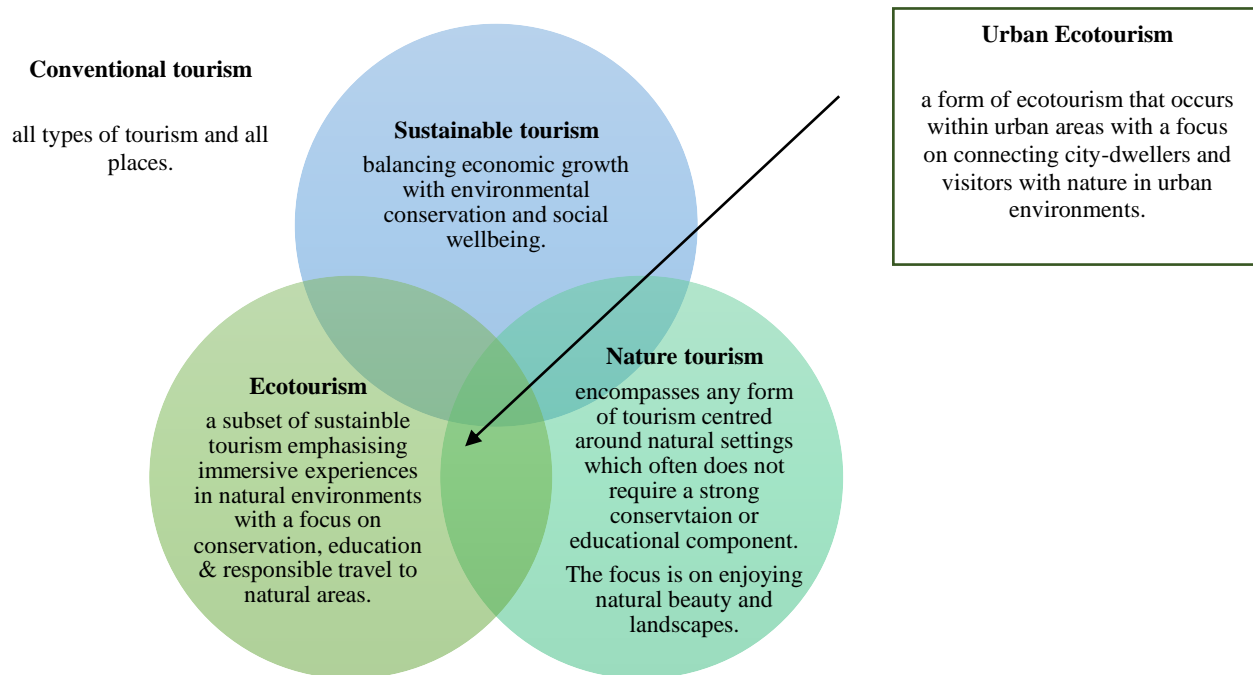


Figure 2.3: The urban ecotourism niche (Modified from source: Zewdie and Kindu 2011)

Thus, this sustainability orientation is applicable to all forms of tourism, and when it is combined with ecotourism in natural urban spaces and protected areas, there is a possibility for an emerging market called urban ecotourism. This could increase ecological awareness among tourists who frequently travel to cities across the entire tourism industry from an educational and interpretive standpoint. It is a chance to turn ecosystems like urban parks and nature preserves close to cities into ecotourism hotspots (UNWTO, 2020a).

2.5 THE ADVENT OF URBAN ECOTOURISM: A COMBINATION OF TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM AND URBANISM

This section provides a comprehensive examination of urban ecotourism, an emerging subfield that synthesises elements of traditional ecotourism with urbanism and sustainable urban development. The section further addresses the definition and scope of urban ecotourism, highlighting its objectives to enhance ecological and cultural conservation within urban settings. By integrating traditional ecotourism principles with the unique challenges and opportunities of urban environments, urban ecotourism aims to address sustainability and community development in areas typically not associated with conventional ecotourism.

The section further investigates the principles underpinning urban ecotourism, examining its potential to revitalise industrial and abandoned urban spaces while contributing to local economic growth and environmental stewardship. The discussion also includes an evaluation of current academic and practical perspectives on urban ecotourism, acknowledging both its potential benefits and the criticisms it faces. In alignment with the study's focus, this section also contextualises urban ecotourism within the broader framework of ecotourism and highlights how WPBL contributes to developing expertise in both traditional and urban ecotourism domains. This connection underscores the significance of WPBL in equipping professionals with the requisite skills to address the evolving demands of urban ecotourism and enhance its practical implementation. Urban ecotourism is an emerging subcategory that combines elements of traditional ecotourism with urbanism, sustainable urbanism, and nature-based tourism. In 1996, the Green Tourism Association of Toronto enlisted the services of the Blackstone Corporation to provide consultation concerning their initiatives aimed at promoting environmentally sustainable practices in urban tourism. This collaboration marked the inception of the concept of urban ecotourism.

2.5.1 Defining urban ecotourism

The definition of the urban ecotourism concept, as stated by Gibson, Dodds and Joppe (2003), refers to the act of travelling and exploring both within and in the vicinity of an urban area. This activity aims to provide visitors with a greater understanding of the natural areas and cultural resources present in the city. Additionally, it aims to contribute to the long-term ecological wellbeing of the city while ensuring that it is accessible and fair to all individuals. Urban ecotourism pursues the same sustainability and community development objectives as traditional ecotourism, but it does so at locations other than the more naturally occurring ones that are found in traditional ecotourism, such as large cities, industrial wastelands, and post-productivist agricultural sites. According to Weaver (2005), modified areas also have potential and specific ecological benefits, even though the analysis of the three key ecotourism criteria (natural attractions, educational motivation as well as ecological and social sustainability) indicates a high position for protected areas as ecotourist spaces. According to the author, urban areas can serve as a destination for a wider range of ecotourist goods.

Weaver (2005) bases this assertion on the fact that urban ecotourism is a complex phenomenon with a high capacity, which can be focused on the issue of restoration and improvement, enabling engaging excursions far from delicate natural areas. According to Joppe and Dodds (1998), urban ecotourism offers a viable combination of ecological and cultural conservation, enhanced local consciousness regarding the significance of safeguarding natural and cultural environments, and the promotion of local economic growth. Blackstone Corporation first proposed the idea of urban ecotourism in 1996, describing it as a sustainable way to travel in urban areas (Wu, Wang and Ho, 2010). The concept of urban ecotourism was further advanced at the inaugural First Urban Ecotourism Convention, held in White Rock, Canada, in 2004.

2.5.2 Principles and potential for urban ecotourism

According to the Declaration on Urban Ecotourism (2004), urban ecotourism presents an opportunity to preserve both biological and social diversity, generate employment opportunities, and enhance the overall quality of life. The inclusion of relatively undisturbed and uncontaminated areas is a fundamental aspect of ecotourism. However, it is worth noting that urban ecotourism has the potential to enhance the overall wellbeing of urban dwellers and contribute to the preservation of natural environments (Sarkar and Lecturer, 2016). Urban green tourism, also known as urban ecotourism, is a form of travel and exploration that occurs within and around urban areas. This type of tourism is intended to provide visitors with both satisfaction and respect for the natural areas and cultural heritage of the city (Green Tourism Association, 2003). It exclusively encompasses the inherent patterns of motion occurring within a densely inhabited region. Making the urban environment tolerable for the preservation of biodiversity is a particular challenge. Urban ecotourism recognises urban centres as examples of the coexistence of various cultures and as the origins of civilization. These areas may become so badly damaged that they are no longer usable or that the objects and space no longer serve their original purpose. Through restoration and repurposing, they can offer great potential in this situation. If modified areas are well-presented, well-guided, and aesthetically pleasing, they may be acceptable as ecotourism destinations (Higham and Lück, 2002).

Urban ecotourism is both a necessity for the development of cities that are becoming urban ecotourism destinations and a new area of interest in the tourism industry. Urban ecotourism was established as a unique field of study and practice in the early 2000s because of research. It lies at the intersection of the tourist and sustainable urban development fields.

Due to the higher capacity of urban destinations and the potential to restore areas that have suffered harm from industrialism, traffic, or other human activities, urban ecotourism is more acceptable than traditional ecotourism. Urban ecotourists can utilise the existing infrastructure, such as public transportation. Consequently, numerous cities renowned for their appeal to tourists, as well as those aspiring to attain such recognition, allocate considerable resources towards the preservation and enhancement of their ecological attributes. This strategic investment serves to attract a distinct category of travellers.

2.5.3 The integration of urban ecotourism with sustainable urban development

The growth of ecotourism, while adhering to ecological sustainability standards, becomes a means of making money for business owners as well as providing social and economic advantages for the local community. The inclusion of cities in the growth of ecological ethics creates the foundation for the greening of tourism in cities all over the world. An increase in green space in a city improves the quality of life for its inhabitants, serves as a catalyst for the revitalisation of deindustrialised areas, and paves the way for finding new uses for abandoned spaces and objects. This indicates that urban ecotourism is a strategy for urban development that is sustainable. According to Higham and Lück (2002), urban ecotourism can have some advantages over ecotourism in sensitive natural areas because it can bring in more money, attract a wider audience, and usually be done year-round. Dodds and Joppe (2003) have compiled a list of characteristics relating to urban ecotourism, some of which contribute to the organised development of cities. Through active, personal, and meaningful engagement with nature, individuals can promote ecological responsibility, promote local economic prosperity, enhance cultural sensitivity, and gain a multitude of enriching experiences. Urban ecotourism considers issues with wildlife, pollution, and noise. The creation of numerous public spaces is also necessary, as is thoughtful town planning. Tourists and locals must interact because of urban ecotourism.

Reimagining the relationship between nature and culture creates new opportunities for ecotourism ventures to promote travel within and around urban areas. According to Ebbessen and Holm (2019), there has been a recent increase in academic research on urban and peri-urban tourism. Outside of the academic community, cities are also becoming more interested in sustainable tourism (Hoang and Pulliat, 2019; Holden, Lupton and Slocum, 2017; Maćkiewicz and Konecka-Szydłowska, 2017).

While some critics may view ecotourism as an oxymoron, most recent literature suggests that it has the potential to benefit the urban environment, population, and economy (Yanfeng, 2018). Urban ecotourism is still understudied as a field, and there are limited examples of it being used in practice. Urban ecotourism literature focuses much more on greening the environmental effects of already-existing urban tourism than on the implementation of new urban ecotourism. Due to this, this study analyses the contribution of WPBL in developing expertise in the field of traditional ecotourism. Most traditional ecotourism studies focus on the impacts on the environment, the economy, and community involvement; therefore, this topic needs further research.

2.6 INSIGHTS INTO THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AND THEMES IN THE ECOTOURISM SECTOR: A JOURNAL OF ECOTOURISM OVERVIEW

A plethora of literature reveals that little has been done in terms of academic work on ecotourism and employment. This is not surprising, bearing in mind that a large amount of ecotourism literature has focused extensively on the environmental impacts of ecotourism but little on the economic dimension (Monterrubio and Espinosa, 2013). Singh, Sibi, and Sharma (2021) employed an analytical framework encompassing the publication and citation structure, prolific authors, countries of origin, institutional affiliations, and impactful articles to gain insights into the prevailing patterns within the Journal of Ecotourism (JE) publication. The establishment of the Journal of Ecotourism (JE) was overseen by Dr. David A. Fennell, and it is the sole international peer-reviewed journal that offers a discussion forum and a source of information on ecotourism and nature-based travel. With a cite score of 3.1, Scopus places JE at 138 in the geography, planning, and development category and 33 in the tourism and hospitality management category. Individual journal reviews are important for the development of the field because they can help authors with the content and methodology of future manuscripts and may even help editors spot trends and gaps in the research (Strandberg, 2018).

2.6.1 The comprehension of ecotourism

The articles related to a fundamental comprehension of ecotourism definitions make up the first set (Cater, 2007). It consisted of 18 articles, including the piece with the most citations (Fennell, 2001).

Using 85 definitions, this paper offers a thorough overview of the ecotourism idea and its development. Significant factors in these definitions include ethics, sustainability, local benefits and impacts, education, and conservation. To better comprehend ecotourism and provide a framework for its development and applications, Donohoe and Needham (2006) discussed several themes. Conservation, education, nature-based themes, ethics, responsibility and awareness, sustainability, and benefit distribution were among the themes that frequently showed up.

Eleven references are highlighted in the second set, which emphasises the idea of ecotourism and how it benefits the local community. According to Honey (1999), ecotourism helps rural communities develop economically in a sustainable way. The importance of the local community in promoting ecotourism was emphasised by Scheyvens (1999) through the development of an empowerment framework. The third set has nine references. These specifically highlight ecotourism and its effects. Wearing and Neil (2009) looked at the effects of travel on nations and the advantages of embracing ecotourism. For a sustainable tourism sector, Midler, Newsom, Sierra and Bahn (2016) described a variety of effects that tourism had on the environment and recommended practical steps for promoting and managing tourism.

2.6.2 Ecotourism and its role in environmental preservation

The identification of the author's keywords serves as an indicator of the central theme and subject matter explored within the research article (Sharma, Chauhan and Bhardwaj, 2020). From 2002 to 2020, the researchers categorised their studies in the Journal of Education (JE) using a total of 862 keywords. The co-word analysis yielded a total of four clusters. Using keywords like ecotourism, conservation, wildlife, biodiversity, national parks, protected areas, and tourism, this cluster is based on articles that discuss ecotourism and its role in preserving the environment and safeguarding natural resources (Black and Cobbinah, 2018; Boley and Green, 2016; Lemelin and Jaramillo-López, 2020; Lopez Gutierrez et al., 2020). The largest cluster, which consists of 16 keywords, includes the two terms that appear the most frequently: ecotourism and conservation. This cluster also encompasses the subject of ecotourism marketing segmentation analysis (Thurau et al., 2007; Wade and Eagles, 2003). Another cluster consists of a compilation of articles related to the value of ethics in ecotourism as well as other closely linked topics like sustainable tourism and nature-based tourism (Dawson et al., 2011; Fennell and Nowaczek, 2010).

It also covers topics such as ecotourism management (Howes et al., 2012) and the function of ecotourism certification (Puhakka and Siikamäki, 2012; Sipic, 2017). With 10 keywords, this is the second-largest cluster. Within a separate cluster, the articles contained therein illuminate the significant concepts pertaining to the importance of local engagement in ecotourism (Pornprasit and Rurkkhum, 2019; Walter, 2020). Given the increasing prominence of Thailand as a subject of interest, a significant portion of the research conducted within this cluster has focused on this country (Sonjai et al., 2021). This cluster encompasses articles that discuss the topic of environmental education and its significance in the conservation of ecotourism resources (Jackson, 2007; Rattan, Eagles and Mair, 2012).

The fourth cluster consists of documents analysed in terms of the actions of stakeholders in relation to the guiding principles and practices of ecotourism (Jackson, 2007; Strong and Morris, 2010). Three keywords, including stakeholders, behaviour, tour guides and operators, are included in this cluster. The only keyword identified in the fifth cluster pertains solely to Australia, with a specific focus on ecotourism in the country. Table 2.2

Table 2.2: Frequently occurring keywords in the Journal of Ecotourism

Table 6. Frequently occurred keywords in JE.					
2002–2010	O	2011–2020	O	2002–2020	O
Ecotourism	34	Ecotourism	50	Ecotourism	84
Wildlife tourism	13	NBT	22	Wildlife tourism	28
Conservation	7	Conservation	20	Conservation	27
Sustainability	5	Sustainable tourism	16	NBT	26
Sustainable tourism (ST)	5	Wildlife tourism	15	ST	21
Tourism	5	Sustainability	8	Sustainability	13
Community Based Tourism (CBT)	4	Protected areas	7	Tourism	10
Nature based tourism (NBT)	4	CBET	6	Protected areas	9
Recreation	4	Management	6	CBT	8
Australia	3	Botswana	5	Management	8

O: Occurrences, CBET: Community based ecotourism

Source: Khanra, Dhir, Kaur, and Mäntymäki 2021)

Literature related to the topic, however, has discussed the issue of employment as a general indicator of ecotourism impacts rather than as a single factor. For example, in their study on the perceived benefits of ecotourism in the Amazon regions of Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia, Gordillo, Hunt and Stronza (2008) found that ecotourism has become a major source of income for local people either through direct employment such as managers, guides, housekeepers, and boat drivers, or from sales of foods, handicrafts, transportation, or other services.

The authors report that a few workers have abandoned other economic activities and shifted entirely to tourism; others have added tourism to traditional economic activities such as forest extraction and farming. This empirical evidence may support the idea that some of the occupations in ecotourism do not require high skill levels, which allow people to participate in more inter-professional mobility. Specific scientific evidence is nonetheless required for assertions regarding the characteristics of ecotourism employment in this sense. Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine the discipline-specific skills required for ecotourism and evaluate the efficacy of workplace-based learning (WPBL) in facilitating the acquisition of these skills by ecotourism students. This study is of considerable significance and will provide valuable contributions to the existing literature in the various fields related to ecotourism education.

First and foremost, the statement acknowledges the importance of understanding the discipline-specific skills that are crucial in the context of this rapidly expanding sector, which prioritises environmental sustainability and responsible tourism. The comprehension of this concept is of utmost importance when formulating effective educational initiatives targeted at nurturing proficient and environmentally aware ecotourism practitioners. Furthermore, this study attempts to address gaps in current knowledge by identifying specific skills within the field of ecotourism that are frequently deficient among professionals in the industry. These professionals are expected to have a comprehensive understanding of both tourism and environmental conservation. Therefore, the results offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and practitioners to take proactive measures to address skill deficiencies in their respective fields.

2.7 DISPARITIES IN SKILLSETS WITHIN THE ECOTOURISM SECTOR AND THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THIS DEFICIT

The proliferation of ecotourism can be attributed to the global trend of countries endeavouring to foster sustainable tourism practices as a means of mitigating the environmental deterioration resulting from the prevalence of mass tourism (Gavurova, Suhanyi and Rigelský, 2020). Despite the substantial expansion of the ecotourism sector, there continues to be a notable deficiency in skills within the industry (Xu, Ao, Liu and Cai, 2023). This section aims to examine the skills gaps present in the field of ecotourism, along with the underlying factors contributing to these gaps.

There are several skills shortages in the ecotourism industry, including soft skills, technical skills, and knowledge gaps. Technical skills, computer skills, and soft skills are of particular significance to ecotourism (Fennell, 2021). This is in line with the views of Cavalcante, Coelho and Bairrada (2017), who emphasise the significance of soft skills such as communication, customer service skills, and teamwork. Indeed, this study agrees with this view, considering the customer-oriented nature of the ecotourism industry. Hence, one of the objectives underpinning this study is to identify discipline-specific skills that are crucial for ecotourism.

The study aims to further identify the skills gaps in ecotourism and assess the implications of WPBL for the attainment of discipline-specific skills. Furthermore, this research examines the effectiveness of WPBL within the specific domain of ecotourism. According to Shasha, Geng, Sun, Musakwa and Sun (2020). By elucidating the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application, this study provides valuable perspectives on how students can acquire crucial skills and real-world experience required to navigate the ever-changing and context-dependent ecotourism sector. In addition, the recognition of skills specific to the discipline plays a crucial role in preparing a cohort of ecotourism professionals who possess the ability to actively contribute to the broader sustainability objectives of the industry.

Although this study primarily examines skill deficiencies, it is important to acknowledge the importance of taking a broader view that considers the complex interaction of different factors that shape the ecotourism industry. Ramaano (2023) asserts that community-based ecotourism (CBET) initiatives have emerged as an alternative strategy. These initiatives seek to integrate environmental, cultural, social, and economic sustainability through active community participation. The author further states that by involving local communities, CBET not only addresses skill gaps but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment. It emphasises collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and community engagement, recognising that ecotourism success hinges on the active involvement of those directly impacted. In line with this notion, Dangi and Petrik (2021) posit that responsible tourism emphasises not only technical competencies but also a deep understanding of environmental impact, conservation, and community well-being. Responsible tourism practitioners advocate for holistic approaches that balance economic benefits with environmental stewardship and social equity.

By integrating responsible practices, there is a move beyond mere skill acquisition to foster a mindset of stewardship and long-term sustainability. Beyond only technical knowledge, successful ecotourism management calls for a sophisticated awareness of environmental dynamics. Environmental deterioration affects the viability of ecotourism by endangering natural resource management. Therefore, this research recognises the importance of environmental management techniques in reducing skill shortages. The resilience of ecotourism businesses is generally improved by tackling environmental challenges. Professionals who possess extensive expertise can significantly and powerfully advocate for the adoption of responsible and environmentally sustainable practices (Shasha et al., 2020).

These practices aim to effectively preserve biodiversity and enhance the welfare of local communities. Furthermore, the findings of this study have the potential to provide valuable guidance in the formulation of policies and strategies pertaining to ecotourism. This is particularly relevant as governments and industry stakeholders often depend on research outcomes to inform their decision-making processes, ensuring that their actions are grounded in empirical evidence. This study adds to what is known about ecotourism education by focusing on discipline-specific skills and WPBL. It does this by adding to the literature on how to teach students well enough to have successful careers in this unique and specialised field. This study's thorough examination of the specific skills needed and its evaluation of how well WPBL is functioning make it a significant and long-lasting addition to the existing body of knowledge and the field of ecotourism. Apart from technical and soft skills, knowledge gaps have been identified in ecotourism. A study by Camargo and Gretzel (2017) focused on tourism and hospitality students and found that there are knowledge deficiencies in sustainable tourism practice and ecotourism principles.

There are several considerations contributing to skill gaps in ecotourism. Hence, one of the main research questions of this study is to explore the factors contributing to the skill gaps in ecotourism. There is a discrepancy in approaches to ecotourism education and training courses. As noted by Font and McCabe (2017), there is non-standardisation in content, quality, and heterogeneity in the structure of ecotourism courses, which results in discrepancies in the skills and knowledge of graduates. Another crucial factor that has intensified the skills gaps is the constant and rapid evolution of the ecotourism industry.

As noted by Camargo and Gretzel (2017), the industry is continually evolving, with new trends and practices developing continually. This necessitates that individuals employed in the industry possess adaptability and the capacity to rapidly acquire novel skills and knowledge to effectively address the prevailing demands of the industry. The inclusion of sustainability and the principles of ecotourism into the broader curriculum of tourism and hospitality education can play a crucial role in equipping graduates with a fundamental comprehension and awareness of sustainable practices (Xu, et al., 2023). This study is in support of this notion, as it has great potential to empower graduates with a wider spectrum of tourism, considering the emerging phenomenon of urban ecotourism. Although the focus of this study is on undergraduate ecotourism students from DUT, it is imperative that these students are not confined and restricted by the boundaries of traditional ecotourism.

Consequently, this study posits that the placement of ecotourism students for WPBL should not only be limited to traditional ecotourism establishments. These students must be exposed to the broader scope of tourism so that they understand and learn how sustainable practices and pillars of ecotourism can be applied in both rural and urban environments. As the ecotourism industry evolves, so should the WPBL experience, so that it better prepares students for the world of work through the attainment of contemporary skills. The following sections examine the multifaceted realm of work-integrated learning (WIL), emphasising its function as a comprehensive term that connects theory and practice. Although the primary focus of this study is WPBL, it is important to acknowledge WPBL as a form of WIL. Consequently, a discussion on WIL is essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of its overarching framework and its relevance to the study.

2.8 EARLY INTERPRETATIONS AND APPROACHES TO WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL) AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS TO WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING (WPBL)

In scholarly discourse, it is imperative to recognise that workplace-based learning (WPBL) exists within the broader framework of work-integrated learning (WIL). WPBL represents a specific manifestation of WIL, characterised by its emphasis on authentic workplace experiences for learners. For a comprehensive exploration of WPBL, it is essential to recognise its inherent linkage to WIL. This section serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it establishes the theoretical foundation by acknowledging WPBL as a subset of WIL.

It will commence with an examination of early interpretations of WIL, particularly through the lens of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, which provides a robust framework for understanding the experiential learning process. By integrating Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, this section will elucidate how experiential learning theories underpin the broader concept of WIL and its various manifestations, including WPBL. Subsequently, this section will justify the study's primary focus on WPBL. Explicitly addressing this relationship not only lays the groundwork for a nuanced exploration of WPBL but also situates it within the broader educational landscape. This approach will ensure a thorough understanding of WPBL's unique features and its critical role within the WIL framework.

Dewey (1938) was among the first educational theorists who emphasised the significance of experience in achieving a genuine education through learning by doing. Dewey's (1938) idea of vocation is expressed as a calling to an intensely felt and ethically grounded identity within a chosen career and encompasses the value of critical and educational engagement with the key issues of public life that link professional and vocational proficiency. Subsequent theorists, such as Kolb (1984), have similarly pointed out that experience alone is insufficient for an all-inclusive and effective learning experience, though it is part of learning.

In the context of higher education, effective learning requires a knowledge foundation, a motivational context, learning tasks and activities, and interaction between the learner and the learning environment (Biggs, 1995). Observation and reflection on experience by students are important for learning to occur. Students need to further develop concepts and interpret the experience by applying and testing these concepts through new experiences (Schön, 1983). More recently, the theoretical background and underpinnings of Kolb's experiential learning process and Schön's reflective practitioner model have been met with criticism. For people to learn from experience and general reflection, critical thinking is crucial. If the aforementioned form of learning is considered a catalyst for acquiring knowledge about the workplace and merging theoretical understanding with practical application, then its efficacy and worth are not yet fully realised.

2.8.1 Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

WPBL is a component of WIL and occurs when students are placed in work environments for the purposes of learning and acquiring discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Workplace learning, therefore, typically involves students in the planning and implementation of duties and activities (Kolb, 1984). This enables students to reflect on and evaluate the tasks and activities and make necessary adjustments for future action. The reflective process is used by the student to determine what is useful, relevant, and important to retain, and in addition, to use this learning to perform another activity. Workplace-based learning consequently mirrors the way humans naturally learn. Typically, WPBL curricula tend to be grounded in Kolb's (1984) learning cycle or its characteristic versions. The learning cycle suggests an iterative sequence of methods that triggers learning. There are four stages:

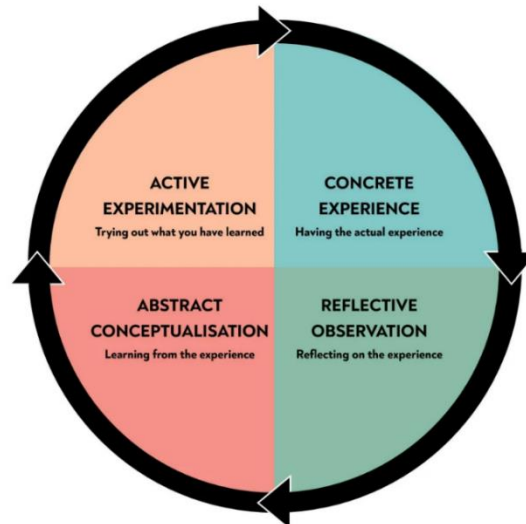


Figure 2.4: Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (Source: Kolb 1984)

- **Concrete experience:** one cannot learn something merely by watching or reading about it; active participation is indispensable.
- **Reflective observation:** student attention should be focused on elements of the experience. This means taking time out of doing and pausing to consider what has just taken place.
- **Abstract conceptualisation:** through a process of inductive reasoning, students analyse observations, explain them, and integrate them into logically sound theories.
- **Active experimentation:** the students consider how they are going to put what they have learned into practice.

WPBL was designed to enhance skills and better prepare students for the world of work. However, the underpinning reason behind its partial contribution to bridging the skills gap, particularly in the tourism industry, is the rapidly changing nature of workplaces. Most employers require entry-level employees with high-level technical skills, thus creating detrimental discrepancies. This disadvantages first-or second-year students in a sense that the students are merely trainees, but it fails to provide the student with an appropriate experience. Jacobs and Dzansi (2015) state that there are discrepancies between theoretical knowledge and contextualised work knowledge, which make it difficult to generate meaningful articulation between the two, particularly when the forms of knowledge and structures are inadequately understood by both educators and workplace supervisors.

2.8.2 Critiques of experiential education with emphasis on Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

Critiques have been directed towards experiential education, particularly Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). This model has been subject to critical examination by scholars and educators in order to identify its potential limitations and areas for improvement. This section provides a detailed examination of existing sources that present critiques of experiential education, offering insights into the limitations and areas for improvement within this educational framework.

The influential study conducted by Kolb (1984) instituted the fundamental principles of experiential learning, which subsequently led to its extensive implementation. However, Kolb acknowledged potential criticisms within his framework, including the lack of explicit guidance and organisation in experiential learning activities. The author emphasises the importance of deliberate contemplation and effective guidance to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) explored the importance of reflection within the context of experiential education and further expresses concerns regarding superficial and unanalytical contemplations that could impede the transformative capacity of experiential learning. According to Boud et al. (1985), the facilitation of meaningful reflection is essential to improving the depth of learning and fostering the development of critical thinking skills. In their subsequent research, Boud and Walker (1998) examine diverse models aimed at facilitating reflection within the context of experiential learning.

Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the cultivation of reflective practice can present difficulties, as certain students may exhibit resistance or encounter difficulties when engaging in the process of introspection. Consistent with this concept, Smith, et al., (2007) provide a critical examination of Kolb's (1984) Theory of Experiential Learning, emphasising potential limitations in its adaptability within various contexts. The author underscores the potential limitations of Kolb's model in accounting for cultural and contextual variations, suggesting that its application to educational settings outside of the Western context may be limited.

In the work of Neden, Townsend and Zuchowshi (2018) lies a comprehensive evaluation of experiential learning programmes, where concerns regarding their propensity for superficiality and oversimplification of intricate real-world dynamics are highlighted. The authors posit that while experiential learning possesses engaging qualities, it should not be universally perceived as a remedy for all educational difficulties. There exist contrasts between acquiring knowledge through direct personal experience and through formal educational resources, leading to investigations into the effectiveness of experiential education in facilitating knowledge acquisition (Fleming and Haigh, 2017). In accordance with this perspective, this study aims to highlight the practicality and relevance of WPBL in the field of ecotourism education, particularly by emphasising the acquisition of discipline-specific skills. The contribution of this research extends beyond the realm of academia, as it intends to effectively address the requirements of the ecotourism industry and its various stakeholders.

This study provides valuable insights for both higher education institutions (HEIs) and industry practitioners by emphasising the positive impacts of WPBL on the development of discipline-specific skills. Higher education institutions (HEIs) can utilise this information to enhance and improve their ecotourism curricula. Konstantinou and Miller (2020) argue in favour of adopting a more nuanced perspective on experiential learning that acknowledges the significance of design, intentionality, and alignment with learning objectives. Academic discourse has witnessed scholars raising inquiries regarding the underlying foundational assumption upon which the theory is predicated. Moreover, these scholars have articulated concerns pertaining to the formulation and acceptance of its constructs, as well as its potential for generalisability and efficacy (Kumar and Bhandarker, 2020). Morris (2020) argues that Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory does not offer a satisfactory understanding of Dewey's notion of experience and reflective thought, instead presenting a biased and inaccurate portrayal.

Calderon Carvajal, et al., (2021) conducted a study that concluded that while Kolb's model incorporates the four learning modes, it does not sufficiently adhere to the "orthogonal bipolar structure" necessary for determining valid learning styles. This implies that despite the acknowledgment of different learning modes, the concept of learning styles is not considered viable due to its failure to adhere to an orthogonal bipolar structure.

2.9 CONTEXTUALISING WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING (WPBL) WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

The term work-integrated learning (WIL) was coined because of the rising diversity in the modes of vocational learning (Reeders, 2000). According to Eraut (2004), WIL is defined as a process of placing students in professional environments with the goal of fostering the development of vocational skills and qualities. In this regard, there is considerable emphasis on the importance of WIL in facilitating practical experience and the cultivation of essential employability competencies, including but not limited to problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. Accordingly, Billett (2002) refers to WIL as an educational methodology that purposefully combines an academic curriculum with practical experiences in real-world environments. The author emphasises the significance of establishing substantial connections between theoretical knowledge acquisition and practical application in professional settings, with the aim of augmenting students' professional growth and marketability. WIL is intended for the development of graduate capabilities by incorporating authentic workplace experiences into the curriculum. The focus is on the cultivation of graduate attributes, such as critical thinking and adaptability, with the aim of equipping students for a seamless transition into the professional domain (Zegwaard and Coll, 2011). Different terms are used in the literature to refer to WIL, including experience-based learning, professional learning (Zanko, et al., 2011); cooperative education, work-based learning (Groenewald, 2007); practice-based learning (Hodge, et al., 2011); work placements, internships, field work, sandwich year degrees, and job shadowing (Von Treuer, Sturre, Keele and McLeod, 2011).

Internships or placements taken off-campus are conventional (Gardner and Bartkus, 2014) and the most widely reported and accepted form of WIL (Rowe, Winchester-Seeto and Mackaway, 2016). Therefore, WIL is still often mistaken for a simple internship or work placement.

However, tertiary institutions are using the term WIL in a broader sense than just internships or placements to accommodate a wide range of activities that have a strong focus on industry partnerships (Simpson, et al., 2018). In this sense, WIL is used interchangeably with professional learning, which is conceptualised as the development of professional capabilities through teaching and learning experiences and activities that integrate academic, discipline-specific, and industry-referenced knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Papadopoulos, et al., 2011).

A typology of WIL to cover all activities that have industry involvement is also generated by Mackaway and Winchester-Seeto (2018), encompassing industry simulation, industry practitioner delivery, industry mentoring, industry study tours industry placement, industry competitions and industry projects. The World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE) is a globally oriented international organisation that is dedicated to the advancement and proliferation of WIL on a global scale. The association characterises WIL as a methodical strategy for designing educational curricula that combines theoretical instruction with the practical utilisation of knowledge in authentic contexts. Similarly, the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) describes WIL as an instructional approach involving students in genuine, pertinent, and significant work encounters that enhance their professional growth. The significance of WIL in enhancing the employability of graduates and developing robust collaborations between academic institutions and industries is underscored by ACEN. The European Work-Integrated Learning Consortium (EWIL) elucidates that WIL is a pedagogical method that incorporates the attainment of theoretical knowledge with practical work experiences, with the intention of preparing students with the necessary skills and proficiencies to efficiently navigate future career demands. A substantial body of literature has highlighted the positive correlation between WIL and student motivation, engagement, and skill development. Roberts, Hall and Morag (2017) argue that WIL can encourage critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in tourism students, which leads to better decision-making skills in real-world scenarios. Similarly, Park, et al., (2019) emphasise that WIL enhances students' interpersonal and communication skills, preparing them for successful integration within the workforce. By contrast, some researchers have concerns regarding the effectiveness of WIL in tourism and ecotourism qualifications.

Rowe and Zegwaard (2017) contend that inadequate industry partnerships and limited resources can hinder the successful implementation of WIL programmes, reducing their impact on student employability. Moreover, Bilslund, Nagy and Smith (2020) propose that variations in industry practices and the dynamic nature of the tourism sector might not always align with academic curricula, creating a discrepancy between theoretical learning and practical application. The issue underpinning this research is in accordance with these sentiments. As previously noted, WIL plays a crucial role in preparing ecotourism students for the dynamic and evolving industry. However, variations in industry practices and the ever-changing nature of the ecotourism industry may result in a misalignment between theoretical learning and practical application. This discrepancy can hinder the development of discipline-specific skills critical for success in ecotourism careers. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify discipline-specific skills required in ecotourism, ascertain any existing gaps, and investigate the effectiveness of WPBL in assisting ecotourism students in acquiring these essential skills. Moreover, the researcher presents a persuasive case for the integration of WPBL into the curricula of ecotourism undergraduate qualifications. Due to the complex nature of ecotourism, which incorporates interactions with natural environments, local communities, and cultural heritage, traditional classroom education alone is insufficient to provide students with the requisite abilities to effectively navigate these complexities.

2.10 HIGHLIGHTING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING MODALITIES WITH EMPHASIS ON WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING (WPBL)

This section highlights the diverse modalities of WIL, outlining various approaches such as internships, cooperative education, and service learning. Emphasis is placed on WPBL, illustrating its significance and relevance to the central research focus by situating it within the broader framework of WIL. Workplace-based learning (WPBL) is associated with the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills in both the university and the workplace with the formal and pre-arranged involvement of employers (Holmes, 2018). Problem-based learning (PBL) stimulates learning through the structured exploration of a research- or practice-based problem (Stepheson and Galloway, 2020). This type of learning requires small, self-directed groups working on a task that is usually related to or based on a real-life problem. Project-based learning (PjBL) merges PBL and WPBL by combining intellectual inquiry, real-world problems, and student engagement in pertinent and meaningful work.

This approach engages students in complex, real-world problems to support their understanding of essential concepts and practical skills (Guo, et al., 2020). Work-directed theoretical learning (WDTL) requires the introduction and sequencing of theoretical forms of knowledge in a way that meets academic criteria that are applicable and relevant to career-specific components (Morris, 2019). Simulated learning (S) involves the impersonation of the real world in the academy, representing certain key qualities of the selected workplace. This sort of learning will include laboratories, patient models, mock meetings, and flight simulations (Leary, 2019). These types of WIL provide several approaches to bridge the gap between theory and practice, enhancing students' employability and preparation for their future careers. However, this study focuses on WPBL. Table 2.3 provides a summary of the types of WIL.

Table 2.3: Summary of the different types of WIL modalities

Workplace based learning (WPBL)	WPBL involves the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills both in the university and in the workplace, with the formal involvement of employers.
Problem-based learning (PBL)	PBL is used for a range of pedagogic approaches that encourage students to learn through the structured exploration of a research or practice-based problem. Students work in small self-directed groups to define, carry out and reflect upon a task, which is usually related to, or based on, a 'real-life' problem.
Project-based learning (PjBL)	Combines PBL and WBL in that it brings together intellectual inquiry, real-world problems, and student engagement in relevant and meaningful work. Project work is generally understood to facilitate students' understanding of essential concepts and practical skills by immersing students in complex, real-world problems.
Work-directed theoretical learning (WDTL)	Involves an attempt to ensure that theoretical forms of knowledge (such as mathematics and physics in engineering programmes) are introduced and sequenced in ways that meet academic criteria that are applicable and relevant to career-specific components.
Simulated Learning (S)	Learning is stimulated through an activity that involves the imitation of the real world in the academy. The act of simulating something entails representing certain key characteristics of the selected workplace and includes such things as laboratories, patient models, mock meetings, flight simulations etc.

Source: Adapted from (Maseko 2018; CHE 2011)

2.10.1 Workplace-based learning (WPBL)

WPBL is a component of WIL and occurs when students are placed in work environments for the purposes of learning and acquiring discipline-specific knowledge and skills. WPBL therefore typically involves students in the planning and implementation of duties and activities (Kolb, 1984). This enables students to reflect on and evaluate the tasks and activities and make necessary adjustments for future action. WPBL consequently mirrors the way humans naturally learn and was designed to enhance skills and better prepare students for the world of work.

The Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative (2013) denotes that it must be recognised that effective and successful WPBL must be underpinned by a solid theoretical foundation. Solid grounding in specific disciplines is crucial for students to gain full competence and proficiency in their professions. Students ought to understand how the knowledge production systems of the disciplines are relevant to extra-academic contexts if they are to adequately prepare themselves for South Africa's diverse social and economic needs. Effective WPBL should be integrated into discipline-based knowledge and should attempt to understand appropriate discipline. If this is not the case, divergence is likely to occur, and an anti-disciplinary attitude will be taken in which vital discipline-based concepts are overlooked rather than enlarged through connections among disciplines and across contexts (Council on Higher Education, 2011).

In the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (2013) reports that, commonly, work placements are unstructured and do not contribute to the outcomes of the qualification; rather, they take the form of compulsory work experience. Therefore, close cooperation between employers and higher education institutions in the design of curricular and learning outcomes for WIL is necessary. The government has over the years introduced policies that emphasise the significance of WIL. The New Growth Path, the National Development Plan (RSA, 2012), the National Skills Accord (DHET 2011a), the National Skills Development Strategy III (DHET 2011b), and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) all allude to the growing emphasis on workplace learning as a core and vital component of vocational and occupational education and the role this type of education and training plays in economic development and job creation.

2.10.2 The benefits of workplace-based learning (WPBL)

The growing body of literature on the benefits of WPBL on competence development tends to intersect in the following areas: improving academic performance (Caldicott, et al., 2020), improving academic knowledge (Ferns, Campell and Zegwaard, 2014), expanding the work-based knowledge of students (Peters, Sattler and Kelland, 2014), and increasing the employability of graduates through broadening their professional skills (Zehr and Korte, 2020).

Other studies have placed their emphasis on developing the professional identity and language of students (Burgess, et al., 2020), increasing the career management competencies of students, and increasing local and regional collaborative engagement between the university, employers, and industry (Atkinson, 2016; Henderson and Trede, 2017; Khuong, 2016). Regarding the WIL-academic performance relationship, Crawford and Wang (2015) highlighted that Chinese students who undertook placements in their third year of study were seven times more likely to achieve good grades than those who opted out of work placements. The authors further reported that students with good grades in their first and second years of study were more likely to undertake placements than those with poor grades. Much of the aforementioned research seems to lay emphasis on strengthening the learning outcomes of students, for example, targeting particular authentic competencies and improving the quality of industrial experience and exposure (Smith and Worsfold, 2015), rather than focusing on the nature of programmes, including the selection of appropriate content, and the processes, such as course organisation and teaching modalities, which trigger and culminate in the acquisition of such competencies.

2.10.3 The value of WPBL in preparing students for graduate-level employment and the application of disciplinary knowledge

The selection and organisation of applicable learning content to adequately prepare students for workplace requirements is pertinent to student success in WPBL for two important reasons. Firstly, the reality is that while universities manage the WPBL programme, the learning environment is not within the premises of the university campus, and secondly, processes that enable student participation and the attainment of learning outcomes occur within the workplace or industry (Henderson and Trede, 2017). WPBL has received increasing attention as higher education institutions endeavour to align their curricular offerings with employability outcomes (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017). The need for this alignment arises from demands by employers, students, and governments on the premise that institutions of higher learning should produce employable and work-ready graduates. Institutions of higher learning have recognised WPBL as a fundamental and significant learning strategy that entails meaningful, applied, practical, and real-world activities in an authentic context with the aim of advancing students' professional understanding and abilities (Zegwaard, Khoo and Adam, 2018). The authors further state that WPBL provides an opportunity to develop life-long learning and enhance discipline-specific competencies.

A study by Jackson (2017) emphasises the significance of facilitating an authentic learning experience that exposes students to professional ideology and practice during the course of their academic studies. It affirms the role of WPBL in enhancing the early stages of development amongst students, with a specific focus on student understanding and awareness of the duties, responsibilities, expectations, standards, attitudes, beliefs, and ethical values associated with their prospective profession.

Throughout work placements, students improve their understanding of the importance of self-directed learning through inquisitiveness and not merely conforming to current practice as the best and only way of doing things (Jackson, 2017). Students must be central to the university-industry collaboration to facilitate access to the workplace and achieve effective integration of students into work-based environments. During WPBL, students engage with the offerings of the workplace and can reflect on their experiences and their ability to demonstrate that they can achieve WPBL outcomes and enhance work-related skills (Henderson and Trede, 2017). WPBL is fundamental in assisting students to better understand the tasks and responsibilities of their intended profession. Active participation and engagement in the workplace enhance awareness of what is required and why. The observation of behaviour from co-workers allows students to capitalise on gaining knowledge through asking questions and fostering internal relationships (Jackson, 2017). Since students learn in the workplace through the observation of the actions of their supervisors and work colleagues, it is therefore important to highlight how individual behaviour impacts learning experience of students. Role-modelling by workplace supervisors and employees is crucial and allows for mindfulness on how tasks are executed in the workplace, thereby raising standards and setting a good example for students (Fleming and Pretti, 2019).

To optimise the learning experience for students, it is imperative they are integrated into the workplace community rather than being considered outsiders. This integration promotes authentic activities and grants students the opportunity to learn about what working in their intended field really entails (McClean, Odio and Kerwin, 2020). The key strategy for workforce development lies in hosting students for WPBL, as both the student and work organisations stand to mutually benefit. Firstly, organisations gain from students who bring verve and disciplinary knowledge, and secondly, hosting students is a way of nurturing and securing students to become a skilled workforce when they graduate (Crane, Brough and Fisher, 2019).

Graduate competence and employability are regarded as essential and critical success factors for graduate programmes by universities, industry, and the students themselves. In response to the demands of the industry, the higher education and training sector has been developing and advancing WPBL experiences for academic credit within undergraduate programmes. The interest of the university in valuable WPBL experiences is worthwhile given the acclaimed benefits to professionalism and student employment.

The problem is that such WPBL opportunities, if not effectively governed and supervised, pose risks for ensuring the quality of student standards of practice (Govender and Våland, 2021). On a global scale, a common challenge that exists among universities is adequately grooming and preparing graduates for employment. The ultimate objective is to produce work-ready graduates that possess the obligatory work-based skills to become productive members of the workforce. Therefore, graduate employability has become a significant indicator for measuring the value of a university education (Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp and Graley, 2017).

2.11 THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING (WPBL) IN THE ATTAINMENT OF DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC SKILLS FOR ECOTOURISM

The rapid growth and evolution of the ecotourism industry warrants industry practitioners being in possession of a variety of discipline-specific skills and abilities. Notwithstanding the relevance of these skills for the sustainable growth of the sector, there has been limited research on their identification and the efficacy of workplace-based learning (WPBL) to acquire them. Following this, this study hopes to bridge this gap, as it is guided by the principal aim to identify discipline-specific and lacking skills in ecotourism and further assess the WPBL programme undertaken by undergraduate ecotourism students to determine its contribution towards assisting students attain discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. The existing body of literature on ecotourism skills has mostly focused on the significance of the possession of skills by ecotourism practitioners. These include in-depth knowledge about environmental management, interpretation, nature guiding and community engagement. Kharna et al., (2021) argue that further research is required on the specific skills and knowledge of ecotourism practitioners, especially in the areas of interpretation, environmental management, and community engagement. Similarly, Gunawardana, Aloysius and Chandrika (2022) identify the need for additional research on the specific skills and knowledge required of ecotourism practitioners in various practice areas.

One of the key areas of research in ecotourism has been identifying the essential skills and knowledge areas for ecotourism guides. A study by Moscardo and Murphy (2015) investigated the identification of essential knowledge areas and skills for ecotourism guides and found that interpretation of the natural environment, customer service safety, and group management are among the most important.

A similar study by Scott, Hall and Gössling, (2019) emphasise that a range of competencies, such as knowledge of sustainability principles, stakeholder engagement, and natural resources management, are essential for ensuring that ecotourism practices are sustainable and impact both the environment and local communities positively. There have been further studies that have investigated specific skills and capabilities that are essential for various aspects of ecotourism. Cuong (2020) conducted a comprehensive examination of the requisite skills and competencies essential for the effective implementation of community-based ecotourism. The investigation revealed that community-based ecotourism initiatives necessitate a diverse set of skills, encompassing community engagement and empowerment, marketing and promotional strategies, as well as financial management.

Despite this focus, there is still a need for research that examines the effectiveness of different approaches to training and developing these skills, such as WPBL and other formal education programmes. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the efficacy of WPBL in helping ecotourism students attain discipline-specific skills. Research of a similar nature as this study is crucial to ensuring that ecotourism continues to be a sustainable and successful industry. WPBL presents opportunities for ecotourism practitioners to develop practical skills such as guiding, interpretation, and safety management through hands-on experience (Choi, Oh and Chon, 2021). WPBL also provides opportunities for improving sustainability and conservation knowledge and allows ecotourism practitioners to apply these principles in real-world contexts (Fennell, 2021). More meaningful ecotourism growth can be achieved through community engagement in ecotourism, which can be facilitated through WPBL (Weaver and Lawton, 2017). Mixed results are another deficiency in the current research on ecotourism skills. Although studies such as those by Baum, Weaver, and Elliot-White (2018) have discovered that WPBL can efficiently develop ecotourism skills, on the contrary Chan, Yeung and Law (2019) argue that WPBL is limited in its effectiveness in helping students acquire discipline-specific skills.

As previously indicated, literature on ecotourism skills has hugely focused on broad-based skills and knowledge required for ecotourism practitioners, such as environmental management, interpretation, and community engagement, and there is limited research on the specific skills and knowledge required in different areas within the ecotourism sector (Mbaiwa, 2016). Thus, additional research is required to determine the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of WPBL in developing ecotourism skills. This study emphasises the need for further research to address the existing gaps.

Specifically, there is a need to identify the discipline-specific skills that are essential for the successful implementation of ecotourism and to evaluate the effectiveness of WPBL in developing these skills. These studies have the potential to address the existing gaps in the literature regarding ecotourism skills, thereby increasing the comprehension of the specific skills and knowledge required for the successful growth and development of ecotourism.

2.12 THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs) IN BRIDGING THE SKILL GAPS IN ECOTOURISM

Expanding upon the discourse surrounding the deficiencies in skill sets in ecotourism, Dredge and Jenkins (2011) assert that educational programmes pertaining to ecotourism, as offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) and other recognised training establishments, must align with the present and anticipated skill demands of the industry to attain sustainable development. For this to be achieved, a collaborative approach between industry and HEIs is necessary to develop a curriculum that will best enhance the necessary skills to meet the constantly evolving needs of the industry. Emphasis must be further placed on the continuous professional development of industry professionals, with upskilling opportunities presented on a recurring basis to ensure that the workforce is equipped with the latest knowledge and skills (Drege et al., 2011). One of the objectives of this study is to determine the role of WPBL in assisting ecotourism students from DUT to attain discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. This study posits that the utilisation of WPBL can effectively facilitate and foster robust relationships and collaboration between industry entities and HEIs. The integration of industry and academia within the framework of WPBL allows for the convergence of practical and academic expertise.

By fostering collaborative efforts and promoting transparent communication of learning outcomes, students can optimise their WPBL experience and acquire the necessary skills for ecotourism. In a similar vein, Römgens, Scoupe, and Beusaert (2020) state that HEIs and other formal training institutions should focus on practical training and experiential learning. The authors made this suggestion after their study revealed that most ecotourism operators and graduates possessed inadequate practical skills such as guiding and interpretation in the natural environment and limited knowledge about marketing and business concepts. In line with this, this study further argues that discipline-specific skills for ecotourism should go beyond soft skills and practical skills, but there should be a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship advancement and community development. Clarke and Healey (2020) assert that the integration of entrepreneurship into workplace learning creates an ideal platform for participants to develop an array of skills, including innovation, creativity, problem-solving, and risk-taking, which can be applicable to various contexts within and beyond where they are placed. This study is set in the South African context at DUT, which is a university of technology based in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In the present context, the significance of entrepreneurship education cannot be overstated, as it plays a pivotal role in facilitating the attainment of sustainable economic development for the nation. Morukhu, Mapanga and Mokgojwa (2021) state that embedding entrepreneurship into university curricula equips individuals with the skills and competencies necessary to start and manage businesses, thereby leading to employment creation and, ultimately, economic growth. Exposure to entrepreneurship in the workplace can contribute to wider economic and social benefits through the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, which in turn promotes innovation and competitiveness and creates new jobs and career opportunities.

As previously stated, this study uses a case study of DUT, in which the institution has developed a strategic plan, ENVISION2030, which is aimed at guiding the institution towards development over a period of 2018 to 2023. The plan is underpinned by four strategic perspectives, namely stewardship, systems and processes, sustainability, and society. Stewardship prioritises lived values, institutional culture, and creativity. The second pillar, systems and processes are focused on providing an enabling environment with coordinated and interdependent systems and processes across the institution. Sustainability, the third perspective of ENVISION2030, prioritises an integrated approach to knowledge production, environmental protection, and economic growth.

The fourth strategic perspective is society underpinned by three strategic goals: engaged university, entrepreneurship, and adaptable graduates. The fourth strategic perspective of DUT's ENVISION2030 is of particular relevance to this study, and it has a focus on entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) posit that there is a need for a multidisciplinary approach to ecotourism education and training. The authors suggest that the ecotourism curriculum should encompass a range of disciplines, such as environmental science, business management, social science, and cultural studies, to ensure that graduates have a broad understanding of the complexity of the industry.

2.13 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Universities of Technology (UoTs) are crucial in the South African higher education landscape, particularly in the technical and vocational fields. This section will examine the academic significance of universities of technology, considering the role of workplace-based learning and the focus on tourism and ecotourism qualifications. The South African higher education system exhibits distinct divisions along racial, gender, class, and spatial lines, reflecting the enduring influence of the oppressive apartheid regime. The founding of universities of technology in South Africa can be attributed to the organisational structure of the country's higher education system. The implementation of this change commenced in 2004. From 2003 to 2005, the number of higher education institutions in South Africa declined from 36 to 23 due to mergers. The higher education system in South Africa had 21 traditional universities and 15 technikons prior to the mergers. Currently, there are six comprehensive universities and six universities of technology (Department of Education, 2004).

Universities of Technology were commonly known as technikons and are widely recognised for their strong involvement in providing career-focused educational programmes. These resources are designed to assist recent graduates in preparing for the professional environment. The programmes have remained up-to-date due to the applied nature of the research and the partnerships established with industry. Universities of technology worldwide have made a substantial contribution to the advancement of their nations and regional economies through their dual focus on equipping graduates with the necessary skills for the workforce and utilising their research capabilities to identify societal and industrial needs and challenges, subsequently collaborating to develop effective solutions to real-world problems.

One of the primary challenges faced by the ecotourism industry in South Africa pertains to the limited availability of avenues for promoting awareness, facilitating education, and providing training opportunities. One effective approach to mitigating this scarcity is through education and training; however, the challenge of obtaining adequate access to such resources persists. This approach has been acclaimed for producing graduates who are equipped with the relevant skills and well-prepared for the world of work.

In addition, emphasis, is on providing students with skills required by industry, which ultimately makes a significant contribution to the country's economic growth (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). The primary objective of the Diploma in Ecotourism Management is to provide students with a strong inclination towards and enthusiasm for ecotourism, thereby empowering them to make valuable contributions towards the growth and advancement of the industry (South African Qualifications Authority, 2018). According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2014), universities of technology have the potential to alleviate the skills shortage in the country by equipping students with the necessary industry-specific skills and knowledge. Furthermore, numerous UoTs have forged alliances with various entities, such as industry, government, and other relevant stakeholders. These collaborations aim to cultivate entrepreneurship, foster innovation, and stimulate economic development. These efforts have proven instrumental in addressing challenges related to increased unemployment rates and limited innovation (Council on Higher Education, 2018).

The primary emphasis of UoTs lies in the realm of pedagogy and knowledge acquisition, while simultaneously engaging in scholarly investigations within their specific domains. The research findings are frequently utilised in practical contexts, emphasising the creation of innovative and viable resolutions for real-world challenges. In recent years, the process of evolution has been significantly shaped by the pursuit of research and innovation, placing particular importance on the domains of entrepreneurship and collaborations with industries (García-Morales, Martín-Rojas and Garde-Sánchez, 2020). This approach has the potential to contribute to addressing social and environmental challenges through active involvement in contemporary and impactful research and innovation endeavours. One of the key distinguishing characteristics of UoTs is the WPBL offering, which provides students with opportunities to gain workplace-based experience, which can enhance their employability and job readiness (Ferns Dawson and Howitt, 2019).

By participating in WPBL, students can apply classroom-learned knowledge and skills to real-world contexts, thereby helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice in education. According to Tichaawa (2021), tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the South African economy, and UoTs have a crucial role to play in providing the necessary education and training to contribute to this growth. Watson and Turpie (2019) also suggest that these institutions can promote the development of ecotourism in South Africa by providing education and training in ecotourism-related fields, such as sustainable tourism management and environmental science.

This thesis aims to explore the importance of the WPBL programme for ecotourism students pursuing a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management, with a specific focus on its implementation and impact at DUT. By examining the WPBL programme within the unique setting of DUT, this study seeks to present a compelling argument for the integration of such programmes in higher education institutions offering ecotourism courses and further contribute to the broader understanding of its significance in shaping responsible ecotourism practices. The importance of this study lies in its emphasis on the WPBL programme's potential to address the multifaceted challenges of the ecotourism industry. The increasing global recognition of the significance of environmental conservation and the adoption of sustainable practices has led to a heightened emphasis on the training and expertise of ecotourism professionals. The incorporation of real-world experiences and problem-solving tasks within the educational framework provides ecotourism students at DUT with a distinct opportunity to effectively connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. The case study approach allows for an in-depth investigation of how the WPBL programme is implemented in the Department of Ecotourism at DUT and its effects on students' academic performance, professional development, and overall understanding of sustainable ecotourism practices. Furthermore, the inclusion of the DUT case study contributes a crucial aspect to the current body of literature concerning ecotourism education. Although there exists a considerable body of literature examining the conceptual underpinnings of ecotourism and its potential advantages, there is a dearth of empirical investigations pertaining to the practical integration of experiential learning initiatives such as WPBL into ecotourism educational frameworks.

The case study will provide valuable insights that can address this knowledge gap, enhancing the existing literature with empirically supported strategies that can be implemented by other organisations and HEIs. The implementation of the WPBL programme by the Department of Ecotourism at DUT represents a pioneering step in promoting responsible ecotourism practices among future ecotourism managers. By immersing students in real-world scenarios and encouraging active engagement in problem-solving tasks, the programme fosters a deeper understanding of sustainable ecotourism principles beyond traditional classroom learning. This study further posits that, as a result, graduates from this programme are better equipped to tackle the complex challenges faced by the ecotourism industry, such as balancing economic growth with environmental preservation and respecting local cultures and communities. Moreover, the contribution of this study transcends the realm of academia.

The increasing demand for ecotourism experiences has created a significant requirement for skilled professionals who possess the necessary expertise to effectively address the industry's complex challenges in a responsible manner. This research aims to showcase the beneficial effects of the WPBL programme on student learning outcomes and professional competencies. By doing so, it has the potential to encourage other educational institutions and industry stakeholders to engage in collaborative efforts and prioritise the implementation of comparable experiential learning initiatives. Mtshali and Sooryamoorthy (2019) note the involvement of UoTs in research activities related to tourism, including destination management, tourism policy, and tourism impacts on local communities. This research has been instrumental in the development of knowledge and best practices in the industry and has also contributed to inform government policy. The practical and applied learning approach of UoTs in relation to tourism and ecotourism has been praised for producing graduates who are well-trained for the workforce and able to contribute to the tourism industry immediately upon graduation (Tichaawa and Rogerson, 2022). Through research and engagement with industry and government, UoTs are influential in informing best practices and policies in the tourism and ecotourism sectors (Wondirand, Tolkach and King, 2020). UoTs play a key role in supporting the growth and development of the tourism and ecotourism sectors in South Africa. The education and training they provide, along with their research and engagement with industry and government, can promote sustainable development in these sectors.

2.14 A UNIFIED SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK FOR ALL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The revised South African Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF, 2022), approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2012, has resulted in new qualifications. These are intended to eliminate articulation barriers caused by the former separate and parallel qualification structures for universities and the former technikons (now universities of technology). Consequently, specific qualifications have been substituted with alternative ones, and novel variations of qualifications were developed to enhance adaptability, particularly with regards to pathways for vocational and professional qualifications. Considering these developments, the Minister of Higher Education and Training has decreed that the deadline for initial participants enrolling in academic programmes not in accordance with the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework was December 31, 2019 (Government Gazette No. 40123, 2016). Table 2.4 shows the NATED 151 (non-HEQSF aligned qualifications) and HEQSF qualification categories with their corresponding NQF levels.

Table 2.4: Non-HEQSF aligned qualifications) and HEQSF qualification categories with their corresponding NQF levels.

Non – HEQSF Aligned Qualifications		HEQSF Aligned Qualifications	
Qualification type and credits	NQF level	Qualification type and credits	NQF level
Doctor Technologiae (DTech: Marketing) (240 credits)	NQF level 8	Doctor of Commerce in Marketing (360)	NQF level 10
Magister Technologiae (M Tech: Marketing) (120 credits)	NQF level 8	Master of Marketing (180)	NQF level 9
No equivalent Non-HEQSF aligned qualification exists		Postgraduate Diploma in Marketing (120)	NQF level 8
No equivalent Non-HEQSF aligned qualification exists		Advanced Diploma (120 credits)	NQF level 7
Baccalaureus Technologiae (BTech: Marketing) (120 credits)	NQF level 7	No equivalent HEQSF aligned qualification exists	
National Diploma (360 credits)	NQF level 6	Diploma (360 credits)	NQF level 6

(Source: South African Technology Framework, 2019, p. 3)

Table 2.4 illustrates that, with the exception of the nomenclature, there are no substantial variations in the structural composition of the previous and current academic programmes. There exist compelling rationales for this proposed alteration, one of which pertains to the increased global mobility of students and the assessment of relative efficacy. The syllabus content for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management has been reviewed, leading to minor modifications in the module offerings. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the current Diploma in Ecotourism, which includes a doctoral degree track, has replaced the former National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and has received official recognition from the South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework.

2.14.1 Transitioning from the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management to the Diploma in Ecotourism Management: The viewpoint of universities of technology in South Africa

The National Diploma in Ecotourism Management housed in the Department of Ecotourism at DUT is currently undergoing a phase-out process. According to the South African Qualifications Authority (2018), the purpose of the qualification is to equip the ecotourism industry with competent tour operators capable of effectively overseeing ecotourism programmes and successfully establishing and managing ecotourism enterprises. The initial registration of this qualification took place in 2018 with the South African Qualifications Authority, where the Council on Higher Education was designated as the primary entity responsible for quality assurance. The oversight and regulation of South African qualifications is carried out by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The recently introduced Diploma in Ecotourism Management, offered by both Vaal University of Technology and Tshwane University of Technology, is in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework and Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework established by SAQA. The new Diploma in Ecotourism Management is designed to address the concerns of misalignment with current industry needs and trends and further provide students with a nationally recognised qualification. In addition, the new qualification places a greater emphasis on practical and work-integrated learning, in accordance with the ecotourism industry's requirements. Curriculum modules such as Ecotourism Management Practice, Ecotourism Destination Planning and Development, and Ecotourism Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management reflect this (South African Qualifications Authority, 2019).

The National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and Diploma in Ecotourism have been developed with the purpose of providing learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values that support the sustainable development of the ecotourism sector (South African Qualifications Authority, 2019). This implies that the incorporation of WIL is a significant aspect of these qualifications. This study specifically examines the impact of WPBL on the acquisition of discipline-specific skills in the field of ecotourism by students.

Within the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) offering courses in ecotourism, WPBL demonstrates considerable potential in fostering the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical implementation. The significance of this study lies in its focus on WPBL as a potent pedagogical approach that expands learning beyond conventional classroom environments. In the context of ecotourism education, WPBL is particularly evident due to its requirement for a distinctive combination of theoretical understanding and practical skills (Thapa, 2019). This research aims to examine the impact of WPBL on the development of discipline-specific skills among students studying ecotourism, with the objective of enhancing the overall educational experience. Moreover, emphasizing WPBL beyond the confines of the classroom introduces a novel aspect to the current body of literature. Although there have been many investigations conducted on the advantages of WPBL in controlled academic settings, there is a lack of research exploring the results of WPBL conducted in authentic ecotourism environments. The study presents a persuasive argument regarding the integration of WPBL into the curricula of ecotourism qualifications. Due to the intricate dynamics encompassing natural environments, local communities, and cultural heritage, the comprehensive nature of ecotourism necessitates educational approaches that extend beyond traditional classroom settings to adequately prepare students for engaging with these complexities. The study posits that the WPBL approach serves as an experiential learning strategy that affords students the opportunity to employ theoretical knowledge in practical, real-world scenarios. By doing so, students can refine their problem-solving skills and cultivate a more profound comprehension of ecotourism practices.

2.15 ECOTOURISM QUALIFICATIONS: A GLOBAL AND REGIONAL VIEW ON THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Ecotourism has become an important sector of the tourism industry, with an approximate annual growth rate of 10 to 15% globally (Fennell, 2020). The ecotourism industry is focused on sustainable tourism practices that minimise negative impacts on the environment and promote conservation endeavours. This resulted in the development of ecotourism qualifications globally and regionally. Bob (2023) claims that, in the context of South Africa, universities of technology (UoTs) have emerged as leaders in the provision of ecotourism qualifications. According to De Villiers, Saayman, and Jordaan (2018), universities in the country have devised a range of programmes that focus on sustainable tourism practices and nature conservation.

The recognition of ecotourism qualifications was also acknowledged in Europe. The European Commission has earmarked ecotourism as a key priority for sustainable tourism development and, thus, has encouraged the development of qualifications in this area (European Commission, 2019). The EuroMAB programme, the initiative of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme, has contributed to promoting ecotourism qualifications in Europe. The primary objective of the programme is to foster the implementation of sustainable tourism practices within biosphere reserves. As part of this initiative, the programme has designed a comprehensive set of qualifications, one of which is a Master's degree in Sustainable Tourism Management. Equally, in Asia, ecotourism qualifications have gained acclaim as an important component of sustainable tourism development (Saidmamatov, et al, 2020). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture has developed a National Ecotourism Plan that aims to promote ecotourism as a core sector of the tourism industry (Mohd Nor, et al., 2020). The plan involves a focus on developing ecotourism qualifications. The development of ecotourism qualifications has also been influenced by the urgent need to address skill gaps in the industry. As noted by Becken and Hay (2007), there is a shortage of formal training and qualifications for ecotourism practitioners, which can result in inadequate knowledge and skills in sustainable tourism practices. This led to the development of qualifications that aim to overcome the skills gap and ensure that ecotourism practitioners have the knowledge and skills required to promote sustainable tourism practices.

Moreover, increasing interest in ecotourism and the growing number of tourists seeking environmentally sustainable experiences have led to a higher demand for qualified ecotourism professionals. Long and Bui (2020) assert that the development of ecotourism qualifications has therefore become a key priority for many countries, as they strive to meet this demand while ensuring that their tourism industry is sustainable and responsible. According to Ghazali, Jaafar and Omar (2018), there needs to be a comprehensive approach to ecotourism education that includes both the theoretical and practical aspects of sustainability. This is essential to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between tourism, the environment, and local communities and to equip them with the necessary skills to efficiently manage ecotourism operations.

Additionally, the development of ecotourism qualifications has been identified as an important tool to promote economic development and poverty alleviation in rural and marginalised communities. However, despite the growing demand for ecotourism professionals and the recognition of the importance of ecotourism qualifications, there are still significant challenges to the development and implementation of such qualifications. One of the main challenges is the lack of standardisation and certification of ecotourism qualifications, which can make it difficult for employers to evaluate the quality and relevance of qualifications. According to Higginbottom and Kline (2019), there is a need for greater collaboration between academia, industry, and government to develop and implement standardised ecotourism qualifications that meet the needs of the industry and ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Moreover, there is a need for more research on the effectiveness of ecotourism qualifications in meeting the needs of the industry and promoting sustainable tourism. According to Guttentag and Smith (2020), there is a shortage of research on the results of ecotourism education and training, notably in terms of employment outcomes and the ability of graduates to effectively manage ecotourism operations. Greater research in this area could help to inform the development of ecotourism qualifications and ensure that they are effective in meeting the needs of the industry and promoting sustainable tourism. Overall, the development of ecotourism qualifications is increasingly important in the context of growing demand for environmentally sustainable tourism experiences.

Although there are still challenges to the development and implementation of such qualifications, there is an acknowledgment of their significance in promoting economic development, supporting sustainable tourism, and ensuring that the tourism industry is managed in a responsible and sustainable manner.

2.16 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter has presented a thorough examination of ecotourism, tracing its development from its historical origins to its current growth and the rise of urban ecotourism. The chapter highlighted the importance of ecotourism as a prominent economic industry on a global scale, as well as its relevance specifically within South Africa. Additionally, it emphasised the fundamental principles that serve as the foundation for the implementation of ecotourism. Moreover, the chapter has emphasised the significance of acknowledging the discrepancies in skillsets within the ecotourism industry and the pivotal function that higher education institutions serve in mitigating these disparities. The implementation of WIL has been recognised as a valuable strategy for equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in postgraduate employment while also allowing them to apply their disciplinary expertise. The forthcoming chapter will elucidate the foundational theories underpinning this research.

CHAPTER 3

THE ADAPTATION OF THEORIES TO THE STUDY: GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND THE THEORY OF CHANGE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 described the purpose of this study and the research problem, which was in view of the study objective. The recent theoretical developments in Chapter 2 focused on presenting the theoretical foundations of this research. A common strategy used to fulfil the objectives of this research was aimed at providing a conceptual meaning of the probe as one contextualises the study. This research constituted a relatively new area in that it emerged from the perspective of providing a comprehensive overview of the key concepts that were founded on the theories that guided the research objectives. These approaches have been influential in the field not only because they laid the basis of the study; and further explained what the underlying principles were, which were part of the philosophies that informed the research design and methodology. Most of the Theories of Change and General Systems Theory adapted in this study were, however, focused on explaining how the incorporated sections provided for this study's theoretical setting and the research findings, as the researcher set the stage for the remaining chapters, which also presented some relevant literature and theories. The field has gradually broadened as the study provides the context in which both the General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change were applied, which all had to do with ensuring that such theories serve as a basis for the development and support of the study. This study's common technique was also to fundamentally project its philosophical, epistemological, methodological, and analytical methods. This thesis considers the field of establishing a theoretical framework that is discussed in the next paragraphs as the main subject of its study.

3.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ESTABLISHED AS THE BASIS FOR ECOTOURISM DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC SKILLS DURING WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING

This research emphasises the critical role of the theoretical framework in guiding the analysis and interpretation of data. It serves as the foundation upon which all knowledge for the study is constructed. Specifically, General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change were instrumental in shaping the rationale, problem statement, purpose, significance, and research questions of this study, aligning with Swanson's advice (Swanson and Chermack, 2013). The methodological and analytical approach used in this study closely adhered to the paradigm of the theoretical framework, recognising it as the cornerstone upon which the literature review, research methodology, and analysis in Chapter 5 were based. The theoretical framework not only facilitated the data analysis chapter but also examined established ecotourism concepts and theories, assuming they had been previously studied and were established knowledge in the field, in accordance with Kivunja's guidance (Kivunja, 2018). This study adopts the General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change as a structured approach to address the challenges encountered by the ecotourism field in effectively demonstrating discipline-specific skills. These theories were utilised as instruments to augment the comprehension of how WPBL contributes to the cultivation of discipline-specific skills for employment in the field of ecotourism.

The present study is in accordance with Lysaght's (2011) claim that the significance of a thesis depends on its effective integration within its theoretical framework. The utilisation of systems and change theoretical frameworks played a crucial role in addressing the intricate nature of concept collection, principles, and hypotheses that formed the foundation of this research. Furthermore, the primary objective of this section is to showcase an innovative methodology for addressing conventional discipline-specific challenges in the field of ecotourism through the utilisation of these theoretical frameworks. The objective of this study was to demonstrate how these lenses effectively addressed the research questions, thereby offering valuable insights into understanding the literature in the field of ecotourism research. The adoption of the General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change offers valuable tools for social scientists in this field, promoting coherence and overarching principles.

These theories enable the establishment of relationships between various ecotourism variables, facilitating explanations and predictions regarding the nature of the industry and the skills needed to foster its growth and sustainability. Moreover, they provide a systematic framework for understanding discipline-specific skills in ecotourism.

3.3 AN EXPLORATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is used to analyse data and interpret results based on expert theories in the field that the researcher plans to explore. It was important that the researcher mention that the theory in this study served an important purpose, which was to analyse the data and interpret the results. The theoretical framework is the foundation upon which all knowledge for a research study is built. It structures and supports the rationale, problem statement, purpose, significance, and research questions of the study. The issue of the theoretical framework cannot be mentioned without making emergent scholars understand that this is the foundation on which knowledge for research is built (Swanson and Chermack, 2013). In furtherance, the theoretical framework aids in the analysis and interpretation of research data as it is a structure that encapsulates concepts and theories developed from previously examined and published knowledge (Kivunja 2018). A theoretical framework, as defined by Eisehnart (1991), is a structured foundation for research that relies on a formal theory. This theory provides a well-established and coherent explanation of specific phenomena and their relationships. The chosen theory (or theories) that inform the understanding and guide the research process, along with the relevant concepts and definitions from that theory, collectively constitute the theoretical framework.

In the context of a research study, Lysaght (2011) underlines the importance of clearly establishing the researcher's theoretical framework. According to experts in the field of theoretical frameworks in research, it serves as a collection of concepts, principles, and hypotheses that form the bedrock of the research investigation. This framework not only provides a structured approach to understanding the research problem and question but also serves as a method for organising and comprehending the existing literature and research within a specific field. Yin (2009) defines a theoretical framework as a coherent bundle of general principles that presents a systematic description of phenomena by building relationships between variables to explain and predict the nature of the phenomena.

Wildemuth (2016) argues that broad ideas, concepts, and assumptions that guide the research and provide a framework for understanding the topic under investigation are what constitute a sound theoretical framework. Hesse-Biber (2011) asserts that a set of concepts and their relationships provide a framework for understanding the event under investigation and guide data gathering and analysis. A theoretical framework provides a set of assumptions, ideas, attitudes, and practices governing the researcher's approach to the study as well as data collection and analysis (Smith, 2020).

The selection of a framework by a researcher is not executed at random; it reflects significant personal beliefs and understandings about the nature of knowledge and how it exists in relation to the researcher, as well as the potential roles and tools that the researcher may adopt. According to Lovitts (2005), for a theory to be applied or developed for a research study, it must align with the research question, be interpreted in a logical manner, and be well understood. Mertens (1998) recommends that researchers identify the theoretical framework at the outset of a research study because it affects every decision made during the research process. Sarter (2006) justifies the importance of including a solid theoretical foundation, asserting that there is little practical value when a study is not supported by a sound theoretical framework. Overall, a theoretical framework is a set of concepts, principles, and assumptions that provide a foundation for the research study. It is a method for comprehending the literature and research in a particular field; it provides a perspective for comprehending the research problem and question; and it directs the collection and analysis of data.

3.4 THE ORIGINS AND FOUNDATIONS OF THE GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Figure 3.1 is a depiction of the origins of the General Systems Theory stemming from biology, emerging in the 1950s in response to a demand for a set of systematical theoretical structures to describe the empirical world (Boulding, 1956; Von Bertalanffy, 1951). Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1951) developed General Systems Theory (GST), which is a broad theory used to explain all systems in all domains of science (Von Bertalanffy, 1967). In the sense that it tries to create a framework or structure of systems on which to hang the meat and blood of individual disciplines and particular subjects in an organised and cohesive corpus of knowledge, General Systems Theory is the skeleton of science (Boulding, 1956).

The language of systems thinking, according to Johnson and Anderson (2018), offers a completely new method to discuss how we perceive the world and to collaborate more effectively on comprehending and resolving difficult issues.

Systems thinking, which has its roots in GST, is extremely effective in tackling complicated issues that are intractable by traditional reductionist thinking. It has been used in a wide range of subjects and disciplines (Monnat and Gannon, 2015). The ability to comprehend and resolve system difficulties is the true test of any definition of systems thinking. Systems thinking is one of the essential management skills for the twenty-first century, according to Kim (1999), and as our world becomes more internationally interconnected and as the rate of change quickens, we will all need to become more ‘system-wise’.

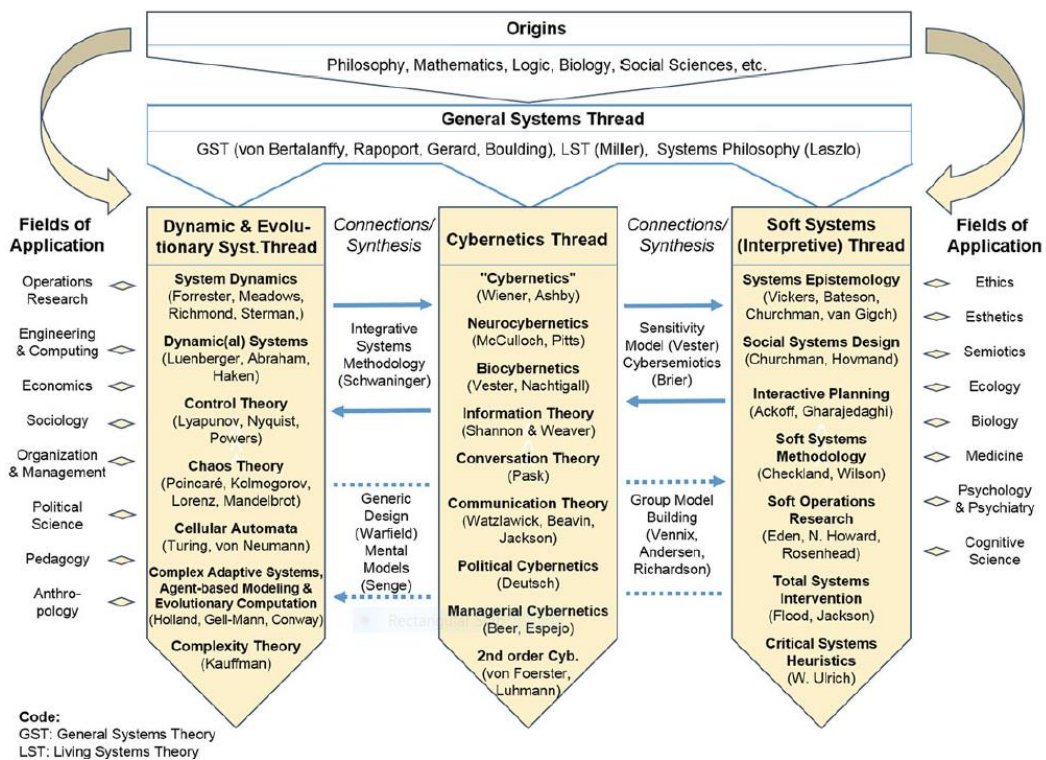


Figure 3.1: The Evolution of the Systems Approach and System Dynamics. (Source: Schwaninger 2020, p. 3)

GST also has its roots in mechanical engineering's cybernetic General Systems Theory (Lai and Huili Lin, 2017). Cybernetics is the study of control and communication in machine systems (Von Bertalanffy and Sutherland, 1974). The ideas of cybernetic GST were discovered to be helpful in explaining the behaviour of social systems that were extrapolated from machine systems, much like general systems theory.

Cybernetic systems depend on various feedback or control techniques to keep the system in a stable state. The system will therefore be forced to respond to and adapt to changes in the environment to preserve this equilibrium. Structural functionalism is another source of GST in organisational communication studies (Parsons and Shils, 1951). It places emphasis on the roles played by system parts as the system adapts to environmental demands. The four roles of actions: adaptation, goal accomplishment, pattern maintenance, and integration are crucial for a system's continued existence, efficacy, and pursuit of balance.

Specifically, adaptation entails the open exchange of system components with the environment to get resources necessary to sustain system development. The utilisation of resources to achieve goals in relation to other environmental systems is referred to as goal achievement. The construction and upkeep of a system's symbolic frames of reference as well as the utilisation of resources for internal coordination are the key focuses of pattern maintenance and integration. The concepts and principles of General Systems Theory can therefore be viewed as a macro-level theory that can be applied to comprehend biological, physical, and social systems due to its convergence of origins from several fields, that is, engineering, mathematics, biology, physics, and economics (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1972).

3.5 ADAPTATIONS OF GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY IN ORGANISATIONS

GST was quickly accepted by organisational academics by the 1970s, in part because they realised that traditional models were unable to explain complex organisational behaviour. The seminal publications closely related to organisational communication at the time (Monge, 1982; Thayer, 1968) helped GST gain traction at that time. GST is founded on the tenets of maximising interaction and democratic government as opposed to classical models, which emphasise minimising interactions (Von Bertalanffy and Sutherland, 1974). Additionally, the recognition that organisational contexts are complex and change quickly contributed to the development of GST (Ashmos and Huber, 1987). Von Bertalanffy (1972) introduced three key aspects, such as systems science, systems technology, and systems philosophy to the development of systems thinking and studies. According to Kiburg (1976), GST notions provide a framework for analysing and comprehending the actions of any specified interacting parts.

GST has thus developed into a powerful tool for classifying various phenomena, and having so done, it also permits the examination of their structures and processes in a manner that can generalise findings from such extremely diverse fields as cell biology, cognitive psychology, and organisational behaviour (Kilburg, 1976). Systems thinking, as described by Monat and Gannon (2015), can be used to resolve complicated issues that cannot be resolved using standard reductionist thinking. The relationships that exist between system components as well as the components themselves are the emphasis of the systems thinking method, and these linkages frequently determine how well a system functions (Monat and Gannon, 2015).

The insights from on Bertalanffy's GST are still relevant for the social sciences, according to Vanderstraeten (2019), Hofkirchner (2019), and Cadenas (2019), even though Von Bertalanffy's GST never presented a fully developed theory of social systems. According to Vanderstraeten (2019), one reason Von Bertalanffy's approach is appealing is because it emphasises the embeddedness of social processes and enables researchers to explain how complex, open systems behave because of interactions with their surroundings. The author further discusses how Parsons (1970) and Luhmann (1995), two of the most well-known social systems theorists, have expanded on these ideas and, in their own distinctive ways, show the enduring value of GST as a vital tool for developing reflexive sociological theories.

3.5.1 The unification of social sciences

Hofkirchner (2019) and Cadenas (2019) both make the case that Von Bertalanffy's GST offers significant insights into how to approach the unification or integration of the social sciences. Hofkirchner (2019) emphasises that Von Bertalanffy hoped to further the unification of science to produce solutions to the world's problems and discusses how his GST advances methodological, theoretical, as well as more practical ideas in this direction. According to Cadenas (2019), Von Bertalanffy's primary contribution to the integration of the sciences was to establish a universal language for the scientific community, which facilitated communication between various fields and fostered cosmopolitanism based on science. Some of the organisational, informational, and ethical ramifications of the Von Bertalanffy's theory of open systems are examined by Roth (2019) and Van Assche, Valentinov and Verschraegen (2019). According to Roth (2019), the concepts of openness and closure are highly susceptible to moralisation, which has detrimental effects on the advancement of modern systems-theoretical thought.

The similarities between the ideas of openness and transparency, both of which are frequently promoted as components of good governance today, are highlighted by Van Assche, et al. (2019). These similarities, according to the authors, are not as significant as they first appear to be. According to the authors, Von Bertalanffy's work on open systems raises some concerns about the notion of transparency and thus foreshadows some of the later systems-theoretic studies on operational closure and self-referentiality. The moral ramifications of the GST are further examined by Hammond (2019) who states that from an epistemological perspective, Von Bertalanffy's critique of mechanistic science is crucial. Many catastrophes, including the environmental problems faced today, are thought to be partially the result of mechanistic science. Mechanistic science tends to be coupled with administrative systems that can magnify the anti-humanistic tendencies, the effects in the real world, and produce understandings of issues that miss the unity of the person and the unity of science, producing an inappropriate reverence for technology and technological solutions to problems.

His perspective on a humanist science is still useful. Hammond emphasises Von Bertalanffy's ongoing significance for the life sciences and for bridging the social and natural sciences. Similar reasoning is used by Van Assche, Verschraegen, Valentinov and Gruezmacher (2019) who emphasise the value of Von Bertalanffy for comprehending connections between social and ecological systems. They share Hammond's belief in the ability of GST to understand the interconnectedness of systems and how problems can be solved in novel ways as a result. This study explored the significant problem of skill shortages in the field of ecotourism, with a particular emphasis on the lack of focus on this specific niche within the wider tourism industry. The primary issue at hand pertains to the prevailing emphasis placed on conventional tourism, resulting in a lack of adequate attention to the distinct demands and complexities associated with ecotourism. This research utilises Von Bertalanffy's theoretical framework to enhance the understanding of adaptive governance in social ecological systems. Specifically, it applies his systemic theories to investigate the dynamics of skill shortages in the context of ecotourism. Through the utilisation of an interdisciplinary framework, this study aimed to explore the interconnections among the various components of ecotourism and its association with the wider tourism industry. Baecker (2019) reviews some of Von Bertalanffy's earliest works and finds new connections with his later work, as well as pertinent issues for the development of systems theory, its dialogue with the scientific disciplines, and its quest to explain real-world issues.

3.6 FROM THE GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY OF BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

GST gives an alternate perspective for viewing organisations as organisms and served as the basis for significant theory development during that period, including the pivotal open systems strategy (Katz and Kahn, 1978). According to Ueland, Hinds and Floyd (2021), higher education institutions (HEIs) are frequently considered open systems that interact and exchange resources with their surrounding environment. This viewpoint acknowledges that higher education institutions are not isolated entities but rather components of broader systems that are influenced by a variety of external influences such as government policies, economic situations, and changing student demographics. Higher education institutions are incredibly complicated institutions because they work with people and focus on education and training (Gebretsadik, 2022).

According to Sá and Serpa (2020) universities are institutions focused on serving people by engaging both internal (academic staff, students) and external local community, political activists, quality assurance agencies, and the press stakeholders. Academic freedom, critical thinking, and autonomy are protected ideals on the one hand, while changing environmental conditions have a significant impact on the core activities of universities on the other. Unlike many other organisations, HEIs have unique characteristics that must be understood and that govern the organisational culture of academic institutions (Sá and Serpa, 2020). The study by Cameron (1981), which was adapted by Bonisenha and d'Angelo (2018), is an ideal illustration of how to categorise HEIs according to how they are structured. There are four different domains of HEIs, according to the authors, as illustrated in Table 3.1.

In South Africa, the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101 of 1997), which states that it is desirable for the HEIs to enjoy freedom and autonomy in their relationship with the state within the context of public accountability and the national need for advanced skills and scientific knowledge, regulates and oversees higher education institutions in South Africa. Although the government grants HEIs autonomy, the Ministry of Higher Education and Training supervises, supports, and regulates the processes and policies implemented there since those processes and policies must adhere to the administrative governance of the state (Department of Education, 2001).

Table 3.1: Four organisational effectiveness domains in HEIs.

1.Academic domain	Supports the academic growth of students, the professional satisfaction of the teaching and non-teaching personnel, as well as the ability to obtain resources.
2.Moral domain	Promotes the academic contentment of the student, the professional satisfaction of the teaching and non-teaching staff, and the sturdiness of the internal institutional processes.
3.Adaptation and external interaction domain	The realm of adaptation and outside engagement which supports students' career growth.
4.Extracurricular activities domain	The area of extracurricular activities promotes students' personal growth.

Source: Adapted from (Sá and Serpa ,2020, p. 16)

Universities have long characterised academic excellence in terms of inputs, such as the calibre of students and professors, resources, and facilities, as opposed to outputs, such as student performance. A shift in focus from resources to results is necessary to effectively carry out the primary academic duties of a university of technology. Because of this, the institutional emphasis is shifted from faculty productivity to student productivity, from faculty disciplinary interests to what students need to learn, and from faculty teaching styles to student learning styles. Instead of being faculty-centred, it reframes the institution as being student-centred. It wrestles with the most fundamental procedures, including decision-making, information sharing, student attitudes toward learning, faculty work, conducting research, and management of ancillary businesses (Council on Higher Education, 2006). The Council on Higher Education, through the Kagisano Issue Number 5 (2006) report, further states that universities of technology should give students the tools they need to become more talented, competent, and employable. To guarantee that potential employees obtain a relevant education, they should be more employer-focused, offer continuous upgrading through short courses, bring the institution into the workplace, and routinely communicate with industry. A university of technology should also come up with innovative strategies to recruit staff members who can present real-world issues for students to tackle during their training term through work-integrated learning.

3.7 DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AS AN OPEN SYSTEM

This section establishes the theoretical foundation of the study by intertwining the concepts of ecotourism skill shortages and Von Bertalanffy's systems theory. It explores how Von Bertalanffy's ideas on the interplay between the whole and its parts offer a new lens through which to understand the complexities of ecotourism and the scarcity of skills. The section also emphasises the relevance of Von Bertalanffy's adaptation theories to the current discourse on resilience and adaptation in complex systems. The open system paradigm that is conceived for use in higher education institutions is illustrated in Figure 3.2, where the Durban University of Technology is an open system. This model identifies the primary internal and external stakeholders, major outputs, and major inputs, and uses the WPBL programme evaluation to highlight the important internal and external stakeholders, major outputs, and major inputs needed for effective workplace-based learning. The study adopts the GST to ascertain the efficacy of WPBL offered to students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management at DUT to attain discipline-specific skills for employment in ecotourism.

Figure 3.2 is an illustration of the application of the GST to this study and justifies the various key concepts that the research addresses. The National Diploma in Ecotourism Management is a managerial-level qualification designed for individuals actively involved in or interested in responsible, environmentally friendly ecotourism development. It serves as a credential for those pursuing a career path in sustainable ecotourism management and administration.

This diploma plays a crucial role in implementing sustainable tourism practices. By defining and outlining the necessary skills for technical tourism authorities (both in the private and public sectors), it provides a foundation for efficient implementation processes. These officials require relevant knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to drive sustainable ecotourism management reforms. The qualification aligns with South African priorities related to environmental conservation and community upliftment. It contributes to existing national and international goals by promoting responsible ecotourism practices. Currently, the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management is being phased out. The Department of Ecotourism is actively working on developing a new Diploma in Ecotourism through curriculum revision. One of the study's goals is to explore the rationale behind this enhancement and its anticipated impact on workplace-based learning (WPBL). To achieve this, online interviews were conducted with academic staff from the Department of Ecotourism.

DUT's EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

- Department of Higher Education
- HEQSF
- South Africa Council of Higher Education
- Organisations that offer WPBL to registered students (industry)

Permeable border between Durban University of Technology and its external environment.

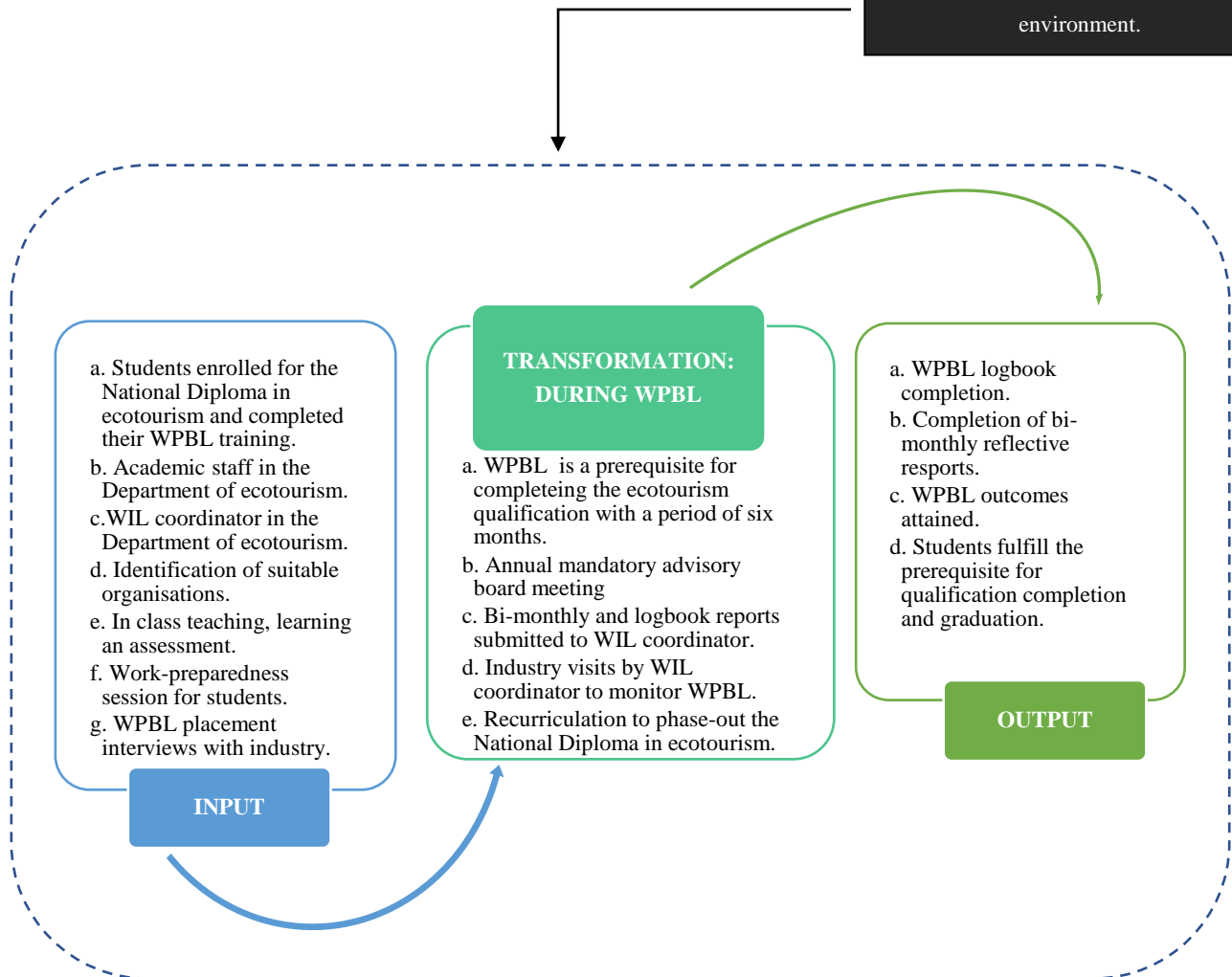


Figure 3.2: DUT as an open system Source: Generated by author.

3.7.1 The external environment of DUT

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training's Higher Education Degrees Sub-Framework (HEQSF) (2014), the introduction of WPBL into the curriculum is distinctive of vocational and professionally oriented qualifications.

According to the HEQSF (2014), where the WIL component takes the form of WPBL, it is the duty of institutions that offer programmes requiring credits for such learning to place students into suitable workplaces, and that such WPBL must be properly structured, accurately supervised, and assessed. The Council on Higher Education (2014) recognises the need for proper arrangements in terms of placement, mentoring, and supervision. It highlights the importance of effectively coordinating work-based learning, which involves ensuring sufficient infrastructure, efficient communication, accurate progress tracking, monitoring, and mentoring. Additionally, the CHE emphasises the significance of implementing learning agreements or contracts. These agreements involve negotiations and approvals between the student, the higher education institution, the employer (WPBL provider), and the mentor. They also outline the agreed-upon roles and responsibilities and assess the objectives and outcomes of the learning process. Furthermore, a mentoring system that helps each student recognise their strengths and limitations, develop current and new abilities, and obtain an understanding of work practices. The focus of this study lies within the expansive domain of WIL, with particular emphasis on the concept of WPBL. Consequently, the study incorporates General Systems Theory concepts in the following ways:

3.7.2 Inputs

Inputs encompass various aspects related to students, such as their academic achievements, demographic characteristics, individual needs and aspirations, as well as their interests. Additionally, inputs also encompass the qualities possessed by the teaching staff, the adequacy and effective utilisation of financial resources, and the quality of facilities, including classrooms, library holdings, and teaching equipment. Furthermore, inputs encompass programmes, curricula, course offerings, and timetables, as well as the provision of support services such as canteen facilities, recreational activities, food services, and transportation options. The concept of modifying perceptions arises as a crucial concept that significantly impacts the functioning dynamics within HEIs, especially when considering students as recipients of educational services within the framework of the GST. The inputs in the case of DUT are students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme in the Department of Ecotourism. These individuals have successfully fulfilled the requirements of the six-month WPBL programme. The motivation behind this inquiry stems from the observable trend of an imminent disruption to the current educational system as a result of changes in student perspectives.

Therefore, it is crucial to employ a methodically systematic response to maintain the equilibrium of the educational ecosystem. Significantly, the act of modifying educational modalities often represents a crucial responsive action. The introduction of change within the educational environment disrupts the existing balance, thus requiring a collective and coordinated response to facilitate adjustments and restore equilibrium. Simultaneously, it is crucial to recognise the susceptibility of open systems to the impacts imposed by the surrounding context in which they are located.

3.7.3 The process of transformation

The transformation process within DUT pertains to the series of operations or procedures that occur to convert given inputs into desired outputs. The interplay among inputs, resources, and outputs constitutes a fundamental aspect of the operational dynamics of a technical system, with the transformation process serving as the facilitator of this interplay. The process involves the conversion of inputs into outputs through the utilisation of resources, thereby enabling the efficient transfer of materials, information, and energy within the system. The efficacy of the transformation process is a pivotal determinant in assessing the overall performance of the technical system. The component in question encompasses several elements, namely design (comprising courses, programmes, schedules, inputs, and class size), delivery (encompassing diverse approaches employed to transmit educational content to students), measurement of outputs (including the quantity and frequency of tests, assignments, and quizzes), and an evaluation of the curriculum, instructors, and overall experience (involving student surveys, alumni feedback, parental perspectives, and employer assessments).

3.7.3.1 The Division of Cooperative Education at the Durban University of Technology and student placement by the Department of Ecotourism

The Division of Cooperative Education is responsible for overseeing WPBL at DUT. The term "co-operative education" refers to an integrated approach to higher education that combines classroom instruction with practical job experience gained through collaborations between universities, their students, businesses, and the local community. The term "industry" refers to all areas of business and industry, as well as small businesses, the unorganised sector, and regional, provincial, and governmental agencies.

Liaison between the university, employers, professional bodies, professional societies, and other pertinent organisations, including student groups, is part of cooperative education. The emphasis is on the student learning by doing, and it involves experiential learning/in-service training (IST), which calls for the placement of a student in a relevant industry for integrated workplace learning. Within the Department of Ecotourism, the successful fulfilment of a six-month (WPBL) programme is an obligatory criterion. It is imperative for the student to satisfactorily complete the prescribed duration of practical experience in the industry to be eligible for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. The following are guidelines by the Division of Cooperative Education that govern WBPL at DUT:

- Experiential learning (also known as in-service training, or IST) will be incorporated into every programme at the university.
- The relevant department will make every effort to ensure that students receive the required hands-on training.
- Academic specialists will monitor each student assigned to experiential learning.
- The relevant Faculty Board or Senate must authorize evaluation processes on a formal basis.
- The University will officially accredit workplace trainers, supervisors, and mentors.
- A training manual for experiential learning will be made available for each programme, serving as a resource for both the trainee and the mentor.
- The Department will implement methods to ensure that the student receives the required element of training, such as rotating students between different companies, in the event that a single industry is unable to provide all aspects of training as specified in the manual.
- All experiential learning should be reported to the university.

3.7.3.2 WPBL programme evaluation

Programme evaluation is an organised process of variable complexity that involves data collection, observations, and analysis and ends with a value judgement about the programme's quality, whether the programme is being evaluated as a whole or through one or more of its components. Evaluation is a process of comparison between the actual outcomes of a programme with those that were predicted based on measures (qualitative or quantitative) that are thought to be valid and trustworthy.

Even when evaluating difficult-to-measure intangible conditions, the evaluation must be grounded in evidence acquired with rigour and objectivity for it to be trustworthy (Rossi, 1985). The definition of an assessment subject is the first stage in the evaluation process. To achieve that aim, it is necessary to define what a programme and a subprogramme are. A programme is made up of objectives, activities, and means as a cohesive, well-organised, and structured whole. The efficiency of quality improvement systems in improving educational practices and outcomes must be assessed through programme assessment. It is necessary to design and include standards in the assessment system through which programmes, courses, teaching and learning needs, and learning outcomes will be evaluated. It is imperative to incorporate qualitative research methods for programme assessment alongside statistical analysis and documentation processing. This will facilitate a comprehensive and thorough analysis, yielding more detailed insights and information. Consistent with this perspective, the research employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the aim of identifying discipline-specific competencies for ecotourism and examining the role of WPBL in developing these competencies. Pellissier (2007) defines qualitative research as an investigative approach that focuses on capturing and conveying descriptions using verbal and visual means. This methodology is deemed suitable for addressing the research questions at hand. Data was collected from industry supervisors through the utilisation of face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, student data was collected via focus group interviews after the conclusion of the WPBL programme, spanning a duration of six months. Only a limited number of universities have thus far adopted a centralised and systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness of WPBL for their students.

3.7.4 Outputs

This includes, amongst others, scholastic success (measured in terms of success rates, the growth of skills, and levels of proficiency); graduate, dropout, and failure; after graduation (success rates on professional examinations, additional education, for example, success rates in securing admission in graduate institutions); and employment achievements (employer satisfaction). The component of employer satisfaction is aligned with the problem under study, where there is a limited amount of literature that focuses on the skills gaps in ecotourism, a subset of tourism, but there has been a lot of focus on the tourism sector. Globally and in South Africa in particular, ecotourism is expanding.

While numerous studies have examined how ecotourism affects environmental preservation and sustainable development, less attention has been given to the aspects of ecotourism employment that set it apart from other forms of tourism. Since ecotourism is a very specialised industry, it is essential to have specialised knowledge and abilities in the field. The goal of the study is to close this knowledge gap and further suggest potential workplace-based learning methodologies to help undergraduate students develop specific skills for employment in ecotourism. In terms of discipline-specific skills for ecotourism and identifying those that are deficient, the researcher will be able to assess the input from the organisations that host ecotourism students using the output component of the model. Ecotourism is a form of tourism that emphasises environmental appreciation and conservation. Education and training are vital for the establishment of a sustainable ecotourism industry. The emphasis of ecotourism education should be on experiential learning, which encourages students to make significant contributions to the environment. It should also underline the significance of education in ecotourism enterprises, as it assists in the education of tourists, generates revenue for conservation, and directly benefits local communities. Moreover, educational programmes should combine Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles with ecotourism to promote sustainable practices.

3.7.5 Feedback

The maintenance of adherence to management-oriented evaluation methodologies within the systems approach is crucial as it signifies a comprehension of organisational dynamics. The managers benefit from the management-oriented evaluation strategy. Administrators, policymakers, school boards, teachers, and other stakeholders need the data produced from the evaluation. A systems approach to education is used in the models, where choices are made about inputs, processes, and results (Worden and Sanders, 1973).

- Context assessment, which supports planning decisions, identifying the goals of an educational programme, and deciding which needs it should meet.
- An examination of the input will support structure choices. Designing programme processes is made easier by identifying the resources that are accessible, the alternative strategies that should be taken into consideration, and the plan that appears to have the highest chance of satisfying needs.

- Evaluation of the process in support of implementation choices. How effectively is the plan being carried out? What obstacles stand in its way of success? What changes are required? Procedures can be monitored, managed, and improved once these questions have been resolved.
- Product assessment to support recycling choices. What outcomes were seen? How successfully did needs become determined? When a programme has finished its intended purpose, what should be done with it? These inquiries are crucial for assessing programme success.

The previous sections described General Systems Theory as an all-encompassing method for comprehending complex systems and their interactions with the environment. It has been utilised in a variety of sectors, including administration, engineering, and social work. General Systems Theory can be useful for providing an all-encompassing view of a system and its components, as well as for identifying potential problems and solutions. Interdependence, feedback loops, and equilibrium are the primary properties of systems theory. The benefits of utilising General Systems Theory in management are simplicity, comprehensiveness, adaptability, and flexibility.

By giving an integrated approach to problem-solving, General Systems Theory can also aid in reducing organisational leakage. The capacity to recognise recurring patterns in behaviour is one of the most significant advantages offered by systems theory. Other advantages include the theory's emphasis on interdependence between components of a system and its holistic approach to the comprehension of complex systems. Nevertheless, there are possible drawbacks to employing GST in terms of what it can and cannot explain.

The emphasis on homeostasis, which can limit creativity and innovation, the difficulty in recognising the limits of a system and identifying interrelationships between sub-systems, and the assumption that any degree of influence at any level has power over the entire system. To address any gaps within the General Systems Theory (GST), the study will further adopt the Theory of Change. This decision does not imply discarding GST; rather, it signifies a complementary approach. The Theory of Change will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

3.8 THE HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES THAT FORM THE BASIS OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE

The Theory of Change is a methodology that was created to help explain how change occurs and how interventions result in desired results and goals. A Theory of Change is basically a detailed explanation and demonstration of how and why the desired change is anticipated to occur in a specific setting (Weiss, 1995). According to Connell and Kubisch (1998), a Theory of Change is an intentional method for considering and articulating how and why a programme or intervention will succeed, as well as who it will benefit and how. A Theory of Change is often created during the programme design phase and is based on facts, presumptions, and beliefs (Jones and Rosenberg, 2018). Chen's (2012) *Theory-Driven Evaluations* is a seminal early work in the subject of evaluation that sets the groundwork for the Theory of Change method. The author further emphasises the importance of having a clear and evidence-based understanding of how a programme is expected to lead to desired outcomes and suggests that using a theory to guide evaluation can help to ensure that evaluations are more rigorous, systematic, and focused on the underlying causes of a problem. Weiss (1995) is credited for popularising the term "theory of change" itself, which was achieved through the collaborative efforts of the Aspen Institute and the Roundtable on Community Change (Anderson and Harris, 2005). This term is typically written with all capital letters within the assessment community (i.e., Theory of Change), however, this might cause misunderstanding among scientists because they do not regard the Theory of Change for an individual project as analogous to how they understand the term theory. In a study by Coryn, Noakes, Westine and Schröter (2011), the application of theory in the evaluation of programmes and treatments, as well as how theory was used to drive assessment design and data gathering, was investigated.

The authors discovered that the use of theory in assessment methods had grown over time and that theory-driven evaluations were more likely to provide more rigorous, systematic, and focused evaluations. They also identified several barriers to the implementation of theory-driven evaluations, such as the difficulty of identifying appropriate theories for a given programme or intervention, as well as the need for evaluators to have a thorough understanding of the underlying theories and how they apply to the programme under evaluation (Coryn et al., 2011).

Overall, the authors offer useful insights into the application of theory in assessment procedures and highlight the need to employ a theory-driven approach to guarantee that evaluations are thorough and focused on the underlying causes of an issue. The term ‘Theory of Change’ originally appeared in the 1990s. Its goal at the time was to solve some of the issues that evaluators encountered when attempting to assess the impact of complicated social development programmes. These included poorly articulated assumptions, a lack of clarity about how change processes evolved, and an insufficient focus on the sequence of changes required to achieve long-term goals (O’Flynn, 2012).

3.9 THE THEORY OF CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The twenty-first century will bring ever greater challenges for humanity, including access to resources, rising inequity, deforestation, environmental degradation, ever-increasing shortages of potable water, pandemics like COVID-19 access to new technologies and their effects, as well as access to education, knowledge, and information (Satgar, Cherry and Buthelezi, 2023). According to Williamson (2018), higher education institutions (HEIs) are important in developing the change-makers and future leaders that are required to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. For hundreds of years, universities have excelled at advancing knowledge adoption and science, which is crucial for humanity. They have contributed to the growth and well-being of communities and nations, promoted science and technical innovation, and produced qualified professionals (Purcell, Henriksen, and Spengler, 2019). However, in the context of twenty-first-century challenges, universities must align their efforts with global priorities.

The United Nations has established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and related targets to address the problems of our time. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide should direct their research and instruction to significantly advance the SDGs (Purcell et al., 2020). HEIs are uniquely positioned to equip the next generation with the knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to handle sustainability issues and opportunities. Additionally, their research efforts promote the sustainable development agenda, addressing environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

HEIs serve as role models for stakeholders by using their expertise, talents, and leadership to persuade them to embrace and model more sustainable practices (Mori Junior, Fien, and Horne, 2019). Therefore, to be effective agents of positive change, HEIs must fully dedicate themselves to supporting and implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The SDGs are a crucial vehicle for making a good impact through incorporating sustainability into HEIs business plans, decision-making processes, and practices, as well as increasing accountability to stakeholders. Quality education is the fourth SDG, and it focuses on providing universal access to quality education regardless of gender, race, or economic background. HEIs worldwide must teach and train today's students and tomorrow's decision-makers to think both critically and ethically, to learn to cope with ethical quandaries, and to apply systems-thinking approaches to serious and complex societal problems to increase the likelihood that these 17 SDGs will be achieved (Levi and Rothstein, 2018). HEIs are in a unique position and therefore have a critical responsibility to provide SDGs to as many students as they can within their sphere of influence. Additionally, HEIs are the providers of general, professional, and vocational education across all disciplines, reaching hundreds of millions of learners at all stages of their lives (Stiftung, 2018).

3.9.1 Elevating ecotourism education in HEIs: A catalyst for advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This section underscores the utmost importance of this study in aligning with and contributing significantly to the attainment of SDGs. HEIs may contribute to all 17 Sustainable Development Goals by preparing graduates for the employment required for SDG implementation. These institutions must guarantee that they are adaptable, ready for change, and focused on the future to remain relevant not only for the jobs that exist today but also for those that will exist in the future. To achieve this, HEIs need to establish close connections with business and industry to monitor employer trends and skill requirements, including executive education, online learning, and vocational training (Stiftung, 2017). Building upon this imperative, this study seeks to assess the impact WPBL on cultivating discipline-specific ecotourism skills in DUT students, as well as pinpointing areas where the industry requires further proficiency. This study addresses a critical gap in sustainable development efforts by focusing on the integration of ecotourism education within HEIs.

It emphasises that HEIs must adapt to evolving industry needs and equip students with discipline-specific ecotourism skills to meet SDG targets. The utilisation of WPBL as an instructional method is essential in providing students with practical experiences and problem-solving capabilities crucial for effective ecotourism management. Furthermore, this research contributes to the identification of skill gaps within the ecotourism sector, enabling targeted interventions for skill development. By bridging these gaps, HEIs have the potential to greatly augment the industry's ability to make meaningful contributions towards sustainable development. Figure 3.3 serves as a pivotal visual representation within this thesis, encapsulating the profound connection between ecotourism education and the attainment of the SDGs. As the intricacy of this study is explored, it becomes apparent that Figure 3.3 illuminates the transformative potential that lies at the convergence of education, industry, and global sustainability efforts. This diagram further elucidates the interconnections between the research objectives and the wider framework of the SDGs. The intersection of theory and practice serves as a catalyst for tangible advancements towards a more sustainable global environment. This study not only makes a valuable contribution to the academic discourse but also aligns with the following SDGs:

- **SDG 4: Quality Education:** The focus of this research on ensuring effective WPBL aims to equip the future workforce and entrepreneurs with the necessary expertise in ecotourism, enabling them to effectively promote sustainable practices within the broader tourism sector.
- **SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth:** The study highlights the positive effects of aligning educational programmes with the specific requirements of industries, with a particular focus on the ecotourism sector. This alignment not only creates economic opportunities but also contributes to the promotion of decent work and overall economic growth.
- **SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production:** This study supports responsible consumption and production by promoting an enhanced comprehension of ecotourism practices.
- **SDG 13: Climate Action:** Through ecotourism education, students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to not only comprehend the impact of tourism on climate patterns but also to actively engage in practices that mitigate its effects.

- **SDG 14: Life Below Water and SDG 15: Life on Land:** Ecotourism education directly affects marine and terrestrial ecosystems. This education fosters a sense of responsibility towards marine and terrestrial habitats, ensuring their preservation for generations to come.

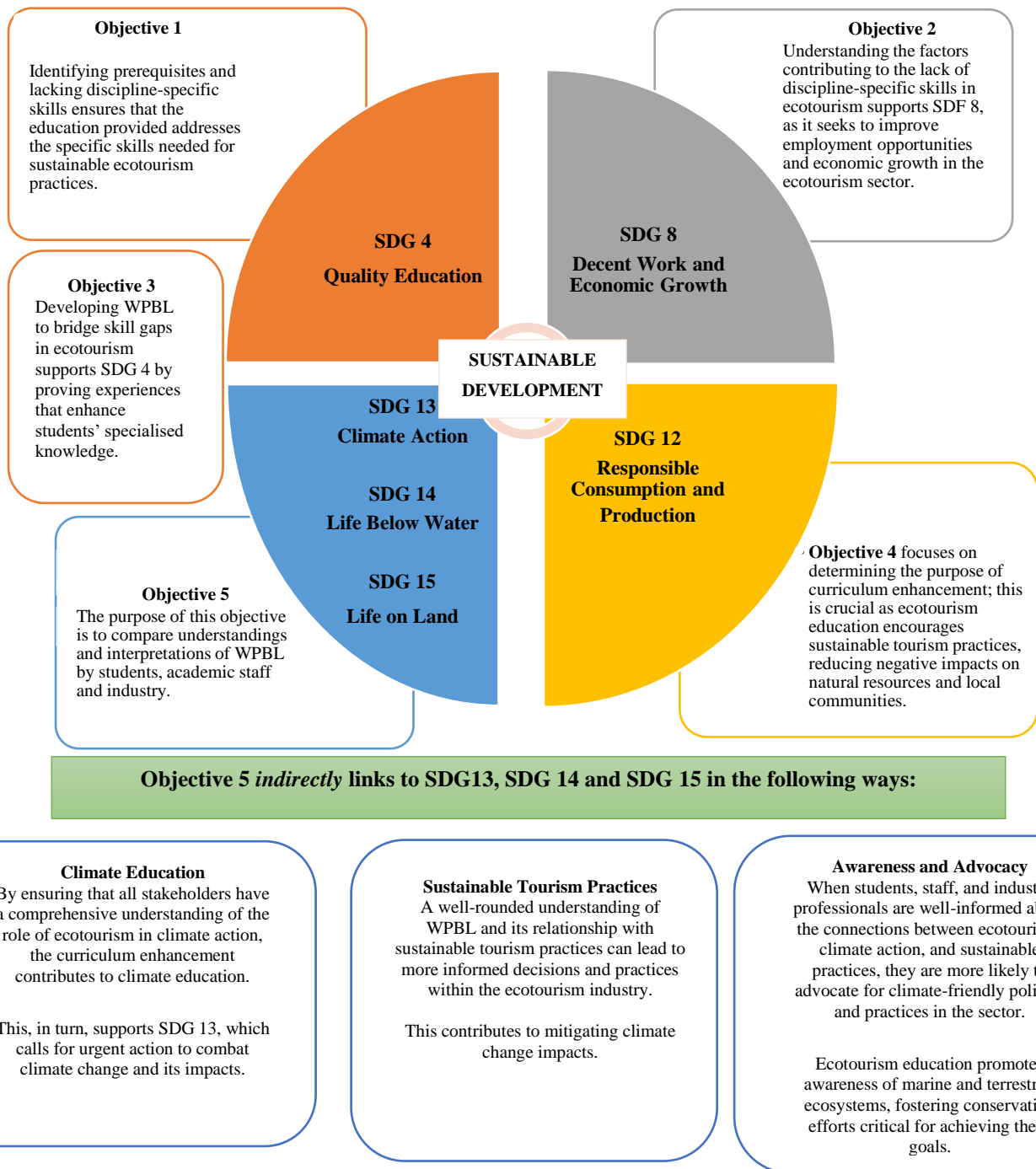


Figure 3.3: Aligning study objectives with SDGs: A visual roadmap to sustainable ecotourism education Source: Generated by author.

Investing in ecotourism education does not only ensure graduates are prepared for the evolving demands of the industry but also focuses on HEIs as leaders in sustainable practices. This study advocates for a strategic partnership between HEIs, industry stakeholders, and policymakers to collectively work towards the realisation of SDGs related to responsible consumption and production, life below water, and life on land. Through such collaborative efforts, the tourism sector can play a transformative role in global sustainable development efforts. The allocation of resources towards ecotourism education not only guarantees that graduates are adequately equipped to meet the changing requirements of the industry but also establishes higher education institutions (HEIs) as frontrunners in the implementation of sustainable practices. This study proposes the establishment of a strategic alliance among HEIs, industry stakeholders, and policymakers. By engaging in collaborative initiatives, the tourism industry has the potential to significantly contribute to global sustainable development efforts (Tampubolon and Wulandari, 2021).

3.10 THEORY OF CHANGE (ToC) FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ADAPTABILITY

Despite the huge significance of HEIs in adapting to change, they have come under fire in recent years for being slow to modify curriculum and pedagogy in response to breakthroughs in knowledge and communication (Ramírez, 2015). Therefore, HEIs must realign their cultures and educational systems to become more student-centric and devoted to producing ethical leaders with more relevant knowledge and skills for the 21st century (Crawford and Fink, 2020). In line with this, the fourth objective of this study seeks to determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement by the Department of Ecotourism at DUT and its foreseeable implications for WPBL. In addition, a case study of a single HEI institution, the Durban University of Technology, was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the WPBL programme received by students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management in acquiring discipline-specific skills for employment in the ecotourism industry. Thus, this study used the Theory of Change to better understand how the six-month training WPBL programme completed by ecotourism students is expected to help students prepare for work by acquiring relevant and discipline-specific skills required in the ecotourism sector. A Theory of Change is a visual representation or written account of the tactics, conditions, and resources that encourage change and produce results. It has explanatory power in that it should explain why you believe specific behaviours or actions will result in specific results (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020).

The Theory of Change, when used in conjunction with GST as discussed in the previous sections, will help the researcher understand the causal relationships between the inputs, activities, outputs, and end outcomes of the WPBL programme. Furthermore, through the lens of this framework, this study will be able to make viable recommendations on how HEIs such as DUT can best implement WPBL to satisfy the needs of the ecotourism industry. The Theory of Change can help participants reach consensus around the desired results of an effort and the steps required to get there. In this study, this will be governed by objective five, which compares how students, institutions, and organisations understand and interpret WPBL. This approach is widely acknowledged as a useful instrument for programme design, execution, and assessment. According to Allen, Cruz and Warburton (2017), Theory of Change is regarded as a best practice in the field of programme evaluation and is commonly used in conjunction with other evaluation methodologies, such as impact assessments, process evaluations, and result evaluations. However, there is no standardised method for establishing a Theory of Change; each one will have unique characteristics and details (Davies, 2018). Table 3.2 provides an overview of the fundamental principles underlying this framework.

Table 3.2: Key concepts of the Theory of Change

Desired Outcomes	The ultimate impact or change that is sought through a programme or intervention.
Drivers of change	The underlying factors that must be addressed to achieve the desired outcomes.
Activities and interventions	The specific actions or interventions that are taken to achieve desired outcomes.
Inputs	The resources and investments that are required to implement a programme, such as funding, personnel, and equipment.
Outputs	The intermediate results or products that are produced because of programme activities.
Assumptions	The underlying beliefs and premises that inform a programme's design and implementation, such as the causal relationships between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes.
Feedback loops	The ongoing monitoring and evaluation process that is used to assess progress and make course corrections as needed
Stakeholders	The individuals, organisations, and communities that are affected by or involved in a programme, including beneficiaries, implementers, funders, and others.
Evaluation	The process of assessing the programme or intervention, with the goal of understanding whether it is achieving the desired outcomes and identifying areas for improvement.
Stakeholder engagement	The active involvement of stakeholders, including programme beneficiaries, in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the programme or intervention.

(Modified from Source: Reinholz and Andrews 2020, p. 5)

3.11 EARLY CRITICS OF THEORY OF CHANGE AND DIAGRAMMING

Critics have been present since the early days of Theory of Change, when questions were raised about whether evaluators needed to know why and how a programme worked, when the primary purpose was to demonstrate whether it worked (Scriven, 1998). The Theory of Change has been subject to criticism ever since its inception. This framework has also been criticised for not paying sufficient attention to the broader context in which the intervention is taking place, as well as the nature of the interactions that take place between the intervention and this broader environment (Ofek, 2017). A persistent issue with the Theory of Change identified by Valters (2014) is that organisations assert that societal transformation revolves around them and their programme, as opposed to a range of interconnected contextual components of which their programme is a part. In their analysis of its application, Donaldson, Lee and Donaldson (2019) uncovered several similar issues. These criticisms have, for the most part, fallen out of favour, but Theory of Change diagrams are frequently still criticised for being too inflexible and linear, and for not adequately representing the complexity of the programme or project that is being investigated (Patton, Katafiasz and Tefeller, 2021).

Literature frequently expresses concerns about its overly linear nature and its failure to consider links with other policies and programmes or the larger institutional environment within which an intervention takes place. Weiss (1995) made the observation that comprehensive community initiatives have characteristics that make them challenging to evaluate, including horizontal complexity, vertical complexity, importance of context, flexibility and evolution of interventions, breadth of outcomes pursued, and lack of suitable control groups for comparison. Mason and Mason and Barnes (2007) point out that the Theory of Change method of evaluation should be viewed less as a strategy for assessing the viability of the theory and its application and more as a framework for creating a narrative about the process of application and its results. As a result, Vogel (2012) proposes that the formulation of the Theory of Change should be done in a participatory manner. This means that it should engage stakeholders who represent a variety of roles and views related to the intervention. Diagramming has been the subject of a great number of attempts over the course of its history, many of which have been made to circumvent the drawbacks associated with an excessively linear approach (Maru, et al., 2018).

In earlier conceptualisations, numerous theorists tended to favour linear models when describing programme theories. Coryn et al., (2011) point out that in earlier conceptualisations, programme theories were typically described using linear models. The environment in which these theories of change are being utilised can make it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully incorporate complexity aspects into them. This might take place during the planning phase of the intervention itself, or it might take place during the phase of establishing an assessment framework or a data collection framework. Essential to the construction of an effective evaluation design is not only the quality of the Theory of Change itself but also the process of creating the diagrams. However, attention is frequently drawn to the diagram itself, which is frequently employed as a communication tool. Mayne (2017) asserts that simple diagrams are a sufficient depiction of and offer the framework for a coherent performance narrative. The author further states that the Theory of Change should be organised in a hierarchical manner. Usability, according to Maru et al., (2018), requires that diagrams be relatively straightforward and simple to comprehend. A level of simplicity is also essential because many stakeholders involved in the process of developing the Theory of Change or reading about the intervention will be unfamiliar with the terminology of complexity and the behaviour of complex adaptive systems (Wilkinson et al., 2021).

The development of a Theory of Change map is a crucial instrument for interpreting the complex dynamics involved in the implementation of a programme. The statement acquaints stakeholders with the possibility of encountering greater intricacy than initially anticipated, thereby prompting a reassessment of oversimplified assumptions pertaining to the mechanisms of change. According to Alford (2017), this approach represents a notable departure from inflexible and simplistic planning and management techniques, particularly deviating from the constraints of conventional logical frameworks. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognise that visual depictions in diagrams frequently fail to completely encapsulate these intricate and ever-changing systems, potentially perpetuating a linear and excessively simplistic mindset. Systems mapping has been recognised and is now recommended in some evaluation guidelines, especially for projects in complex settings or those that want to change the whole system. However, there are still not clear instructions on how to do it and how it can help with planning and carrying out evaluations (Taylor, Drayton and McBride, 2019).

3.12 COMBINING GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND THEORY OF CHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

The application of both GST and the Theory of Change in the context of this research was covered in the previous sections. Therefore, understanding the interconnectedness of many components and how each of those components contributes to the achievement of a desired outcome is a central tenet of both GST and the Theory of Change approach. The following items can be counted as shared characteristics:

- These techniques seek to comprehend how various components are interconnected and how they contribute to the achievement of a desired result.
- These methods view the problem or topic under consideration as a complex system comprised of numerous linked components.
- Both theories highlight the significance of identifying and addressing the underlying drivers of change to achieve the desired outcome.
- Both approaches entail mapping the cause-and-effect interactions between many components to better comprehend how they interact and contribute to the intended outcome.
- Both approaches can be used to identify areas in need of improvement or additional research. Stakeholders can be informed on the rationale and effects of a programme or intervention using either method.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the notable differences between these two methodologies. The GST functions as a comprehensive theoretical framework that can be applied across a wide range of fields and problem domains. On the other hand, the Theory of Change is commonly employed in programme evaluation and endeavours focused on social transformation. Moreover, the GST places a greater emphasis on understanding the fundamental structure and dynamics of a system, whereas the Theory of Change is more focused on devising strategies to achieve a desired outcome. This qualitative research study utilises both the GST and the Theory of Change to explore the complexities of the identified issue. The lack of scholarly literature on the topic of skills gaps in ecotourism, a specific area within the larger tourism industry, is apparent, despite the considerable amount of research conducted in the broader field.

The growing global ecotourism sector, with a particular focus on South Africa, has attracted significant interest due to its implications for environmental preservation and sustainable progress. Nevertheless, the examination of employment within the intricate domain of ecotourism has been relatively understudied. Considering the highly specialised nature of this particular industry, it becomes crucial to possess a distinct set of knowledge and competencies. The primary aim of this study is to address the existing research gap and put forth effective WPBL methodologies. The objective of these methodologies is to enhance the ability of undergraduate students to develop the essential employment skills necessary for achieving success in the ecotourism industry.

3.12.1 The identification of key components

Using the GST in this qualitative research study enabled the researcher to identify key components of the system and how they are interconnected, as shown in Figure 3.2. The researcher further used various data collection methods in the form of face-to-face interviews and online focus groups to gather information about the system and its components. Face-to-face interviews were used to collect data from industry supervisors from ecotourism organisations at which students undertook their WPBL programme and academic staff, as well as from the Durban University of Technology. Online focus groups were employed for students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management who had completed their six-month WPBL programme. The data gathered was used and analysed to identify patterns and relationships within the WPBL programme between academic staff, students, and industry. Furthermore, it is important to understand how they contribute to the overall functioning of the system. In the context of the Theory of Change, the data gathered through face-to-face interviews and online focus groups assisted the researcher in identifying the key drivers of change and the activities and interventions that can be implemented to ascertain how WPBL can be developed to bridge the skill gaps in ecotourism, as stipulated in Objective 2 of the study. The data was further analysed to understand how the different components of the WPBL programme, that is, academic staff and students from the Durban University of Technology and organisations that offer six months of WPBL to students, are contributing to the desired outcome and identify areas for improvement.

The GST and Theory of Change approaches are used together in this study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem being studied. Combining both approaches gives a better understanding of how the different components of a system are interconnected and how they contribute to achieving a desired outcome.

3.12.2 The identification of drivers of change

The incorporation of GST and the Theory of Change in this study offers numerous benefits. These frameworks are highly valuable tools for understanding the intricacy of the research problem. The use of GST and the Theory of Change in conjunction provides a holistic and interconnected perspective on the fundamental elements of a system, thereby augmenting our understanding of the inherent dynamics at play. Furthermore, the authors explore the essential catalysts for change that require consideration, specifically in the context of optimising the efficacy of the WPBL programme at DUT in the acquisition and development of crucial discipline-specific competencies within the field of ecotourism. This process of discernment, in turn, provides valuable insights that can be used to inform targeted interventions and programme design that are aligned with the demands of the industry. Moreover, the combined utilisation of GST and the Theory of Change framework significantly improves the accuracy of programme design and evaluation. The evaluation of DUT's WPBL programme is conducted with increased rigour by identifying the fundamental factors that drive change and the necessary actions and interventions to achieve desired results. The likelihood of successfully bridging ecotourism skills gaps can be enhanced by prioritising stakeholder engagement, as recommended by both the Global Sustainable Tourism (GST) framework and the Theory of Change. The effectiveness of the WPBL programme can be enhanced through the active engagement of stakeholders in its design, implementation, and evaluation processes. The strategic approach employed in this study is in accordance with Objective 5, which seeks to examine and contrast the perspectives and understandings of WPBL among academic staff, students, and industry supervisors. Both theories play a significant role in establishing a qualitative research design, facilitating a detailed examination of the complex interactions, connections, and contributions of different factors towards achieving the intended result. Moreover, the use of a Theory of Change is of great significance in academic research as it facilitates the process of identifying essential variables and interventions to be examined.

This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of the WPBL programme in empowering ecotourism students with discipline-specific skills. The assessment will involve quantifying the extent to which the anticipated outcomes have been realised.

3.13 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter discussed the incorporation of GST and the Theory of Change in this qualitative research and how it signifies a notable progression in the understanding and analysis of intricate phenomena. Within the scope of this research, which aims to identify discipline-specific skills in the field of ecotourism and assess the efficacy of WPBL offered by the Department of Ecotourism at DUT, these frameworks assume a fundamental role. The application of GST provides a framework for comprehending the various elements within the ecotourism industry and DUT, particularly the Department of Ecotourism as well as their interconnectedness with the broader ecosystem. This viewpoint gains significance due to the institution's functioning as an open system, engaging in dynamic interactions with the ecotourism sector. Moreover, the Theory of Change framework offers a systematic methodology for understanding the causal mechanisms that lead to desired outcomes. This is particularly important when evaluating the efficacy of WPBL in developing discipline-specific skills among undergraduate students enrolled for in National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. Through the utilisation of this integrated methodology, the study will provide a holistic comprehension of the intricate dynamics between academia, industry, and the enhancement of students' skills. In addition, the utilisation of GST and Theory of Change yields visual representations that are highly valuable as means of communication. The utilisation of diagrams and models serves to consolidate intricate concepts into easily comprehensible visuals, thereby enhancing the transparency and approachability of research findings. Stakeholders are provided with a concrete understanding of the rationale and consequences of programmes and interventions, thereby promoting increased involvement and endorsement. The subsequent chapter will expound on the research methodology, design, and data collection process utilised in this study.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The fourth chapter discusses the research method, design, data collection, and procedure. It also explains the reasoning behind the methodological choices made by the researcher to achieve the study objectives and tackle the research topic. The technique, design, and tools were chosen because they were methodologically appropriate for answering the research questions indicated in Chapter 1. The study adopted a qualitative approach, which enabled the researcher to identify discipline-specific skills required for ecotourism and those considered lacking. This was done through exploring the six-month WPBL programme undertaken by students enrolled for a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management at the Durban University of Technology. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the discipline-specific skills required for ecotourism, and which skills are perceived to be lacking?
2. What are the factors contributing to the skill gaps in ecotourism?
3. How can workplace-based learning (WPBL) be designed to address the identified skills gaps in ecotourism?
4. What is the intention behind curriculum enhancement by DUT, and what are the potential consequences for WPBL?
5. How do ecotourism students, institutions, and organisations understand and interpret WPBL, and how does this vary among these groups?

This chapter commences with a description and explanation of the interpretative paradigm chosen for the study. The paradigm aims to comprehend the perspectives and experiences of the respondents. In accordance with the study, the research design and qualitative approach are further justified. Face-to-face interviews, online one-on-one interviews, and online focus groups are described as data generation methods.

Furthermore, the limits of the study are highlighted. The ethical measures used to protect the privacy and safety of participants in this study are discussed in the final section of the chapter.

One approach to developing a research technique is based on the theoretical research onion concept put forth by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019). The purpose of a research onion is to provide a framework for structuring the research design process. The research onion in this section provides a visual representation of the different layers that make up this research study, with each layer building on the one before it, as shown in Figure 4.1. The layers include defining the research problem, selecting a research design, determining data collection methods, and deciding on data analysis techniques. To ensure that the research study is well-designed and that the results obtained are reliable and trustworthy, the adoption of the research onion is to assist the researcher in making informed decisions at each level of the research process.

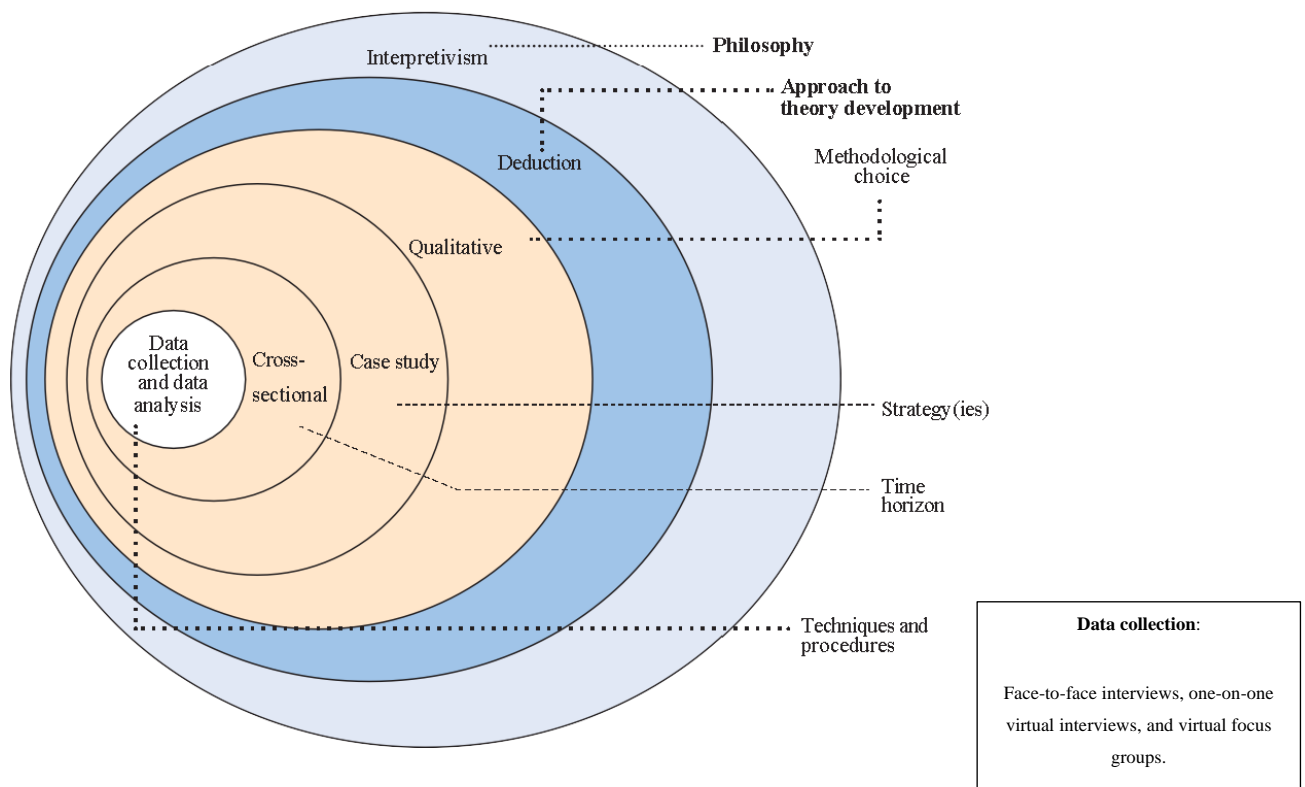


Figure 4.1: The research onion model as applicable in the study (Modified from source: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, p.130)

4.2 THE DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF A RESEARCH PARADIGM

Kuhn (1962) was the first to coin the term paradigm and define it as an integrated cluster of substantive concepts, variables, and problems attached to corresponding methodological approaches and tools. Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as a basic system or worldview that guides the investigator. Kaushik and Walsh (2019) regard a research paradigm as the umbrella approach that determines the rest. Chilisa and Kawulich (2012) argue that a paradigm is an individual view of the world that is informed by philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality. As a result, realities may vary from individual to individual (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim and Martin, 2014). Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that reality is socially produced; reality is not an objective truth but is instead moulded and constructed by social interactions and communication. This implies that our perceptions of truth and reality are influenced by the norms, values, and beliefs of the society in which we reside. Furthermore, the authors argue that knowledge is neither neutral nor objective since it is formed by the social and institutional structures of the society in which it is created. This indicates that the dominant beliefs and power structures of society influence what we regard as knowledge. The central principles of Berger and Luckman (1966) have had a substantial influence on how researchers think about and conduct their studies. Researchers can endeavour to develop information that is more objective, accurate, and dependable by acknowledging the social and institutional forces that affect knowledge and reality.

According to Kamal (2019), a study paradigm inevitably reflects the views of the researcher on the kind of world they desire to live in. It consists of the underlying ideas and precepts that guide a researcher's perspective on the world, as well as how they understand it and behave in it; therefore, it is a perspective that a researcher uses to view the world. To choose the research methods that will be employed and how the data will be analysed, the researcher considers the methodological components of their project via the conceptual lens (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1994) defined a paradigm as a fundamental set of assumptions or worldview that directs research activities or an inquiry. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), paradigms are human constructs that deal with fundamental ideas or concepts that indicate the researcher's viewpoint and contribute to the meaning that is encoded in the data.

Thus, paradigms are crucial because they offer ideas and rules that guide what should be investigated, how it should be studied, and how the findings of the study should be understood by academics in each field. The paradigm is an important aspect of the research process that provides a framework for understanding the purpose and objectives of the study, as well as the methods used to collect and analyse data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). In line with the authors' definition of a paradigm, this study aimed to determine discipline-specific skills for ecotourism and how WPBL contributes to the attainment of these skills. In furtherance, through this study, the researcher was seeking to understand the efficacy of WPBL in preparing undergraduate students enrolled for a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management to attain discipline-specific skills for employment in the ecotourism sector. This is consistent with the claim made by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020) that paradigms offer details about a phenomenon and what and how it might be examined and understood. Thus, a paradigm can influence the questions that researchers pose, the approaches they take, and the interpretations they give to the results. It may also have an impact on how results are presented and shared with others.

4.3 RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND THE SELECTED APPROACH FOR THE STUDY

Several research paradigms, including positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and constructivism, have been addressed and established (Candy, 1989). The pragmatic paradigm, which was proposed by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2008), is one that incorporates features from the aforementioned. Positivism is a research paradigm based on the notion that information can be learned using scientific procedures and that unchanging truth may be found. It is frequently employed in the natural and physical sciences and is connected to empirical and quantitative research methodologies. Critical theory is based on the premise that knowledge may be utilised as a tool for social change and that research should be used to question established power systems (Habermas, 2021).

Constructivism is a research paradigm that is founded on the notion that knowledge is created through both individual and group experiences and that it is shaped by the language and symbols that are used to represent it (Von Glasersfeld, 1987). Interpretivism is a research paradigm based on the notion that knowledge is created through interpretation and that no absolute truth is known (Schutz, 1967).

It is frequently used in the social sciences and is connected to qualitative research methodologies. Understanding the subjective realm of human experience is important in the interpretivist paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). This method attempts to comprehend and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning they are deriving from the situation. Every attempt is made to comprehend the perspective of the observed subject as opposed to that of the observer. Therefore, this study adopted an interpretivist paradigm to determine what the ecotourism organisations that host DUT students for WPBL deem as discipline-specific skills in ecotourism and those that are considered lacking. Additionally, it was significant for this study to further recognise how these organisations understand and interpret WPBL in comparison to students and academic staff, as stated in Objective 5 of the study.

The researcher relied on the views, interpretations, and experiences of the WPBL participants, that is, ecotourism students who completed their six-month WPBL programme, supervisors from the traditional ecotourism organisations that hosted the students, and the academic staff members at DUT. Understanding an individual's perspective of the world is emphasised by the interpretivist paradigm. Therefore, the central assumption of the interpretivist paradigm is that reality is a social construction (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) assert that the interpretive paradigm gives the researcher the ability to enter the mind of the subject and comprehend it from the inside out. Thus, in this study, the researcher adopted interpretivism to understand reality through the personal experiences and viewpoints of the participants.

4.4 THE PRINCIPLES OF A RESEARCH PARADIGM AS THEY APPLY TO THE STUDY

A research paradigm is the framework and theoretical perspective that guide a researcher's approach to a study. It encompasses the researcher's assumptions, beliefs, and values about the nature of reality, knowledge, and the methods used to investigate a research question. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that there are several essential elements of a research paradigm, including ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. Mertens (2010) declares ontology to be the nature of reality, epistemology to be the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the object of knowledge, methodology to be the appropriate approach to systematic inquiry, and axiology to be the nature of ethics.

Therefore, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of these characteristics, as they represent the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, norms, and values of each paradigm (Khatri, 2020). Four viewpoints on the research paradigm are outlined in the section that follows, along with how they relate to this study.

4.4.1 Epistemology

In the framework of his investigation of scientific revolutions, Kuhn (1962) defined epistemology as the study of how scientific knowledge is generated and how it evolves over time. Scientific knowledge, in the author's view, develops through a series of paradigm shifts in which the dominant view of a field is contested and replaced by a new one rather than gradually through the collection of evidence. Epistemology, which Blaikie (1993) describes as the theory or science of the process or grounds of knowledge, can be thought of as a set of claims or assumptions about how we can learn about reality. It is concerned with the very foundations of knowledge, including its nature, forms, modes of acquisition, and methods for disseminating it to other people. Additionally, it is focused on the basic foundations of knowledge, including its nature, forms, methods of acquisition, and methods of dissemination to other people. It focuses on the kind of knowledge and understanding that you, as the researcher or knower, may be able to gain to be able to extend, broaden, and deepen understanding in your field of research. According to Crotty (2003), epistemology is a method for comprehending and explaining how we know what we know. Schwandt (1997) asserts that it is a study of the nature of knowledge and justification. Trochim, Donnelly and Arora (2016) defined epistemology as the philosophy of knowledge, or how we come to know. According to Cooksey and McDonald (2019), what constitutes knowledge in the world is what epistemology refers to as how we come to know something; how we know the truth or reality. In research, epistemology is concerned with the foundations of research and the ways in which researchers acquire knowledge.

The epistemological perspective utilised in this study is the constructivist approach. Crotty (1998) defines constructivism as the belief that all knowledge and reality depend on human activities, which are created through the interaction between individuals and their environment and communicated in a social context. The constructivist approach holds significant relevance in the context of this study for several compelling reasons. Firstly, it places a crucial emphasis on understanding the individual learning processes of ecotourism students.

By exploring the process through which individual students actively construct their own knowledge and understand concepts related to ecotourism, the researcher will acquire valuable insights into their distinct cognitive pathways. This aspect is relevant in the pursuit of identifying discipline-specific skills in ecotourism, as it enables a detailed analysis of how these skills are acquired and integrated at the individual level.

Furthermore, the utilisation of the constructivist framework plays a crucial role in identifying the current skill sets and areas of knowledge deficiency within the student population. By adopting this perspective, we can identify specific areas within the curriculum that may require more focused attention in terms of education. In addition, the constructivist approach promotes the development of personal reflection and self-awareness in relation to an individual's learning process. The inclusion of introspection in the research process not only enhances the overall quality of the study but also enables students to develop a more profound comprehension of their own abilities and areas for growth in relation to ecotourism-related skills. The constructivist approach is a crucial methodological choice that has the potential to shed light on the complex intricacies of individual learning experiences and make a substantial contribution to the broader objectives of this study.

4.4.2 Ontology

In the context of research, ontology refers to the underlying presumptions and beliefs about what exists and how it exists. Ontology is a subfield of metaphysics that examines the nature of existence and being. In the discipline of social studies, ontology has a significant impact on how academics perceive and analyse social phenomena. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, first published in 1966, is a fundamental resource for the study of ontology in social research. The authors contend that social and cultural variables influence ontological beliefs and that the common values and customs of the societies to which we belong determine our perception of reality. This implies that various communities will have distinct ontologies and that the community in which we are located has an impact on how we perceive social phenomena. Ontology is described by Al-Ababneh (2020) as the study of the nature of reality that is concerned with the identification of a pre-existing phenomenon. In this study, the researcher explored the attainment of discipline-specific skills by students enrolled for a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management through WPBL at traditional ecotourism organisations.

Students were given the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the workplace through WPBL, which enabled them to connect the dots between the knowledge gained in the classroom and the realities of the working world. As a result, students were able to give reality more meaning. Ontological presumptions, according to Lincoln and Guba (1982), are the fundamental notions concerning the nature of reality. By establishing what exists in the world and how it exists, these presumptions serve as a guide for inquiry. Therefore, in this study, ontology aims to establish the realities of what ecotourism students learn in the industry during WPBL.

4.4.3 Methodology

Methodology is the study of how methods are used in a field of study in a systematic and theoretical way. Methodology is an important part of the research design in the social sciences, and it is closely linked to the researcher's paradigm. A paradigm is a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape how researchers understand and study social phenomena (Keeves, 1997). From this, we can assume that the methodological considerations in a paradigm are the participants, the tools used to collect data, and the measures for analysing data that help us learn about the research problem. In the context of this study, the researcher used face-to-face interviews, online one-on-one interviews, and focus groups as data collection tools. The methods employed by the researcher helped to understand the WPBL phenomenon and its contribution to the attainment of discipline-specific skills for employment in ecotourism. To understand this phenomenon, the study further adopted a single case study of DUT, which is one of the public higher education institutions in South Africa that offers an undergraduate qualification in ecotourism.

4.4.4 Axiology

Axiology is a branch of philosophy that studies ethics and values. Axiology is the study of the values, beliefs, and ethical principles that affect the way research is done and how the results are interpreted. Axiology is especially important in the social sciences, where researchers often investigate sensitive topics and must think about what is right and wrong (Khatri, 2020). When doing research, researchers have a moral obligation to follow certain ethical principles, such as respect for people, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice (Nigussie and Bekele, 2021). In research, values and ethical principles affect how research questions are made, what methods are used to collect and analyse data, and how results are interpreted and shared.

In this study, NVivo version 12 software was used to deductively code the information collected from both interviews and focus groups. In this step, the transcribed interview data was separated into distinct, meaningful codes. Based on the differences, similarities, and interpretations that emerged from the transcribed data, codes were constructed. This method permits the researcher to refine the data into manageable themes and subthemes.

The information acquired from structured interviews was transcribed verbatim throughout the analysis phase, and important excerpts from this data were used to enhance the discussion on themes. Researchers have a moral duty to consider the values and ethical principles that guide their work and to make sure it is done in an ethical and responsible way (Shaw, et al., 2020). In this regard, to safeguard the anonymity of the primary respondents, the study does not reveal their identities. Thus, axiology is a key part of research that helps shape both the way research is done and how the results are interpreted.

4.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research adopted a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is defined as a type of research that seeks to understand social and human phenomena in a naturalistic and context-specific manner, emphasising the importance of understanding experiences, meanings, and perspectives (Creswell, et al., 2007). A collection of interpretive, tangible techniques that make the world visible makes up qualitative research. The world is changed by these methods. They transform the world into a collection of representations, which may include memos to oneself, field notes, interviews, dialogues, and images. At this level, qualitative research adopts a naturalistic, interpretive perspective on the world. This means that qualitative researchers look at objects in their natural environments while attempting to interpret or make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings that different people assign to different phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research is structured using words, an open-ended questionnaire, and interview questions (Creswell and Poth, 2016). In other words, qualitative research develops and evaluates non-numerical data such as text, images, and audio. This study aims to identify discipline-specific skills in ecotourism and establish whether a six-month WPBL programme in traditional ecotourism organisations assists students in attaining these skills. The data collection methods employed in this study comprised eleven in-person interviews conducted with workplace supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations that provided WPBL to ecotourism students from DUT.

Additionally, five online interviews were conducted with academic staff members from DUT. Furthermore, four focus groups were organised, each consisting of students who had completed a six-month WPBL programme in both traditional ecotourism organisations and conventional tourism organisations.

4.6 INTERVIEWS

One of the most popular and effective techniques used by qualitative researchers to comprehend other people is interviewing (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Bryman, 2011). According to Kahn and Cannell (1957) and Dexter (1970) interviews are conversations with a purpose that qualitative researchers use to obtain data on a certain subject or topic. Interviews are planned and adhere to processes and standards; they do not happen accidentally (Roberts, 2020). Interviews are a common method for qualitative researchers to get data because they allow them to explore social factors by asking people to talk and to gather or build knowledge by listening to and interpreting what they say and how they say it (Döringer, 2021). Most qualitative researchers rely on interviews to get insight into aspects of reality that would otherwise be unavailable, such as the experiences and perspectives that are subjective to individuals (Crawford and Johns, 2018). The data collection method employed in this study involved conducting interviews with the participants. In the subsequent section, a more comprehensive description of these interviews is provided.

4.6.1 Face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations

Face-to-face interviews, according to Kvale (1999), allow the interviewer and interviewee to form a personal bond that may encourage more candid and open responses. According to the author, conducting interviews in person provides interviewers with the opportunity to pose additional questions and seek clarification on ambiguous responses, thereby enhancing their understanding of the subject matter being investigated. Face-to-face interviews, according to Jain (2021), give the interviewer the chance to elucidate and probe responses, resulting in a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon under study and enabling the provision of a rich and in-depth account of the experiences and perspectives of the individuals under study.

Face-to-face interviews offer the interviewer the chance to develop a rapport and a relationship with the interviewee, which can result in more in-depth and meaningful responses (Malmqvist et al.,2019). Face-to-face interviews therefore have the potential to offer a rich and complex insight of the experiences and opinions of the participants. A total of eleven supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations were interviewed face-to-face using an interview schedule.

The flexibility of a qualitative research methodology is essential since it allows for modification of the investigation focus based on ongoing experiences throughout the collection of data and reflection on that data (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, 2005). The researcher initially designed the interview schedule prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, data collection occurred during the outbreak, necessitating adjustments. Consequently, an additional question was introduced to explore emerging themes and gain deeper insights into specific experiences and perspectives. Specifically, workplace supervisors were invited to elaborate on the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak for the Workplace-Based Learning (WPBL) programme.

4.6.2 Online one-on-one interviews with DUT academic staff

In qualitative research, the most common method of data collection is interviewing (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007). According to Janghorban and Roudsari (2014), the benefits of conducting qualitative research on the internet are more visible in online individual interviews where both the interviewer and the interviewee have equal status. Traditional face-to-face interviews have been hampered by time and budgetary constraints, geographical dispersion, and the physical mobility boundaries of research populations (Cater, 2011). Over the last few decades, technological advances in the rise of the internet have enhanced the experience of online interviewing in qualitative research and minimised the challenges associated with face-to-face interviews (Hooley, Wellens and Marriott, 2012).

In this study, both virtual focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews were conducted using synchronous platforms. Online interviews are also less expensive than traditional interviews because there are no travel, venue rental, or accommodation costs. Microsoft Teams was the virtual platform used to conduct online interviews with academic staff from DUT as well as four focus groups with ecotourism students.

Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021) note that respondents reveal more personal information in computer-mediated communication than in conventional face-to-face interviews. Respondents exhibit a greater inclination to express their ideas directly in an online environment compared to a traditional interview setting, likely due to the reduced constraints imposed by the online medium (Gray et al., 2020). The researcher was able to collect data from a wider spectrum of participants using Microsoft Teams for online focus groups, overcoming the limitations of traditional in-person focus groups. In a similar vein, Moises (2020) discovered that respondents are more inclined to reveal their deeper emotions in an online context compared to traditional interviews.

4.6.3 Online focus group interviews with students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management

Focus groups provide insights into how individuals think and a broader grasp of the topics under investigation. Focus groups are group interviews that allow researchers to get more detailed information than individual interviews and surveys (Nagle and Williams, 2020). The study involved the organisation of four focus groups, comprising students who had successfully completed a six-month WPBL programme in both traditional ecotourism organisations and conventional tourism organisations. Conducting online focus groups using Microsoft Teams had several benefits, including:

- **Convenience:** Online focus groups conducted with Microsoft Teams made it possible for participants to participate in the conversation without having to travel or attend meetings in person because they could do so from the convenience of their own locations.
- **Accessibility:** Microsoft Teams enabled online focus groups to reach participants who may not have been physically accessible, such as those who live in remote locations and those who struggle with mobility.
- **Cost effectiveness:** The elimination of travel and other costs that relate to in-person data collection made online focus groups more cost-effective than in-person focus groups.
- **Flexibility:** This is a key feature of Microsoft Teams, which enabled online focus groups to be held at a time and location that was most suitable for the researcher as well as the participants.

- Increased participation: The online focus group reached a wider range of participants because of the elimination of restrictions such as geography and time.
- Enhanced data quality: The recording feature of Microsoft Teams allowed for the collection of reliable and detailed data, which was helpful for subsequent analysis. This feature also helps improve data security.
- Enhanced collaboration: The chat, screen sharing, and file sharing features of Microsoft Teams made it possible to collect and analyse data in a manner that was both more efficient and more collaborative.

4.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a case study research method, which is defined as an investigation of a unit of analysis that is systematic and conducted over a certain period to obtain in-depth data. The underpinning principle of case study research is the systematic approach, which seeks to describe the phenomenon of interest (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010; Creswell, 2013). Case study designs are distinctive in that they allow for rich, detailed accounts of the participants' actual experiences, emotions, and thoughts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). The selection of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) for this study was based on its status as one of the universities of technology in South Africa that offers an undergraduate qualification in ecotourism. The intention of case study research is to achieve optimum accuracy and comprehension of the case (Cronin, 2014). During the process of developing the proposal for this study, attempts were made to establish contact with the Tshwane University of Technology and the Vaal University of Technology. However, one of the institutions declined to participate, while the other did not respond until the study had been completed.

The unit of analysis was made up of students from DUT enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. The study solely focused on students who had officially completed their WPBL programme as per the guidelines from the respective institution. It must be noted that WPBL is a compulsory requirement for students to obtain their qualification with a duration of six months. In the case of DUT, WPBL commences from the beginning of November every year to the end of April the following year, when students are in their second year of study. In using single case study research, the interpretation and understanding of WPBL by students, the institution, and employers were explored.

Single case study research was deemed suitable for this study because it allowed the researcher to consider not only the views from the perspective of participants and the nature of their interaction, but also the context in which this happens. In particular, the case study method describes an intervention or phenomenon within the real-life context in which it occurred (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Furthermore, the researcher employed cross-sectional research, which is described by Creswell (2014) as a study design in which data are collected from a sample of individuals at a single time point to describe their features and the variables of interest.

4.8 STUDY POPULATION

Welman, Kruger and Mitchel (2005) define the population as the subject of study, which can be individuals, groups, institutions, anthropological products and activities, or the conditions to which they are subjected. A population connects the elements of the investigation for which the researcher wishes to draw explicit conclusions. Bless and Higson-Smith (2007) further define the population as a group of comprehensive customary components or individuals on whom the research is focused and whose characteristics the researcher wishes to regulate. According to Punch (2013), the population is a target group that cannot be examined directly; thus, a sample from that population is taken. As a result, the population is a group of people who share some characteristics. Peterson (2019) defines the study population as a collection of subjects, persons, groups, organisations, human products, and events that adhere to predetermined research requirements and standards. The population is the complete group of individuals having one or more comparable characteristics from whom information is requested (Wiid and Diggins, 2013). The target population for the study comprised industry supervisors from eleven traditional ecotourism organisations that hosted ecotourism students from DUT for WPBL for a period of six months. Another target population were students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management who had completed their six-month WPBL programme, and lastly, the academic staff from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. Six months after the completion of WPBL, participants were selected to participate in this study and record their experiences in detail while they could still recall them.

4.9 SAMPLING METHOD

Sampling is a crucial and necessary step in the research process, entailing the selection of a portion, piece, or segment that is representative of the whole (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007).

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014), a sample is a subset of a population that is representative of the population. Consequently, the process of sampling entails the deliberate selection of individuals who possess the potential to provide valuable and comprehensive data for research investigations. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2015), because purposeful sampling is used by qualitative researchers, their selection of data sources is purposefully non-random. Taherdoost (2016) defines sampling as the process of choosing a subset of the population for research.

4.9.1 Purposive Sampling

According to Bryman (2008), a type of non-probability sampling method is "purposeful sampling," in which the researcher chooses participants based on predetermined criteria. These criteria may include the participants' capabilities and willingness to participate in a particular study. Creswell (2014) defines purposive sampling as a nonprobability sampling technique in which the researcher selects cases for the sample based on purposeful considerations. The author also notes that this type of sampling is often used when the researcher has a specific research question and wants to select participants who will provide insight into that question. According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2015), purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling wherein the researcher deliberately chooses the sample based on specific characteristics or criteria that are pertinent to the research question. The authors additionally acknowledge that this approach is frequently employed in qualitative research to examine a particular population or subgroup and caution that the sample obtained through purposive sampling may not accurately reflect the entire population.

Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) also agree that purposive sampling entails the purposeful selection of informants based on their characteristics, expertise, and abilities. In qualitative research, the value of information-rich cases is the basis for selection decisions because this information cannot be obtained using a random sample technique. According to Mesuwini, Thaba-Nkadimene and Kgomotlokoa (2021), purposive sampling looks for examples with a wealth of material that may be explored in depth regarding key topics for the goal of this research. The use of purposive sampling in this study enabled the researcher to selectively include participants who were deemed most likely to provide pertinent data in order to address the research inquiries.

In this study, a purposive sampling method was employed to select participants from three groups: industry supervisors, students, and academic staff members from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. Only those individuals who expressed a willingness to participate were included in the sample. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the sample size allocated to each target population.

Table 4.1: Sample size per target population

Target population	Data collection tool	Number of participants
Industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations where ecotourism students from DUT undertook WPBL for six months	Face-to-face interviews	11
Academic staff from the Department of Ecotourism, DUT	Online interviews via Microsoft Teams	05
Student focus group 1: Students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and completed WPBL for a period of six months at traditional ecotourism organisations	Online focus groups interview via Microsoft Teams	13
Student focus group 2: Students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and completed WPBL for a period of six months at traditional ecotourism organisations	Online focus group interview via Microsoft Teams	13
Student focus group 3: Students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and completed WPBL for a period of six months at conventional tourism organisations	Online focus group interviews via Microsoft Teams	09
Student focus group 4: Students enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and completed WPBL for a period of six months at conventional tourism organisations	Online focus group interviews via Microsoft Teams	08

Source: Generated by author

4.9.2 Sample size considerations in qualitative research

Boddy (2016) asserts that the issue of determining the ideal, and standard, sample size in qualitative research continues to be a subject of constant debate, highlighting the significance attributed to studies utilising qualitative methods.

Upon conducting an extensive review of scholarly literature, it becomes evident that there is a significant lack of agreement among researchers and professionals regarding the appropriate sample size (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, 2016). There is considerable variation in recommended sample sizes, ranging from at least one up to a maximum of 350 participants, which is also influenced by a number of factors. (Wynter, 2021).

The factors include the scope of research, type of approach employed, epistemological stance adopted, researcher expertise, publishing venue, funding sources, time limitations, as well as the expectations of the researcher. It is important to highlight that researchers exhibit significant variability in their preferences for sample sizes, even within specific research methodologies. Furthermore, in qualitative research, there is a lack of universally applicable statistical guidelines or definitive methodologies to determine the appropriate sample size. According to Shaheen and Pradhan (2019), there is a recommendation for a smaller sample size that is based on a sensible and realistic representation of the phenomenon under study. However, several researchers rely on the notion of saturation, which is borrowed from grounded theory, to assess the sufficiency of the sample (Sandelowski, 1995; Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). Based on this notion, a sample is considered to have reached an appropriate size when it is sufficiently large to effectively address the research inquiries and meet the objectives of the study. In the context of this study, the combination of industry supervisors, academic staff, and ecotourism students, with their diverse backgrounds and experiences, was carefully considered to ensure that the sample size was appropriate for the intricate examination of discipline-specific skills for ecotourism across industry and academia. This aligns with the recognition in the literature that qualitative research can achieve saturation with relatively modest sample sizes, particularly when examining homogenous populations with clearly defined goals.

4.9.3 An evaluation of saturation in qualitative research

The concept of saturation, which is a fundamental aspect of assessing purposive samples in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 1995; Morse, 1995, 2015), has traditionally been used to determine sample adequacy. Saturation occurs when additional data collection does not contribute any new theoretical insights or enhance the understanding and explanation of the analysed phenomenon.

The attainment of saturation is crucial in confirming the sufficiency of the sample, guaranteeing that it fully encompasses the variety, intricacy, and subtleties of the subject matter, thereby establishing the validity of the content (Francis et al., 2010). The concept of saturation has become an essential measure in qualitative research, enhancing the reliability and credibility of data collection (O'reilly and Parker, 2013). It is commonly acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of ensuring the quality of qualitative research (Morse, 2015). Over the course of time, there have been alterations and advancements in the comprehension and analysis of saturation.

Weller et al. (2019) propose the adoption of saturation to assess salience, establishing a clear association between salience and the frequency of an item or theme within the population under investigation. According to this methodology, a research study focused on investigating the most prevalent ideas can be adequately conducted with a sample size of 10 units. However, for a more comprehensive examination of a wider range of ideas, a larger sample size may be necessary. The inherent intricacy of saturation is further compounded by the absence of definitive rules or methods to ascertain its attainment, regardless of its application. The presence of abstruseness frequently results in a lack of confidence and transparency in research reports, as evidenced by the lack of explanation regarding the methodology employed to ascertain sample sufficiency. In a comprehensive examination of 845 qualitative studies, Kindsiko and Poltimäe (2019) discovered that a considerable majority of these studies did not adequately explicate their methodology for determining sample adequacy. Merely 10% of the studies made reference to the saturation point as a means of evaluation. The attribution of this reference was frequently ascribed to an implied anticipation on the part of reviewers. Therefore, determining the minimum, yet adequate, sample size necessary to accomplish the objectives of the research poses a significant challenge. The determination of an optimal sample size remains a subject of contemplation that encompasses both theoretical analysis and practical ambiguity (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

According to a study by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), studies using empirical data reached saturation after only a small number of interviews (between 9 and 17) or focus group discussions (between 4 and 8). This trend was particularly evident in studies involving relatively homogeneous study populations and narrowly defined research objectives. It has been established that qualitative studies can achieve saturation with relatively small sample sizes.

This study aligns with the various viewpoints on sample sizes and saturation that have been discussed in the existing literature. The study involved a total of 11 industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations. These supervisors oversaw the WPBL of students, which lasted for a period of six months. Furthermore, a total of five academic staff members from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT actively and voluntarily took part in the study. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of students, a series of four focus groups were organised and conducted. Focus Groups 1 and 2 were comprised of a total of 26 participants, all of whom had successfully concluded their WPBL in traditional ecotourism environments. Focus Group 3 consisted of 9 participants, while Focus Group 4 had 8 participants. All participants in both focus groups had successfully completed their WPBL in conventional tourism organisations. The researcher took great care in selecting diverse sample sizes and group compositions to examine the process of ecotourism skills development comprehensively and intricately across various academia and industry. The incorporation of varied sample sizes aligns with the acknowledgment in scholarly works that qualitative research can attain saturation and valuable insights even with relatively small sample sizes, particularly when examining homogeneous populations with clearly defined objectives. The selection of this approach was considered suitable considering the particular objectives and extent of this study.

4.10 DATA ANALYSIS

The process of data analysis commences after the data collection is fully completed. This study used thematic analysis in research as a tool, which is the foundational method for qualitative analysis, which assisted the researcher in categorising the study into different themes as recommended by Holloway and Todres (2003). Explorative data evaluation ought to be carried out through systematising data into groups based on subjects, perceptions, or analogous descriptions.

According to Choy (2014), qualitative researchers frequently engage in the analysis of data through the process of developing novel insights, articulating theoretical explanations, and examining the interplay between different perspectives. Lancaster (2005) states that the analysis of data can be seen as a technique used to transform data into information. It is of particular significance to state that information refers to organised facts, which can be utilised to create awareness and make informed decisions.

The information gathered from respondents during online focus groups and one-on-one interview sessions in this study is presented and discussed in Chapter 5. The data gathered from the sessions, that is, interviews and focus group discussion, was deductively coded using NVivo version 12 software. The recorded information from the interviews was sorted into many useful codes during this phase. The differences, resemblances, and meanings that emerged from the transcribed data served as the foundation for the development of the codes. The researcher organised the data into useful themes and subthemes using this technique. In other words, the goal of the analysis is to transform large amounts of data into procedures that can be easily managed and implemented, as well as to eliminate data that is irrelevant. In addition, relevant quotes from the verbatim transcription of the structured interview data were utilised to assist the discussion on themes during the analytical phase. The study does not provide the names of the primary respondents to preserve their confidentiality.

4.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The act of acknowledging study limitations allows researchers to showcase their critical thinking skills in relation to the research problem, their comprehension of the pertinent literature on the subject, and their accurate evaluation of the selected research methods for investigating the problem. In addition to the acquisition of new information, one of the primary goals of the research process is to challenge preconceived notions and investigate areas in which we are lacking information (Price and Murnan, 2004). The limitations of the study are any aspects of the study design or methodology that prevented or limited the research findings from being interpreted in a certain way. Study limitations are the restrictions imposed on the ability to generalise from the results to further describe applications to practice and may be the result of your initial study design choices. In addition, study limitations include the occurrence of unanticipated challenges during the course of the study (Theofanidis, Dimitrios and Fountouki, 2018). The subsequent section delineates the constraints faced by the researcher throughout the duration of this study.

4.11.1 Scope of the study

The scope of this research is limited to the Durban University of Technology, where an instrumental case study was used to examine the phenomenon of workplace-based learning and its influence on the attainment of discipline-specific skills in the field of ecotourism.

During the phase of proposal development for this study, the researcher intended to incorporate two additional universities of technology, namely the Tshwane University of Technology and the Vaal University of Technology, both of which offer undergraduate programmes in the field of ecotourism. Nevertheless, one of the institutions declined to partake in the study, whereas the other institution remained unresponsive until the study had reached its conclusion.

An instrumental case study in research can be characterised as a qualitative research approach that centres on comprehending a particular theme or issue in a comprehensive manner through the examination of a solitary phenomenon. The primary objective of an instrumental case study is to acquire a comprehensive comprehension of the phenomenon under investigation and to provide insights for subsequent research or practical applications. According to Yin (2000), the instrumental case study is a qualitative research approach that concentrates on a singular phenomenon with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of a specific topic or situation. Gerring (2006) emphasised the value of employing instrumental case studies as a way of thoroughly examining complicated and subtle phenomena in qualitative research. Researchers can develop a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the particular theme or issue being investigated by concentrating on just one case, which can then be used to guide future study and practice. The purpose of an instrumental case study is to gain greater knowledge of a specific theme or issue by investigating a single phenomenon in depth. This strategy can provide useful insights into unusual or complex circumstances that other research approaches cannot (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

4.11.2 Data collection methods partially influenced by the Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19)

The Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a developing emergency that has a significant impact on various sectors globally, including tourism and higher education. Numerous organisations purposefully halted and postponed in-person methods for interviews. As a consequence of the implementation of a national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, certain limitations on travel were enforced. At the time of preparing this report, certain restrictions had been eased. However, due to the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the situation, the researcher made the decision to employ online methods of data collection to ensure the continuity of the research.

It is noteworthy to mention that the completion of a six-month WPBL programme is a mandatory component for students pursuing their National Diploma in Ecotourism Management in the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. The WPBL programme is conducted during the period spanning from November to April each year. This programme specifically targets students who are in their second year of study. Nevertheless, the study was conducted amidst the implementation of lockdown measures, thereby resulting in an extended duration for the collection of data. This had a huge impact on the availability of participants, particularly for interviews. There were cases where respondents requested a rescheduling of interviews owing to health-related circumstances such as illness or quarantine. In the context of this study, conducting in-person interviews with industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations was deemed essential. This approach facilitated the researcher's ability to personally visit and investigate the remote nature of traditional ecotourism organisations.

4.11.3 Curriculum advancement: Phasing out the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management at DUT

The South African government has created a single, unified national qualification framework for education. This framework applies to all higher education institutions (HEIs) and makes it easier and more effective for students to move from one qualification to the next and between institutions. The changes are based on the Revised Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), which was officially published in the Government Gazette on August 2, 2013. Consequently, both public and private institutions of higher education in the nation, encompassing universities of technology, were compelled to reassess and harmonise current credentials and develop novel qualifications that adhere to the stipulations of the recently introduced sub-framework. Several universities of technology have commenced the provision of new qualifications or revised and realigned qualifications (South African Technology Framework, 2019). The phasing-in of the new Diploma in Ecotourism at the Durban University of Technology, specifically within the Department of Ecotourism, has been delayed until the conclusion of this research. The investigation of WPBL in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management remains highly pertinent, despite the impending discontinuation of this qualification and the upcoming implementation of the new Diploma in Ecotourism.

The significance of this relevance is rooted in the enduring nature of WPBL as a fundamental component of qualifications, thereby emphasising the importance and continued applicability of this study. While the National Diploma in Ecotourism is currently undergoing a phase-out process, it is imperative to acknowledge the continued significance of WPBL in both the outgoing and incoming iterations of the diploma. The continuity highlights the importance of this study as it directly contributes to the improvement of workplace learning practices within the field of ecotourism education.

The absence of the new Diploma in Ecotourism presents a favourable occasion to undertake this research, as the findings can potentially contribute to the design and execution of the new qualification, guaranteeing the continued efficacy and relevance of WPBL in accordance with industry requirements. The significance of the research extends beyond the credentials under consideration. The study explores the efficacy of WPBL within a wider educational framework, as it pertains to a pedagogical approach that extends beyond individual qualifications. The study's insights and findings have the potential to enhance the pedagogical comprehension of how WPBL can effectively facilitate the establishment of significant linkages between academic theory and practical application in real-world settings. Consequently, this phenomenon can have a beneficial influence on educational methodologies across diverse fields of study and certifications, resulting in a cascade of enhanced educational achievements. Moreover, this study is of significance to various industry stakeholders, employers, and policymakers who have a vested interest in the field of ecotourism education and the enhancement of the workforce. Through a comprehensive analysis of WPBL, this study aims to provide evidence-based suggestions for improving the calibre of individuals entering the ecotourism industry. The research gains significant value from its alignment with industry needs and its potential to impact educational policy and practices.

4.11.4 The impact of university non-participation

During the course of this study, a notable hindrance was encountered when two universities of technology, which were intended to be included in the study, did not engage in the research process. This occurred subsequent to the approval of both the research proposal and its corresponding title, *'The implications of workplace-based learning in attaining specialty skills for ecotourism employment: The medial viewpoint of universities of technology in South Africa'*.

The study intended to encompass three universities of technology; however, one institution exhibited reluctance to partake after the researcher's completion of their ethics requirements and subsequent approval. Regrettably, the department that was chosen for the study declined to participate, thereby leaving the researcher with the sole remaining institution. Nevertheless, as of the present time, the researcher has not yet received any form of communication or feedback from the second institution. The unforeseen occurrence has significantly influenced the research methodology, as the researcher initially intended to employ a case study approach involving multiple institutions. The circumstances have compelled the researcher to reassess the research design and investigate alternative methodologies.

4.11.5 Traditional ecotourism organisations

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), the first non-profit organisation advocating ecotourism, defined ecotourism in 1990 as travel to natural regions with the objectives of learning about a location's natural and cultural qualities and enhancing the well-being of local communities (TIES, 2013). According to Fennell and Markwell (2015), ecotourism was initially defined in 1965 as a subset of micro-niche travel focused on more expansive, clean, and remote protected environments that are thought to be vulnerable. Because of its connection to alternative niche travel, ecotourism has long been distinguished from mainstream tourism. Numerous sustainable tourism principles, including minimising environmental impact, respecting local culture, maximising earnings for local grassroots, and incorporating a learning and experience component, have gradually emerged in various locations. As a result, ecotourism has evolved into a macro-niche or a comprehensive framework that encompasses these principles (UNWTO, 2020a). After the Rio Conference in 1992 and the publication of the Brundtland Report (United Nations General Assembly, 1987), a global political agenda with Agenda 21 as its focal point witnessed the rise of ecotourism. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) was founded in the United States (The International Ecotourism Society, 2017). In line with this definition, the study purposely selected traditional ecotourism organisations based on several characteristics, but predominantly geographical location. The study presents a depiction of the geographical isolation of the ecotourism organisations that were involved in the research, as illustrated in Figures 4.2 to 4.12. All these photographs were captured using a mobile device belonging to the researcher.



Figure 4.2: The researcher at the Drakensberg region, Bergville -Unginyeza (Mofokeng, 2021)



Figure 4.3: The researcher at Isimangaliso Wetland Park (Mofokeng, 2021)



Figure 4.4: The researcher at the Langwverwacht area (Mofokeng, 2021)



Friday · Aug 6, 2021 · 11:25 AM

IMG_2152



Figure 4.5: The gravel road at Nyusana area, Bergville (Mofokeng, 2021)



Friday · Jul 30, 2021 · 10:16 AM

IMG_1662



Figure 4.6: Rugged terrain of Mkuze Game Reserve, Tshaneni area (Mofokeng, 2021)



Friday · Jul 30, 2021 · 9:39 AM

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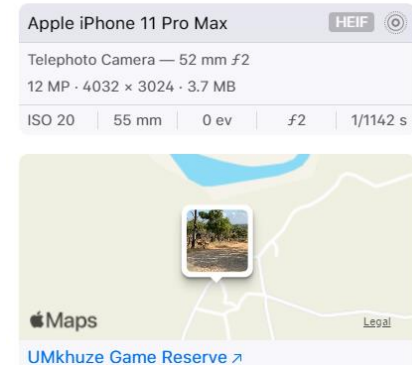


Figure 4.7: Wildlife at Umkhuze Game Reserve (Mofokeng, 2021)

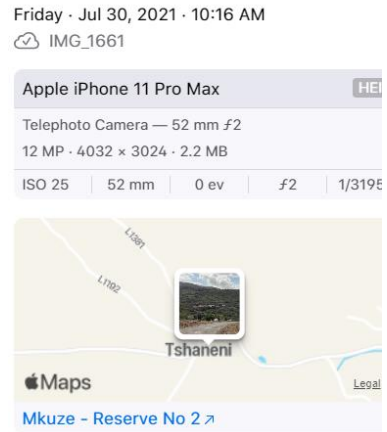


Figure 4.8: Scenic, remote topography at Mkuze Game Reserve (Mofokeng, 2021)

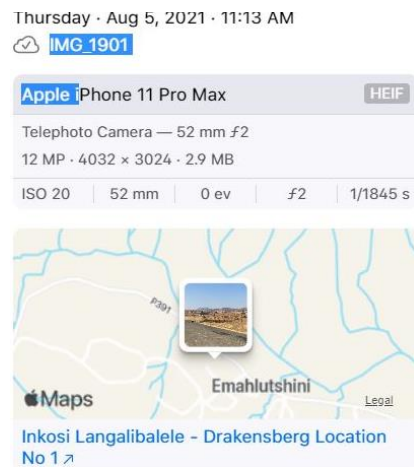


Figure 4.9: Rural area of Inkosi Langalibalele -Drakensberg Location (Mofokeng, 2021)

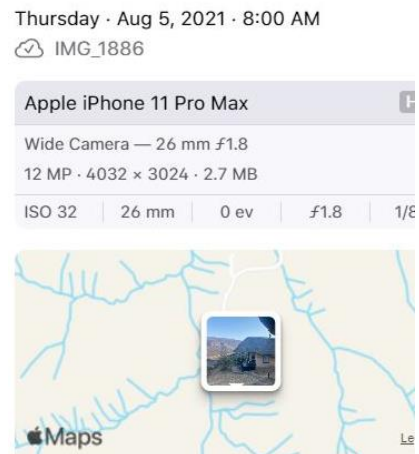


Figure 4.10: Accommodation at the heart of the Drakensberg (Mofokeng, 2021)



Wednesday · Jul 28, 2021 · 11:22 AM

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Apple iPhone 11 Pro Max

HEIF

Wide Camera — 26 mm f1.8

12 MP · 4032 × 3024 · 2.0 MB

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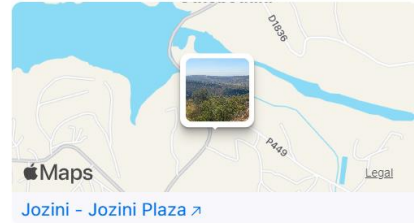
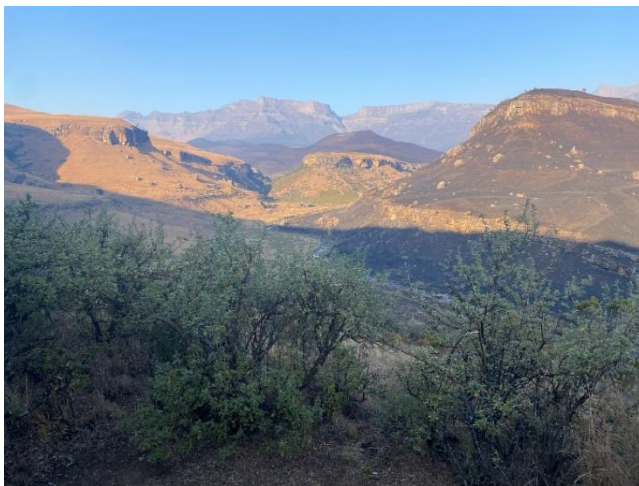


Figure 4.11: The view of the Jozini area, northern KwaZulu-Natal (Mofokeng, 2021)



Thursday · Aug 5, 2021 · 8:00 AM

IMG_1884

Apple iPhone 11 Pro Max

HEIF

Wide Camera — 26 mm f1.8

12 MP · 4032 × 3024 · 3.1 MB

ISO 32 | 26 mm | 0 ev | f1.8 | 1/858 s

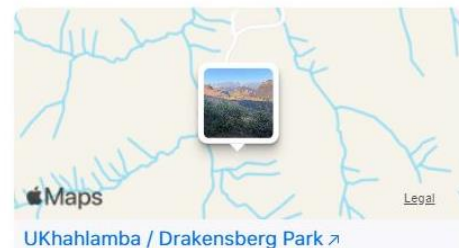


Figure 4.12: The view of uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park (Mofokeng, 2021)

4.12 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Validity as a concept can be applied to every aspect of the research process; it refers to the appropriateness of each step in finding out what you set out to investigate. The interview schedule was submitted to experts in the field to make sure that the questions were both appropriate and comprehensive. Comments received were then included in the final draft of the interview schedule. The relevant research committee of the Durban University of Technology, including the Research and Ethics Committee, further reviewed the interview schedule. In addition, triangulation was employed to increase the accuracy and validity of the research findings. Thus, addressing issues of reliability and validity.

This study used triangulation well by carefully choosing a range of sample sizes and group compositions, which is in line with the different viewpoints about sample sizes and saturation that have been highlighted in the literature. The inclusion of 11 industry supervisors, 5 academic staff members, and participants from four distinct focus groups provided a multifaceted view of the ecotourism skills development process. These participants were drawn from both traditional ecotourism settings and conventional tourism organisations, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the subject. The use of varying sample sizes is consistent with the understanding that qualitative research can yield meaningful insights even with modest sample sizes, particularly when studying well-defined populations. The researchers deliberately chose this approach to align with the particular goals and parameters of the study, ultimately bolstering the credibility and comprehensiveness of the research outcomes. Noble and Smith (2015) define reliability as the ability of a research instrument to consistently provide similar results when used repeatedly under similar conditions. The qualitative component of the research was assessed for data trustworthiness, which consists of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

4.13 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Nchabeleng (2019), the importance of ethics in research is particularly emphasised when considering inquiries that delve into personal lives and the dignity of individuals. These inquiries should be regarded as fundamental subjects due to their impact on the cultural values of the individuals being studied. Oliver (2012) endorses this view when adding that, more than anything, the consideration goes beyond the mere subject being treated with essentiality; it further requires the researcher to treat respondents with respect, upkeep, and sympathy. It is important to mention that the researcher obtained permission to undertake the study of this nature from DUT, as authorised by the Faculty of Management Sciences. This follows an essential and meticulous process, which was facilitated by the Faculty Research Committee (FRC) and the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), which came out strongly on the ethical issues and considerations that the researcher ought to continuously adhere to when the research is undertaken. The aim of this approach was to guarantee that this study, without fail, does meet the required research ethical standards.

4.13.1 Anonymity and confidentiality

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were asked to provide their informed consent by signing consent letters before the interviews were conducted. The participants possessed a legitimate entitlement to engage in or discontinue their involvement in the study. The researcher obtained written informed consent letters from the participants prior to conducting the interviews. The researcher provided the respondents with a guarantee that the information disclosed would be kept confidential throughout the entire duration of the study, including before, during, and after the investigation. To ensure the preservation of confidentiality, the researcher employed distinct codes to designate participants, thereby excluding any mention of names or other identifying information. Finally, the participants were notified about the requirement to retain their provided information for a period of five years before it could be disposed of.

4.13.2 Digital data storage and security

Digital versions of qualitative data were stored in several forms, including digitally recorded voice files (of interviews or fieldwork notes) held in MPEG Audio Layer III (MP3) format and similar transcriptions of voice files held in word-processed documents. Hence, security protocols devised for digital data consider the various formats in which digital versions of data can be stored, such as voice files, text files for transcriptions and annotations, and text files suitable for use in data analysis software. To enhance data security, the researcher implemented lockout mechanisms for screen savers. This suggests that any computer used for data analysis would be programmed to automatically initiate a "lockout" state after a period of three minutes of inactivity. This practice mitigates the potential for theft or unauthorised access to data in scenarios where the researcher handling sensitive information temporarily vacates their workstation without promptly logging out.

4.13.3 Physical data security measures for non-digital data

The preservation of security and confidentiality for research data is of utmost importance, particularly in cases involving sensitive information. The researcher took meticulous steps to safeguard all non-digital data related to this research in order to adhere to the suggested protocols for maintaining data integrity.

This section provides a detailed explanation of the rigorous protocols that have been established to safeguard paper-based documents that contain sensitive personal information. Stringent security protocols were applied to all non-digital data, encompassing physical documents such as consent forms, printouts, and case tracking sheets. The aforementioned documents were diligently stored in securely locked file cabinets during periods of non-use. The file cabinets were situated in a specifically designated area with restricted access, thereby enhancing the physical security measures for the data. To mitigate the potential hazards associated with unauthorised access or inadvertent disclosure, the researcher assumed sole responsibility for the management of physical documents. By implementing this approach, the data was restricted to only those individuals who were directly involved in the study, thus effectively minimising the likelihood of any unauthorised access or breaches of the data. Ensuring the privacy of participants was a key priority, which encompassed maintaining strict confidentiality throughout all aspects of the study, including the consent forms. The consent forms, which recorded the participants' voluntary involvement in the research, were regarded as confidential records. The treatment placed significant emphasis on its dedication to ensuring the protection of sensitive information belonging to participants. Therefore, these forms were stored in a secure manner, in close proximity to other confidential documents, and were only accessed by individuals with a legitimate need for the information.

4.14 DISPOSAL OF DATA

In the context of data disposal pertaining to this study, the utmost importance is placed on safeguarding the security of sensitive information. Conventional techniques, such as file deletion or hard drive formatting, may not be entirely effective, as there is a potential for data recovery. To effectively address this concern, a more comprehensive and rigorous approach will be implemented. The data residing within the hard drive, which encompasses the responses provided by participants, will undergo not only deletion but also physical destruction. To accomplish this objective, the researcher will collaborate with an authorised secure destruction facility, where the researcher will be physically present to supervise the procedure. The physical disposal of data will be carried out using a shredding process, which guarantees the permanent removal of the data and its inability to be retrieved. In line with data retention policies, it is important to note that complete data erasure will occur after a period of five years, following the conclusion of the examination and the full completion of the research study.

Social research is conducted within intricate cultural, legal, economic, and political frameworks. The complexities of these dynamics are heightened when multiple stakeholders possess divergent agendas or when researchers themselves harbour personal biases and priorities. Considering these intricacies, it becomes crucial to prioritise the maintenance of ethical considerations. This study implemented stringent measures to ensure the protection of the rights of all respondents. The data provided by the respondents was treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity, thereby safeguarding their privacy. The involvement of individuals in the research study was completely voluntary, thereby upholding the principle of autonomy for the participants. The research framework and objectives were presented in a transparent and unbiased manner, ensuring that all participants had a comprehensive comprehension of the research's intent. The research administration demonstrated adherence to ethical principles by providing a comprehensive explanation of the research's objectives and methodology in the introductory cover letter. This approach promoted transparency and ensured that participants provided informed consent. The commitment to conducting a robust and responsible study is highlighted by the comprehensive approach taken towards data security, ethical considerations, and transparent research practices.

4.15 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter served as a fundamental basis, providing a comprehensive explanation of the research paradigm, approach, design, and methodology that form the basis of this extensive study. The core focus of this discussion revolved around the fundamental principles of a research paradigm, specifically epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology. These concepts were thoroughly outlined to establish a coherent rationale for the chosen investigative approach. This research employed the purposive sampling method to facilitate the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders in both face-to-face and online interviews. These stakeholders encompassed industry supervisors, academic staff, and students. Recognising the essentiality of transparency in academic research, this chapter forthrightly acknowledges the inherent constraints of the study. One of the primary limitations is the significant influence of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic on methodologies for collecting data, which has required a re-evaluation of traditional approaches to adhere to safety protocols. Furthermore, the termination of the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme at DUT poses an unforeseen obstacle, necessitating a perceptive acknowledgment of its potential impact on the research findings.

Moreover, the chapter highlighted the importance of ethical considerations in this research journey. The preservation of anonymity, confidentiality, and data security is of utmost importance to ensure the integrity of the study and uphold the rights and dignity of all participants involved. Having established a strong methodological foundation, the subsequent section transitions to the presentation and discussion of the insightful findings of the study.

CHAPTER 5

EMPIRICAL DATA ANALYSIS AND DECODING: INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCOURSE BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND UNIVERSITY RESPONDENTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to determine discipline-specific skills for ecotourism and how workplace-based learning (WPBL) contributes to the attainment of these skills. The methodological approach utilised to respond to the study questions was thoroughly described and supported in the preceding chapter. This chapter presents and examines the data gathered through face-to-face interviews conducted with industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations and online one-on-one interviews with academic staff from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. Four focus groups were conducted with second-year students who were enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme. These students had successfully fulfilled the prerequisite of completing a six-month WPBL programme to qualify for their qualification. Furthermore, two of the focus groups consisted of students who successfully completed their WPBL in traditional ecotourism organisations, while the remaining two focus groups comprised students who completed their WPBL programme in conventional tourism organisations. The data obtained from both interview sessions and focus group discussions was systematically coded using the software NVivo version 12. In this process, the transcribed data from the interviews was divided into different meaningful codes. The codes were developed based on the differences, similarities, and meanings that emerged from the transcribed data. This process allowed the researcher to fine-tune the data into convenient themes and subthemes. During the analysis phase, information gathered from structured interviews was verbatim transcribed, and pertinent quotes from this data were used to support the discussion on themes. To protect their anonymity, the study does not disclose the identities of the main respondents.

The chapter is segmented into four sections. The first section presents findings from face-to-face interviews conducted with eleven industry supervisors selected from traditional ecotourism organisations where students completed their WPBL programme. Part two of this chapter presents data obtained from online interviews with academic staff members from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. Parts three and four of the study involve the analysis of data gathered from online focus group discussions with ecotourism students who had completed a six-month WPBL programme. Table 5.1 showcases the key themes and subthemes that have emerged from the face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors. These interviews provided a rich source of qualitative data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their perspectives on ecotourism skill development. The themes encapsulate the core concepts and insights shared by these professionals, shedding light on the nuanced aspects of the process. This table serves as a valuable resource for interpreting and synthesising the qualitative findings, offering a structured overview of the salient themes that emerged from this crucial phase of the research.

Table 5.1: Themes and subthemes emerging from face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors.

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: The comprehension and conceptualisation of ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Definition of ecotourism Subtheme 2: Ecotourism components (nature, culture, education, conservation) Subtheme 3: Benefits of ecotourism to local communities Subtheme 4: Integration of local culture and history as components of ecotourism Subtheme 5: Adventure and outdoor activities as part of an ecotourism experience
Theme 2: Identified gaps in ecotourism discipline-specific skills	Subtheme 1: Limited understanding regarding green energy and eco-friendly practices Subtheme 2: Limited comprehension and eagerness towards conservation and the environment Subtheme 3: Inadequate guiding skills and safety knowledge Subtheme 4: Inadequate customer service skills Subtheme 5: Lack of knowledge about the natural environment Subtheme 6: Trustworthiness and adaptability
Theme 3: The significance of WPBL in addressing the skills gaps in ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Practical application and real-life experience Subtheme 2: Mentorship and guidance Subtheme 3: Willingness to learn Subtheme 4: Communication of WPBL outcomes and expectations
Theme 4: Preparedness of students for WPBL	Subtheme 1: Students were deficient in communication skills at the initiation of WPBL Subtheme 2: Insufficient readiness for the work environment Difficulties in comprehending and adhering to rules and regulations in the actual workplace setting
Theme 5: Equipping students with knowledge and skills relevant to ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Exposure to various divisions and responsibilities within the organisation Subtheme 2: Introducing students to tasks related to conservation and customer relations Subtheme 3: Interaction with guests to develop and enhance communication skills Subtheme 4: Fauna, flora and animal behaviour education sessions Subtheme 5: Empowering students to conduct guided tours and cultural experiences Subtheme 6: Supervised student involvement in housekeeping and maintenance tasks Subtheme 7: Administrative tasks and financial management
Theme 6: WPBL programme management and evaluation	Subtheme 1: Supervision and monitoring Subtheme 2: Induction programme Subtheme 3: Incentives for exemplary performance

Theme 7: The role of higher education institutions in effective WPBL programmes	<p>Subtheme 1: Constant communication and transparency between industry and institutions</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Frequent industry visits by university personnel</p> <p>Subtheme 3: Clearer expectations of WPBL outcomes and entrepreneurship integration</p> <p>Subtheme 4: Industry's desire for a bigger role in WPBL placement and curriculum development</p>
Theme 8: The role of students in maximising their WPBL experience	<p>Subtheme 1: Engaging in inquiry and displaying curiosity in the workplace</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Demonstrating receptivity and willingness to acquire knowledge</p> <p>Subtheme 3: Sharing expectations and goals with industry supervisors and other organisational personnel</p> <p>Subtheme 4: Respect for experienced employees</p>
Theme 9: Assessing the progress and improvement of students in executing certain tasks over a period of six months	<p>Subtheme 1: Communication skills</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Problem-solving skills</p>
Theme 10: The adequacy of a six-month period for WPBL in preparing students for employment in the ecotourism sector	<p>Subtheme 1: The six-month duration of WPBL proves inadequate for students to acquire comprehensive knowledge and skills</p>
Theme 11: Placement of students in traditional ecotourism and conventional tourism establishments	<p>Subtheme 1: Diverse views on placing students in traditional ecotourism organisations</p>
Theme 12: Navigating the Pandemic - The influence of COVID-19 on WPBL	<p>Subtheme 1: Effect on training and learning experience</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Effect on guest volume</p>

Source: Generated by author

5.2 SECTION 1

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION - ECOTOURISM INDUSTRY SUPERVISORS

This section explores the empirical foundation of the study, wherein primary insights from experienced industry supervisors are given prominence. This data presentation is anchored by a group of eleven industry supervisors who have been purposely sampled from traditional ecotourism organisations that hosted ecotourism students from the Durban University of Technology for WPBL. These individuals, who possess a significant amount of experience and expertise, have openly shared their perspectives through open and direct in-person interviews. This thoughtfully chosen group exemplifies a diverse range of traditional ecotourism organisations, serving as a tangible link to the applied domain where students engage in WPBL initiatives. As the examination of their significant contributions unfolds, a comprehensive perspective on the interdependent connection between academia and industry in shaping future ecotourism professionals becomes apparent. By means of their perceptive narratives, a distinctive perspective on the intricate dynamics of ecotourism education and its congruence with industry imperatives is provided. This section serves as the foundation upon which the insights of the study are developed, providing a crucial perspective that enhances the discussion on the education and implementation of ecotourism.

5.2.1 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION PERTAINING TO INDUSTRY SUPERVISORS

This section will present the demographic information of industry supervisors from traditional ecotourism organisations. The demographic data of industry supervisors is significant in providing valuable insights into the makeup of the ecotourism industry and the demographic factors that influence it. The demographic variables analysed in this section include gender, race, categorisation of organisations within the ecotourism sector, and years of experience in the organisation. The presentation of these variables allows for a better understanding of the diversity and composition of the ecotourism industry, as well as the level of expertise and experience of the industry supervisors. Gender is a significant variable to consider, as it can draw attention to any potential disparities and biases that may exist.

In addition, analysis of the racial makeup of industry supervisors provides insights into the level of diversity and inclusion in the ecotourism industry within the scope of this study. The categorisation of organisations within the ecotourism sector is also a key variable to consider, as it provides insight into the various types of organisations that form the industry as well as their unique characteristics and needs. Finally, analysing the years of experience of industry supervisors provides an understanding of their level of expertise and experience within the industry. Overall, this section is a critical component of this study as it provides insights into the diversity, multiplicity, composition, and expertise of industry supervisors. These insights can be instrumental in informing policy and decision-making within the industry, as well as identifying areas where additional research and intervention can be needed.

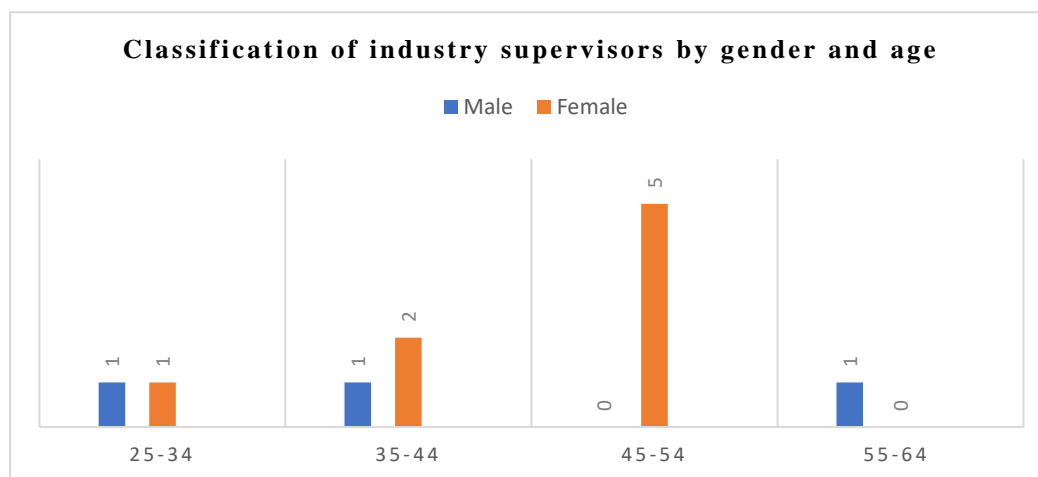


Figure 5.1: Classification of industry supervisors by gender and age

The age categories delineated in Figure 5.1 encompass individuals between the ages of 25 and 34, 35 and 44, 45 and 54, and 55 and 64. The data suggests that there is an equivalent distribution of males and females within the age range of 25–34 years, with a single representative of each gender. Within the age bracket of 35–44 years, there is a single male respondent and two female respondents. In the age group of 45–54, there is an absence of males and a presence of five females. In conclusion, the demographic group consisting of individuals aged 55–64 exhibits a gender distribution of one male and zero females. The provided information offers valuable insights regarding the distribution of industry supervisors based on gender and age.

The subject of gender concerns in tourism development has been widely acknowledged as a significant area of study. This is evident in the works of scholars such as Gibson (2001), Rinaldi and Salerno (2020), Dang and Nguyen (2021), who have recently devoted attention to this matter. According to Alrwajfah, Almeida-García and Cortés-Macías (2020), existing literature demonstrates that tourism has the potential to contribute positively to gender equality by yielding advantages for women in various domains such as employment, income, education, and social status. Bianchi (2021) considers gender equality to be a significant objective within the framework of sustainable development goals (SDGs). In recent decades, the tourism industry has experienced significant growth, positioning it as one of the most rapidly expanding sectors. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2020), the tourism sector contributes to over 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and plays a significant role in generating a quarter of all newly created employment opportunities. In a recent study by Zhang and Zhang (2020), a comprehensive analysis was conducted on a sample of 36 Asian countries, spanning the period from 2006 to 2018. The findings of this study shed light on the positive impact of tourism on the promotion of gender equality. In a study conducted by Nassani et al., (2019), it was discovered that tourism played a significant role in fostering gender equality across 24 European countries during the period spanning from 1990 to 2015. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there exists empirical evidence pointing towards the presence of certain disadvantages experienced by women within the context of the tourism sector's evolution and growth. Carvalho, et al., (2019) have conducted a study that examines the presence of discriminatory practices against female managers within the tourism industry. Therefore, this study affirms that it is imperative to understand the impact of tourism on various aspects of gender equality to inform policy decisions.

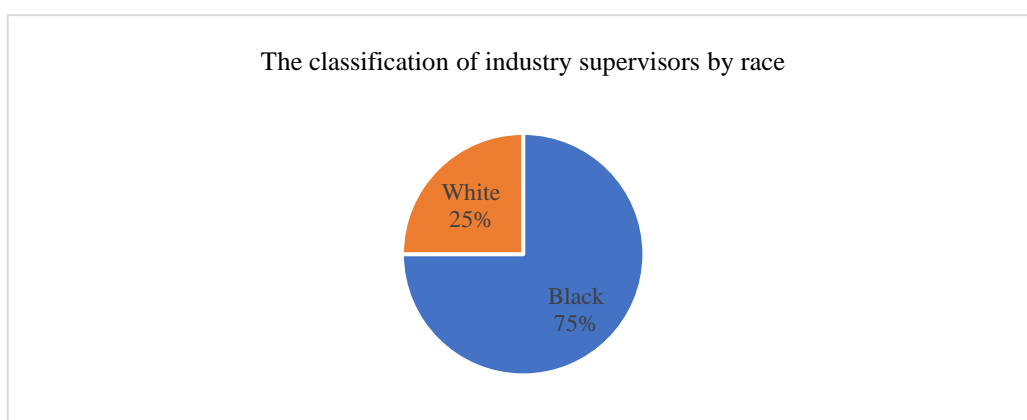


Figure 5.2: Classification of industry supervisors by race

The racial distribution of industry supervisors is depicted in Figure 5.2. The data provided illustrates the distribution of industry supervisors across various demographic categories. Among the eleven industry supervisors, nine are identified as black, while two are identified as white. Throughout the historical period of colonisation and the apartheid era in South Africa, there was a notable tendency for conservation efforts to be primarily linked to specific racial groups, namely white individuals and those belonging to the socio-economic upper class, including the elite and individuals occupying positions of power or authority (Musavengane and Leonard, 2019). Although the study findings reveal that the majority of the respondents are racially classified as black, it is worth noting that there is currently a significant global discourse surrounding the notion and achievement of inclusive and sustainable growth trajectories. To foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth in South Africa, it is imperative to establish an economy that caters to the needs of all its citizens in a fair and just manner (World Bank, 2018). Although various state policies, strategies, and programmes have achieved some success in addressing economic disparities, it is evident that persistent inequalities still define the South African economy (Abrahams, 2019). These disparities are established based on racial and gender biases pertaining to the allocation and availability of wealth, income, skills, and employment opportunities. The national government of South Africa considers the tourism sector to be of utmost importance for the economic transformation of the country (National Treasury, 2019). Furthermore, the national government recognises the labour-intensive nature of the tourism sector and acknowledges its significant potential for generating additional employment opportunities and fostering the growth of small, medium, and micro-enterprises (SMMEs). This, in turn, is expected to contribute to the alleviation of the alarmingly high rates of unemployment. However, it is contended that for the tourism sector to expand and make a positive contribution to economic growth and employment objectives, it is necessary to address concerns related to access and transformation.



Figure 5.3: Industry supervisors' positions within organisations

As represented by Figure 5.3, a collective of nine participants occupy managerial roles within conventional ecotourism establishments, spanning across diverse departments such as operations, reservations, customer services, resorts, and finance. Two of the participants own and manage their own establishments. Hence, this study highlights the significance of these roles in facilitating effective functioning within organisations, serving as indicators of a specific degree of proficiency and knowledge that could prove advantageous for students engaging in WPBL.



Figure 5.4: Industry supervisors' number of years in the organisation

The data in Figure 5.4 illustrates the duration of time that the participants have held their current positions. The age range of 11–25 years and 16–25 years both had an equal number of respondents, specifically three individuals. However, there was only one respondent who reported having experience ranging from 0 to 5 years in their current position.

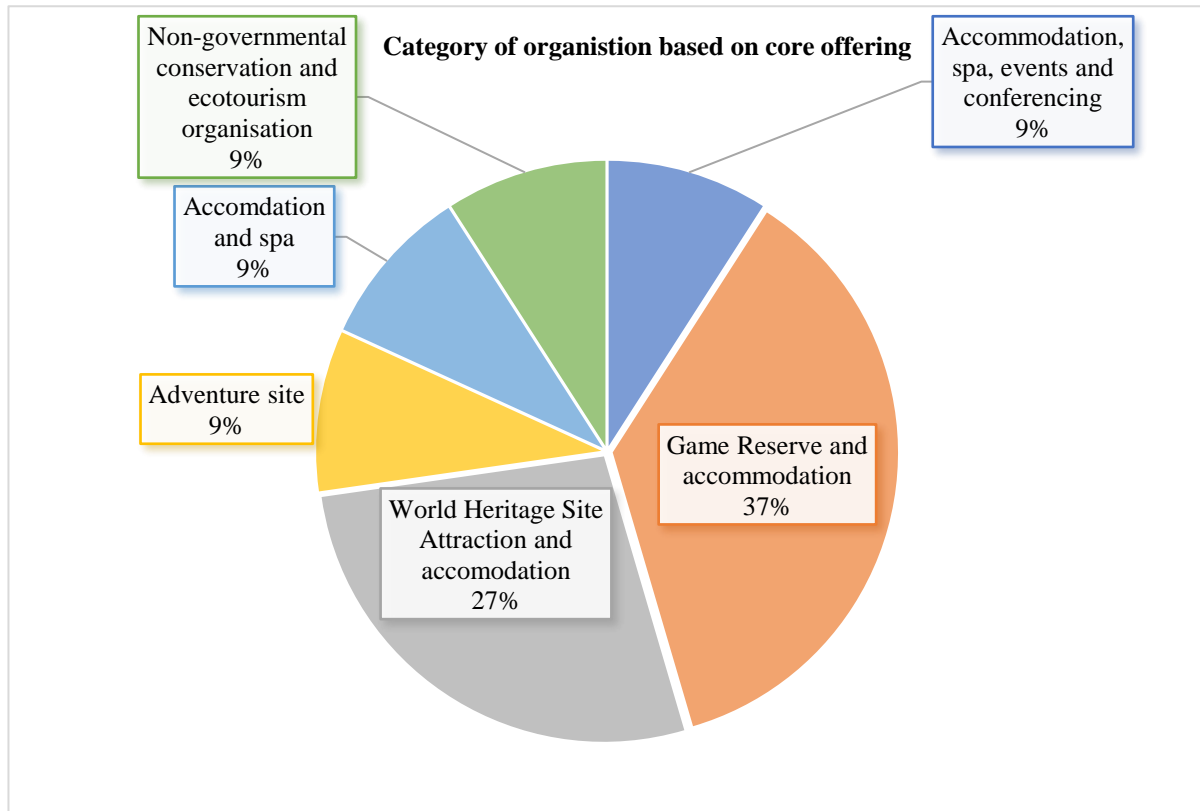


Figure 5.5: Category of traditional ecotourism organisations based on core offerings

The study includes two respondents who have been in their managerial roles for a period of 6–10 years, which encompasses individuals who both own and manage their own establishments. Additionally, there are two respondents who have accumulated over 25 years of experience in their managerial positions. The findings in Figure 5.5 are an indication of the various subsectors that make up the ecotourism industry within the ambit of this study. The above subsectors can be further consolidated into three main groups, which include accommodation appearing multiple times in various types of organisations, both as a main and secondary offering, including lodges, game reserves, and World Heritage Sites. In addition, the events and conferences subsector are also represented by 9% of the total establishments, with the majority of (37% of the organisations) being game reserves.

5.2.2 THEME 1: THE COMPREHENSION AND CONCEPTUALISATION OF ECOTOURISM

The central focus of this theme pertains to the comprehension and conceptualisation of ecotourism as perceived and defined by the respondents. The respondents hold the belief that ecotourism is a type of tourism that places emphasis on the conservation of the natural environment and the preservation of local culture while simultaneously providing advantages to the local communities. They view ecotourism as an experience that includes a combination of nature, culture, and education. Many of the respondents consider their businesses ecotourism establishments, highlighting their focus on nature conservation, protection of flora and fauna, cultural and community benefits, and providing outdoor and adventure activities. The respondents emphasised the importance of providing educational and enlightening experiences for guests, and many of them offer tours and activities conducted by local guides. These are elaborated under the subthemes below:

5.2.2.1 Subtheme 1: Definition of Ecotourism

Respondents provided their understanding of ecotourism, which includes elements of nature and culture conservation, benefits to local communities, providing employment to locals, and offering an educational experience for tourists. From its earliest definition by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism is defined as travel to natural areas with the aim of learning about the natural and cultural characteristics of a region (TIES, 1990). The definition of ecotourism given by TIES (1990) was expanded upon by Honey (1999) to include and emphasise that ecotourism has few negative effects on host communities and the environment. The majority of the respondents considered their establishments ecotourism businesses as they offer eco-friendly services in natural and remote settings and provide opportunities for tourists to engage in cultural and adventure activities.

"Ecotourism bundles nature and culture into a tourism experience." (Respondent 3)

"Ecotourism encompasses a tourism and hospitality experience in a natural setting, which also includes a component of culture." (Respondent 4)

"Ecotourism for me means an experience with a cultural component and local community benefit." (Respondent 5)

"Ecotourism certainly includes an element of nature conservation, protection of fauna and flora, cultural and benefits to local communities." (Respondent 7).

*"You cannot define ecotourism without the words 'nature', culture, and education."
(Respondent 9)*

The responses highlight the multifaceted nature of ecotourism, which involves not only experiencing nature and wildlife but also engaging with local communities and their cultures. Additionally, education plays a crucial role in ecotourism, as it helps visitors understand the importance of conservation and sustainability. Respondents provided their understanding of ecotourism, which includes elements of nature and culture conservation, benefits to local communities, providing employment to locals, and offering an educational experience. According to the respondents, ecotourism encompasses elements of nature and cultural preservation, benefits to local communities, employment for locals, and providing tourists with an educational experience. The majority of respondents perceived their organisations as being in the realm of ecotourism, as they offer opportunities for tourists to engage in cultural and adventurous pursuits, all the while delivering environmentally sustainable services in secluded and pristine environments. This is supported by Stronza, Hunt and Fitzgerald (2019), who assert that ecotourism is a form of responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and benefits local communities. It involves sustainable practices that mitigate negative environmental impacts while providing travellers with unique and enriching experiences. This highlights the importance of ecotourism in promoting sustainable tourism practices and supporting conservation efforts. Therefore, it is important for ecotourism destinations to prioritise education as a means of promoting sustainable tourism practices and increasing awareness among visitors about the importance of conservation and sustainability (Forje, Tchamba and Eno-Nku, 2021).

5.2.2.2 Subtheme 2: Ecotourism components (Nature, Culture, Education, and Conservation)

The respondents highlighted the key elements of ecotourism as a holistic encounter encompassing nature, culture, education, and conservation. The integral components of ecotourism were identified as the natural environment, cultural immersion, and educational opportunities. According to Primack, Lovejoy and Hannah (2021), the significance of culture in ecotourism lies in its ability to provide visitors with a unique and authentic experience, all the while ensuring the preservation and respect of the cultural heritage of local communities.

This is further in line with Respondent 9, who stated that ecotourism cannot be defined without the words nature, culture, and education.

"You cannot define ecotourism without the words nature, culture, and education; ecotourism is not only meant to be fun but educational and enlightening as well, particularly when it comes to the natural environment, culture, and indigenous knowledge." (Respondent 9)

The focus on conservation, community benefit, and cultural elements was also noted by other respondents. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (2021) report on ecotourism and Sustainable development suggests that ecotourism can contribute to sustainable development and conservation when it is developed in a culturally sensitive and participatory manner and when the benefits are shared with local communities.

5.2.2.3 Subtheme 3: Benefits of ecotourism to local communities

Several respondents mentioned the importance of ensuring that local communities benefit from ecotourism. Respondent 2 stated that the lodge sources local produce and is 30% owned by the local community. Respondents 3 and 5 discussed the community levy imposed on visitors to the game reserve with the purpose of funding the construction of educational facilities and communal gathering spaces within the community. Respondent 8 discussed providing employment for people in nearby communities, including Swart Mfolozi and Ceza communities.

"We source local produce, and the lodge is 30% owned by the local community." (Respondent 2)

"We provide employment for people in nearby communities, including Swart Mfolozi and Ceza communities." (Respondent 8)

According to respondent 5,

"Ecotourism for me means an experience with a cultural component and local community benefit." (Respondent 5)

The participants also discussed specific initiatives, such as a community levy, that contribute to community development.

"Currently, we have a community levy which is included in our pricing. The levy helps enhance local infrastructure such as schools, playgrounds, local sports facilities, and community halls." (Respondent 5)

"The main thing about ecotourism for me and the biggest component is conservation, and that is how I understand ecotourism. This money (from the community levy) is distributed to communities by building community schools and halls." (Respondent 3)

The subtheme pertaining to the advantages for local communities underscores the participants' recognition that ecotourism ought to yield not only environmental benefits but also foster favourable outcomes for local communities by means of employment prospects and initiatives aimed at community development. Sharma and Kumar (2022) state that ecotourism may significantly boost local economies and promote sustainable development when it is developed in a way that is inclusive and sensitive to cultural differences.

5.2.2.4 Subtheme 4: Integration of local culture and history as components of ecotourism

The integration of local culture and history is a key component of ecotourism for the respondents. Many of the respondents consider cultural experiences to be an integral part of the ecotourism experience, such as visits to local communities to experience the culture, guided tours rich in culture and history, and homestays offered by local residents. This assertion is substantiated by the findings of Xiang and Yin (2020), who posit that the inclusion of historical and cultural heritage in ecotourism can provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the local culture and environment and can help to create a sense of appreciation and stewardship for natural and cultural resources.

"The ecotourism experience includes guided and educational game drives, tours within the reserve, as well as visits to local communities to experience the culture." (Respondent 5)

"Ecotourism encompasses a tourism and hospitality experience in a natural setting, which also includes a component of culture." (Respondent 4)

Some respondents highlighted cultural attractions like the King Shaka kaSenzangakhona Heritage Route and Khoi San Rock Art as significant draws for tourists.

"The Heritage Route, which is rich in culture and history, particularly that of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona. Guest sleepovers and homestays offered by the local villagers to guests visiting the outdoor adventure park." (Respondent 9)

"This establishment is big on culture; we have Khoi San Rock Art covering an extensive surface area in the Drakensberg Mountains; it is our biggest attraction. Tours are facilitated by guides from the local community." (Respondent 5)

5.2.2.5 Subtheme 5: Adventure and outdoor activities as part of an ecotourism experience

Subtheme 5 focuses on the adventure and outdoor activities offered by the ecotourism establishments. The activities offered range from hiking, scenic views, abseiling, quad-biking, water-based activities, and guided tours.

"We offer adventure activities, including abseiling, quad-biking, and water-based activities in the Mhlathuze River." (Respondent 9)

Local tour guides frequently conduct these activities, giving the local communities employment opportunities. The activities also add to the overall experience for the tourists, providing a unique and exciting way to explore the natural environment and culture. Rebossio and Gallardo (2021) note that ecotourism acknowledges adventure and nature-based tourism as significant constituents. These activities, such as hiking, mountain biking, and kayaking, allow tourists to experience the natural environment and wildlife in a sustainable and responsible way.

"This resort offers activities in the nearby Howick Falls and a cultural experience in neighbouring communities." (Respondent 4)

"Our hiking trails and scenic views of the Drakensberg Amphitheatre are a hit with both local and international visitors." (Respondent 5).

"Tours around the area, which include adventure activities and cultural tours, as well as abseiling and hiking areas, are available and conducted by local tour guides." (Respondent 8)

The use of local guides in ecotourism activities highlights the importance of involving local communities in the ecotourism industry, both for their benefit and to ensure that visitors have a more authentic experience.

"All tour guides are people from the village." (Respondent 9)

5.2.3 THEME 2: IDENTIFIED GAPS IN ECOTOURISM DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC SKILLS

This theme explores the discipline-specific skills that are valuable to ecotourism. To elicit responses, the respondents were asked the following questions: (i) Being in the industry, what are discipline-specific skills that are valuable to ecotourism? (ii) Have you observed any that are lacking? (iii) What can be done to fill the skills gap? Based on the collected responses, the participants emphasise the significance of particular skills that are specifically relevant to the ecotourism sector. These skills encompass the utilisation of sustainable energy sources, the practice of conservation, the acquisition and preservation of knowledge, proficiency in ensuring safety, the provision of quality customer service, effective communication abilities, trustworthiness, and adaptability, as well as a comprehensive understanding and awareness of the principles and practices of ecotourism. These concepts are further expounded upon in the subsequent subtheme.

5.2.3.1 Subtheme 1: Limited understanding regarding green energy and eco-friendly practices

Respondent 2 suggests that using more green energy is an important aspect of ecotourism and that education institutions should do more to teach students about eco-friendly energy-saving methods in ecotourism establishments. Respondent 2 also mentions that students lack understanding of ecotourism and that education institutions need to do more to address this.

"I think the biggest thing that is lacking is using more green energy." (Respondent 2)

The ecotourism industry encounters a significant obstacle in imparting knowledge to tourists and operators regarding ecologically sustainable practices, including the adoption of renewable energy sources and waste management strategies (Iwaran and Hartoyo, 2022). Lin et al., (2022) present a contrasting perspective, asserting that although greenwashing may pose a challenge in the ecotourism industry, there exists substantiation indicating that numerous tourism operators are conscious of the significance of sustainability and are adopting measures to integrate eco-friendly practices. The ecotourism industry has shown some level of awareness regarding environmentally conscious practices.

However, there is a pressing need for more proactive measures to be taken in the implementation of sustainable tourism practices, such as the utilisation of renewable energy sources and the adoption of waste reduction strategies (Raza and Khan, 2022). According to Respondent 2, students should be taught how to change light bulbs in an eco-friendly way and to find more sustainable ways of generating and using electricity in ecotourism establishments.

"Like, for instance, we have, I mean, we have various departments in the lodge. Like to use an example as maintenance, are we teaching them how to change a lightbulb, merely change it, or are we teaching them how to you know and find more eco-friendly energy-saving means of generating you know electricity and electricity usage in ecotourism establishments?" (Respondent 2)

5.2.3.2 Subtheme 2: Limited comprehension and eagerness towards conservation and the environment

Respondent 2 suggests that students lack knowledge and skills on how to take care of the environment while in the business of ecotourism, and that conservation knowledge and enthusiasm about the environment are lacking among students.

"The knowledge and skill of how to take care of the environment while in the business of ecotourism that are also lacking." (Respondent 2)

Ensiyawatin and Astina (2021) note that ecotourism students exhibit inadequate comprehension regarding the significance of ecotourism in conservation and sustainable development, as well as the necessity for tourism practices that are environmentally responsible. Respondent 3 notes that conservation knowledge is something that students do not understand and that they struggle with providing a good experience because of the lack of knowledge about plants and animals in the area.

"Based on my observation and interaction with your students as their mentor, conservation is something they do not understand." (Respondent 3)

Respondent 2 suggests a two-week probation period before students commit to the programme to assess their passion and enthusiasm for the industry.

"I think it would be beneficial to have a two-week probation period before students commit to the programme. This will help identify if they have the passion and enthusiasm for the industry and would also give them an opportunity to decide if this is the right path for them." (Respondent 2)

5.2.3.3 Subtheme 3: Inadequate guiding skills and safety knowledge

Respondent 3 notes that safety is an important aspect of ecotourism and that it is often overlooked. The respondent points out that students tend to be negligent and do not realise that safety is the most important thing, especially when working in a game reserve. The respondent also observes that students lack skills and knowledge of how to deal with dangerous situations when approaching dangerous game and animals on foot, whether alone or with guests.

"In addition, one of the skills that is often overlooked is safety for you as an individual as the student and safety for the guests, I tend to observe students; I mean, we are in a game reserve where wildlife roams freely. To give an example, just this morning on my way to work, I saw a cheetah, so you see, safety is very important for students to consider and have that skill of how to deal with dangerous situations when you are approaching dangerous game and animals on foot." (Respondent 3)

In concurrence with the assertion posited by Respondent 3, Chan, Marzuki and Mohtar (2021) noted that a significant hurdle in the realm of ecotourism risk management pertains to the dearth of safety-related knowledge and proficiency among tour operators and guides. According to Uchiyama and Jacobson (2021), it is necessary for ecotourism guides to receive training in guiding techniques, environmental interpretation, and sustainable tourism practices to proficiently regulate tourist conduct for the purpose of conservation and safety. The respondent emphasises that students should be extra careful and have the knowledge of how to manage dangerous situations.

"We always tell them to be extra careful." (Respondent 3).

Insufficient training in guiding skills among ecotourism guides may have adverse effects on the environment and local communities, as well as reduce the quality of the visitor experience (Mafi, Pratt and Trupp, 2020). In line with this view, Seng, Wang and Lin (2021) observe that the absence of adequate safety knowledge and education among tour guides and operators can have an adverse effect on the level of satisfaction and loyalty of tourists in the ecotourism sector.

5.2.3.4 Subtheme 4: Inadequate customer service skills

Respondent 4 observes that students are not able to adapt swiftly to the workplace and lack customer service and communication skills, both verbal and written.

Inadequate customer service skills are a subtheme that emerges from the responses of Respondent 4 and Respondent 5. Respondent 4 points out that students lack understanding of the demanding nature of the industry and that this often leads to service failures such as incorrect booking information and non-payments.

"Students are not able to adapt swiftly to the workplace because they aren't able to understand the demanding nature of being in the industry. In this resort, weekends and public holidays are our busiest periods, when we need all hands-on deck. During peak season, service failures such as incorrect booking information and non-payments are often caused by the lack of customer service from the students." (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 also notes that communication skills are lacking among students, both verbal and written, and that they struggle with engaging with guests, colleagues, and superiors as well as reports and emails.

"Another skill that isn't the strongest in the students is communication, both verbal and written. They struggle with engaging with guests at the front desk, engaging with colleagues and superiors, as well as reports and emails." (Respondent 4)

Respondent 5 stresses that customer service is the key skill in ecotourism and that it is the most important skill.

"Customer service is key. Customer service is the key; that's the most important skill.."
(Respondent 5)

Insufficient customer service competencies among ecotourism service providers may adversely affect visitor contentment and the prosperity of the sector. Samdin, Abdullah and Subramaniam (2022) posit that inadequate customer service skills can engender unfavourable visitor experiences, thereby culminating in adverse reviews and diminished visitor demand. Garrod and Fennell (2023) contend that customer service plays a pivotal role in shaping the visitor experience in ecotourism, as it has the potential to significantly impact visitor satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visitation. It is imperative that ecotourism service providers exhibit robust customer service abilities, including proficient communication, adept problem-solving, and effective interpersonal skills, to guarantee visitor satisfaction and the prosperity of the sector. There is a divergence of opinions among researchers regarding the significance of customer service competencies in the context of ecotourism. Weaver and Lawton (2021) propose that although customer service is a crucial aspect, it does not hold the utmost importance in the realm of ecotourism.

The authors contend that people's motivations for visiting ecotourism destinations are primarily a desire to interact with the natural environment and cultural aspects, and that the provision of customer service is merely one of many factors that contribute to the overall visitor experience. According to Navey (2022), customer service is a significant aspect of ecotourism, but it is not the sole determinant of tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. Thompson (2022) contends that the significance of customer service within the context of ecotourism is contingent upon the nature of the ecotourism locale and the inclinations of the tourists. The author proposes that ecotourism service providers ought to customise their customer service strategies to cater to the distinct requirements and anticipations of diverse tourist segments. In the context of ecotourism, there exist divergent viewpoints regarding the extent to which customer service skills are deemed consequential. Nevertheless, a prevailing agreement exists that adept customer service is an indispensable element in guaranteeing visitor satisfaction and the flourishing of the industry. Hence, this study accepts that it is crucial for ecotourism service providers to possess strong customer service skills to ensure visitor satisfaction and the long-term sustainability of the industry.

5.2.3.5 Subtheme 5: Lack of knowledge about the natural environment

The lack of knowledge about the natural environment is a subtheme that emerges from the responses of Respondent 2 and Respondent 3. Respondent 2 suggests that students lack an understanding of ecotourism.

"I don't see that in, in, in, in, in the students. In all the years that I have been teaching students, I do not see the understanding of ecotourism, and that needs to start on your side as institutions; the education starts with you, and we do not see that when they come to us." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 observes that students struggle with providing a good experience because of the lack of knowledge about plants and animals in the area; he also notes that students lack knowledge of conservation.

"Based on my observation and interaction with your students as their mentor, conservation is something they do not understand. When they are tasked with facilitating a guided tour, they struggle a lot and fail to provide a good experience because of the lack of knowledge about plants and animals in the area." (Respondent 3)

Ecotourism is a promising strategy for promoting sustainable tourism practices and assisting conservation efforts. However, one of the most significant challenges confronting the ecotourism industry is a lack of knowledge and skills among operators regarding the natural environment. This skills gap may limit the effectiveness of ecotourism in promoting conservation and providing quality experiences for visitors (Smith, 2020). To address this issue, ecotourism operators must be trained and educated to improve their knowledge and skills. Environmental education, according to Killick and Dimmock (2018), can be a useful tool for addressing the skills gap in the ecotourism industry. Ecotourism operators can gain the skills and knowledge needed to effectively manage and interpret natural environments by receiving training and education. According to Koh and Wilcove (2018), ecotourism operators must have a thorough understanding of the natural environment to effectively promote conservation and avoid overexploitation. Inadequate knowledge can lead to overuse of natural resources, which can harm the environment and undermine conservation efforts. This study asserts that the inclusion of environmental education is crucial in fostering awareness among ecotourism operators regarding the need to implement conservation measures. This research further suggests it is important to consider the current expertise, knowledge, expertise, and skills that exist within these ecotourism organisations to tailor further training and upskilling to suit their specific needs. This has a great potential to yield positive outcomes in bridging this skills gap.

5.2.3.6 Subtheme 6: Trustworthiness and adaptability

Respondent 5 notes that trustworthiness is also important.

"What I would also add is that you need to be trustworthy, which may not be a skill but is something that you need to have." (Respondent 5)

The respondent also mentions that adaptability and the ability to work under pressure are important skills in the ecotourism industry.

"Adaptability and the ability to work under pressure are important skills in the ecotourism industry." (Respondent 5)

Ecotourism operators are required to possess adaptability in addition to trust. According to Tichaawa and Mudzengi (2018), adaptability plays a crucial role in the sustainability and expansion of entrepreneurial enterprises.

In the field of ecotourism, it is imperative for entrepreneurs to possess adaptability as a key attribute to effectively address environmental fluctuations, competitive pressures, and evolving consumer inclinations. In accordance with this, Ching and Chen (2022) indicate that trust is crucial to the success of ecotourism because tourists are more likely to participate in ecotourism activities if they believe the service provider will provide accurate and trustworthy information about the local environment and community. In addition, trust is crucial for establishing long-term relationships between tourists and service providers, which results in repeat business and positive referrals.

5.2.4 THEME 3: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WPBL IN ADDRESSING THE SKILLS GAPS IN ECOTOURISM

Workplace-based learning (WPBL) is a form of education that focuses on providing students with practical, hands-on experience in real-world work environments. This allows students to apply their theoretical knowledge in a real-life context, learn from experienced professionals, and gain relevant work experience that can make them more competitive in the job market. The theme encompasses the importance of mentorship and guidance from employees, the willingness of students to learn, and the communication of learning outcomes and expectations between students, higher learning institutions, and organisations. This theme addresses the research question: How can WPBL be designed to address the identified skills gaps in ecotourism? In addition, the section dissects the industry's understanding of WIL and, more specifically, WPBL.

5.2.4.1 Subtheme 1: Practical application and real-life experience

The assertion made by Billett, Smith and Choy (2021) notes that WIL is a viable method for aiding students in the acquisition of professional skills and knowledge while also improving their employability through the provision of practical experience.

WIL serves as a proficient approach for students to acquire tacit knowledge, which is arduous to attain through conventional classroom-oriented education. This notion is corroborated by Pham and Jackson (2020), where they state that WIL affords students the opportunity to cultivate transferable skills, such as communication and teamwork, which are highly sought after by employers.

The authors further allude that WIL has the potential to facilitate students' comprehension of their preferred field and foster a professional network, thereby augmenting their post-graduation employability prospects. Additionally, Crawford, Gordon and Nicholas (2019) note that WIL has a beneficial effect on the academic achievement, personal development, and professional preparedness of students. WIL offers a secure environment for students to apply their competencies and expertise in a practical setting while also obtaining input from professionals in the field (Crawford et al., 2019). Respondents 2, 3, and 7 emphasise the significance of acquiring practical knowledge and skills within an authentic professional environment.

"It is all about learning and acquiring basic skills for employment in an actual, authentic, existing, and operational organisation." (Respondent 2)

"Work-integrated learning is about helping students in conservation, mainly ecotourism, to gain relevant experience and skills needed in the sector. Therefore, work-integrated learning is the opportunity given to students by the institutions for students to gain practical knowledge and skills that will help them in their careers in the field of ecotourism in our case." (Respondent 3)

"Actual setting up for practical experience and learning is bottom-up meaning we learn from the students and the students learn from us as well, so it's two ways; yes, the purpose is for students to get more industry experience, but we also learned so much from them as well; they bring in you know, new, fresh, and vibrant energy." (Respondent 7)

5.2.4.2 Subtheme 2: Mentorship and guidance

The success of WPBL programmes is heavily reliant on the provision of mentorship and guidance. Roberts, Storm and Flynn (2019) assert that mentorship is a crucial element of WPBL since it offers students guidance, support, and feedback during their educational experience. The authors have additionally observed that mentorship has the potential to augment the confidence, self-awareness, and professional growth of students. The assertion is corroborated by Eby and Robertson (2020) indicating that pupils who were provided with mentorship during WPBL manifested elevated degrees of individual and occupational development. Respondent 4 and Respondent 9 emphasise the importance of being mentored by employees in the workplace.

"It is about being mentored in a real work environment by the employees; therefore, as a student, you get an opportunity to learn from them." (Respondent 4)

"It has to do with taking students from the classroom to the work environment, where lecturers handover." (Respondent 9)

Moreover, the significance of mentorship in WPBL is not restricted to the enhancement of students' personal and vocational growth but also encompasses their academic achievements.

Richardson and Loughlin (2019) note that students who engaged in WIL programmes that incorporated mentorship exhibited notably superior graduate outcomes compared to their counterparts who did not participate in such programmes. The reason for this outcome may be attributed to the individualised guidance and assistance furnished by mentors, which can assist students in surmounting academic obstacles and attaining their objectives. Apart from fostering academic and personal growth, mentorship can also confer advantages on students' professional trajectories. According to Ceelen, Nieuwenhuis and de Bruijn (2023), the act of being mentored by professionals in the workplace can offer students valuable exposure to the industry as well as insights into the organisational culture, structure, and processes. This practice holds potential advantages in equipping students with the necessary skills for their prospective professions and facilitating their job market navigation. Respondent 9 agrees with this notion.

"Students to people who will mentor them in the workplace." (Respondent 9)

5.2.4.3 Subtheme 3: Willingness to learn

The willingness to learn is an important aspect of WPBL that emphasises the importance of the student's attitude towards learning and gaining experience in a real work setting. Respondent 5 suggests that for WPBL to be successful, students must have a willingness to learn and be open to new experiences. Without this attitude, students may not be able to fully benefit from the opportunities and knowledge provided by the workplace setting.

"WIL is about taking someone who's willing to learn and who has no work experience and putting them in a work environment. I mean, for WIL to be successful, there must be a willingness to learn, particularly from the student; that's my interpretation of it" (Respondent 5).

According to Giacumo, Chen and Seguinot-Cruz (2020) the importance of being willing to learn is a key factor in achieving success in WPBL. According to the authors, possessing an open and receptive attitude towards learning is a crucial characteristic that enables students to derive maximum benefits from their workplace experiences. Similarly, Sahin and Thompson (2016) posit that the success of WPBL programmes is significantly influenced by their

willingness to learn. The adoption of a proactive learning approach has the potential to facilitate enhanced personal and professional growth for the learner.

5.2.4.4 Subtheme 4: Communication of WPBL outcomes and expectations

WPBL involves clear communication of learning outcomes and expectations between students, higher education institutions, and organisations. It is important that the students, the institution, and the organisation all understand the goals and objectives of the WPBL programme. This includes clearly defining what is expected of the student and what they can expect to learn and achieve during the programme. It also involves setting clear expectations for the organisation and the institution regarding the level of support and guidance that will be provided to the student throughout the programme. Respondent 6 highlights the importance of communication between students, institutions, and organisations.

"It entails the communication of learning outcomes and expectations between students, institutions, and organisations. At the centre of it all, though, are students; therefore, the outcomes should be communicated and understood clearly by the student, the institution, as well as us, the organisations." (Respondent 6)

Kreber (2022) posit that the establishment of unambiguous and mutually agreed-upon expectations and outcomes is instrumental in fostering a cohesive, synchronised, and adaptable WPBL programme. This underscores the necessity for effective communication among all stakeholders engaged in WPBL, encompassing students, institutions, and organisations, to guarantee a shared understanding of the programme's goals and objectives. The General Systems Theory places significant emphasis on the interrelatedness and mutual reliance of all components within a given system. This highlights the importance of effective communication and collaboration among these elements to achieve the most advantageous outcomes. The effectiveness of the WPBL programme relies on the collaborative and integrated efforts of its stakeholders, who are essential components of a larger system. In the context of this study, ecotourism students who participated in WPBL were mentored by workplace supervisors during the course of their WPBL programme while also receiving guidance and support from their WIL coordinator and lecturers. The success of the programme depends on effective communication and collaboration among all these stakeholders to ensure that the students are gaining the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to succeed in their future careers. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that there exists a divergence of opinions among researchers regarding the significance of lucid communication in WPBL.

Lee and Hannafin (2016) posit that effective workplace learning does not always require explicit communication of expectations, despite its potential benefits in certain contexts. The contention put forth by the authors is that the success of WPBL programmes can be influenced by the individual learning preferences and styles of students and that a more adaptable approach may prove advantageous for certain learners. The researcher argues that communication is the fundamental catalyst that drives collaboration among all stakeholders involved in WPBL, thus making communication the backbone of WPBL. Communication plays a significant role pre-WPBL, where outcomes and expectations must be clear and shared amongst the students, academic staff, and industry. It is significant to enable feedback between these stakeholders during and after placement. Therefore, in line with the elements of the General Systems Theory adopted in this study, the components of input, transformation, and output would not serve their purpose without communication. In addition, one of the most important purposes for developing WPBL is for all stakeholders to determine the common goal, which would not be people to determine or establish in the absence of communication. The study further iterates that stakeholders must collaborate to ensure that goals and objectives are clearly defined and communicated throughout the WPBL programme.

5.2.5 THEME 4: PREPAREDNESS OF STUDENTS FOR WPBL

When asked the following questions: “Based on your observation, were students adequately prepared to commence WPBL in your organisation? Did you observe any skill gaps between what the students are able to do and what you expect them to know upon placement? What were these gaps? Based on the respondents' feedback, it appears that there are several recurring criticisms regarding the students. The respondents noted various challenges they have observed with the students they have received from the institution, including poor communication skills, difficulty with computer usage, a lack of understanding of the nature of the work environment, poor customer service skills, and a lack of knowledge about the area and attractions. The respondents suggest that there may be a gap between what they expect from the students and the reality of the students' preparedness, which is primarily attributed to a lack of work-preparedness activities by the institution. These are further elaborated on in the subthemes below. Ratnasingam and Jegatheesan (2021) present evidence in favour of adopting a systems approach to tackle skills gaps in WPBL with an emphasis on the interdependence of diverse constituents within a given system, encompassing the higher education institution (HEI), students, and professional environments.

The argument put forth by the authors highlights the significance of comprehending the interconnections between various factors to devise efficacious interventions aimed at mitigating the skill gaps. Hossain and Khan (2020) emphasise the significance of feedback loops in systems theory, contending that negative feedback loops can sustain skill gaps within the system. This study thus points out that it is therefore imperative for the Department of Ecotourism to collaborate closely with the ecotourism industry to identify feedback loops and devise proactive rather than reactive interventions to avoid any potential hindrance to the attainment of WPBL outcomes in the ecotourism undergraduate qualification.

5.2.5.1 Subtheme 1: Students were deficient in communication skills at the initiation of WPBL

Several respondents expressed concerns about the communication skills of the students they received. They noted that the students were shy, lacked communication skills, and struggled with engaging with others, both employees and guests. The respondents also mentioned that the students had a hard time following instructions, expressing themselves clearly, and understanding the importance of customer service and excellence. The concept of interconnectedness describes how parts of a system are linked together and how changes in one part can affect the others. According to the study, several systemic variables, including the institution's quality of education and training and the nature of the workplace, have an impact on students' communication skills. According to Rabinowitz and Waksman (2015), factors like culture, personality, and experience have an impact on communication abilities. Therefore, when developing interventions to enhance communication skills, it is crucial to take these factors into account. The respondents suggested that more work-preparedness activities, including training in communication, could help bridge the gap between what was expected of the students and the reality of their skills.

"The one thing that irritates me is that they don't follow instructions; they bring that city attitude. They lose their sense of reality; there is a huge difference between being in a classroom setting and being in the real work environment." (Respondent 2)

"Computer usage, skilled communication with clients, communication with us as staff members, that skill of communication is lacking." (Respondent 3)

"They seem to not understand the nature of this industry. Not very good at verbal and written communication." (Respondent 4)

"Communication, well, students didn't seem to know how to communicate, and they had a very hard time engaging with other employees and guests. They didn't seem to understand the importance of customer service and excellence." (Respondent 6)

"There's a very huge gap between the reality of the students we receive; they are very shy and aren't able to express themselves and communicate clearly. The biggest thing is communication." (Respondent 7)

"Students struggled with communication and interaction with guests. General knowledge was also lacking." (Respondent 8)

Within the framework of this research, the deficiency in effective communication abilities among students pursuing ecotourism has a direct impact on their job performance, subsequently influencing the willingness of employers to recruit graduates from the institution. The notion presented is substantiated by Arnold and Boggs (2019) wherein the authors assert that possessing proficient communication abilities is imperative for achieving success in one's professional endeavours. Furthermore, the authors contend that employers exhibit a preference for individuals who possess such skills. The imparting of essential communication skills to students is of utmost importance to guarantee their professional achievements. The subtheme of the study pertaining to communication skills underscores the importance of considering the interplay between educational institutions, students, and workplaces. There is emphasis among respondents on the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability.

"There is a growing focus on refining the communication, teamwork, and adaptability skills of students through various training programmes and hands-on experiences." (Respondent 7)

The notion of emergence pertains to the way diverse elements within a system can engage in interactions that give rise to intricate phenomena.

The Department of Ecotourism at DUT's high level of instruction and training as well as the characteristics of the workplace are two examples of the complex interdependencies among various system components that the respondents to this study identified as skills gaps. The theory presented in this statement is substantiated by a study conducted by Parker and Grote (2022) wherein they assert that skills gaps often arise from complex interactions among multiple factors, necessitating the implementation of a comprehensive strategy to effectively tackle these gaps.

5.2.5.2 Subtheme 2: Insufficient readiness for the work environment

A number of respondents indicated that the students exhibited deficiencies in their readiness for the professional environment, specifically in the domains of communication, computer literacy, and familiarity with the local area and adjacent attractions. The respondents hold the belief that the Department of Ecotourism at DUT may have failed to provide an adequate number of preparatory activities, resulting in a discrepancy between the expected level of student performance and their actual abilities. Respondent 2, for example, mentioned that students suffer from a loss of roots and a sense of reality. Respondent 2 further observes that students often lack an understanding and appreciation for the rural setting in which ecotourism takes place. They tend to have a "city attitude," and expect urban amenities, and fail to understand the balance between work and leisure. Respondent 2 emphasises the importance of educating students about the realities of working in a rural setting and the differences between classroom and real-world environments. Respondent 2 also noted that students from urban environments lost their sense of reality and understanding of the rural setting of ecotourism and expected luxuries such as easy access to malls and modern amenities.

"They lose their roots, and you know the most important thing is they lose their sense of reality, so I always tell them that there is reality and what's on your mind; this is the real ecotourism setting in the rural area." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 4 reported that students were not fully prepared for the demands of the industry, such as working on weekends and holidays, and suggested that work preparedness workshops could be implemented to help students understand what to expect in the workplace.

"They seem to not understand the nature of this industry; it is very demanding; it requires them to sometimes report for duty even on public holidays and weekends, and you would see on their facial expression when you tell them that they need to work on the weekend or holidays that you know they would be angry and upset about it." (Respondent 4)

"I think it would be nice to have work preparedness workshops in place just to get them to fully understand what to expect when they get to the workplace." (Respondent 4)

The application of the interdependence concept of the General Systems Theory is relevant to the matter of inadequate work readiness among students. Senge (2006) posits that interdependence pertains to the notion that the constituents of a system are interrelated, and modifications in one constituent can influence the others.

Given the students' inadequate level of work readiness, the Department of Ecotourism at DUT, ecotourism students, and the industry have a significant interdependence that is of the utmost importance. The institution offers instruction and skill development to ecotourism students, who subsequently enter the workforce, particularly the ecotourism industry, and make valuable contributions to its expansion. A disruption in this mutual reliance may result in inadequate readiness for employment among ecotourism students. The respondents' proposal for the implementation of work readiness workshops and communication skills training is in line with the General Systems Theory's principles of feedback loops. Within the framework of this theory, the concept of feedback loops pertains to the notion that alterations in a particular system element can trigger a series of consequences that may influence the original element. According to Musheke and Phiri (2021), the possession of effective communication skills is a vital determinant of attaining success in the professional environment. In addition, it is suggested that employers highly value candidates who exhibit a high level of proficiency in communication skills. The establishment of a positive feedback loop within the Department of Ecotourism at DUT can be achieved through the provision of training and support to students in areas where they demonstrate deficiencies in skills. This approach will enable them to improve their competencies and align more effectively with the expectations of the industry. The observation of the relevance of resilience in General Systems Theory can be made within the context of students' lack of work readiness. Resilience refers to the ability of a system to adapt and recover from disruptions or changes. The respondents' criticisms regarding the students' lack of preparedness for the workplace suggest that the current system may not possess the requisite adaptability to fulfil the industry's requirements. Holling (1973) posited that the enhancement of resilience can be achieved through the establishment of feedback loops within a given system.

Through the provision of enhanced support and training, the Department of Ecotourism can bolster the resilience of its system and facilitate the students' ability to effectively acclimatise to the demands of the industry. Respondents 3 and 4 express that they expect students to have a certain level of computer usage and communication skills upon starting their workplace-based learning placement. These skills are seen as important for providing good service to guests and for effective communication with staff members. However, the respondents observe that students often lack these skills and struggle with communication and computer usage in the workplace.

"Computer usage, um, and the fact that students have a challenge of understanding and skillful communication with clients' communication with us as staff members, and for that reason they are not able to offer a good service to our guests, and that skill of communication is lacking." (Respondent 3)

5.2.5.3 Subtheme 3: Difficulties in comprehending and adhering to rules and regulations in the actual workplace setting

The results revealed that students also exploited their supervisors' leniency and failed to effectively manage their work-life balance. According to the second respondent, it was noted that students exhibited a lack of comprehension regarding the significance of their training and future professional endeavours, resulting in a negative disposition towards adhering to instructions.

"They don't understand the importance of their training and their careers in the future, OK? Listen, they have, when they started, they were going back to using the word great, then I start to pick up the bad habits. Not they actually pick up the bad habits; they develop a bit of an attitude; they don't follow instructions; uh, and I always told them that you play hard, you work hard, so you can't, you know, put less focus on your job." (Respondent 2)

Musheke and Phiri (2021) emphasise the significance of collaboration and cooperation as fundamental principles of the General Systems Theory. Collaboration possesses the potential to facilitate the harmonious integration of all constituent components within a given system, thereby fostering the attainment of a shared goal and yielding superior outcomes for all entities engaged in the collaborative endeavour. The partnership between the Department of Ecotourism and the workplace has the potential to yield enhanced training programmes that are better aligned with industry demands in terms of work readiness. Furthermore, the notion of co-creation, which underscores the importance of collaboration and cooperation among diverse stakeholders, is also relevant within this framework. Co-creation, within the framework of work readiness, entails a collaborative effort between the Department of Ecotourism, the ecotourism industry, and ecotourism students to collectively design and refine training programmes that align more effectively with the industry's requirements. The need for collaboration and cooperation is also supported by the concept of systems thinking, which emphasises the significance of considering the interrelationships between the various system components.

According to Senge (2010), systems thinking entails a shift from focusing on individual components to analysing the entire system and how its components interact. In the context of work readiness, systems thinking can assist the Department of Ecotourism, the industry supervisors, and ecotourism students in identifying areas for improvement and developing solutions that will benefit all parties. Respondent 2 stressed the importance of educating students about the differences between the classroom and the real work environment, including understanding and following rules and regulations.

"I think what needs to be explained to these students is that, guys, this is not like the classroom where I talk and talk, and you don't listen if you're going to go to in-service training. You need to understand there are rules and regulations, so if you come into work five minutes late for three days, you will definitely get a warning. Uh, there is a huge difference between being in a classroom setting and, you know, being in the real work environment. Students need to be educated about the classroom and the real world." (Respondent 2)

5.2.6 THEME 5: EQUIPPING STUDENTS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS RELEVANT TO ECOTOURISM

The theme explores equipping students with knowledge and skills for ecotourism employment. It is worth mentioning that the WPBL programme aims to provide students with practical and relevant experience in the ecotourism industry and to expose them to the specific knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the field. The programme could cover various aspects of ecotourism, such as sustainable tourism practices, wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation and interpretation, and cultural and historical tourism. The hands-on experience offered through the WPBL programme would help students build a strong foundation in the industry and gain a competitive edge in the job market. According to the respondents, the WPBL programme provided by their organisation equipped and exposed students to knowledge and skills that are specific for ecotourism employment. This includes skills related to conservation, customer relations, interaction with guests and staff, information sharing sessions, educating students about the local flora and fauna, rules and regulations, and community tours. The students were also given tasks and responsibilities from different divisions within the establishments, such as tour guiding, cultural tours, cooking in the bush, preparing fire, team-building activities, cultural tools, auditing financial statements, admin, and bartending. These activities were done on a rotational basis to give the students a comprehensive understanding of the ecotourism industry. These are further elaborated on the following subthemes.

5.2.6.1 Subtheme 1: Exposure to various divisions and responsibilities within the organisation

The respondents stated that the WPBL programme provided students with exposure to various divisions and responsibilities within their establishment. This included working in different departments such as conservation, customer relations, reception, housekeeping, maintenance, and more. The respondents noted that this exposure allowed students to gain a diverse set of skills and experience in the field of ecotourism. Some also mentioned that this helped students understand the service industry and the importance of interaction with guests and fellow employees.

"We pride ourselves on the fact that we make sure that whichever division we have here, our students get the opportunity to be a part of it, so yes, I would say we exhaust everything that we have to give students the experience." (Respondent 5)

"We gave them a number of activities, responsibilities, and duties from different divisions within the establishment." (Respondent 7)

The argument that the WPBL is a mechanism that equips learners with the requisite knowledge and competencies essential for securing employment in the field of ecotourism is substantiated by Kim and Andersen (2012), who emphasise the significance of understanding the interplay between various components of a system to achieve a common goal. The WPBL programme utilises the concept of feedback loops to facilitate the comprehensive comprehension of the ecotourism industry among students, achieved through their engagement in a diverse array of tasks and obligations.

The existing body of literature on experiential learning, which emphasises the significance of hands-on experience and exposure to diverse environments in the process of learning (Kolb, 2014; Lave and Wenger, 1991), provides substantiation for this claim. Respondents 8 and 9 state:

"We gave them a number of tasks and ensured that they were exposed to anything and everything we were able to offer as an organisation." (Respondent 8)

"They also did tour guiding; they also did cultural tours; they were, you know, equipped with many skills, such as cooking in the bush, preparing fire, taking guests to team-building activities, cultural tools, auditing financial statements, and admin. They also stopped taking at the bar, and all of that was done on a rotational basis." (Respondent 9)

The rotational framework for tasks and responsibilities in the WPBL programme is also in line with the idea of job rotation, which has been shown to improve employee learning, skill development, and job satisfaction (Biron, Farndale and Paauwe, 2011). According to Respondent 2,

"We were able to get students to work in all the various divisions, with each division requiring and sharpening different skills." (Respondent 2)

The approach employed by the industry in the WPBL programme entails assigning ecotourism students a range of tasks and responsibilities. This approach can be considered a feasible strategy for equipping students with the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue careers in ecotourism. Respondents mention rotating students through different departments or divisions to give them a diverse experience and exposure to different skills and knowledge. Respondent 3, for example, states that the organisation rotates students through different divisions, such as housekeeping, reservations, and the field, to ensure they get a well-rounded experience and are exposed to different knowledge and skills.

"We rotate them in a sense that, you know, in the six months they're with us, you'll find that maybe they will spend two months at housekeeping, two months at reservations, and two months in the field, you know, but then what we have observed over the years is that when you start them off at, for example, that reservation, they do not want to go to housekeeping." (Respondent 3)

The above respondent also mentions that starting students off in housekeeping, which is typically the least favourite division, ensures that they get the best of everything.

"So, what we've done now is we always start all of them; they started housekeeping, you know, and that is our way of ensuring that they get the best of everything." (Respondent 3)

Respondent 4 states that they make sure students have the opportunity to be in different divisions to diversify their experience and exposure to different knowledge and skills.

"In all the divisions that we have, students get the opportunity to be in those divisions, therefore diversifying their experience and exposure to different knowledge and skills." (Respondent 4)

Respondent 7 mentions that the organisation has the reality of being understaffed and therefore relies a lot on the students, allowing them to work with various supervisors and receive support from senior staff.

“We are understaffed, and therefore we rely a lot on the students, and with that comes their advantage of getting a lot of exposure and the opportunity to work with various supervisors; there is also support from senior staff.” (Respondent 7)

Moreover, the respondents engaged in a discussion regarding the various tasks and responsibilities assigned to students within their respective organisations across a range of departments, including housekeeping, food and beverage operations, reception, maintenance, administration, reservations, curio shop management, gate management, finance, and front desk operations. The responsibilities encompassed a range of duties, including, but not limited to, cleaning, upholding regulations, engaging with visitors, managing financial records, overseeing guest arrivals and departures, fostering community engagement, facilitating sales, providing support in the kitchen and restaurant, assisting at the bar, and organising and accompanying guests in various recreational activities such as zip lining, hiking, and animal tracking.

5.2.6.2 Subtheme 2: Introducing students to tasks related to conservation and customer relations

Conservation-related knowledge and customer relations refer to the knowledge and skills that students were exposed to in terms of conservation and the interactions with customers while in the ecotourism setting. Respondent 3 mentioned that the students were mostly exposed to conservation-related knowledge and customer relations in their programme. This suggests that the programme focused on providing students with knowledge and skills specific to ecotourism employment in terms of understanding conservation and interacting with customers in a professional manner. The existing body of literature offers evidence to substantiate the claim that the subtheme pertaining to conservation-related knowledge and customer relations within the realm of ecotourism can be linked to systems theory. In their study, Kim and Andersen (2012) highlighted the significance of the interconnectedness between the various elements within a system and its overall achievement. In addition, ecotourism literature has emphasised the importance of balancing conservation needs with customer needs. According to Escalona and Cañada (2021), the achievement of economic sustainability in ecotourism businesses requires a balance between environmental goals and customer demands. Therefore, meeting the service quality, facilities, and amenities expectations of visitors while simultaneously safeguarding and conserving natural and cultural resources is imperative.

Respondent 3 mentions that to cover the conservation component of the work experience, students were usually sent on research expeditions within the reserve to partake in activities such as animal tracking and behaviour, as well as the study of the entire ecosystem in the reserve, including plants and animals.

"In order to cover the conservation component of the work experience, we usually send them research tools within the reserve so that they partake in research activities that include animal tracking in their behaviour as well as knowing the entire ecosystem in the reserve, including, um, plants and animals." (Respondent 3)

Literature on experiential learning supports the significance of balancing conservation-related knowledge and customer relations in the context of the WPBL programme. According to Kolb (2014) and Lave and Wenger (1991), hands-on experience and exposure to a variety of contexts are indispensable components of effective learning. By exposing students to both conservation and customer relations aspects of the ecotourism organisations, the WPBL industry supervisors were aiming at providing ecotourism students with a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of the various departments and divisions within these organisations and how they work together to provide a successful ecotourism experience for customers. Guest interaction and service encompasses a range of duties and obligations assigned to students that involve engaging with and attending to guests. These responsibilities include handling phone calls, facilitating reservations, offering relevant information, managing guest check-in and check-out procedures, and addressing any inquiries or concerns raised by guests. The primary objective of these tasks was to equip students with discipline-specific skills essential for securing employment in the field of ecotourism, including customer service and communication skills. Several participants in the study indicated that students were allocated to the front desk, where they were provided with the chance to engage with guests and provide them with various services.

"Reception, it's answering calls, reservations, you know, giving information, guest related information." (Respondent 4)

"Mostly, they were based at the front desk, dealing with reservations, queries, and guest information services." (Respondent 6)

"Office, reception, welcoming guests, checking them in, you know, responding to guests' information, and filing." (Respondent 8)

5.2.6.3 Subtheme 3: Interaction with guests to develop and enhance communication skills

Respondents 4 and 9 mention that interaction and communication skills are crucial for success in the ecotourism industry and that students were exposed to this through their placements. They mention that students were given the opportunity to interact with guests and fellow employees, and that this helped to sharpen their communication skills. Additionally, they mention that students were taught how to talk to guests, analyse guest behaviour, and read body language. Overall, it appears that the students were equipped with the ability to effectively interact and communicate with others in the ecotourism industry.

"The most crucial skill is interaction—interaction with guests, interaction with fellow employees—and I mean, that is what students did for six months, whether interaction during placement at the reception, housekeeping, or maintenance; there was always interaction with guests or staff." (Respondent 4)

"We taught our students, and they were exposed through learning and communication to how to talk to guests, be able to study and also analyse guest behaviour, read their body language, and they also did tour guiding." (Respondent 9)

To support this view by respondents 4 and 9, Chooma, Seangkul and Bulsathaporn (2022) assert that effective communication is crucial to the success of ecotourism because it facilitates the transfer of information between tour guides and tourists and helps to build and maintain positive relationships. Sustainable ecotourism destinations must have effective communication as a core element of the visitor experience. Transparency, information, and education must all be included in the communication process. Respondents mention the importance of open communication and feedback, both in terms of allowing students to express their expectations and concerns and in terms of supervisors providing feedback on the students' performance.

"We always, as supervisors and others in different divisions, ensure that there are frequent one-on-one consultations with the students. In those consultations, we reviewed the performance of the students and allowed the students to speak really well. You know what their expectations are and their challenges." (Respondent 4)

The establishment of efficient communication channels between students and supervisors is a crucial element in ensuring the success of WPBL in the field of ecotourism. Kunjuraman (2022) posits that communication plays a pivotal role in the learning process. This is because it enables students to articulate their needs, concerns, and expectations, which in turn assists supervisors in customising the learning experience to meet their requirements.

The General Systems Theory offers a theoretical structure for understanding the significance of communication within the context of this study. As per the theoretical framework, the constituents of a system, including but not limited to the ecotourism student, the workplace, and the supervisor, exhibit interdependence and necessitate collaborative efforts to accomplish shared objectives of assisting students to acquire discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. The ability to communicate effectively enables students to articulate their expectations and concerns, thereby facilitating the customisation of the learning experience by supervisors to cater to their requirements. According to Römgens, Scoupe and Beausaert (2020) effective communication aids supervisors in creating a supportive learning environment in addition to facilitating learning outcomes. Supervisors can foster a culture of trust and collaboration by encouraging open communication, thereby allowing students to feel more comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance. Respondents mention the open-door policy, which is an approach that makes it easy for students to come to the supervisor for advice or assistance.

“We always kept an open-door policy, you know, and made it easy for students to come to us for advice in terms of how they could maximise their learning experience.” (Respondent 4)

“I always encourage them to ask if they do not understand an instruction given to them by me or one of their supervisors. I'm always very friendly, open, and welcoming towards them so that they are free to communicate with me about anything.” (Respondent 8)

Adding further, the open-door policy offered to the students seems to extend beyond office hours.

“I always encourage them to speak about their expectations and what they hope and wish to learn, and I always keep my door open so they can call me at any time of day or night.” (Respondent 8)

Communication can be used by supervisors to furnish feedback to students regarding their performance, emphasising their strengths and identifying areas that require improvement.

5.2.6.4 Subtheme 4: Fauna, Flora, and Animal Behaviour Education Sessions

The WPBL programme provided students with an understanding of animal behaviour and rules within the establishment. This included information sharing sessions to educate students about the fauna, flora, and behaviour of animals within the establishment, as well as rules such as not feeding animals and how to communicate these rules to guests.

"We had a lot of information sharing sessions with our students to educate them about the fauna, flora, and animal behaviour within this establishment. We also spoke to them about rules such as, you know, no feeding of animals and how they can communicate that to guests." (Respondent 6)

Johnson, Nunkoo and Giannopoulos (2018) assert that the theoretical construct of General Systems Theory is employed to analyse intricate systems, with a focus on the interdependence of diverse constituents within a given system. The argument posits that ecotourism establishments function within a multifaceted framework that encompasses the natural surroundings, the local communities, the visitors, and the internal structures of ecotourism organisations. Hence, it is imperative for professionals operating in the ecotourism industry to understand the functioning of the system and its components. In the context of the study findings, the ecotourism industry deems it necessary for ecotourism students from DUT to have knowledge of animal behaviour and adhere to the rules within which ecotourism organisations operate. Ecotourism involves responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improve the well-being of the local people. As animals play an essential role in the ecosystem, any disruption in their behaviour can have negative effects on the environment. Therefore, knowledge of animal behaviour and rules within the ecotourism establishment is required to ensure that neither guests nor staff cause harm to animals or the environment (Archer et al., 2017). Additionally, students were taken on community tours and given the opportunity to learn about the environment outside the establishment and the communities that the establishment works with. This knowledge is important to be able to interact with guests effectively and responsibly and participate in ecotourism activities.

"We did take our students on local community tours, so if they understand then you know the environment outside this establishment so that they understand the communities that we are working with and how vital benefits this community is in terms of the fact that most of our employees are from the community, so yes, we also took them on trails, on boat rides, and all other you know activities within the area". (Respondent 6).

5.2.6.5 Subtheme 5: Empowering students to conduct guided tours and cultural experiences

Tour guiding and cultural tours refer to the experience and training provided to students in leading and educating guests on the cultural and historical aspects of the destination as well as the proper conduct and etiquette during tours. It includes teaching them how to analyse guest behaviour, read body language, and communicate effectively with guests.

"They also did tour guiding; they also did cultural tours. It also includes exposing them to different activities and responsibilities within the establishment, such as cooking in the bush, preparing fire, team-building activities, cultural tools, and auditing financial statements." (Respondent 9)

"They were equipped with many skills, such as cooking in the bush, preparing fire, taking guests to team-building activities, cultural tours, and auditing financial statements." (Respondent 9)

In support of this, Wondirand, Tolkach and King (2020) emphasise that tour guides are the most important component of ecotourism. They are particularly important for educating tourists about the natural and cultural resources of a place. Tour guiding is a specialised skill that requires knowledge, experience, and the ability to talk to people and engage with visitors. Respondent 7 mentioned that students were given tasks such as interacting with the local communities, visiting a craft market, and taking guests there to give them the best experience.

"We interact with the local communities; we have a craft market there; they used to go there and take some of our guests there, so we tried to ensure that they got the best experience." (Respondent 7)

"We also took our students with guests to activities such as zip lining up stealing as well as hiking." (Respondent 8)

Respondent 8 also mentioned that students were taken with guests to activities such as zip lining and hiking, and community interaction was also part of their duties. Outdoor activities and tour guiding involve tasks such as taking guests on trails, boat rides, and other activities within the establishment. These activities are aimed at providing students with a well-rounded experience and allowing them to understand the environment outside the establishment as well as the communities they are working with. Respondent 6 mentions that students were mostly based at the front desk and did housekeeping and tour-guiding on several trails.

"Mostly they were based at the front desk, dealing with reservations and queries, guest information services; they also did housekeeping, and they also did tour guiding. We have a number of trails." (Respondent 6)

All the above respondents have stated that the WPBL programme equipped and exposed students to knowledge and skills that are specific to ecotourism employment. They mention that students were able to work in different divisions of the organisations and were exposed to different types of skills like conservation, customer relations, interaction, information sharing, and community tours, which are specific to the ecotourism industry.

Some respondents also mentioned that students were exposed to a variety of tasks and responsibilities from different divisions within the establishment, which helped them gain knowledge and skills specific to the ecotourism industry.

5.2.6.6 Subtheme 6: Supervised student involvement in housekeeping and maintenance tasks

It appears that students were given tasks and responsibilities related to the upkeep and maintenance of ecotourism establishments, such as ensuring the cleanliness of the rooms and common areas and making sure that everything is in working order for guests' arrivals. In line with this, Forje, Tchamba and Eno-Nku (2021) postulate that the upkeep and maintenance of ecotourism infrastructure is a critical component of ecotourism development. The cleanliness, safety, and functionality of the facilities can have a significant impact on visitors' experiences and perceptions of the destination. As a result, developing discipline-specific skills in maintenance and upkeep is critical for the success of ecotourism businesses. This includes making certain that the facilities are in good repair, that the water and sanitation systems are operational, and that the waste management system is effective (Mwesigye et al., 2016). Respondents 2, 7, and 8 mentioned that ecotourism students were exposed to duties during WPBL that aligned with the upkeep and maintenance of ecotourism establishments, such as housekeeping.

“They will start in housekeeping; they will learn the basics of housekeeping, ummm..., and then they will do general areas of health and safety regulations, then they will do rooms and make sure rooms are ready for stays and arrivals.” (Respondent 2)

“For maintenance, it was about the general upkeep of the resort, the rooms, you know, making sure that everything is working perfectly when guests arrive.” (Respondent 4)

“Housekeeping, which entails cleaning chalets, maintaining the rules, and making sure that everything is placed in an orderly manner,” (Respondent 7)

“Housekeeping, and we also took our students with guests to activities such as zip-lining and hiking.” (Respondent 8)

5.2.6.7 Subtheme 7: Administrative tasks and financial management

Some respondents mentioned tasks related to reservations, guest information services, and housekeeping, which could be considered administrative tasks. There were also mentions of curio shops and finance, which may be related to financial management.

"Admin reception reservations mending the curio shop; we also have a store there, meaning the store um horse rides gate management and finance." (Respondent 5)

"There was, you know, selling and kitchen assisting." (Respondent 8)

5.2.7 THEME 6: WPBL PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION

This theme explores the various strategies, methods, and systems implemented to ensure that the WPBL programme is well-structured, efficient, and effective in providing students with the necessary skills and knowledge in ecotourism. It was in direct response to the question, "What measures are in place to ensure an effective WPBL programme that is beneficial to students?" It, therefore, provides an explanation of the assessment and evaluation of the programme's impact and effectiveness on the students, as well as any adjustments or improvements that are made to the programme based on this evaluation. This section is aligned with the research question: How can WPBL be designed to address the identified skills gaps in ecotourism?

5.2.7.1 Subtheme 1: Supervision and Monitoring

WPBL is a complex and dynamic process that necessitates effective supervision and monitoring to ensure that students acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies. The General Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the student-workplace-industry supervisor relationship. An organisation is viewed as a system of interdependent parts that work together to achieve a common goal (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). In the context of WPBL in this study, the interdependent system components are the ecotourism students, the workplace, and the industry supervisors.

Effective supervision and monitoring by the supervisor are crucial for the success of WPBL, as they help ensure that the student acquires the required ecotourism industry knowledge, skills, and competencies. Supervisors and staff members are responsible for ensuring that students are performing their duties correctly, giving feedback, and providing guidance to help them maximise their learning experience. Respondents mention the role of supervisors in monitoring the activities of the students and ensuring that they are completing the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them.

"We have supervisors who supervise the students each and every day, and they always have a list of activities they need to cover, and those activities are monitored daily through, you know, a clearly defined checklist." (Respondent 3)

"We rely a lot on the students, and with that comes their advantage of getting a lot of exposure and the opportunity to work with various supervisors." (Respondent 7)

Additionally, it was uncovered that the staff members are heavily involved in the duties and responsibilities of the students and act as mentors and guides throughout the programme.

"As their mentor and the owner of this establishment, what I did was ensure that I was heavily involved in all the duties and responsibilities. I'd given them not to supervise only but to be there for them, especially at the beginning of their work placement and training." (Respondent 9)

Respondent 5 mentioned the role of experienced staff members in providing leadership, mentoring, and training to students to help them grasp as much as possible during their work placement.

"We all had educational sessions with our very experienced staff members; we offered leadership and mentoring, and we taught our students and trained them to also observe how things are done by more experienced employees." (Respondent 5)

5.2.7.2 Subtheme 2: Induction programme

An induction programme refers to a process or programme that is used to introduce new employees, students, or volunteers to an organisation or company. An effective induction programme can assist students in communicating their expectations and concerns to their supervisor, which can improve their learning experience. According to Ryan and Lane (2013), an induction programme that includes opportunities for new employees to ask questions and provide feedback can help establish an open and supportive workplace culture, which can promote learning and development.

This is especially important for students participating in WPBL because it allows them to express any concerns they may have and receive feedback from their supervisor. Respondents mention the importance of an induction programme for students, to allow them to share their expectations and to provide them with an overview of the programme.

"We have an induction programme with them where we allow them to share their expectations; we share our expectations, and whatever duties and responsibilities we give them, we always know that they are aligned with the expectations as well as the outcomes." (Respondent 7)

5.2.7.3 Subtheme 3: Incentives for exemplary performance

Respondents mention the incentives provided to students for good performance, such as free access to activities or extra days off. Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) affirm that the most effective incentives are those that align with the interests of students and learning objectives. The authors further note that incentives that are meaningful to students, such as the opportunity to work on interesting projects or learn new skills, are likely to be more effective. Respondent 4 states that:

“We compliment and recognise good deeds and great work from our students, and there are incentives for good performance, like, for example, uh, uh, giving them free access to activities and extra off days.”

Johnson and VanWie (2014) recommend linking incentives to measurable goals and letting students design them. The authors emphasise that incentives can be very effective in motivating students, but only if they are used in a manner that is consistent with the goals and objectives of the workplace learning experience.

5.2.8 THEME 7: THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMMES

The respondents articulate a desire for enhanced communication and transparency between the ecotourism organisations and institutions of higher education, particularly the Department of Ecotourism at DUT, with regards to the implementation and management of WIL. They suggest that frequent interactions, such as weekly phone calls, and clear communication channels would improve the WPBLL experience for students, organisations, and the institution. They also mention the importance of transparency and the need for DUT to visit and engage with students and supervisors more frequently.

Some respondents also recommend that the industry be given a larger role in WIL placements and that DUT focus on refining communication and other soft skills, as well as integrating elements of entrepreneurship into the curriculum.

5.2.8.1 Subtheme 1: Constant communication and transparency between industry and institutions

The respondents emphasised the importance of constant communication and transparency between the industry and institutions to improve the WPBL experience for students. They stated that more interaction and communication between the WIL coordinators, lecturers, and industry is needed, with suggestions for simple measures such as weekly phone calls or emails to address any concerns. This statement is reflective of the theoretical framework of General Systems Theory as adopted in this study, specifically in relation to the principles of feedback and control. According to Bertalanffy (1968), consistent feedback and resolution of concerns can facilitate system modifications and guarantee that it is progressing towards its objectives. Therefore, DUT and the WPBL supervisors are two interdependent parts that need to collaborate and communicate effectively to provide ecotourism students with a meaningful learning experience that may assist them in attaining discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. Respondents also highlighted issues with delayed responses, a lack of feedback from the institution, and the need for constant communication to prevent problems from arising. They emphasised the need for transparency in terms of sharing information about students' schedules and planned events and for institutions to take responsibility for ensuring that students are getting the right WIL experience.

"What needs to happen is more interaction between us as the industry and your department; constant communication would really make the WIL experience better. There needs to be more communication between institutions and us, as the industry definitely has to happen between the different institutions. Since I've been here since December 2021, it is now July. Finally, three days later, after the situation had happened, did I get a response? Hence, I emphasise the importance of constant communication and transparency between us and the institutions." (Respondent 2)

"It's really up to the institution; the biggest thing that is lacking when students come and commence their work placement training is communication, both verbal and written. The situation should just focus on refining communication." (Respondent 7)

"I recommend frequent communication and visits by DUT. I recommend that we at least communicate with DUT and whoever is responsible for WIL at least twice a month." (Respondent 8)

"Working together and keeping constant contact, what is also missing is that I do not see any element of entrepreneurship that should be integrated." (Respondent 9)

Overall, several respondents emphasised the importance of constant communication, transparency, and prompt response time between the industry, the educational institution, and the students. They recommend frequent communication and visits by the educational institution to ensure a better WPBL experience for the students. The respondents also mentioned the importance of improving written and verbal communication skills, which are essential for the students' future assessments and careers.

5.2.8.2 Subtheme 2: Frequent industry visits by university personnel

Industry visits are important to assess the progress of students, engage with supervisors, and provide feedback to ensure that students are receiving the best possible experience during their WPBL placement.

“You know the visits are also very meaningful because you get the work integrated facilitators checking for reports from the students; they will engage with the students and engage with the supervisors, and I'm satisfied.” (Respondent 3)

“More frequent visits I feel it would be nice if at least you saw the WIL coordinator once a month.” (Respondent 5)

“What DUT can do is try to make their visits more frequent, at least once a month, and doing that will also allow the institution to engage with different supervisors.” (Respondent 6)

To support this, respondents 3 and 5 mention that the institutions have a responsibility to make sure that students receive a high-quality and valuable WPBL experience.

“Institutions must take their responsibility to provide students with a meaningful and beneficial WIL experience seriously.” (Respondent 3)

“It is the duty of institutions to ensure that students are receiving a valuable and worthwhile WIL experience.” (Respondents 5)

5.2.8.3 Subtheme 3: Clearer expectations of WPBL outcomes and entrepreneurship integration

There is a need for clear expectations from both industry and institutions for the outcomes of WPBL training.

“Working together and keeping constant contact, it is important that, as organisations, our expectations are known in the same vein as the expectations of DUT, so right now,

I could say what DUT expects as the outcomes of training to meet them are not clear.” (Respondent 9)

There is a push for incorporating entrepreneurship education into WIL programmes and curriculum. This is seen as important for preparing students for the dynamic and ever-changing job market.

“I do not see any element of entrepreneurship even when I engage with students, so I think the curriculum should be integrated.” (Respondent 9)

This study uses General Systems Theory to explain how DUT is a part of a larger system that is subject to external trends as previously discussed in Chapter 3 and illustrated in Figure 3.1. GST views an organisation as an interconnected and interdependent system, with each part contributing to the whole. The strategy map of DUT, illustrated in Figure 5.6, shows the institution’s strategic direction, ENVISION2023, and goals with its DNA as its essence on the map.

DUT started using the DNA concept in 2015, recognising that people-centeredness is a priority. This aligns with GST, which emphasises the importance of considering the human element within organisational systems. The first strand of the map emphasises being people-centred and engaged, feeding into the second strand, which promotes university innovation and entrepreneurship. This approach mirrors the systemic view that emphasises the interrelatedness of various components within an organisation.

Respondents' recommendations, emphasizing the need to integrate entrepreneurship education into the curriculum in alignment with the institution's overarching objectives, reinforce this systemic approach. DUT’s values, principles, ethos, and culture, which connect the DNA strands, form the foundational elements of the system that drive the university’s mission. The strategy map also presents four perspectives: stewardship, systems and processes, sustainability, and society. GST highlights the interdependency between these perspectives, allowing for a multi-disciplinary, cross-institutional approach to responding to challenges and achieving strategic goals. Stewardship, systems, and processes enable DUT's external perspectives on sustainability and society, illustrating how internal functions and values impact broader societal outcomes.

By integrating the principles of systems theory, it is highlighted that DUT's strategic direction and goals are not isolated elements but interconnected within a larger system. This holistic approach ensures that changes in one part of the system resonate throughout, ultimately contributing to the overall sustainability and societal impact of the institution.

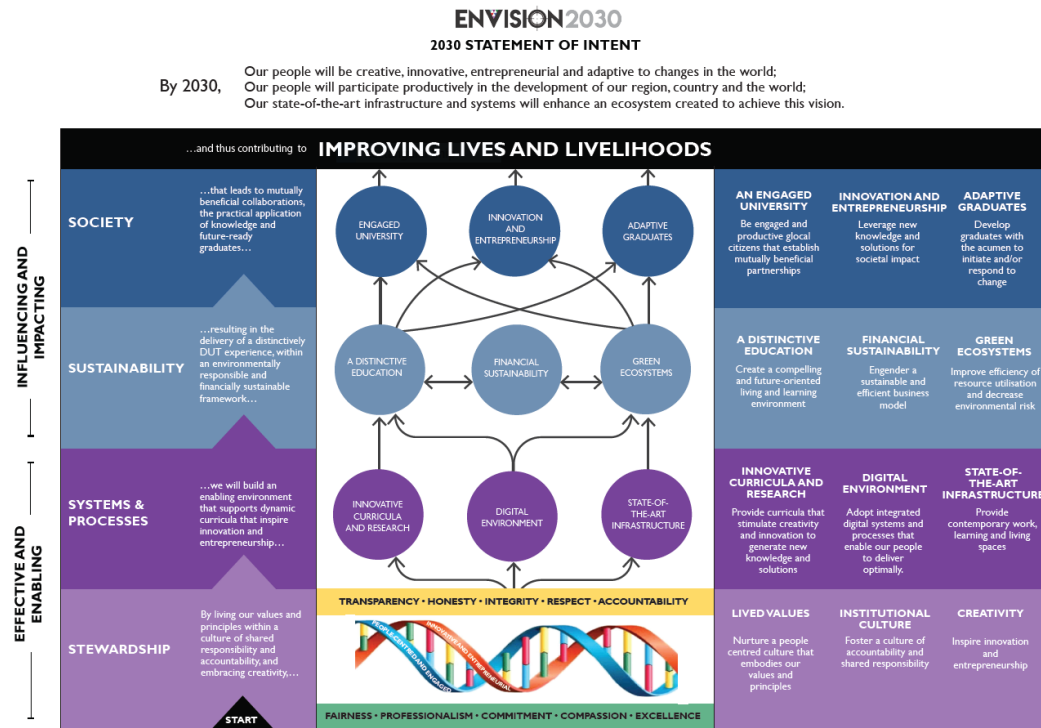


Figure 5.6: DUT's ENVISION2030 strategy map (Source: Durban University of Technology, 2021)

5.2.8.4 Subtheme 4: Industry's desire for a bigger role in WPBL placement and curriculum development

The subtheme 'Industry's desire for a bigger role in WPBL placement and curriculum' suggests that industry partners want to be more involved in the design and implementation of WPBL placements and the curriculum. They believe that this would lead to more effective and relevant training for students, as well as better alignment between what is taught in the classroom and what is needed in the workplace. They also believe that greater industry involvement would better prepare students for the workforce and improve their chances of getting a job after graduation.

“I would say it would be nice for institutions of higher learning to allow us to take a bigger role in wake placements. You know, I so wish we could have a bigger voice and lead this process instead of institutions leading WIL placements.” (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 also mentions that the industry should have more of a say in the curriculum and in the WPBL placement. The motive behind this may be that it would ensure that students are better prepared for the workforce and that their skills align with the needs of the industry.

"I would say it would be nice for institutions of higher learning to allow us to take a bigger role in work placements. You know, I so wish we could have a bigger voice and lead this process instead of institutions leading WIL placements." (Respondents 4).

The respondents expressed a desire for a greater role in the placement and curriculum of WPBL, with a focus on being more involved in the selection process of students, having input in the curriculum, and tailoring it to align with industry needs.

5.2.9 THEME 8: THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN MAXIMISING THEIR WPBL EXPERIENCE

This theme and subthemes highlight the importance of proactive approach, communication, and learning from experience in maximising the WPBL experience and attaining discipline-specific skills. The respondents were asked the following questions: "Do students have a role to play in maximising their own WPBL experience in ecotourism organisations and attaining discipline-specific skills? What is their role?" From their response, the following subthemes were uncovered:

5.2.9.1 Subtheme 1: Engaging in inquiry and displaying curiosity in the workplace

This subtheme highlights the importance of being proactive in learning and seeking out opportunities to gain knowledge and information in an ecotourism organisation.

According to Respondent 4, students should be like sponges and absorb all the relevant information they can from colleagues and guests.

"The number one rule I always share with students is to be like a sponge and absorb all the relevant information from colleagues, even from guests." (Respondent 4)

Respondent 5 encourages students to learn as much as possible by taking notes, asking questions, and being inquisitive.

"What students can do is learn as much as possible, take down notes, and ask questions." (Respondent 5)

Respondent 5 also mentions always encouraging the students to be inquisitive.

"I always encourage my students to be inquisitive and ask, ask, ask. If you are not sure about something, the only way to know is if you ask. We will be more than happy to guide you, and we are always happy to teach our students." (Respondent 5)

Asking questions and being inquisitive is seen as an important aspect of maximising the WPBL experience in ecotourism organisations. Respondent 7 emphasises that students should be encouraged to ask questions and take notes on the various tasks they are involved in and to take advantage of opportunities to have one-on-one sessions with employees to clarify any uncertainties they may have. This will help them gain a deeper understanding of the work they are doing and make the most of their WPBL experience.

"I encourage them to have notes and a notepad where they can take down notes; they can even record things, you know, and have one-on-one sessions with us if they have questions. I always encourage them to ask, so that is how they can maximise their learning experience." (Respondent 7)

Respondent 5 suggests that students can maximise their learning experience in ecotourism organisations by taking notes on relevant information and being inquisitive by asking questions. They should always have a notebook and pen on hand to make notes about, for instance, how to deal with challenging guests and other pertinent information. The respondent stresses the significance of questions as the only means of learning and comprehending things.

"What students can do is learn as much as possible; they can do that by always having you know when notebook and pen with them take down notes of, for example, where you think a guest is difficult, and you observe how you know, you can handle that situation because today it's me, tomorrow it's you who is faced with a similar, you know, issue, take notes and ask questions." (Respondent 5)

Overall, several respondents emphasised the importance of asking questions and having one-on-one sessions with employees to maximise the learning experience in ecotourism organisations. These opportunities allow students to clear up any misunderstandings, ask for clarification, and get personalised guidance. Having notes and notepad can help students keep track of their learning journey.

5.2.9.2 Subtheme 2: Demonstrating receptivity and willingness to acquire knowledge

The cultivation of open-mindedness and the demonstration of genuine curiosity are identified as subthemes that contribute to the optimisation of the WPBL experience within ecotourism organisations. The respondents highlighted the significance of possessing a willingness to acquire knowledge and demonstrating genuine interest in both the work placement and the respective sector.

"What students can do is literally just show interest and enthusiasm; make yourself available to learn." (Respondent 7)

Added to the above, respondent 7 mentions that students should be open-minded for them to maximise their learning experience.

"Be open-minded; that is how they can maximise their learning experience." (Respondent 7)

In summary, students are encouraged to approach their work placement with an open mind and to show interest in the work they are doing. Respondent 7 emphasised the importance of being willing to learn and being engaged in the work placement to maximise their learning experience.

5.2.9.3 Subtheme 3: Sharing expectations and goals with industry supervisors and other organisational personnel

Sharing expectations and goals with employees in ecotourism organisations can help students maximise their work placement experience. By being open about what they hope to achieve, employees can better understand how to support the student and help them meet their goals. This can lead to a more fulfilling and productive experience for both parties.

"They should not be shy about sharing their expectations. You know, they should share their expectations so that we can see how best we can meet the expectations or even go beyond them, so I advise students to always communicate what they hope to achieve after six months of work placement." (Respondent 6)

As previously stated under the subtheme 'Sharing expectations and goals with industry supervisors and other organisational personnel', this study recognises the importance of communication between ecotourism students and WPBL industry supervisors so that the industry is made aware of student expectations and needs. This aligns with Objective 3 of the study, which aims to develop WPBL to bridge the skills gaps in ecotourism.

Effective communication, in accordance with General Systems Theory, ensures that industry supervisors can adapt to best serve ecotourism students, thereby maximizing the benefits of WPBL. Communication with employees about tasks and responsibilities is an important aspect of effective management at WPBL. This involves clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each employee as well as providing regular updates and feedback on student performance.

“They can learn to embrace opportunities where they are assigned tasks in which they work independently. Also, they must be free to communicate with us with regards to tasks and responsibilities allocated to them.” (Respondent 3)

Another way the students can achieve the above is by sharing their expectations with their supervisors at the placement.

“Share their expectations so that we can see how best we can meet the expectations or even go beyond them, so I advise students to always communicate what they hope to achieve after six months of work placement.” (Respondent 6)

Being memorable and sharing new knowledge is considered a valuable aspect of maximising the WPBL experience in ecotourism organisations.

“Students need not be shy; we also learn so much from them; therefore, they can share new knowledge that makes them memorable, which is a plus for future employment considerations.” (Respondent 9)

This subtheme is also linked to ack to Objective 4 of the study, which focuses on curriculum enhancement and its implications for WPBL. Effective communication, as well as the sharing of expectations and goals, are critical components of a curriculum that supports WPBL. Aligning students and industry supervisors can better tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of both students and the industry, resulting in improved educational and professional outcomes. Furthermore, this theme aligns with Objective 5, which seeks to compare understandings and interpretations of WPBL by students, academic staff, and industry. The shared expectations and communication between these groups highlight the different perspectives and the need for alignment to maximize WPBL's effectiveness in ecotourism education.

5.2.9.4 Subtheme 4: Respect for experienced employees

Respect for experienced employees is a subtheme within the theme of maximising learning experiences in ecotourism organisations.

This subtheme highlights the importance of acknowledging the value of the experience and knowledge of employees who have been in the industry for a long time. Respondents 2 and 8 stress the importance of respecting more experienced employees for them to maximise their learning experience.

"Understand one thing: when you were born, I was earning my own salary, so to say to them as well, guys, I've been in the industry for 35 years, and I'm still learning new things. I'm learning new things every day. You are just starting, so here are people that are training you, but you're not willing to learn from them; you are not willing to look at them and understand what they're doing." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 8 emphasises the potential inclination of students to perceive themselves as superior by virtue of their formal education. Nevertheless, it is imperative for students to relinquish this sense of superiority and instead demonstrate respect towards seasoned employees, recognising the value of their experience and actively seeking opportunities to learn from them. While the employees may lack formal education, they possess a considerable amount of industry experience.

"The mistake that students make is to believe that because some of the employees here do not have formal education, therefore the students believe that they are superior because they come from university, which is not true. The employees have far more experience, and therefore students must use that to their advantage. Learn from them, forget about you being superior because of the theoretical education from the institution, and respect other colleagues." (Respondent 8)

The active engagement of students is crucial to optimising their experience in WPBL. This entails assuming responsibility for their own learning process, actively pursuing opportunities for skill acquisition and personal growth, displaying initiative by seeking clarification through questioning, diligently documenting information through note-taking, engaging in individualised sessions with mentors or supervisors, demonstrating open-mindedness and genuine interest, articulating expectations and goals, exhibiting respect towards experienced professionals, eschewing a sense of theoretical superiority, disseminating newfound knowledge effectively, leaving a lasting impression, embracing independent work opportunities, and maintaining clear and effective communication with mentors or supervisors regarding assigned tasks and associated responsibilities. These various actions facilitate the optimisation of the student's WPBL experience, the acquisition of practical skills and knowledge, and readiness for their prospective professional endeavours.

5.2.10 THEME 9: ASSESSING THE PROGRESS AND IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN EXECUTING CERTAIN TASKS OVER A PERIOD OF SIX MONTHS

This theme addresses the question: “After six months of supervising students during the course of WPBL, did you observe or notice any improvement in the way they executed certain tasks? What were those? Are there any that are discipline-specific?” The following improvements were uncovered by the supervisors:

5.2.10.1 Subtheme 1: Communication skills

Communication skills were observed to have improved in the students after six months of supervision during the WPBL programme. The improvement was noted in various aspects, such as interaction with guests.

"The most noticeable improvement is interaction with guests and improved communication with guests and other colleagues." (Respondent 3)

"Mostly in communication and every other skill pertaining to guest relations, but it's always mostly communication." (Respondent 5)

"They are more refined when it comes to communication. They are more knowledgeable about the fauna and flora in the area." (Respondent 6)

"Definitely there is improvement in terms of communication; they are more confident in communicating in terms of customer relations." (Respondent 7)

"Mainly, they have a reception relationship with customers; they are able to communicate; they adapt to the nature of the industry." (Respondent 8)

"Good communication." (Respondent 9)

Overall, the improvement in the students' skills was noted to be mostly in communication in terms of customer relations. The students were observed to be more confident and refined in communicating with guests and showed improvement in interaction with guests. They also became more knowledgeable about the fauna, flora, and culture of the area. Communication skills were noted to be one of the biggest improvements for the students. This study firmly supports communication as an essential skill in ecotourism. The significance of communication has been extensively discussed, in the previous section. The General Systems Theory approach adopted in this study solidifies the importance and impact of communication between DUT academics, ecotourism students, and industry supervisors.

Following this, Respondent 2 believes that students' evaluations by the host and honest feedback on their performance and suitability for the industry are important.

"I think it is crucial for students to receive honest feedback from the host on their performance and suitability for the industry. Evaluation by the host can give valuable insight into the student's strengths and weaknesses and help them understand what they need to work on." (Respondent 2)

5.2.10.2 Subtheme 2: Problem-solving skills

According to the respondents, the students showed improvement in their problem-solving skills after six months of supervising during the course of WPBL. They are more confident in handling customer complaints and can think on their feet and come up with creative solutions to complex problems. Respondent 4 noted that it is evident that individuals exhibit increased confidence in managing issues, particularly when it comes to addressing customer complaints. They demonstrate a greater willingness to engage in problem-solving activities, showcasing their ability to think quickly and employ creative strategies when resolving intricate problems.

"In terms of communication, which is amongst the things I mentioned, as you know skills that are lacking. You see a lot of improvement in that regard, you see that they are more confident, you know, in handling, you know, problems especially with guest customer complaints they are more open to problem solving you know there they are able to think on their feet and creatively so in in solving complex problems they engage more in stuff meetings as well." (Respondent 4)

Respondent 6 said they are more refined when it comes to solving problems; they do not panic; they are calmer when faced with challenging situations."

"They are more refined when it comes to solving problems; they do not panic; they are calmer when faced with challenging situations, such as dealing with difficult tests; they are more knowledgeable about the fauna and flora in the area." (Respondent 6)

Additionally, there was improvement in the student's confidence, ability to think on their feet and solve problems creatively, engagement in meetings, and overall communication with other employees. The improvement in communication skills is noted to be the most noticeable among all other skills. Respondents 7 and 9 stated that communication with other employees improved their problem-solving abilities and that communication with other employees improved their problem-solving abilities.

"In terms of communication, they are more confident in communicating in terms of customer relations, and they are able to solve problems. If their communication with other employees improves, some written communication might be improved." (Respondent 7)

"Firstly, in terms of confidence, good communication, thinking on their feet and problem-solving." (Respondent 9)

5.2.11 THEME 10: THE ADEQUACY OF A SIX-MONTH PERIOD FOR WPBL IN PREPARING STUDENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT IN THE ECOTOURISM SECTOR

The prevailing viewpoint among the respondents is that the duration of six months is insufficient for students to acquire a comprehensive understanding and proficiency in the knowledge and skills required for pursuing employment opportunities within the ecotourism industry. The majority of participants hold the view that it is imperative for students to have an extended duration of exposure to various academic departments and extracurricular activities, in addition to acquiring discipline-specific skills. It is suggested by some respondents that a duration of at least one year, and in some cases even two years, is advisable for the implementation of the WPBL programme. The duration required for WPBL exhibits variability and is contingent upon the unique learning capacities of each student.

5.2.11.1 Subtheme 1: The six-month duration of WPBL proves inadequate for students to acquire comprehensive knowledge and skills

Many respondents believe that six months is not enough time for students to grasp all the knowledge and skills required by each department.

"Six months is not enough, and it's not enough time for students to grasp all the knowledge and skills that are required per department." (Respondent 3)

"Six months is not enough. We have so many divisions, activities, and duties and those are just six months, it is just not enough." (Respondent 7)

"No six months is not enough; there is so much that needs to be done in the different areas of this establishment; therefore, six months is not enough." (Respondent 8)

"No [no, no, no, uh] when students get here, there is so much to learn, and it is not possible to grasp and learn everything in six months. Six months is not enough for students to attain relevant skills that are enough for them to get employment. I recommend at least 12 months. Six months is not enough." (Respondent 9)

A significant number of respondents hold the belief that a duration of six months is inadequate for students to sufficiently acquire the requisite knowledge and skills across various departments within the organisation. There is a prevailing sentiment among individuals that students require an extended period of time to fully comprehend and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. Some proponents advocate for an elongated timeframe of no less than twelve months. To acquire skills specific to a particular discipline, there are varying recommendations regarding the duration of probationary periods. It is argued that a six-month duration is insufficient for comprehensively addressing the various departments and activities within the organisations, as well as adequately equipping students for their future endeavours. There is a prevailing sentiment that numerous tasks remain to be accomplished within various domains of the institution and that students require additional time to acquire the requisite proficiencies.

This study's third objective is to determine how to develop WPBL to address the skills gaps in ecotourism. The respondents' feedback emphasises the need for a more extended WPBL period to comprehensively address the various departments and activities within organisations, thereby adequately equipping students for their future endeavours. This aligns with the General Systems Theory, which emphasises the importance of understanding how different elements of a system interact and influence one another (Bertalanffy, 1968). Extending the WPBL duration would allow students to gain a deeper understanding of the interconnected components of ecotourism. Some argue that a six-month duration is insufficient to comprehensively address the various departments and activities within the organisations, and to adequately equip students for their future endeavours. Many people believe that there are still many tasks to complete in different areas of the institution, and that students need more time to develop the necessary skills.

"Six months is not enough and I think a year would be better." (Respondent 6)

In contrast, Respondent 5 believes that the adequacy of the six-month period depends on the learning capabilities of an individual. This perspective highlights the need for flexibility in WPBL programmes to accommodate varying student capabilities, which is also in line with the Theory of Change.

The Theory of Change provides a framework for understanding how specific activities lead to desired outcomes by establishing clear pathways from initial conditions to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). In this case, it emphasizes the importance of tailoring WPBL durations to meet individual learning needs and maximise skill acquisition.

“The adequacy of the six-month period really depends on the individual's learning capabilities. Some students may be able to grasp all the knowledge and skills required in that time, while others may need more time.” (Respondent 5)

By considering these varied perspectives on the appropriate duration of WPBL, this study aims to provide insights for developing more effective WPBL programs that address the discipline-specific skills gaps identified in Objective 1. Additionally, this approach supports Objective 4, which focuses on determining the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its foreseeable implications for WPBL. Extending the WPBL duration and incorporating flexibility based on student learning capabilities could lead to more comprehensive and effective curriculum enhancements, ultimately benefiting both students and the ecotourism industry.

5.2.12 THEME 11: PLACEMENT OF STUDENTS IN TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM AND CONVENTIONAL TOURISM ESTABLISHMENTS

The majority of respondents express the opinion that substituting city hotels for eco-lodges in the context of WPBL is suboptimal, as it fails to provide an authentic ecotourism encounter. According to the respondents, it is imperative for students to be situated in appropriate surroundings, such as remote and rural areas, to engage with local communities and gain authentic exposure to the ecotourism phenomenon. Certain respondents hold the viewpoint that it would be beneficial for students to be assigned to ecotourism establishments for the initial half-year of their placement, even though this approach may not be entirely sufficient. The rationale behind this suggestion is to provide students with a comprehensive comprehension of authentic ecotourism practices. Nevertheless, there is a respondent who perceives no issue with the location of hotels in urban areas, particularly when they cater to the tourism sector. Another participant asserts that regardless of the placement, it is incumbent upon the student to actively seek out pertinent experiences.

5.2.12.1 Subtheme 1: Diverse views on placing students in traditional ecotourism organisations

The placement of students in traditional ecotourism establishments is a subject of contention among the respondents. There is a viewpoint held by certain respondents advocating for the placement of students in rural and remote regions with the intention of providing them with an authentic ecotourism experience and fostering their comprehension of the natural environment and local culture. There is an alternative viewpoint held by some respondents advocating for the placement of students in diverse sectors of the tourism industry, encompassing urban areas, with the aim of expanding their experiential knowledge.

"Students need to be placed in the right areas." (Respondent 2)

"I don't see a problem with it. As long as it's within tourism, there are many sectors in it." (Respondent 5)

"It is the responsibility of the student to get relevant experience... I don't see any issue with placement in the cities or with establishments that are considered not to be true ecotourism establishments." (Respondent 6)

This study supports the views of Respondents 2, 5, and 6. Providing students with exposure to a wide variety of establishments, including those outside the realm of ecotourism, can enhance their understanding of the larger tourism industry and its interdependence with the natural environment. WPBL in non-ecotourism establishments can also allow students to apply their ecotourism knowledge and skills in a variety of settings, such as hotels or resorts, and identify opportunities for incorporating sustainable practices. This exposure also enables them to comprehend the perspectives and challenges of non-ecotourism businesses, as well as how ecotourism principles can be applied in these settings. The impetus for this study originates from the necessity to shift attention from skills gaps in mainstream tourism to the realm of ecotourism. It is crucial for this study to acknowledge the progression from traditional ecotourism to urban ecotourism. Urban areas are progressively allocating resources towards nature-based solutions to tackle environmental issues and promote sustainable development, as they are now acknowledged as significant contributors to worldwide conservation efforts. According to Spatz and Anderson (2022), urban ecotourism offers a distinct prospect of encountering nature and wildlife within an urban environment, thereby cultivating an enhanced comprehension and admiration for the natural world.

Hence, the inclusion of ecotourism students in a wide range of establishments results in a comprehensive education, broadens their perspectives, and enhances their ability to apply ecotourism principles in different settings. Furthermore, this initiative has the potential to contribute to the development of adaptable graduates, aligning with the objectives outlined in DUT's ENVISION2023 strategic roadmap. Nonetheless, most of the respondents believe that students should be placed in ecotourism establishments as it is the primary objective of their course.

"I don't think it's a good idea to place students in establishments that are in the cities. Always an adventure. Always a new experience. A new day brings new experiences and new adventures, which are essentially part of the ecotourism experience." (Respondent 3)

"Why would you place a student who does ecotourism in a city? My understanding of ecotourism is that it is in remote and rural settings." (Respondent 4)

"Let the first six months be in ecotourism, I mean rural and remote areas." (Respondent 7)

"It is important to note that these students are registered for a qualification in ecotourism; therefore, they should be placed in ecotourism establishments." (Respondent 8)

"I do not recommend it because it means students are not getting the kind of experience, they're supposed to get... and the culture in true ecotourism establishments." (Respondent 9)

The significance of the placement location is a topic of contention among the respondents. There is a perspective among certain individuals that urban locations lack significance and fail to provide an authentic ecotourism encounter. There are individuals who perceive no issue with the location of establishments within urban areas if they operate within the tourism industry. The environmental consequences of tourism have become increasingly significant due to the rising number of tourists, particularly in ecologically fragile regions that are popular tourist destinations. Therefore, it is imperative to devise novel business models that can effectively address the repercussions of tourism and foster enduring sustainability for both destinations and enterprises (Daniel et al., 2017). Therefore, this study concurs that the involvement of academics and entrepreneurs plays a crucial role in the introduction of innovative managerial and planning methodologies.

These approaches aim to equip the industry with valuable intelligence, knowledge, and tools that can potentially influence the competitive advantages of both public and private tourism organisations. Certain participants suggest that being situated in rural and remote regions would provide the most authentic encounter with ecotourism. Conversely, there are those who argue that determining the placement location is the responsibility of the student. In general, most respondents hold the view that the inclusion of students in ecotourism establishments is crucial for their comprehensive comprehension of authentic ecotourism.

5.2.13 THEME 12: NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC: INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 ON WPBL

The COVID-19 pandemic has exerted a substantial influence on diverse establishments, encompassing lodges, hotels, and reserves. Many of these establishments have witnessed a decrease in their revenue as a consequence of a decline in the number of visitors and the necessity to suspend operations. The pandemic has had a significant impact on students' learning experiences, as they were required to leave their educational institutions and were unable to access the customary levels of exposure and training, they had become accustomed to. Furthermore, certain establishments were compelled to cease operations as a consequence of COVID-19 infections, leading to a dearth of resources and restricted training prospects for students. The decrease in patronage at establishments resulted in a diminished opportunity for students to engage in high-pressure work environments and participate in large-scale events. Considering this, the respondents were asked the following question: "What has been the impact of COVID-19 on WPBL in your organisation? How did you overcome the challenges?" From the responses gathered, the following were uncovered:

5.2.13.1 Subtheme 1: Effect on training and learning experience

Consensus among the respondents indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse effect on the educational experience of students. The outbreak precipitated significant disruption in the tourism industry and its associated sectors on both a national and global scale (Jamal and Budke, 2020). In addition, the global economy experienced a deceleration as a consequence of the pandemic (Haleem, Javaid and Vaishya, 2020). According to a study conducted by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2020), the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on a considerable number of individuals, with approximately 75 million individuals at risk of facing adverse consequences in their respective workplaces.

Furthermore, the study reveals that a staggering one million workers have unfortunately experienced job losses as a direct result of this crisis. In the context of this study, respondents reveal that the decision was made to dismiss the students from the institutions of higher learning and organisations, resulting in a state of perplexity as well as a dearth of available resources and limited opportunities for engagement in diverse activities. The decrease in the quantity of attendees led to a diminished scope for the students to acquire practical knowledge, and the incapacity to organise events had an impact on their capacity to perform effectively in high-stress situations.

"Covid affected student mentorship, and we couldn't change students the way we are used to. It really affected the learning experience." (Respondent 4)

"Students had to be sent home. It just ruined the entire learning experience." (Respondent 5)

"There was a lack of resources, and it meant no training for the students...it was a limited time that we had with the students." (Respondent 6)

"Fewer guests...so they only got half off everything; they didn't get a whole experience." (Respondent 8)

"Well, because of COVID, the volume of people visiting the establishment was not the same, so their ability to work under pressure was not tested. Those kinds of experiences were not there because of the coronavirus." (Respondent 9)

5.2.13.2 Subtheme 2: Effect on guest volume

Both Respondent 2 and 9 have indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a decline in the number of visitors to the establishment, consequently affecting the students' capacity to perform effectively in high-pressure situations. Thus, the outcome was a working environment that fostered a greater sense of relaxation among the students.

"We mostly attract or cater for the corporates and the government markets when they do their workshops meetings and conferences, so we are usually fully booked you know even so but of course it wasn't the same [due to COVID-19]." (Respondent 2)

"Well because of COVID the volume of people visiting the establishment was not the same so that allowed students to work in a much more relaxed environment there was no pressure so they ability to work under pressure was not tested." (Respondent 9)

According to respondent 9, COVID-19 prevented the establishment from holding events that would have given the students hands-on experience.

"Secondly we host events that attract you know about 4500 people and the duration of these events it's usually three days, so those kinds of experiences were not there because of coronavirus."

Ng, Wut, and Chan (2022) highlight the challenges and opportunities for WIL posed by the COVID-19 pandemic which include internship disruptions, limited opportunities for experiential learning, and alterations in work practices. However, the authors further suggest that the pandemic has created new opportunities for remote learning, virtual internships, and creative work arrangements. Respondent 5 agrees with this idea as stated in Theme 2, Subtheme: Trustworthiness and Adaptability:

"Adaptability and the ability to work under pressure are important skills in the ecotourism industry." (Respondent 5)

According to Buhalis and Park (2021), ecotourism operators who demonstrated adaptability during the pandemic by providing virtual experiences, outdoor activities, and sustainable practices were more likely to achieve success and longevity. In a similar vein, N'Dower, Moscardo and Murphy (2021) assert that adaptability is a crucial factor for the viability of ecotourism businesses in the aftermath of the pandemic by stating that operators who can modify their products and services in response to changing customer needs are more likely to achieve longevity and success. This emphasises the significance of adaptability in the business sector. The subsequent section of the analysis centres on section two, which pertains to the presentation and analysis of data obtained from academic staff members affiliated with the Department of Ecotourism at DUT.

5.3 SECTION 2

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS - ACADEMIC STAFF FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ECOTOURISM, DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Section 2 undertakes a thorough examination of the viewpoints and knowledge shared by academic staff from the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. It is important to note that within this category of academic staff, some members were actively engaged in both coordinating and facilitating WPBL within the Department of Ecotourism throughout the course of this study. By employing a carefully designed interview schedule, online one-on-one interviews were conducted with the aim of uncovering the extensive range of knowledge and expertise present within this scholarly community. The subsequent examination of this extensive collection of data has not only revealed identifiable subthemes but also overarching, relevant themes that are central to the aim and objectives of the study. The systematic approach employed in this study has revealed a wide-ranging comprehension of the educational aspects of ecotourism as perceived by individuals involved in its academic domain. Table 5.2 presents a tabular demonstration of the primary theme and subthemes that have emerged from this section.

5.3.1 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE ACADEMIC STAFF

To attain a thorough comprehension of the educational environment pertaining to ecotourism at Durban University of Technology (DUT), it is essential to examine the demographic characteristics of the academic department. The purpose of this section is to offer significant perspectives on the composition of this integral cohort, including variables such as age, gender, and length of service within the institution. Through the elucidation of these aspects, the objective is to provide a contextual framework for understanding the various viewpoints and experiences that influence the academic environment. This will ultimately contribute to a more accurate comprehension of the subsequent findings. The incorporation of demographic information, encompassing age, gender, and tenure at DUT, constitutes a vital element of our research methodology. This facilitates a more profound comprehension of the varied backgrounds and experiences that form the foundations of academic personnel's perspectives. Age provides valuable insights into the influences and perspectives of different generations, while gender illuminates potential variations in outlook and experiences within the academic community.

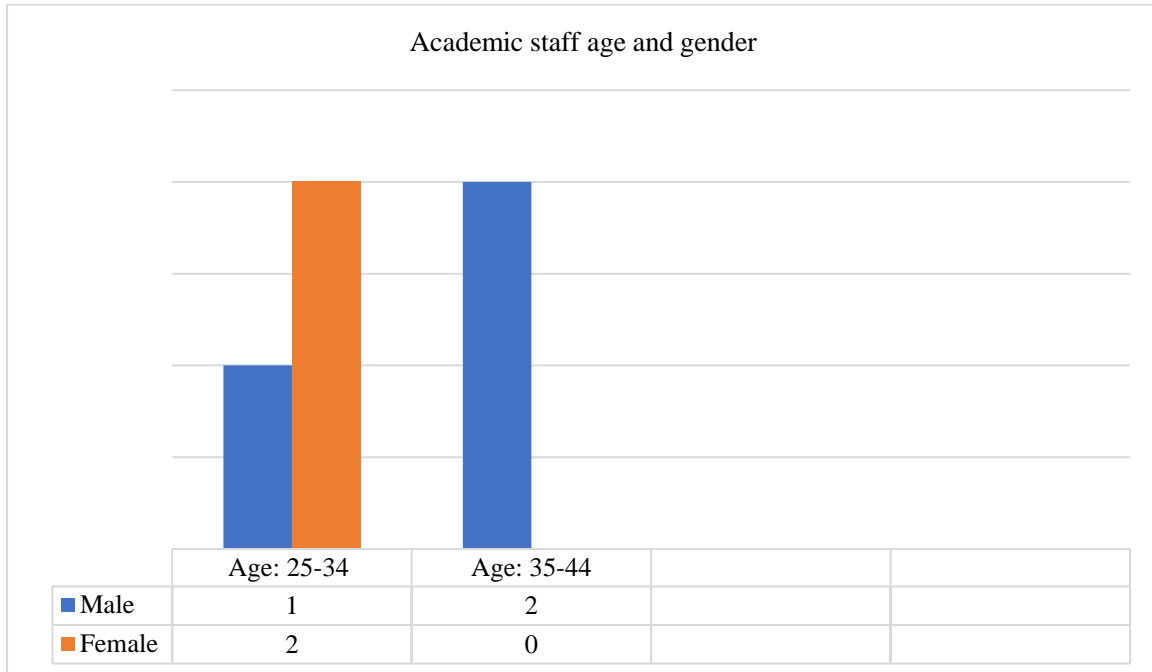


Figure 5.7: Age and gender of academic staff

The provided demographic information in Figure 5.7 indicates that among the academic staff, there are three males and two females. All of them fall within the age range of 25 to 34 years. This suggests a relatively young cohort within this professional group, possibly indicating a trend towards early-career professionals in this academic context. It is important to note that this demographic composition can have implications for perspectives and experiences within the academic environment, potentially influencing teaching approaches and research interests.

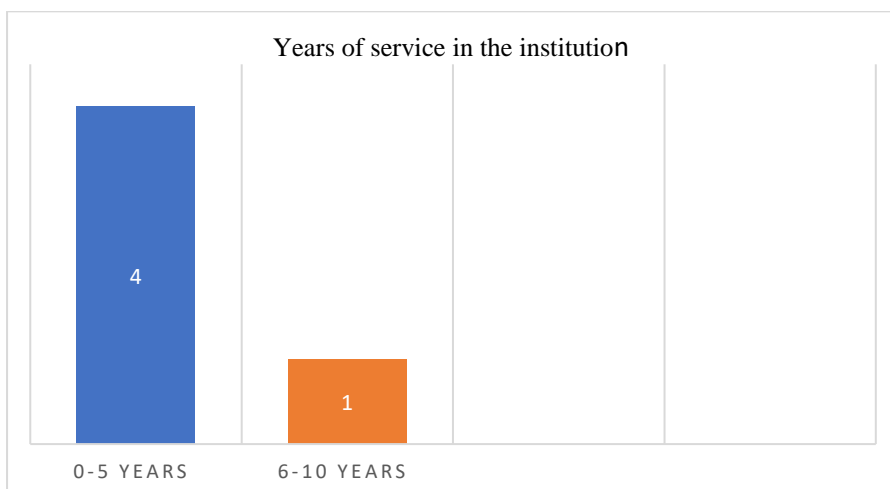


Figure 5.8: Years of service in the institution

Figure 5.8 indicates that four individuals have been in service at the institution for a period ranging from 0 to 5 years. This suggests a relatively recent addition of staff members to the institution, particularly the Department of Ecotourism. Conversely, one academic staff member has accumulated between 6 and 10 years of service, signifying a comparatively longer-standing presence within the institution. This distribution of years of service highlights a blend of both newer and more established members within the academic community, potentially influencing the diversity of experiences and perspectives present in the educational environment. The duration of an individual’s tenure at the institution can be used as a measure of their level of familiarity and expertise within the institution, which may have an impact on their perspectives and contributions to the department and the institution at large.

5.3.2 THEME 1: KEY RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ECOTOURISM AT DUT

This theme explores the key responsibilities of the academic staff in the Department of Ecotourism, DUT. To elicit responses from the respondents, the following question was asked: “What are your key responsibilities in the Department of Ecotourism?” As shown in Figure 5.9, four subthemes were uncovered from the responses, namely, teaching and learning, administrative duties, community engagement, and student support.

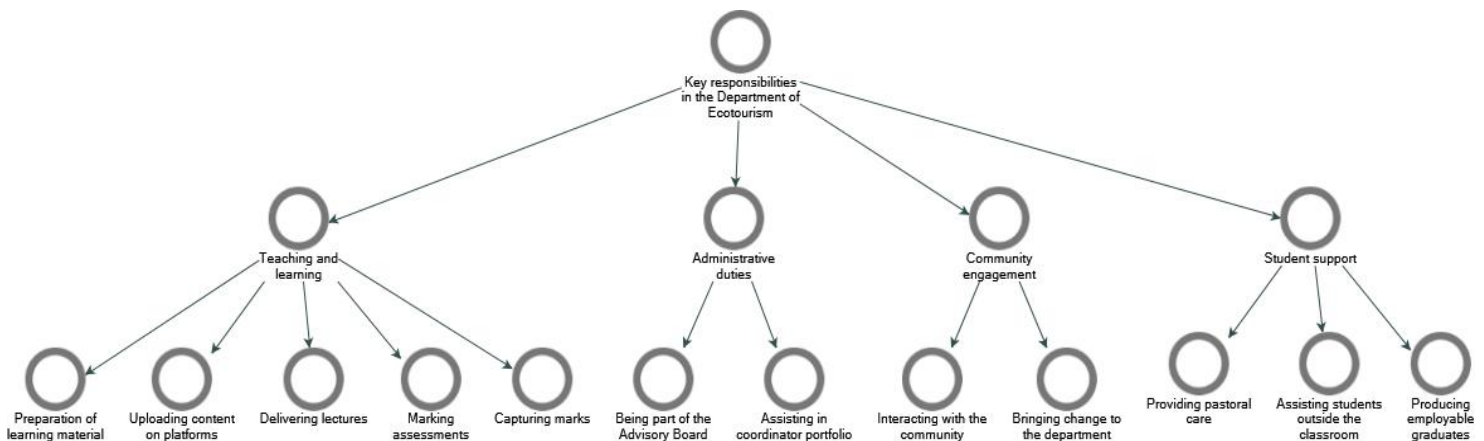


Figure 5.9: The key responsibilities of academic staff in the Department of Ecotourism, DUT

Table 5.2: Identification of themes and subthemes by academic staff

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Key responsibilities in the Department of ecotourism at DUT	Subtheme 1: Teaching and Learning Subthemes 2: Administrative duties Subtheme 3: External engagement Subthemes 4: Student support, guidance, and mentorship
Theme 2: Reasons students enrolled in ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Motivated by desperation Subtheme 2: Enrollment due to limited awareness Subtheme 2: Misconceptions about ecotourism
Theme 3: Student selection criteria	Subtheme 1: Criteria used for enrollment Subtheme 2: The inadequacy of criteria for assessing the level of interest and comprehension of ecotourism among potential students Subtheme 3: Absence of adequate career guidance as an underlying factor Subtheme 4: Recommendations to amend the selection criteria for student enrollment
Theme 4: The description of ecotourism	Subtheme 1: The meaning and purpose of ecotourism Subtheme 2: Key pillars of ecotourism
Theme 5: Individual strategies for enhancing student understanding of ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Innovative assessments Subtheme 2: Embedding entrepreneurship into the ecotourism curriculum Subtheme 3: Understanding of ecotourism principles Subtheme 4: Field trips to enhance teaching and learning
Theme 6: The impact of WPBL on student enthusiasm and interest in the course	Subtheme 1: Enthusiasm about WPBL as a catalyst for launching careers in ecotourism Subtheme 2: Enthusiasm and confidence of students before WPBL. Subtheme 3: Discouragement due to being assigned low-level tasks

Theme 7: Discipline-specific skills valuable to ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Passion for nature and the environment Subtheme 2: Customer service and relations Subtheme 3: Entrepreneurial skills Subtheme 4: Guiding and interpretation skills
Theme 8: Understanding of WPBL	Subtheme 1: On-the job training Subtheme 2: Skills development
Theme 9: Role in ensuring that students are adequately prepared to commence WPBL	Subtheme 1: Providing relatable examples. Subtheme 2: Assessment and guidance on professional conduct. Subtheme 3: Punctuality Subtheme 4: Research activities Subtheme 5: Deadlines and time management Subtheme 6: Communication Subtheme 7: Setting standards within the department to influence students' attitudes and demeanour
Theme 10: The significance of organisations in facilitating students' acquisition of pertinent experience aligned with the objectives of WPBL	Subtheme 1: Accommodation and logistics Subtheme 2: Mentorship and support
Theme 11: The role of students in maximising their WPBL experience to gain relevant skills	Subtheme 1: Understanding the WPBL logbook issued by the Department of Ecotourism, DUT Subtheme 2: Utilising workplace resources Subtheme 3: Bringing change to the organisation Subtheme 4: Workplace preparedness Subtheme 4: Networking and legacy

Theme 12: Maintaining strong relationships with the industry	<p>Subtheme 1: The importance of long-lasting relationships with industry for student exposure to the working environment</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Integrating industry feedback in teaching and learning</p> <p>Subtheme 3: Continuous communication and feedback with industry</p> <p>Subtheme 4: Offering skills development and training programmes based on industry suggestions</p>
Theme 13: Criteria for selecting host organisations	<p>Subtheme 1: Focus on ecotourism organisations as the primary criteria for WPBL</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Involvement of industry in the selection process</p> <p>Subtheme 3: Regular engagement between the Department of Ecotourism and WPBL host organisations</p>
Theme 14: Cognisance of student placements by the academic staff	<p>Subtheme 1: Limited knowledge regarding the selection of organisations for WPBL</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Alignment of student placements with ecotourism criteria</p> <p>Subtheme 3: The placement of ecotourism students in conventional tourism organisations</p> <p>Subtheme 4: Hindrance to student placement in traditional ecotourism organisations</p>
Theme 15: Adequacy of the six-month WPBL period for preparing students for employment in the ecotourism sector	<p>Subtheme 1: Divergent perspectives on the adequacy of the six-month duration</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Timing of WPBL</p>
Theme 16: Curriculum enhancement of undergraduate ecotourism qualification	<p>Subtheme 1: Adaptation to changing environment</p> <p>Subtheme 2: The integration of new content and entrepreneurship emphasis in the revised qualification: Alignment with DUT's ENVISION2023 trajectory</p>
Theme 17: Pandemic disruption - effects on teaching, learning and WPBL	

Source: Generated by author

5.3.2.1 Subtheme 1: Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are a broad theme that encompasses various aspects related to education, including pedagogical techniques, educational resources and tools, assessment and evaluation methods, and the goals and objectives of educational systems. This subtheme encompasses various subthemes, including curriculum design, classroom management, instructional methods, and technology in education. The overall goal of the teaching and learning theme is to promote effective, efficient, and engaging education that prepares individuals for success in a rapidly changing world.

- Preparation of learning material

Two respondents indicated that a significant aspect of their primary duties within the department involved the development and creation of educational resources.

"Prepare learning material and upload it on platforms such as Moodle and Microsoft Teams; prepare learner guides; upload content on TLZ; and set assessments." (Respondent 1).

"It includes facilitating classes." (Respondent 3)

- Delivering lectures

Delivering lectures was also part of the teaching and learning activities engaged by the respondents.

"Deliver lectures." (Respondent 1)

"My key responsibilities are to deliver the content." (Respondent 2)

- Marking assessments

According to Respondent 1, academic staff members at the department are also engaged in the task of conducting mark assessments as part of their teaching and learning responsibilities.

"Mark assessments. Marking and capturing of marks." (Respondent 1)

The interactions between lecturers and ecotourism students are vital to the success of WPBL. According to the General Systems Theory adopted in this study, the nature and quality of teaching and learning therefore have an impact on student preparedness for WPBL. Therefore, in the context of WPBL, this indicates that the workplace, the learners, and the educators must be aligned with the objective of achieving learning outcomes.

5.3.2.2 Subtheme 2: Administrative duties

Administrative duties are another key responsibility of the academic staff interviewed in the department. A subset of the respondents reported their participation on the advisory board or their possession of portfolios within the department.

- Being part of the Advisory Board

Being part of the advisory board involves participating in important decision-making processes for the department.

"I am also part of the advisory board, which is a very important component of WIL." (Respondent 1)

- Assisting in WIL coordination

The task of supporting WIL coordination entails assuming the duties of a WIL coordinator on a temporary basis when the designated coordinator is unavailable.

"I was also assisting in the coordinator portfolio at some point when there was no coordinator in the office." (Respondent 2)

5.3.2.3 Subtheme 3: External engagement

Respondent 2 mentioned being involved in interacting with the community.

"To ensure that I interact in community engagement." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 adds that community engagement Brings change to the department.

"Uh, to ensure it, to bring change in the department in terms of the systems, and also to ensure that I produce graduates that are employable and who are eager to change the world." (Respondent 2)

It can be inferred that community interaction entails active involvement with nearby communities and relevant stakeholders. Consequently, this process engenders transformation within the department, encompassing enhancements and exerting a beneficial influence on both the department itself and its overarching goals.

In alignment with the viewpoint expressed by Respondent 2, the transformation of the higher education landscape in South Africa concurs with the idea that it is no longer sufficient to view society through the lens of the traditional role of academic experts without engaging non-researcher partners (Machimana, Sefotho and Ebersöhn, 2018). Additionally, The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) advocated for the reorganisation of teaching, learning, and research methodologies within universities to align with societal needs and to showcase the generation of knowledge. The South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) was established in 2009 with the objective of enhancing and advancing community engagement within the South African higher education sector. SAHECEF aims to achieve this by fostering partnerships with various stakeholders, promoting the importance of community engagement, and integrating it as integral to the core business of higher education.

This theme of external engagement aligns with Objective 4 of this study, which seeks to determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its foreseeable implications for workplace-based learning (WPBL). The integration of community engagement into the curriculum supports the development of graduates who are employable and eager to effect positive change, addressing the skill deficiencies identified in Objective 1 and Objective 2.

Furthermore, the Theory of Change provides a framework for understanding how such community interactions can lead to desired outcomes by establishing clear pathways from initial conditions to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). By engaging with the community and relevant stakeholders, educational institutions can create transformative experiences for students, thereby enhancing their employability and readiness to contribute meaningfully to society. Moreover, the principles of General Systems Theory emphasise the importance of understanding how different elements of a system interact and influence one another (Bertalanffy, 1968). Community engagement, as highlighted by Respondent 2, serves as a critical component of this interconnected system, bringing about changes within the department and fostering a holistic approach to education that benefits both students and the broader community.

5.3.2.4 Subthemes 4: Student support, guidance, and mentorship

Providing pastoral support involves offering support and guidance to students beyond the classroom setting, addressing their personal and non-academic concerns.

"Often our role goes beyond the classroom; we have to be like parents; we play a pastoral role with them and assist them in whatever personal issues they have, so our role goes beyond just teaching and learning; we also assist students outside the classroom." (Respondent 1)

The key responsibilities of the respondents in the Department of Ecotourism are broadly categorised into four themes: teaching and learning, administrative duties, community engagement, and student support. The respondents fulfil a diverse range of responsibilities, including but not limited to teaching and learning, administrative tasks, community engagement, and student assistance.

The provision of pastoral support aligns with Objective 4 of this study, which seeks to determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its foreseeable implications for workplace-based learning (WPBL). By addressing the personal and non-academic concerns of students, academics can create a supportive learning environment that enhances students' overall well-being and academic performance. This holistic approach to education can help bridge the skills gaps identified in Objective 1 and Objective 2, as students who feel supported are more likely to engage fully in their learning and develop the requisite discipline-specific skills.

Furthermore, the Theory of Change provides a framework for understanding how such comprehensive support can lead to desired outcomes by establishing clear pathways from initial conditions to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). Pastoral support is an essential component of this pathway, as it addresses the personal challenges that may hinder students' academic and professional development. Additionally, the principles of General Systems Theory emphasise the importance of understanding how different elements of a system interact and influence one another (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this context, pastoral support is a critical element that interacts with teaching, administrative duties, and community engagement to create a cohesive and supportive educational system.

By fulfilling these diverse responsibilities, academics in the Department of Ecotourism contribute to a system that focuses not only on academic excellence but also on students' overall development and well-being. Objective 3, which aims to determine how to develop WPBL to bridge the skills gaps in ecotourism, aligns with this comprehensive approach to student support. Providing pastoral support ensures that students are well-prepared and motivated to participate in WPBL, thereby enhancing their learning experiences and improving their readiness for the professional demands of the ecotourism industry.

5.3.3 THEME 2: REASONS STUDENTS ENROLLED IN ECOTOURISM

This theme explores the reasons why students enroll in ecotourism. The following question was asked to elicit a response: “From your experience, why do students enroll for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management in your department?”. It was uncovered that the motivation behind students enrolling in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management can be attributed to a range of factors.

These include a desire to gain admission into a university, limited comprehension of the course content, the misconception that it shares similarities with tourism and hospitality, and a genuine interest sparked by exposure to the concept of ecotourism. This concept is further exemplified in Figure 5.10. Nevertheless, there exists a deficiency in the dissemination of information and the cultivation of awareness pertaining to the available courses and career prospects through high school career guidance.

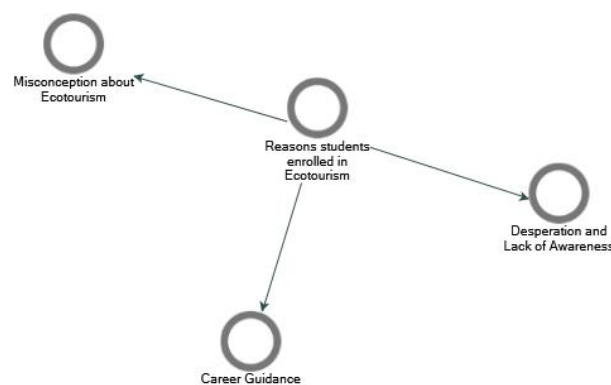


Figure 5.10: The reasons students enrolled for a qualification in ecotourism.

5.3.3.1 Subtheme 1: Motivated by desperation

The field of tourism education often faces challenges related to the admission of students with lower academic qualifications, fragmented student engagement, and subpar academic performance, which in turn can result in uncertain career prospects. Ramakrishnan and Macaveiu (2019) note that a prevailing trend among students pursuing tourism education is the prevalence of low aspirations, as a significant number of individuals exhibit limited enthusiasm towards the industry as a viable long-term professional path. Consistent with the findings of this research, respondents revealed that a significant number of students enroll in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management due to desperation rather than genuine interest.

"The reality is that ecotourism is often the least of their choices. They come and enroll just because they meet the minimum requirements, and they do not even know or understand what the cause is about without even understanding why they want to enroll in ecotourism. It is desperation to be at a university and not have to worry about what they are doing for that particular year over the next three years." (Respondent 1)

"I think most of them just take the course because there's nothing else that they will do, or they do not qualify for their preferred programme... They're just doing it for the sake of being in university and also to be away from home." (Respondent 2)

Students often enrol in ecotourism primarily based on meeting the minimum eligibility criteria, without a comprehensive understanding of the course content and the potential career prospects that may arise upon its completion. This aligns with Objective 2 of this study which is to explore the factors contributing to the lack of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. The respondents' feedback highlights the need for a more integrated approach to student admission, one that considers genuine interest and comprehension of the field, as recommended by the Theory of Change framework. This theory, also discussed in Chapter 3, emphasises the importance of identifying necessary preconditions and activities to achieve desired outcomes in educational settings.

Furthermore, students enroll because of limited options and to alleviate concerns about their future plans over the course of three years. Enrollment provides students with an understanding of the fundamental principles underlying ecotourism and the various career paths they can pursue upon satisfying the diploma program's requirements. This gradual increase in understanding and engagement with the field reflects the Theory of Change, where initial conditions lead to progressive achievement of desired outcomes. This study highlights the need

for a systemic perspective and a structured change process to enhance the quality and relevance of the Department of Ecotourism's programs. This approach ensures alignment with the goals and values of the education system and the society it serves, addressing the research questions and objectives comprehensively.

5.3.3.2 Subtheme 2: Enrollment due to limited awareness

The lack of awareness subtheme pertains to the restricted awareness and comprehension of the concept of ecotourism and the potential professional prospects it presents among students who enroll in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme. The absence of awareness regarding the nature of ecotourism among students is posited to stem from insufficient career guidance provided in high schools, resulting in students enrolling in ecotourism programmes without a comprehensive comprehension of its intricacies. The lack of available information contributes to students experiencing surprise and a sense of being overwhelmed upon initial exposure to the course and its subject matter.

"For a lot of students that the department has seen, I would say that it is desperation to be at a university, and when they are taken by the department, that's only when they realise what ecotourism actually is and what they can do after completing the diploma... I also wouldn't blame the department... for not knowing what ecotourism is about. I think the root of it all is career guidance from high school. Where they come from, I don't think it is done well and efficiently. You see that in how students are surprised when they learn about a particular course or diploma, there is indeed a gap of information in terms of career guidance from high school." (Respondent 2)

"During the registration, you find a flock of students who don't even know what ecotourism is." (Respondent 3)

According to respondent 1, there is a gap in career guidance and information about niche careers, including ecotourism, provided to high school students. They believe this lack of guidance and awareness contributes to students enrolling in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme without fully understanding what it entails.

"The root of it all is career guidance from high school, where they come from. With career guidance, they fail to educate and create awareness about these niche types of careers; hence, they are always unknown." (Respondent 1)

5.3.3.3 Subtheme 3: Misconceptions about ecotourism

Ecotourism is a subcategory of tourism that exhibits a higher annual growth rate, estimated at approximately 5% globally. This growth rate is three times faster than that observed in the broader tourism industry (Carrascosa-López et al., 2021). Hussain (2022) asserts that the term 'ecotourism' is commonly used and frequently misused in the context of the tourism industry. In accordance with this viewpoint, the respondents noted that some students enroll in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme due to misconceptions about the field. Some believe that ecotourism is similar to conventional tourism and hospitality, while others see it as the closest option to nature conservation. These misconceptions lead to a lack of understanding of the unique aspects and challenges of ecotourism as a career, which can make it difficult for students to find jobs after graduation.

"Another thing that I've observed is that there is a misconception that students believe that tourism is similar to ecotourism and hospitality. Yes, there is a link between those three qualifications, but they are different, with ecotourism taking into consideration the rural and the most natural aspects of its nature, and it is a niche type of career and field. Hey, where most students really struggle to find jobs, I would say it's a patient career. Without the passion for it, you will struggle, so having those students come into the department not knowing what ecotourism entails is a big challenge for the department." (Respondent 1)

"Firstly, some of them know about tourism, or they studied tourism in high school. So, when they get through our campus, then ecotourism becomes the closest thing to tourism. Secondly, we have those who are interested in nature conservation. Nature conservation and ecotourism become the closest once again, since we don't have anything related to environmental nature conservation." (Respondent 3)

Overall, the respondents engaged in a discourse pertaining to the diverse factors that motivate students to enroll in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme provided by their academic department. It was observed that there exists a lack of awareness among students regarding the concept of ecotourism and the potential career prospects that can arise upon successful completion of the course. According to the initial respondent, it has been observed that students often hold a misconception regarding the similarity between ecotourism and tourism and hospitality. According to their statement, ecotourism is considered a specialised area of interest that necessitates a deep-seated enthusiasm for the natural environment and the preservation thereof.

The respondent addressed a deficiency in the provision of career guidance within secondary educational institutions, emphasising the importance of incorporating education and awareness regarding specialised career paths such as ecotourism. According to the third respondent, students may choose to enroll in the programme for various reasons, such as the limited availability of alternative programmes or a genuine interest in ecotourism, which they perceive as being closely aligned with their interests in nature conservation or tourism.

5.3.4 THEME 3: STUDENT SELECTION CRITERIA

The preceding discussion revealed that a lack of awareness and inadequate career guidance were factors that influenced the decision of certain students to pursue a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. Given the aforementioned implications and the potential influence of disadvantaged students' career decisions on their academic achievements, it is imperative to ascertain the selection criteria employed by the department for student enrollment.

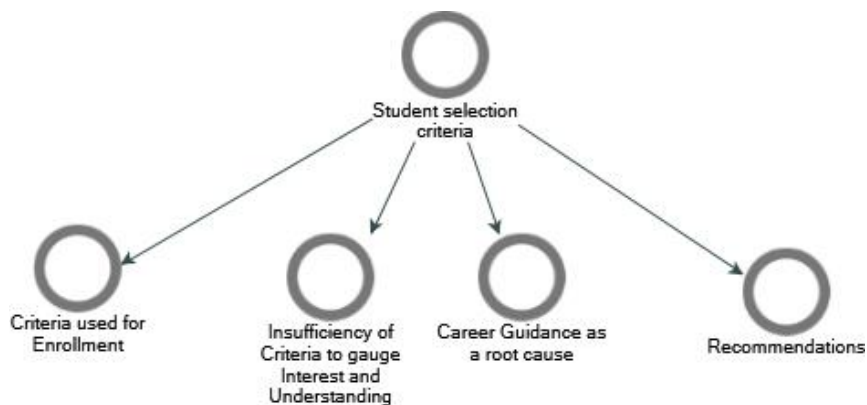


Figure 5.11: The student selection criteria for ecotourism

In this theme, emphasis is placed on the visual representation of the key subthemes related to student selection criteria, which is presented in Figure 5.11. This figure serves as a graphical illustration that encapsulates and organises the essential subthemes. The inclusion of Figure 5.11 not only provides a clear visual summary but also enhances the understanding of the criteria used in selecting students to enroll in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management.

5.3.4.1 Subtheme 1: Criteria used for enrollment

The enrollment criteria for the course encompass meeting a minimum APS score of 28 points or higher, as well as attaining specified proficiency levels in subjects such as biology, English, geography, and other relevant disciplines. There are slight variations in the criteria for regular applicants who apply through the central applications office (CAO) and walk-in candidates who are admitted from other departments with available positions. The Department of Ecotourism places emphasis on the compulsory subjects of life sciences and geography.

"The selection criteria is that students must have a 28-point APS score, and then they must have a level 4 in biology because the criticism tells what biology they will have as a major, and then they must also have a level 4 in English. They must also have a level 3 in geography in any other subject from high school, but the APS score needs to be 28 and above." (Respondent 1)

"Students must have an APS score of 28 points with life sciences and geography as compulsory subjects." (Respondent 2)

"I would say, the criteria that we use, we normally look for students who've got a background in life sciences and a background in geography, which are like biology and also life sciences as well." (Respondent 3)

5.3.4.2 Subtheme 2: The inadequacy of criteria for assessing the level of interest and comprehension of ecotourism among potential students

Respondent 1 posits that the existing enrollment criteria are insufficient for evaluating the students' understanding and interest in ecotourism.

"Yes, even though we do ask students, are they know, so that we try and find out if they know about ecotourism, but I don't think that is sufficient for us to really gauge their understanding and interest in the course." (Respondent 1)

The respondent believes that the problem lies with the lack of career guidance from high school, resulting in students frequently harbouring misconceptions about the subject matter.

"The gap starts with career guidance from high school... the stalls and exhibition stands that students would visit are those you know, um of careers that they're familiar with, you know, others they won't be interested in going to those, so I think that's where the root of the problem is." (Respondent 1)

The respondents propose modifying the selection criteria, such as implementing entrance examinations or interviews, to appeal to students who possess a more comprehensive understanding of the programme's expectations.

"But the reality is, it depends on what your career path is there are many sectors in in tourism and you know some are very much good paying jobs you know depending on what you want in life what you want for yourself which sector you are in and how far you go with your education." (Respondent 1)

5.3.4.3 Subtheme 3: The absence of adequate career guidance as an underlying factor

The choice of profession is among the most critical decisions people make throughout their lifetime. Nevertheless, a considerable number of individuals encounter challenges when it comes to making such decisions, and the evolving landscape of the world of work in the twenty-first century has further intensified the intricacy associated with exploring different career options and making a choice (Gati, Levin and Landman-Tal, 2019). In accordance with this, the respondents feel that the root of the problem in attracting students with an interest in and understanding of ecotourism lies in the lack of proper career guidance provided in high schools. This leads to students having misconceptions about the industry and enrolling in the course out of desperation rather than genuine interest. According to Respondent 1:

"I think that the root of the problem is career guidance from high school. Students come to us already with these misconceptions, and they don't really differentiate between tourism and ecotourism. They really do it because they are desperate, and they don't want to stay at home." (Respondent 1)

5.3.4.4 Subtheme 4: Recommendations to amend the selection criteria for student enrollment

Respondent 1 recommends that the institution should market its programmes equally and not only rely on career guidance in high school. They also suggest changing the selection criteria by administering entrance tests and interviews to gauge the interest and understanding of the students before enrolling them.

"I think that what you can do is really try and market all the programmes equally in the institution so that they are known, so that we do not only rely on career guidance in high school and we ourselves are responsible for spreading the word of what qualifications we offer as an institution. But I also recommend, in order to attract students who are interested in the course, and who know what the course entails, it is important that maybe we change our selection criteria, you know, get students to write an entrance test, you know, interview them so that at least we get people who have an understanding of what they're getting themselves into from the very beginning before we accept them for enrollment." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 3 mentions that the current selection criteria of having a background in life sciences and geography, along with specific modules that can be taken in high school, are somewhat helpful.

"Our requirements do sort of help with that and then yeah, 'cause we've got modules that are specific that they can do in high school, which are also specific to the qualification." (Respondent 3)

The literature on ecotourism emphasises the significance of education and training in sustainable tourism development, as well as the requirement that students have a genuine interest in the subject (Fennell, 2014). This is consistent with General Systems Theory, discussed in Chapter 3, which suggests that the selection criteria for ecotourism courses should reflect the goals and values of the education system and the society it serves (Bertalanffy, 1968).

The current selection criteria for enrolling in ecotourism courses are primarily based on academic performance, with a minimum APS score of 28 and specific levels in subjects such as biology, English, and geography (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). However, the respondents to this study indicate that this criterion is insufficient for gauging students' level of ecotourism interest and comprehension. This lack of comprehension is attributable to the insufficient career guidance provided in high schools, which frequently leads to misunderstandings about the subject and the industry (Mbaiwa, 2017).

The respondents propose modifying the selection criteria by administering entrance exams or interviews to attract students with a deeper understanding of the subject. This suggestion aligns with the Theory of Change framework discussed in Chapter 3, which emphasises identifying necessary preconditions and activities to achieve desired outcomes. The literature on ecotourism supports this approach, highlighting the need to attract students with a genuine interest in the subject and a dedication to sustainable tourism development (Huang, Chan, and Hsieh, 2022). Selecting students who are committed to the development of sustainable tourism and demonstrate genuine interest in the subject is crucial in the context of ecotourism. The topic of selection criteria for enrollment in ecotourism courses emphasises the need for criteria that align with the goals and values of the education system and the society it serves.

The respondents to this study believe that the current criteria for assessing students' level of interest and comprehension in ecotourism are insufficient, and they suggest changing the criteria to attract students with a genuine interest in the subject. This recommendation reflects both the General Systems Theory's focus on aligning educational processes with broader societal goals and the Theory of Change's structured approach to achieving sustainable educational outcomes.

5.3.5 THEME 4: THE DESCRIPTION OF ECOTOURISM

When posed with the following questions: "When you deliver content to students, how do you describe ecotourism based on your understanding, experience, and knowledge of it? Please elaborate on the key pillars of ecotourism you know and understand." As depicted in Figure 5.12, the subsequent findings were revealed:

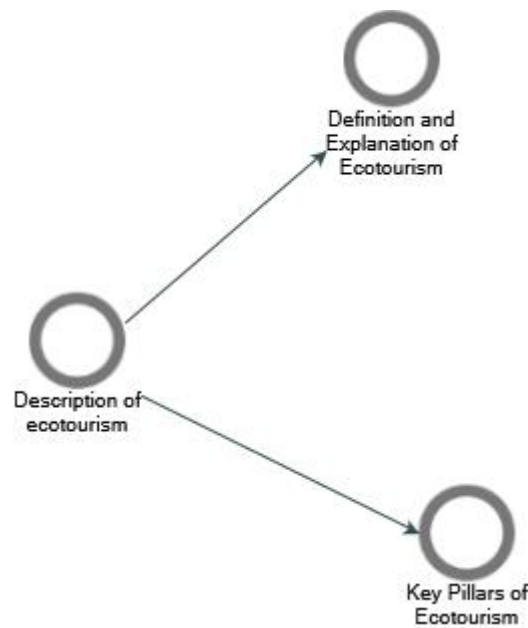


Figure 5.12: The description of ecotourism

5.3.5.1 Subtheme 1: The meaning and purpose of ecotourism

The respondents explain ecotourism in different ways but share common themes. They explain ecotourism as being about benefiting communities, preserving the natural environment, and providing financial benefits to local communities. The focus is on nature and cultural activities, and sustainability is emphasised as a key aspect of ecotourism. The term "ecotourism" is explained as a combination of ecology and tourism.

"Ecotourism is about you, ecotourism is about the community, ecotourism is about everyone. For ecotourism to occur, it needs to occur in a rural area. For ecotourism to occur it needs to benefit the community it needs to benefit the environment. Ecotourism is the natural environment, social environment and economic environment." (Respondent 1)

"Ecotourism is nature-based. It is tourism that leans towards the game reserves and leans against the culture, or cultural activities. Also, cultural offerings and it is also leaning more on nature or tourism that is based in areas that are nature-based like." (Respondent 2)

"Mostly we describe it as... nature-based tourism or tourism that deals with visiting areas that are of natural and cultural significance. So, we speak a lot on sustainability when we speak about it. It is not your traditional tourism but it's more of tourism that is nature-based, and it focuses on communities. We are looking at conservation, looking at sustainability, we're looking at building environmental awareness, and we're looking at providing financial benefits from conservation to local communities." (Respondent 3)

The respondents' views on ecotourism align with Objective 1 of this study, which aims to identify the requisite and lacking ecotourism discipline-specific skills. Their emphasis on the natural, social, and economic pillars of ecotourism underscores the need for students to develop a comprehensive understanding of sustainability and community engagement, which are essential skills in the field. Furthermore, this theme is consistent with the principles of General Systems Theory, which emphasises the importance of understanding the interconnections between different components of a system (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this case, the natural environment, social environment, and economic environment are interrelated components that must be considered holistically to achieve sustainable ecotourism.

Additionally, the Theory of Change provides a framework for understanding how specific activities in ecotourism can lead to desired outcomes by establishing clear pathways from initial conditions to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). The respondents' focus on sustainability and community benefits highlights the need to integrate these elements into educational and training programmes to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary skills to promote sustainable ecotourism practices.

5.3.5.2 Subtheme 2: The key pillars of ecotourism

The natural environment, social environment, and economic environment are the three main pillars of ecotourism that the respondents discussed. The natural environment pillar focuses on conserving and preserving natural resources and practicing responsible ecotourism. The social environment pillar emphasises the benefits to local people and the protection of culture to avoid exploitation and commodification. The economic environment pillar emphasises the benefits to local businesses and the provision of financial benefits from conservation to local communities. According to Hussain (2023), ecotourism encompasses more than a mere catchphrase associated with nature-oriented travel and recreational activities. Ecotourism is dedicated to the preservation and long-term sustainability of global natural and cultural environments. The organisation strives to provide a visitor experience that is environmentally non-intrusive and minimally destructive, while also promoting the preservation and support of indigenous cultures in the areas where it operates. The authentic essence of ecotourism lies in the shared responsibility of both travellers and service providers. To substantiate this assertion, the three respondents agree that ecotourism is a form of natural and cultural tourism that focuses on visiting areas of natural and cultural significance, including local communities. They describe ecotourism as promoting sustainability, conservation, environmental awareness, and financial benefits for local communities.

"In terms of the pillars of ecotourism, first and foremost, it is the natural environment, social environment, and economic environment. ... In terms of the economy, it needs to benefit the community, local businesses need to benefit from ecotourism. In terms of the natural environment, it's always about conserving and preserving and protecting natural resources in ecotourism, we say, leave only footprints." (Respondent 1)

"So, we speak a lot about sustainability when we speak about ecotourism. We are looking at conservation, looking at sustainability, we're looking at building environmental awareness, and we're looking at some are providing financial benefits from conservation to local communities." (Respondent 3)

General Systems Theory (GST) views these pillars as interconnected components of a larger system that contribute to the overall sustainability of ecotourism. As discussed in Chapter 3, GST emphasises the importance of understanding how different elements of a system interact and influence one another (Bertalanffy, 1968). To achieve holistic sustainability, it is important to balance the interrelated pillars of ecotourism, that is, natural, social, and economic.

This systemic view supports the need for comprehensive skills in ecotourism that address these interconnected elements. Objective 2 of this study is to examine the factors contributing to the deficiency of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. The Theory of Change provides a framework for understanding how specific activities lead to desired outcomes. It emphasises the need to establish clear pathways from initial conditions to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). In this case, the Theory of Change highlights the necessity of integrating training and educational practices that address all three pillars of ecotourism, that is, environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Effective WPBL should align with these pillars, ensuring that students develop a comprehensive understanding of how their actions impact each area. By applying the Theory of Change, this study aims to identify and address the factors that contribute to skill deficiencies, ultimately facilitating a more integrated and effective approach to ecotourism education. The alignment of educational programs with these key pillars is critical for developing students' skills and understanding of ecotourism. By incorporating elements related to the natural environment, social dynamics, and economic factors into their curriculum, educational institutions can better prepare students to meet the demands of the ecotourism sector. In particular, balancing these pillars aligns with the overarching goals of both General Systems Theory and the Theory of Change, which advocate for a holistic and integrated approach to achieving sustainable outcomes. The findings from this study underscore the importance of aligning educational practices with these theoretical frameworks to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of ecotourism programmes.

5.3.6 THEME 5: INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OF ECOTOURISM

Considering that the onus to educate students on ecotourism lies in the hands of the lecturers, it was critical to know from the respondents what they do in their individual capacity to ensure that students understand ecotourism as a niche or specialist type of tourism. This theme highlights the individual lecturer's role in promoting student understanding of ecotourism and the specific strategies, assessments, projects, or activities they use to do so, as illustrated by Figure 5.13. The focus is on the lecture's personal efforts to educate students about the characteristics and significance of ecotourism as a niche or specialist type of tourism.

In recent decades, there has been a proliferation of active learning methodologies aimed at enhancing student engagement and fostering deeper comprehension (Robertson, 2018). The respondents emphasised the importance of hands-on learning through field trips and guest lectures, as well as in-service training, to better understand ecotourism. They also focused on incorporating innovative assessments, such as using 3D models, to test students' understanding of ecotourism principles and encourage entrepreneurship. The assessments are mainly case study-based, using local examples to bring the subject to life. These are further elaborated on in the subthemes below.

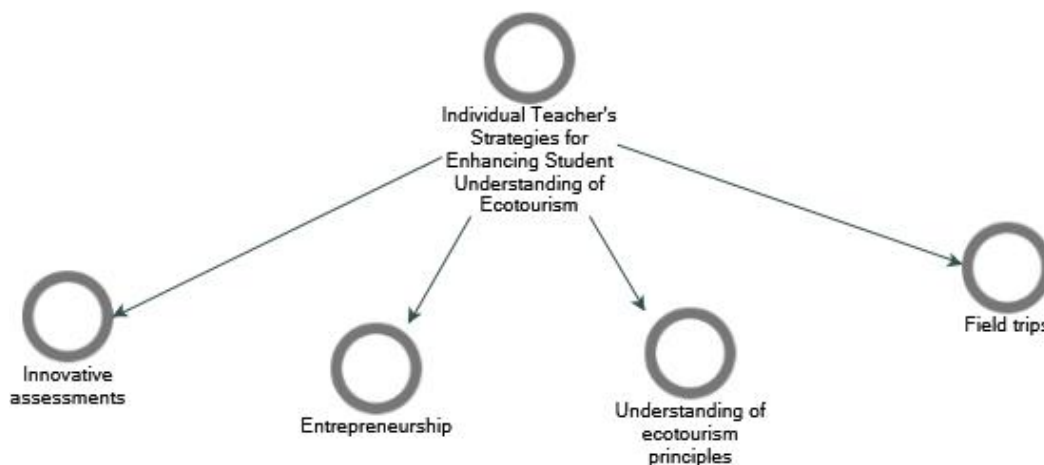


Figure 5.13: The individual lecturers' strategies for enhancing student understanding of ecotourism

5.3.6.1 Subtheme 1: Innovative assessments

Respondent 1 emphasises the importance of incorporating innovative and practical assessments in the classroom to promote creativity, problem-solving skills, and entrepreneurship among students. As an example, the respondent shared a previous assessment task where students had to design an ecotourism establishment using 3D models, which allowed them to use technology and think creatively.

"I always use case studies of establishments in the ecotourism field. Additionally, I try to make my assessments innovative and engaging but still relevant to the field of ecotourism...So that can only happen if we as lecturers give more practical, more innovative assessments that allow students to be creative, think out-of-the-box and be problem solvers... In my assessments, therefore, I try my best to always include the element of entrepreneurship." (Respondent 1)

This approach aligns with Objective 2 of this study, which examines the factors contributing to the deficiency of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism.

The Theory of Change framework supports this approach by highlighting the need for educational practices that bridge the gap between initial conditions and desired outcomes (Weiss, 1995). Specifically, it emphasises the integration of practical, innovative assessments that address all three pillars of ecotourism, that is, environmental, social, and economic sustainability. By incorporating such assessments, educational programmes can better equip students with the skills necessary to meet the demands of the ecotourism sector. This practical, hands-on approach not only enhances students' understanding of the field but also aligns with the Theory of Change's focus on creating clear pathways to achieve long-term educational goals.

5.3.6.2 Subtheme 2: Embedding entrepreneurship into the ecotourism curriculum

The positive effects of fostering entrepreneurial education (EE) have been widely recognised and deemed a crucial driver for economic development. The outcomes of entrepreneurship education include, among others, opportunities for job creation resulting in rapid economic activity and growth (Herman and Stefanescu, 2017). As a result, higher education institutions in South Africa have substantially invested in entrepreneurship education as an attempt to reduce youth unemployment (Walter and Block, 2016). Respondent 1 incorporates the element of entrepreneurship in their assessments to help students understand that they can create their own businesses in the field of ecotourism.

Respondent 1: "In my assessments, therefore I try my best to always include the element of entrepreneurship so that students learn and are aware that it is possible to create or establish your own businesses in the field of ecotourism." (Respondent 1)

5.3.6.3 Subtheme 3: Understanding of ecotourism principles

Respondent 1 states that they endeavour to incorporate an understanding of ecotourism principles into their assessments. They aim to make the assessments innovative and engaging while still relevant to the field of ecotourism. One example given is an assessment where students had to design an ecotourism establishment using 3D models, which tested their understanding of ecotourism and the unique characteristics of an ecotourism establishment, such as blending with the natural environment, being in a rural setting, and using solar panels and water harvesting tanks. The assessment allowed students to be creative and venture beyond their usual boundaries.

“Last year, I gave my students an assessment where they had to design an ecotourism establishment using 3D models, and I was testing them in terms of understanding ecotourism, so the establishment had to have this unique characteristic of ecotourism like blending with the natural environment being in a rural setting, so I needed to see, assess the students’ understanding of what ecotourism is about.” (Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 mentions that they provide in-service training to students before starting the module to help them understand more about what ecotourism is all about.

“I’ve always been unpacking and telling students about ecotourism and in-service training before we start the module or teaching and learning that helps the student understand better what tourism ecotourism all is about.” (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 states that their assessments are mostly case study-based and centred around using local cases and local case studies to help students understand ecotourism better. They believe that by using local cases, students will know exactly what to expect when working for organisations in the field of ecotourism.

Respondent 3: “Our assessments are very case study based, centred around using local cases and local case studies...a good case study for ecotourism.” (Respondent 3)

Respondent 1 also uses case studies in their teaching and assessments. This approach helps students understand ecotourism better by studying real-life examples and scenarios.

“I always use case studies of establishments in the ecotourism field.” (Respondent 1)

5.3.6.4 Subtheme 4: Fieldtrips to enhance teaching and learning

Fieldtrips and excursions play a crucial role in ecotourism education, as they provide valuable opportunities for experiential learning in both the natural and cultural settings of various destinations (Cini, Van der Merwe and Saayman, 2015). According to Shroff, Ting and Lam (2019), active engagement and guided instruction can enhance the quality of education by providing students with valuable experiences that go beyond the theoretical perspectives typically found in university curricula. Fieldtrips have long been acknowledged as valuable opportunities for practical and skill-based learning (Stansbie, Nash and Chang, 2016). However, it has been emphasised that the use of e-learning technologies has the potential to augment the knowledge acquired during these trips and record the students' attitudinal and behavioural changes (Shroff et al.,). Respondent 1 mentions field trips as a method they use to help students understand ecotourism as a niche type of tourism.

"Fieldtrips, guest lectures, and all assessments are linked to fieldtrips." (Respondent 1)

he overall summary of the above is that all three respondents use a combination of various teaching techniques, such as field trips, guest lectures, in-service training, and case studies, to help students understand ecotourism. They aim to make the assessments innovative and engage students by making them practical and relevant to the field of ecotourism. Additionally, the assessments often include elements of entrepreneurship and require students to demonstrate their understanding of the principles of ecotourism. The respondents strive to produce graduates who not only look for employment but who can also create employment by thinking creatively and solving problems.

5.3.7 THEME 6: THE IMPACT OF WPBL ON STUDENT ENTHUSIASM AND INTEREST IN THE COURSE

The theme highlights the comparison between students' engagement and motivation before and after WPBL and the potential changes in their behaviour, attitude, and academic performance. The focus is on evaluating the effect of WPBL on students' enthusiasm and interest in the course and its impact on their overall academic performance. These are further detailed in the following subthemes.

5.3.7.1 Subtheme 1: Enthusiasm about WPBL as a catalyst for launching careers in ecotourism

Respondent 1 notes that students have an enthusiasm for WPBL to kickstart their careers. However, the thrill is dampened when they find out that not all of them will receive a stipend for their work.

"The major [issue] that dampers the mood and the excitement are when they hear that they won't be getting paid...some do get a stipend, others do not." (Respondent 1)

According to the above respondent, some students may experience disappointment in their work-based learning placement due to the lack of payment. While some students may receive a stipend, others may not, and this can impact their overall enthusiasm for the programme.

5.3.7.2 Subtheme 2: Enthusiasm and confidence of students before WPBL

Nguyen, Goh and Muriilo (2023) used personal interviews as a method to investigate the critical incidents that tourism students encountered during their internships and the subsequent effects of these incidents on their overall WIL internship experience. The findings from the narrative analysis indicated that positive occurrences were primarily ascribed to interactions with hotel guests and workplace managers who offered constructive feedback, fostering a sense of appreciation among students and enhancing their motivation to exert greater effort in their work. According to Respondent 1, it has been noted that students demonstrate enhanced self-assurance, confidence, and effective communication abilities subsequent to their participation in the WPBL programme. Furthermore, these acquired skills are evidently manifested in their interactions beyond the confines of the educational setting. Respondent 2 concurs with the notion that students exhibit heightened levels of enthusiasm and energy when they are physically present in the classroom setting.

"Unfortunately for me, I've never taught students after they've come back from WPBL, so it is very difficult to tell however when I do engage with them in events outside the classroom at residences you definitely see a whole lot of confidence and communication so from the little interaction one has the growth is really visible." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 echoes similar sentiments as above by noting that:

"What I would say is that students are more enthusiastic when they are still in class. They've got enthusiasm, the energy is there." (Respondent 2)

5.3.7.3 Subtheme 3: Discouragement due to being assigned low-level tasks

Respondent 2 mentions the challenge of students being "taken for granted" during their workplace-based learning, where they are given tasks, such as cleaning toilets and mopping floors, instead of being exposed to duties that will help with future employment. The respondent notes that this is discouraging for the students.

"I think a lot of them are getting discouraged when they go to for workplace-based learning. I think some of them are taken for granted. Like you find others cleaning toilets, you find others mopping floors, you find others working is housekeeping, cleaning rooms, which is not a problem, right? I observed when I was doing my training that students are not actually taken to where they should be taken. It seems like the companies are taking students as the core of replacing those lousy jobs instead of taking them to expose them to duties that will help with entrance employment." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 1 noticed a visible growth in confidence and communication skills among students after WPBL but was unable to comment on changes in academic performance as they had not taught students after WPBL. Respondent 2 observed that students were more enthusiastic before WPBL, but their enthusiasm decreased after they went through WPBL and were assigned low-level tasks that did not help with their future employment. Respondent 3 could not comment as they had not been in the department long enough to observe any changes.

5.3.8 THEME 7: DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC SKILLS VALUABLE TO ECOTOURISM

The respondents were asked to explain what discipline-specific skills are valuable to ecotourism. From their response, the following subthemes were uncovered:

5.3.8.1 Subtheme 1: Passion for nature

Respondents mention that having a passion for nature and the natural environment is important for someone in the field of ecotourism.

"You need to be someone who's passionate about nature. Who is passionate about changing lives because we also work with communities sometimes." (Respondent 2).

Respondent 3 stated that knowledge of the environment and nature, as well as conservation, are important for individuals in the ecotourism field. They need to have a "broad understanding" and knowledge about the environment, and nature, and "anything related to that field." This knowledge is important for nature guiding and interpretation skills.

"They need to have proper people skills and customer service and then our guiding and interpretation, they've got to know a lot about environment and nature and conservation, and anything related to that field." (Respondent 3).

5.3.8.2 Subtheme 2: Customer service and relations

Customer service and relations are emphasised as important skills in ecotourism by all three respondents. Good people skills, understanding, and the ability to communicate effectively with customers are seen as essential for those working in the field.

"Knowledge about nature and the skill to communicate it, customer relations." (Respondent 1)

"You need to be someone who is not shy and extrovert because you tend to interact with people...you need to have a very good and broad understanding and be able to carry that out and just people skills in general." (Respondent 2)

"So, so I think the biggest one, one of the things that they'll that we always emphasise throughout is, is customer relations or customer service...They need to have proper people skills and customer service." (Respondent 3)

5.3.8.3 Subtheme 3: Entrepreneurial skills

The respondents in this sample emphasised the importance of entrepreneurial skills in the field of ecotourism. According to Respondent 2, it is not enough to just have qualifications and be able to answer calls. One needs to be someone who thinks outside the box and has a passion for nature and changing lives.

"You need to be someone who's passionate about nature. Who is passionate about changing lives... But I would say you need to have entrepreneurial skills because it's not about getting their calls and having your qualification. Yeah, someone who's thinking outside the box, I would say." (Respondent 2)

5.3.8.4 Subtheme 4: Guiding and interpretation skills

Respondent 3 mentions that guiding and interpretation skills are important for ecotourism.

"The respondents emphasised the importance of interpersonal skills, customer service and relations, and knowledge of nature and conservation in ecotourism." (Respondent 3)

Additionally, computer literacy, diversity skills, problem-solving skills, and communication skills were also mentioned as valuable skills for ecotourism professionals.

"Knowledge about nature and the skill to communicate it; customer relations; computer literacy; interpersonal skills; problem-solving skills." (Respondent 1)

The most important skill would be interpersonal skills because you tend to work with a lot of different people... someone who is not shy and an extrovert because you tend to interact with people." (Respondent 2).

The emergence of discipline-specific skills that contribute to the success of ecotourism is identified as a significant factor in this study. Respondents identified four subthemes that are closely associated with the overarching theme. These subthemes include a strong affinity for nature and the environment, a focus on customer service and relations, the possession of entrepreneurial skills, and the ability to effectively guide and interpret information. The

identified subthemes align with the principles of the General Systems Theory, which conceptualises ecotourism as a multifaceted system encompassing diverse stakeholders and necessitating interdisciplinary expertise. The subtheme of passion for nature and the environment is aligned with the interconnectedness principle of the General Systems Theory and emphasises the importance of recognising and safeguarding natural systems. The subtheme pertaining to customer service and relations aligns with the theoretical framework of General Systems Theory, specifically the concept of feedback loops and the importance of fostering favourable customer relationships. The subtheme of entrepreneurial skills is connected to the notion of adaptability within the framework of General Systems Theory. It highlights the importance for ecotourism professionals to possess innovative capabilities and the ability to adjust effectively in response to evolving circumstances. The subtheme pertaining to guiding and interpretation skills is in accordance with the principle of diversity in the General Systems Theory. This principle underlines the significance of recognising and appreciating diverse perspectives and skills within the ecotourism system. The findings of this study suggest that adopting a General Systems Theory framework offers significant contributions in understanding the requisite skills and competencies for achieving success within the ecotourism sector.

5.3.9 THEME 8: UNDERSTANDING OF WPBL

WPBL learning involves taking students into the working environment to learn and gain practical experience. It was thus expedient to know the respondents' understanding of workplace-based learning and their interpretation of it.

Respondents emphasised that this type of learning helps students apply what they have learned in class, become better problem solvers, and gain practical experience that cannot be taught in the classroom. These are discussed under the subthemes below.

5.3.9.1 Subtheme 1: On-the-job training

WPBL is a programme that prepares students for the work environment by giving them the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in the classroom and to gain hands-on experience.

"Workplace learning is that you go out there to learn as much as you can." (Respondent 1)

This type of learning involves taking students into a real-world work environment and giving them practical, on-the-job training. Respondents noted that this type of learning can help students develop problem-solving skills and deepen their understanding of the material beyond what can be taught in a classroom setting.

"Uh, what I understand about workplace-based learning is that it entails taking students to the working environment and learning, also getting the experience of what you learn about in class now. So, what you learn in class now you will be learning about it in a practical form." (Respondent 2)

"It's basically an opportunity for them to apply some of the knowledge and skills they have been taught that they've been imparted on them, but to also gain things that are beyond the classroom, 'cause you can't teach something, you can't give case studies." (Respondent 3)

5.3.9.2 Subtheme 2: Skills development

Respondent 2 suggests that WPBL helps in skill development by providing students with practical experience and problem-solving opportunities. It allows students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in class to real-world situations, thus helping them to develop and enhance their abilities.

"Uh, what I understand about workplace-based learning is that...also getting the experience of what you learn about in class now...it needs someone who's able to, uh, pose a problem solver, because you find many problems encountered in that office." (Respondent 2)

The above is also reiterated by respondent 3 who emphasises that:

"There are just certain skills and certain knowledge and information that is beyond any classroom that you only get and understand and interpret better when you have firsthand experience with them." (Respondent 3)

5.3.10 THEME 9: THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC STAFF IN ENSURING THAT STUDENTS ARE ADEQUATELY PREPARED TO COMMENCE WITH WPBL

The respondents were asked, "What is your role in ensuring that students are adequately prepared to commence with WPBL"? What skills and knowledge do you equip them with, and how is this achieved?" From their responses, the respondents emphasised the importance of preparing students for the industry by sensitising them to the industry environment and providing relatable examples.

They also emphasised the importance of professional conduct, punctuality, and research activities in preparing students for workplace-based learning. Respondents also highlighted the role of skill development, including deadlines, communication, attitude, and demeanour, and setting standards within the department. These are further detailed in the subthemes below.

5.3.10.1 Subtheme 1: Providing relatable examples

Respondent 1 believes in using real-life examples that are relevant to the industry environment to prepare students for their workplace-based learning. This helps the students better understand and adapt to the industry and the challenges they may face. The respondent emphasises the use of examples that are familiar to the students and related to their experiences.

"When I'm preparing for lectures, I prefer prescribed content. I try and sensitise the students to the kind of environment they can experience in the industry and whatever I'm teaching, I make sure that I match it with the industry. I would give examples that relate to what they will experience in the industry. I will not just give foreign examples that they are not familiar with, but I will give examples that relate to what I have experienced and what they may experience as well." (Respondent 1).

5.3.10.2 Subtheme 2: Assessment and guidance on professional conduct

Respondent 2 emphasises the importance of assessing and guiding students on professional conduct in preparation for WPBL. They mention conducting assessments that reflect workplace expectations and behaviours and sharing stories to illustrate appropriate conduct. They also mention the importance of teaching punctuality and conducting research activities related to the workplace as a means of sharpening skills.

"I give an assessment that talks to the workplace and how to conduct themselves and also you also share some stories on what employee or any some any person who's employed in a certain company would be expected to behave or answer, or rather conduct themselves." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 further added that:

"I always talk about how to conduct themselves, professionalism, the dos and don'ts in the workplace and punctuality." (Respondent 2).

5.3.10.3 Subtheme 3: Punctuality

Punctuality is emphasised as an important aspect in preparing students for WPBL.

"Punctuality is also prepared through assessments where you send them assessments and assignments and if they are not actually submitting on time, you can detect that there's a problem with punctuality, which is now a no-go area in the work environment. So, you tend to sharpen all those skills in order to better equip the students." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 also mentioned that punctuality and meeting deadlines are key factors in the workplace, and students need to be equipped with these skills to be successful in their careers.

"If you are not going to meet the deadline, when do you need to communicate and how do you need to communicate that? And that's a skill, that's something that you will need to use in the workplace. Otherwise, some companies will dismiss students if they just, you know, become absent or arrive late." (Respondent 3)

5.3.10.4 Subtheme 4: Research activities

Respondent 2 mentions that research activities are used to better equip students in preparation for WPBL. These activities involve students researching something directly linked to workplace-based learning.

"And also, through research you give them activities where now they will research something that is directly linked to the workplace-based learning." (Respondent 2)

5.3.10.5 Subtheme 5: Deadlines and time management

Respondent 3 discusses the role of deadlines and time management in preparing students for WPBL.

"If you are not going to meet the deadline, when do you need to communicate and how do you need to communicate that? And that's a skill, that's something that you will need to use in the workplace." (Respondent 3)

This includes creating a culture and environment in the classroom where students are aware of the importance of meeting deadlines and communicating when they are unable to do so.

"It starts like in any class, creating a culture and environment where they know what's okay and acceptable" (Respondent 3)

5.3.10.6 Subtheme 6: Communication

Communication is highlighted as an important skill for students in the workplace-based learning environment.

Respondent 3 mentions that students need to know how to communicate effectively, especially if they are not going to meet deadlines. They need to communicate the reason for their absence or lateness, and it is important to create a culture within the classes or department that encourages this type of communication.

"If you are not going to meet the deadline, when do you need to communicate and how do you need to communicate that? And that's a skill, that's something that you will need to use in the workplace." (Respondent 3).

5.3.10.7 Subtheme 7: Setting standards within the department to influence students' attitudes and demeanour

In preparing students for WPBL, respondents emphasise the importance of students having a positive attitude and demeanour. This is achieved by creating a standard within the classes or department that encourages appropriate behaviour.

"Attitude and their demeanour and how they carry themselves. It's also something that we create a certain standard within our classes or within the department." (Respondent 3).

The role of the respondent in setting standards within the department involves creating a culture and environment where students know what acceptable behaviour is, including how they carry themselves and their attitude. This is done to prepare students for the workplace, where similar standards may be expected.

"It's also something that we create a certain standard within our classes or within the department." (Respondent 3).

The overall summary of the previous responses is that academic staff play a crucial role in ensuring students are adequately prepared for WPBL. The staff equips students with the necessary skills and knowledge by sensitising them to the industry environment and providing relatable examples, assessing, and guiding them on professional conduct, emphasising punctuality, conducting research activities, emphasising deadlines and time management, communicating effectively, and ensuring a positive attitude and demeanour. Additionally, they set standards within the department to create a culture of professionalism and expectations for behaviour in the workplace. Objective 3 of this study, which aims to determine how to develop WPBL to bridge the skills gaps in ecotourism, aligns with the department's emphasis on setting standards to influence students' attitudes and demeanor.

By establishing clear behavioural standards, academic staff ensure that students are well-prepared to meet the professional expectations of the ecotourism industry. This subtheme also ties into Objective 4, which seeks to determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its foreseeable implications for WPBL. The setting of behavioural standards within the department can be viewed as a form of curriculum enhancement, as it extends beyond academic learning to foster the development of professional attitudes and demeanour, crucial for success in the workplace. Furthermore, the principles of General Systems Theory emphasise the importance of understanding the interconnections between different components of a system (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this context, the department's standards interconnect with the students' overall preparedness for WPBL, shaping their professional conduct and interactions in the workplace. This holistic approach ensures that students are not only knowledgeable but also demonstrate the professional attitudes expected by industry employers.

Additionally, the Theory of Change provides a framework for understanding how specific activities (such as setting departmental standards) lead to desired outcomes (such as improved student attitudes and demeanour) by establishing clear pathways from initial conditions to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). By creating a culture of professionalism within the department, academic staff help students develop the attitudes and behaviours necessary for success in WPBL and beyond. This subtheme pertains to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically:

- **SDG 4: Quality Education:** Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. By setting high standards for behaviour and attitudes, the department contributes to the overall quality of education.
- **SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Preparing students with the right attitudes and behaviours helps them secure decent work and contribute effectively to the economy.
- **SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production:** Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. Professional conduct and responsible behaviour are critical components of sustainability practices taught in the ecotourism curriculum.

5.3.11 THEME 10: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORGANISATIONS IN FACILITATING STUDENTS' ACQUISITION OF PERTINENT EXPERIENCE ALIGNED WITH THE OBJECTIVES OF WPBL

The role of organisations in ensuring that students get relevant experience that meets the outcomes can be categorised into two main subthemes, namely accommodation and logistics, as well as mentorship and support.

5.3.11.1 Subtheme 1: Accommodation and logistics

This subtheme is about the logistics and accommodation provided by the organisations for the students to ensure a smooth WPBL experience. Organisations are responsible for ensuring that students are well-prepared and provided with the necessary accommodation and support. This includes providing transport and working hours that are suitable for students, as well as providing guidance on working in remote areas.

"The role of the organisation is to be better prepared for the students, mostly in terms of accommodation because as I've explained earlier that ecotourism is more nature-based, so you find that the workplace is usually in a remote area where there is no transport. Even the working hours aren't your normal 9 to 5. So, some places are not, uh, friendly to students. So, the organisation now should be in a position where they are able to cater for students. In terms of accommodation. They should be ready for students." (Respondent 2)

The role of the organisation in ensuring that students receive relevant experience is to be prepared for the students, specifically in terms of accommodation. The workplace in ecotourism is often in a remote area and can have unusual working hours, so the organisation should be able to cater to the students' needs. Abdel-Meguid (2022) concurs with this viewpoint, stating that it is imperative to acknowledge that in sites conducive to environmental development and ecotourism, there is often a scarcity or absence of infrastructural elements and public services due to inherent isolation and remoteness.

5.3.11.2 Subtheme 2: Mentorship and support

The role of organisations in ensuring students get relevant experience includes providing proper mentorship and support. This includes informing and equipping workplace mentors and supervisors on the purpose of students' presence and not feeling threatened by them.

*"Workplace mentors and supervisors must be informed and better equipped that students are not there to take their jobs, but they are there to learn from them."
(Respondent 2)*

According to the views of respondent 2, the organisations should also ensure that the students are not exploited but are given enough opportunities to learn and grow in a short span of time.

"The role of the company is just to take care of students; the main role should be for students to learn in a short space of time than to be exploited a lot." (Respondent 2)

The respondent's perspective on the role of organisations in facilitating students' acquisition of relevant experience aligns with the notion that organisations play a crucial role in providing an optimal learning environment and enabling students to develop essential skills. They are guided by the institution in terms of what is expected and need to be better prepared for students, particularly in terms of accommodation and logistics. The workplace mentors and supervisors should be informed and equipped to handle students, as some workers might have a negative attitude towards them. The organisations should focus on providing a supportive and mentorship environment for students so they can learn effectively in a short space of time, rather than exploiting them. Outcomes for the programme serve as a guide for the organisation on what is expected of them and what students are expected to learn. Some organisations have developed a relationship with the department and are even part of the advisory board, allowing for feedback to be provided.

5.3.12 THEME 11: THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN MAXIMISING THEIR WPBL EXPERIENCE TO GAIN RELEVANT SKILLS

This theme explores the role of students in maximising their workplace-based learning experience to gain relevant skills. It was uncovered that the role of the student in maximising their own workplace-based learning experience is to be better prepared for the workplace, utilise the resources available to them, bring change to the organisation, and build a strong relationship with the company. They should understand their logbook and follow the guidance from their mentor and designated WIL coordinator. By doing so, they can expand their skills and leave a legacy. Additionally, they should aim to create a network for themselves by showing their interest and willingness to work in the organisation, which can help them in the future.

5.3.12.1 Subtheme 1: Understanding the WPBL logbook issued by the Department of Ecotourism, DUT

As part of its strategy to enhance its research advancement, the Education, Training, and Development Practices-Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) implemented the WIL Research Chair during the periods of April 2015 to March 2018 and April 2020 to March 2021. The primary aim of the Research Chair is to engage in research activities that have the potential to enhance the implementation of WIL within the broader context of higher education. The main aim of this study was to ascertain the discipline-specific skills within the field of ecotourism and identify any areas that may be deficient. Furthermore, the study analysed the effectiveness of WPBL in facilitating the attainment of these skills among students pursuing an undergraduate qualification in ecotourism. The Council on Higher Education (2011) regards WPBL as a form of WIL wherein students are placed in professional settings to acquire knowledge and skills. This typically involves active student involvement in the planning and execution of tasks, as well as reflection and evaluation of their performance, to make improvements for future endeavours. This type of WIL is focused on well-defined learning objectives and evaluation standards. It should be conducted in a systematic manner, with appropriate oversight and guidance from qualified professionals in the workplace or academic faculty members of the higher education institution. According to the Higher Education Qualification Sub Framework (HEQSF), it is emphasised that WPBL should be appropriately organised, supervised, and evaluated.

Additionally, institutions offering programmes that involve credits for such learning are accountable for ensuring that students are placed in suitable work environments (HEQSF 2012). Consistent with the findings of this research, Respondent 1 suggests that the students should be aware of the skills required in the workplace and what is mentioned in their logbooks. The respondent notes that students should have a better understanding of what their logbook contains, as it details the specific skills required for their WIL experience. This understanding will help them make informed decisions when choosing an organisation.

*"I think the students also need to know what is on their logbook because I think a lot of us will not necessarily look at what the logbook is saying. So, I think if the students were given, I've had the opportunity to understand that these are the particular skills that are required when you're choosing an organisation; that would be better."
(Respondent 1)*

These findings align with the vision outlined in the South African White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. This vision mandates employers to support higher education institutions in facilitating student placements and staff development to ensure their knowledge remains current with industry advancements (DHET, 2014). The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training highlights the imperative of establishing a connection between education and the professional sphere, as well as broadening the availability of training prospects within work environments.

5.3.12.2 Subtheme 2: Utilising workplace resources

The student should take advantage of the resources available in the workplace to improve their skills, make positive contributions to the organisation, and build a network for future job opportunities. Respondent 2 emphasises that the role of the students is to be prepared for the workplace, use resources to expand their skills, leave a positive impact, introduce new ideas, create a network, and show interest and willingness in the organisation.

“The role of the student in maximising their workplace-based learning experience is to utilize the resources available in the workplace to expand and equip themselves with new skills. The students should not be afraid to suggest new ideas in the organisation and leave a legacy that can bring about positive change. The student should also aim to create a strong working relationship with the organisation and use the opportunity to build a network for future job prospects.” (Respondent 2)

5.3.12.3 Subtheme 3: Bringing change to the organisation

Respondent 2 asserts that students should demonstrate a willingness to actively propose and introduce new ideas within the company, thereby causing disruptions in the organisation.

“They should not be afraid to introduce or suggest new things in the company because they will pave the way for them, or they will bring about change in the organisation.” (Respondent 2)

This subtheme aligns with Objective 3 of the study, which aims to ascertain how WPBL can be developed to bridge the skills gaps in ecotourism. Encouraging students to propose and introduce new ideas within their placement organisations can lead to innovative practices and improvements, thereby helping to bridge the skills gaps identified in the ecotourism sector. The willingness to bring change and suggest new ideas also connects with Objective 4, which focuses on the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its implications for WPBL.

By fostering an environment where students feel empowered to innovate, the curriculum can be enhanced to include components that encourage creativity and proactive problem-solving, essential for future ecotourism professionals. The Theory of Change emphasizes the importance of identifying and understanding the pathways that lead to desired outcomes (Weiss, 1995). Encouraging students to bring new ideas into their workplace aligns with this theory, as it highlights the necessary steps and activities that lead to organisational change and innovation. This process of change not only benefits the organisation but also enhances the learning experience of the students, providing them with practical skills and confidence to make impactful contributions

5.3.12.4 Subtheme 4: Workplace preparedness

Respondent 2 highlights the importance of students being prepared for the workplace and equipping themselves with the necessary skills. Respondent 2 mentioned that the students should make use of the resources available in the workplace to expand and improve their skills.

"And the role of the students will be to be better prepared for the workplace. They have to use whatever resources they find in their workplace in order to expand, and also equip themselves, and expand their skills". (Respondent 2)

The respondent also emphasises the need to leave a positive impact on the organisation and not be afraid to introduce new ideas or bring about change. Building a strong relationship with the company and creating a network can also benefit the student in the future if they are looking for job opportunities.

"They should not be afraid to introduce or suggest new things in the company because they will pave the way for them, or they will bring about change in the organisation and also strengthen their relationship with the company". (Respondent 2)

In line with GST, when students effectively use workplace resources and introduce new ideas, they contribute to the organisation's overall development and adaptability, reinforcing the idea of interdependency within the system. In the context of the Theory of Change, encouraging students to prepare for the workplace and make use of available resources is a crucial activity that can lead to the desired outcome of skill acquisition and professional growth. This aligns with the pathways from initial conditions (student preparedness) to long-term goals (equipped professionals contributing to the ecotourism sector).

5.3.12.5 Subtheme 5: Networking and legacy

Respondent 2 emphasised the importance of leaving a legacy in the organisation and introducing new ideas to bring about change and strengthen the relationship with the company. They also emphasised the need to build a sustainable working relationship and network, which can benefit the student in the future if they need a job recommendation.

"They should leave a legacy wherever they go and introduce new things.....Once you're in the organisation create that working environment or relationship which will be sustainable just in case you need a job in the future. They can be able to recommend you for that particular position because you've shown interest in the organisation, and you've shown the willingness to work and get in that particular organisation."
(Respondent 2)

The discussion of students' responsibilities in maximising their work-based learning experiences is consistent with the General Systems Theory viewpoint, which emphasises the interdependence and interconnectedness of various system components (Luhmann, 1995). This theory contends that an educational system is a complex system made up of numerous parts, including pupils, teachers, the curriculum, and the society it is intended to serve (Bertalanffy, 1968). To maximise the learning experience, it is necessary to align the various elements and make sure they cooperate to achieve a common objective. Students are vital to making sure the various parts of the educational system work together to maximise students' learning opportunities in the case of WPBL. Respondent 1's emphasis on logbook comprehension is consistent with the General Systems Theory's emphasis on curriculum alignment with the aims and principles of the educational system and the society it serves.

Understanding the logbook will help students make sure they develop the specific skills needed in their chosen organisation, which will advance their professional development and meet the needs of the latter. The emphasis placed by Respondent 2 on utilising workplace resources, enacting organisational change, fostering relationships, and networking for future employment opportunities is consistent with the General Systems Theory's emphasis on the interdependence of various system components. Students can aid in the growth and development of an organisation by utilising workplace resources and enacting change, while also learning useful skills and forming connections that may result in future employment opportunities.

The assertion made by Respondent 3 aligns with the principles of the General Systems Theory, which emphasises the importance of collaboration and communication among different components within a system. According to this perspective, it is the responsibility of the students to adhere to the programme requirements, seek guidance from their mentor, and reach out to the WIL coordinator for assistance when needed. Students can ensure that they align themselves with the objectives and values of the educational system and the society it serves through effective communication with their mentor and the WIL coordinator. In addition, students can ensure that they receive the necessary support to maximise their educational experience.

The examination of students' responsibilities in optimising their WPBL opportunities aligns with the perspective of the General Systems Theory, which emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of different components within a system. Students have the potential to optimise their learning opportunities and attain the essential skills required for their professional growth through the coordination of diverse components within the educational system, thereby ensuring their harmonious alignment towards a shared objective.

5.3.13 THEME 12: MAINTAINING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE INDUSTRY

This theme explores the role of the Department of Ecotourism in ensuring the efficacy of WPBL, which benefits the departments, students, and host organisations. From the responses gathered, it was uncovered that the department recognises the importance of these relationships in fulfilling the graduate attributes of students and implementing industry feedback in teaching and learning. Additionally, the department plays an active role in ensuring ongoing communication and feedback with industry organisations and implementing suggestions for skill development and training programmes. Subthemes include:

5.3.13.1 Subtheme 1: The importance of long-lasting relationships with industry for student exposure to the working environment

The respondents emphasised the importance of the department in creating and sustaining relationships with the industry to ensure student exposure to the working environment.

The department needs the industry to provide work placement opportunities for students, and the industry benefits from having a pool of potential employees who are familiar with their work processes. These are highlighted by two of the respondents.

"Distinctive relationships between the industry and the department will allow for graduate attributes to be fulfilled. In addition, through the advisory board, you get to hear the industries insight on what they think of students and you as the department, you get to take that and use it to better be teaching and learning." (Respondent 1)

"The department has a responsibility to create and sustain relationships with industry... it is, therefore, a sensible thing to do is to always integrate industry feedback in teaching and learning." (Respondent 2)

In addition, the department also considers industry feedback to improve teaching and learning, and there is continuous communication between the department and the industry to ensure the students are well-equipped for their work placement.

"And there has to be a continuous communication and relationship to ensure any changes are communicated accordingly, there's a relationship, an ongoing relationship between the department. The department is also playing an active role to ensure would see you know at there's continuous communication between us and these organisations." (Respondent 3)

This subtheme aligns with several key objectives of the study. Firstly, it addresses Objective 3, which aims to ascertain how workplace-based learning (WPBL) can be developed to bridge the skills gaps in ecotourism. The department builds and maintains strong relationships with the industry to provide students with relevant and practical work placement opportunities, thereby directly contributing to the closure of the skills gap. Secondly, it aligns with Objective 4, which seeks to determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its foreseeable implications for WPBL. Integrating industry feedback allows the department to enhance its curriculum, better preparing students for the workplace. Lastly, it supports Objective 5, which aims to compare understandings and interpretations of WPBL by students, academic staff, and industry. All stakeholders align their expectations and understanding of WPBL through continuous communication and relationship building with the industry. Integrating General Systems Theory, which posits that the success of an organisation depends on the interactions and interdependencies between its various components (Bertalanffy, 1968), further highlights the importance of these industry relationships.

By fostering strong connections between the department and the industry, both parties can work synergistically to enhance the education and training of students, benefiting the overall system. Moreover, the Theory of Change, which explains how specific activities lead to desired outcomes (Weiss, 1995), supports this approach. Building and sustaining industry relationships is a key activity that leads to improved student exposure to the working environment, ultimately contributing to the desired outcome of well-prepared graduates with relevant skills.

This focus on building long-lasting industry relationships also aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It supports SDG 4: Quality Education by ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities aligned with industry needs. It also contributes to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by preparing students for the workforce and promoting full and productive employment. Furthermore, it aligns with SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure by fostering innovation through continuous industry feedback integration into educational practices. Finally, it supports SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals by strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising global partnerships for sustainable development through robust industry-academic collaborations.

5.3.13.2 Subtheme 2: Integrating industry feedback in teaching and learning

Respondents 1 and 2 emphasise the importance of integrating industry feedback into teaching and learning processes to ensure that students are well prepared for the industry. Respondent 1 suggests that the department should use industry insights gained through an advisory board to improve teaching and learning methods.

"Distinctive relationships between the industry and the department will allow for graduate attributes to be fulfilled and you get to hear the industries insight on what they think of students and you as the department, you get to take that and use it to better teaching and learning." (Respondent 1)

Ha (2022) conducted a study that revealed limitations in the involvement of business professionals in the development of WPBL materials and the evaluation of students' workplace performance. The primary obstacles to active participation in WPBL among professionals are the prioritisation of industry professionals in managerial positions by university departments, insufficient support from said departments, and time limitations experienced by professionals in the industry.

This discovery indicates that professionals in the industry faced significant difficulties that hindered their engagement in WPBL. It is essential for universities to establish an inclusive and hospitable atmosphere that actively engages professionals in WPBL activities. Consistent with this, Respondent 2 states that it is the department's responsibility to integrate industry feedback into its teaching and learning processes.

"The department has a responsibility to create and sustain relationships with industry... it is, therefore, a sensible thing to do to always integrate industry feedback in teaching and learning." (Respondent 2)

5.3.13.3 Subtheme 3: Continuous communication and feedback with industry

Respondents stressed the importance of continuous communication and feedback between the department and industry to better understand the needs and changes in the industry. This communication helps the department make necessary adjustments to improve the student's exposure to the working environment and their ability to fulfil graduate attributes. The department also plays an active role in ensuring this communication is maintained.

"Distinctive relationships between the industry and the department will allow for graduate attributes to be fulfilled... you get to hear the industries insight on what they think of students and you as the department, you get to take that and use it to better teaching and learning." (Respondent 1)

The perspective by Respondent 1 highlights the reciprocal nature of industry-academic interactions, where feedback directly informs and enhances educational practices. Similarly, the statement by Respondent 2 reiterates the necessity of integrating industry feedback into the curriculum to ensure that students are well-prepared for their future careers.

"The department has a responsibility to create and sustain relationships with industry, at the end of the day, the institution is preparing their students for the industry, it is, therefore, a sensible thing to do to always integrate industry feedback in teaching and learning." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 further elaborated on the process of communication, highlighting the importance of maintaining an active and responsive relationship with industry partners to ensure feedback is not only received but effectively implemented.

"And there has to be continuous communication and relationship to ensure any changes are communicated accordingly and anything these organisations need from us, they are able to also we are able to get feedback from them and implement accordingly... there's a relationship, an ongoing relationship between the department. The department is also playing an active role to ensure would see you know at there's continuous communication between us and these organisations and there's a process of getting feedback from them and implementing whenever we can." (Respondent 3)

These insights align closely with the study's objectives, particularly Objective 4, which focuses on determining the purpose of curriculum enhancement and its implications for WPBL. Continuous industry feedback helps refine the curriculum, making it more relevant to current industry standards and expectations. Additionally, this practice aligns with Objective 3, which aims to determine how to develop WPBL to address skills gaps in ecotourism. By responding to industry needs, the department can enhance WPBL practices to better address these gaps.

Integrating General Systems Theory, which emphasises the interdependencies within a system, reinforces the importance of continuous communication. Effective systems require ongoing interaction and feedback between components to function optimally (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this context, the department and industry are interdependent components whose continuous interaction ensures that the educational system remains responsive and effective. The Theory of Change also supports this approach by illustrating how continuous communication and feedback are crucial for achieving desired outcomes. Regular feedback loops enable the department to adjust its practices and improve educational outcomes, aligning with the theory's focus on clear pathways from activities to long-term goals (Weiss, 1995). Furthermore, this emphasis on continuous communication aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It supports SDG 4: Quality Education by ensuring that educational practices remain relevant and responsive to industry needs. It contributes to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by improving students' preparedness for the workforce. Additionally, it aligns with SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure by fostering ongoing industry-academic partnerships that drive innovation and infrastructure development.

5.3.13.4 Subtheme 4: Offering skills development and training programmes based on industry suggestions

Respondent 3 outlines the provision of a training programme by the department, known as the Galileo Global Distribution System programme which was initiated in response to recommendations submitted by select host organisations.

"Like, we were currently offering a training programme to one of the groups of students that we have, which is a Galileo, and this was a suggestion that came from some of these host organisations who say, you know what, it would be so nice if your students came and they knew how this programme works and will equip them not only for the WIL." (Respondent 3).

The purpose of this programme is to provide students with relevant information systems that are essential in the broader tourism sector, extending beyond the confines of ecotourism. This will further enhance the competitiveness of graduates. Within the domain of information systems, there exists a discrete classification that is specifically tailored to meet the needs of travel agencies and tour operators. These systems have a complex connection with global reservation networks, facilitating the administration of travel arrangements, sightseeing activities, or lodging arrangements in preferred locations. These functions are facilitated by reservation systems that are global, centralised, or internet-based. These systems function as intermediaries, facilitating the distribution of services provided by various entities such as airline companies, budget airlines, hotels, railway operators, cruise lines, ferries, car rental agencies, tour operators, and travel insurance companies. The term used to refer to these systems is Global Distribution Systems (GDS), which have been created with the purpose of facilitating efficient access to commercial offerings, both online and offline. While in the industry, students regularly engage with these information systems as part of their practical training in travel agencies. This demonstrates the department's commitment to valuing and incorporating recommendations from industry organisations to enhance the educational experiences and skill development of their students. Additionally, the GST, which identifies organisations as dynamic systems composed of interconnected and dependent parts that interact with their environment, is used in this study to analyse the Department of Ecotourism.

According to this viewpoint, the Department of Ecotourism is a part of the larger university system at the Durban University of Technology, which is a component of the larger social system. The department interacts with other systems, including the government, academic community, and industry, which both influence and are influenced by how well it runs. The GST offers a helpful framework for comprehending the intricate relationships that exist within and between organisations as well as the variables that affect their performance. Maintaining effective communication and collaboration between the department and its stakeholders ensures the achievement of shared objectives. This is demonstrated by the department's efforts to build and maintain relationships with industry organisations, which allow it to match its educational goals with the demands of the sector. The advisory board acts as a channel for industry feedback and suggestions, which can help the department make better decisions and enhance the standard of its programmes. Adopting the GST as the lens through which DUT, particularly the Department of Ecotourism, is viewed in this study highlights the necessity of a comprehensive and integrated management and operational strategy.

Chapter 3 outlines how the GST serves as a lens to understand the interrelationships and interdependencies within DUT, emphasising the need for a comprehensive and integrated management and operational strategy. The strategy map of DUT, illustrated in Figure 5.6, demonstrates the institution's strategic direction, ENVISION2023, and its goals, with its DNA at the core. Since 2015, DUT has acknowledged the importance of people-centeredness, which aligns with GST's emphasis on the human element within systems. The first strand of the map reflects this emphasis on people-centeredness and engagement, laying the groundwork for the second strand that promotes university innovation and entrepreneurship. Incorporating feedback from the advisory board, which acts as a channel for industry insights, exemplifies the Theory of Change. This theory, also discussed in Chapter 3, emphasises the step-by-step process of achieving desired outcomes by identifying necessary preconditions and activities.

The respondents' recommendation to integrate entrepreneurship education into the curriculum is a practical application of the Theory of Change, aligning educational strategies with the institution's overarching objectives to foster innovation and responsiveness to industry needs. DUT's values, principles, ethos, and culture, which connect the DNA strands, form the foundational elements of the system that drive the university's mission. The strategy map further presents four perspectives: stewardship, systems and processes, sustainability, and

society. The interdependency between these perspectives, as posited by General Systems Theory, facilitates a multi-disciplinary, cross-institutional approach to addressing challenges and achieving strategic goals. Stewardship systems and processes enhance DUT's external perspectives on sustainability and society, illustrating the systemic impact of internal functions and values on broader societal outcomes.

As established in Chapter 3, this study's theoretical framework hinges on GST and the Theory of Change. These frameworks serve as the foundation for the research questions and objectives. Objective 1 of the study aims to identify the discipline-specific skills in ecotourism and assess the gaps. Understanding the systemic interrelationships within the educational and industry ecosystems informs the identification of skills gaps using GST. Objective 2 aims to investigate the reasons for the lack of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. The Theory of Change provides a framework for mapping the process by which WPBL influences skill development and establishes the preconditions and activities necessary for achieving desired educational outcomes. Therefore, this study highlights the integrated approach required to align educational strategies with industry needs. The findings emphasise the importance of a systemic perspective and a structured change process in improving the quality and relevance of the Department of Ecotourism's programmes.

5.3.13 THEME 13: CRITERIA FOR SELECTING HOST ORGANISATIONS

The participants were posed with the following inquiry: "What selection criteria is adopted when selecting host organisations for WPBL for ecotourism students?" Based on the participant's responses, the subsequent subthemes were revealed:

5.3.14.1 Subtheme 1: Focus on ecotourism organisations as the primary criteria for WPBL

According to Respondents 2 and 3, the first criterion for selecting host organisations for WPBL is that they are ecotourism organisations. The purpose of this programme is to equip students with the essential skills and expertise in ecotourism. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that, according to Respondent 2, the inclusion of certain organisations in the selection may not necessarily be attributed to their status as ecotourism entities but rather to a limited range of alternatives.

"What they do is select organisations that they see that will better equip students with the necessary skills that are needed or the basic skills that relate to ecotourism... But you may find those companies, equating to about 50% of those who will fulfil what is needed, and the rest would be companies that are just roped in because there is no other place to place students." (Respondent 2)

"The organisation is an ecotourism organisation; that's normally should be the first criteria." (Respondent 3)

Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF, 2012) states that institutions offering programmes that incorporate WPBL are responsible for facilitating students' placement in suitable work environments. The sentiments expressed by Respondent 3 align with this particular standpoint. According to Respondent 3, when selecting host organisations for WPBL for ecotourism students, the selection criteria consider organisations that align with the pillars of ecotourism, including traditional tourism, nature-based, cultural, or local development. This provides students with a diverse range of experiences and opportunities to learn about different aspects of ecotourism. The objective is to find the best organisations that will benefit the students rather than exploit them.

"So, because ecotourism is broad, they'll normally be placed in or in any of the organisations that sort of has one of the pillars of ecotourism , it can be traditional tourism, it can be nature-based, it can be cultural, it can be locally develop...that goal objective of having the cream top companies which will benefit the students or you find students going to areas which are not good and then which will not equip the students well." (Respondent 3)

The selection criteria for host organisations for WPBL for ecotourism students involves a focus on ecotourism organisations as the primary criteria. However, due to a lack of enough ecotourism organisations to accommodate all students, conventional tourism organisations and organisations involved in local economic development may also be considered. The goal is to place students in organisations that have one of the pillars of ecotourism, such as nature-based, cultural, or local development. The objective is to provide students with the best opportunities to gain the necessary skills and knowledge in ecotourism, but there is also recognition that some organisations may not fully meet these goals and may exploit students.

5.3.14.2 Subtheme 2: Involvement of industry in the selection process

Given the importance of the host selection criteria mentioned above, it was essential to know if the respondents were involved in the selection criteria of the host organisations where students were placed. From their response, it was found that only a designated WIL coordinator handles all selection processes.

"There is a designated WIL coordinator who handles everything related to student placement and as lecturers, we are not involved in that process." (Respondent 1)

"It is entirely the WIL coordinator's job to do that which I think is not good because there are too many students and it's only one person." (Respondent 2)

Nevertheless, respondent 2 felt that it would be much better if other staff in the department could be involved in the selection process.

"It was going to be better if the companies would have been shared with all the departmental staff and then they will have to check if it is suitable for every student, because you find that other companies are actually not suitable for students doing service training, but because we are desperate and there's no other place that you can take students." (Respondent 2)

Also, it was uncovered that the lack of involvement by some of the staff was due to time constraints.

"The problem is time and planning... Everyone is rushing to cover the syllabus content and then there is no time for such engagements, which would open a room for discussion and planning around the selection criteria of the companies." (Respondent 2)

Three participants are excluded from the decision-making process regarding the selection of host organisations for student placements. The primary obstacle to the engagement of other departmental staff, including lecturers, lies in the designated role of the WIL coordinator. In addition to other factors, such as time constraints and the urgency to complete the syllabus, the impediments to active participation are frequently mentioned. Nevertheless, a respondent proposes that enhancing the inclusivity of the selection process by involving a greater number of departmental staff would be advantageous.

5.3.14.3 Subtheme 3: Regular engagement between the Department of Ecotourism and WPBL host organisations

From the above subtheme, one could draw out that only a designated WIL coordinator is responsible for the selection process of the host organisation. While some called for inclusiveness, it is essential to know if the respondents in their current position and job title in the Department of Ecotourism have ever interacted with organisations that hosted ecotourism students for WPBL.

"I have never interacted with the host organisation. I think for the sole reason that you don't want to interfere in some things that they're not part of my portfolio." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 claimed to have little interaction with the host organisation, albeit, at the advisory board meeting.

"No, only at the advisory board meeting and not all organisations were represented. So, it's very little interaction." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 did not engage with any organisations in the year 2021. However, in the preceding year of 2020, there were a limited number of interactions, which were solely attributed to the advisory board meeting. These interactions were exclusively limited to members of the advisory board, which were not necessarily the same as members of host organisations for WPBL.

"In 2021, no, but last year (2020) because we had an Advisory Board meeting, we did get a chance to interact, but with only those companies that are members of the Advisory Board, which was a few. There isn't really no interaction between us and as lecturers and the whole." (Respondent 3)

The findings reveal that some departmental academic staff members did not participate in any organisational activities during the calendar year 2021. Nevertheless, during the previous calendar year of 2020, there existed a restricted quantity of engagements, exclusively ascribed to the convening of the Advisory Board. The scope of these interactions was restricted solely to organisations that were part of the Advisory Board. Given the perceived lack of interaction with the host organisation, it was essential to know if the respondents thought the interactions or keeping communications with those host organisations were important and necessary.

Understanding the perspectives of the participants regarding the potential benefits of engaging with the host organisation is of utmost importance. This includes their opinions on how such interactions may be advantageous to the students, the Department of Ecotourism, and the institutions being hosted. From their response, the following were extracted:

- Benefits to Students

Both Respondent 3 and Respondent 2 emphasised the importance of interaction between the Department of Ecotourism and the host organisations for the benefit of the students. Respondent 3 pointed out that interactions with host organisations can help ensure that students are placed in environments where they can fulfil their learning objectives. Respondent 2 emphasised the significance of remaining informed about contemporary practices within the discipline, a goal that can be accomplished through engagement with host organisations.

"It's very, very important and especially for the benefit of the students because sometimes the students do get placed in these places and the host organisation do know, in principle, what the student is expected to cover during their placement." (Respondent 3)

"So, I think it is better even for the students to be better equipped and know that in, for example, in a hotel you will teach students about certain systems in a hotel you will find that those systems are no longer working because you don't know, you just rely on the book that was published years ago." (Respondent 2)

- Benefits to the Department of Ecotourism and the institution

Respondent 2 notes that interaction with host organisations is beneficial for the students as it facilitates their acquisition of enhanced skills and knowledge pertaining to the subject matter being studied, which may have undergone modifications over the course of time.

"It is imperative to interact with mostly the companies or organisations which are doing exactly what your module talks about...will actually give me an idea of what exactly these organisations need. What have they changed over time." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 highlights the importance of interaction with host organisations for the benefit of the students, as it enables the host organisations to know the expectations of the students during their placement and to prepare accordingly.

"Having excess staff members...they end up not necessarily fulfilling their role as students who are here to learn from the different departments that their host has." (Respondent 3)

The collective analysis of the feedback pertaining to the significance of engagement with host organisations reveals a consensus that such interaction is deemed essential and advantageous for all parties concerned. Respondent 1 asserts that the primary task of the WIL coordinator is to effectively oversee and manage these interactions, expressing confidence in their ability to fulfil this task. Respondent 3 highlights the importance of fostering interaction among students, as it facilitates their acquisition of knowledge from various departments within the host organisation, thereby contributing to an extensive educational experience. Additionally, it is stated that through interaction, students can avoid being overwhelmed by an excessive workload and can concentrate on their educational objectives. Respondent 2 emphasises the advantages of interaction for the lecturer, as it allows them to acquire current knowledge and case studies that can be utilised to enhance the students' preparedness. The respondents assert that engaging with organisations that have the same objectives as the module being taught can enhance the curriculum. In general, the advantages of engaging with host organisations are perceived as enhanced educational experiences for students, updated knowledge and resources for lecturers, and improved curriculum for the department and institutions at large.

5.3.15 THEME 14: COGNISANCE OF STUDENT PLACEMENTS BY THE ACADEMIC STAFF

This theme explores the awareness of the placement of students. The following question was asked to drive the discussion and response from the respondents: “Do the organisations to which students were placed fit the ecotourism criteria in terms of services and products they are offering?” From the responses gathered, the following subthemes were uncovered:

5.3.15.1 Subtheme 1: Limited knowledge regarding the selection of organisations for WPBL

Respondent 1 demonstrated a limited level of knowledge regarding the selection of organisations for student placements, as well as a lack of awareness regarding the number of students who were successfully placed.

"I wouldn't know because I'm not involved in that area. So, I don't know which organisations were selected. I don't know how many students were placed. It is information that I am not aware of." (Respondent 1)

5.3.15.2 Subtheme 2: Alignment of student placements with ecotourism criteria

Respondents 3 and 2 state that the placement of students into organisations for the 2020–2021 period was partly fitting with the ecotourism criteria, as some organisations meet all the pillars of ecotourism while others only meet some of the pillars. They also mentioned that the definition of ecotourism has changed over the years and now includes establishments that are not located in remote areas.

"Partly yes, because I think anywhere that the students have placed that organisation either meets all the pillars or meets some. And also, I think the definition of ecotourism has also evolved over the years to even include establishments that are not in remote areas." (Respondent 3)

"No, some of them. But most of them tend to be like in a hotel setting, then in an ecotourism -based setting". (Respondent 2)

The notion of ecotourism, encompassing tourism activities conducted in pristine and unspoiled natural areas, has traditionally been perceived as incompatible with urban environments. However, evidence indicates that the opposite can be demonstrated to be feasible. The objective is to guarantee the preservation of the natural environment and its resources, regardless of whether the area in question is classified as urban or rural (Simon, Saikim and Bagul, 2021). This applies regardless of whether the area has been officially designated for recreational or tourism purposes and regardless of its current state of pristine condition. The initial respondent lacked sufficient information to provide a definitive answer regarding the alignment of the organisations where students were placed with the criteria of ecotourism. According to the third respondent, certain organisations adhere to the principles of ecotourism in their entirety, while others only partially align with the fundamental tenets of ecotourism. Additionally, it was noted that the concept of ecotourism has undergone a transformation, now encompassing establishments that are not necessarily situated in remote locations. According to the second respondent, a portion of the organisations meet the requirements for ecotourism, although the majority of them are situated in a hotel or tourism-oriented environment rather than an ecotourism-focused one.

5.3.13.3 Subtheme 3: The placement of ecotourism students in conventional tourism organisations

This subtheme explores the placement of ecotourism students in conventional tourism organisations. It was aimed at understanding how such placement will affect the relevance of the experience provided as well as any benefits or disadvantages to students.

- Relevance of experience

The relevance of experience for an ecotourism student placed in an organisation that does not fit the ecotourism criteria is a topic of debate among respondents. One respondent suggests that the experience still has value as the student can learn transferable skills such as administration and financial management.

"No, it doesn't because, at the end of the day, you don't know where you're gonna work. So, with whatever skills you can attain in that particular organisation where you placed it, it's best for you to try and learn as much as possible. Because some things are similar." (Respondent 1)

Another respondent says that the placement may be a disadvantage as it may confuse the student and discourage them.

"It disadvantages students in a way because it turned now to confuse the student. The student has been learning about something and now is placed in a totally different position. So, in a way, it discourages the student." (Respondent 2)

A third respondent argues that the experience may not be as advantageous as if the student were placed in a traditional ecotourism organisation, but still provides valuable work experience that can be helpful in any career within the ecotourism sector.

"Theoretically speaking out, I haven't really experienced a student that has come back from WIL and seen maybe being able to observe to maybe the difference in terms of the quality between the two, but theoretically it does disadvantage their students." (Respondent 3)

- Benefit and disadvantages to students

The respondents have mixed opinions about whether placement in a conventional tourism organisation is a benefit or a disadvantage to the student.

Respondent 1 believes that the student can learn transferable skills and that it doesn't disadvantage them, but there is a gap in specialised ecotourism skills.

"... it's something that you can learn not just in ecotourism but in all other carriers. Can we really say it's disadvantaging students in that manner? No, it doesn't, but it does have a gap. When it comes to the request set of these specialised skills that you would obtain in an ecotourism environment." (Respondent 1)

In this study, WPBL industry supervisors were also asked to share their views on the placement of ecotourism in organisations that practice conventional tourism. The views of the industry supervisors are aligned with those of Respondents 1, 2, and 3 above by the academic staff in the Department of Ecotourism. According to the WPBL industry supervisors, the majority of respondents believe that students should be placed in ecotourism establishments because that is the primary goal of their course, as stated by Respondents 7, 8, and 9.

"Let the first six months be in ecotourism, I mean rural and remote areas." (Respondent 7)

"It is important to note that these students are registered for a qualification in ecotourism therefore they should be placed in ecotourism establishments." (Respondent 8)

"I do not recommend it because it means students are not getting the kind of experience, they're supposed to get...and the culture in true ecotourism establishments." (Respondent 9)

From the academics, Respondent 3 believes that while it may be a disadvantage in terms of ecotourism specialisation, it is still valuable as the student is gaining work experience.

"...I think, the fact that they are getting work experience, and they are going to live with the qualification and some work experience is always a good thing...So what type of work experience they are getting, that's another, that's another conversation. So, whether you place that student in a hotel or you are placing them wherever, it doesn't necessarily disadvantage them because of the field or the stream they want to follow within ecotourism." (Respondent 3)

The feedback pertaining to the integration of ecotourism students into conventional tourism organisations exhibited a diverse range of perspectives regarding its influence on the students. Certain participants hold the viewpoint that this practice can potentially yield unfavourable outcomes for students, as it has the potential to generate confusion and demotivation within their chosen academic discipline.

Nevertheless, some respondents contend that the acquisition of work experience by students is consistently advantageous, asserting that the skills acquired in any given organisation can be transferrable to various professional paths. Furthermore, it has been noted that the disparity between the specific proficiencies required in the field of ecotourism and the practical knowledge acquired in a non-ecotourism establishment can be reconciled through the student's enthusiasm for acquiring new knowledge. The significance of the experience was also deliberated upon, with certain participants asserting that it does not impact the significance as students can acquire administration and financial management competencies in any organisational setting. Conversely, others contend that the relevance of the experience is contingent upon the specific subfield of ecotourism that the student intends to pursue.

5.3.15.4 Subtheme 4: Hindrance to student placement in traditional ecotourism organisations

Considering the chances of students being placed in a non-ecotourism sector and the perceived disadvantage it may have on their confidence, it was critical to know the factors that may be contributing to the wrong placement of students. Respondent 1 and Respondent 3 stated:

“A major one is when organisations do not want to absorb students for their own reasons. And the second one is we have a high number of students, so you will try will find that organisations only want to take or absorb one or two students to avoid chaos”.
(Respondent 1)

“There are more students than there are traditional ecotourism organisations that are willing to take ecotourism students for WIL”. (Respondent 3)

It was uncovered that the higher number of students in comparison to the number of ecotourism centres was the main hindrance to students' placement. The problem with student placement identified in this study is related to the concept of system capacity in systems theory. The maximum amount of input that a system can effectively process and output without compromising its functionality is referred to as system capacity (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this case, the number of students exceeds the capacity of the ecotourism system to provide adequate placement opportunities, causing student placement to be hampered. Similarly, the number of students who can be placed effectively within the ecotourism system without interfering with its functionality should be considered. Furthermore, a barrier to student placement can have a knock-on effect on the industry's long-term viability.

Without adequate placement opportunities, students may choose non-ecotourism sectors, potentially leading to a future shortage of skilled ecotourism professionals. This emphasises the interconnectedness of the ecotourism system and the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing issues that may jeopardise its long-term viability.

5.3.16 THEME 15: ADEQUACY OF THE SIX-MONTH WPBL PERIOD FOR PREPARING STUDENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT IN THE ECOTOURISM SECTOR

This theme explores the adequacy of WPBL periods for preparing students for employment in the ecotourism sector. The theme is discussed under the subthemes below.

5.3.16.1 Subtheme 1: Divergent perspectives on the adequacy of the six-month duration

There is a disagreement among the three respondents on the adequacy of the six-month period for WPBL to prepare students for employment in the ecotourism sector. Respondent 1 believes that 6 months is sufficient, but it depends on the organisation.

"I would think it is sufficient, but it depends on each organisation... six months is more than enough." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 3 thinks it's not enough and that students need at least a year to get enough experience.

"Definitely no, they do need more time. I think a year is sufficient to get enough experience." (Respondent 3)

Respondent 2 feels that the timing is not good, even if the period was sufficient, and suggests that the period should be changed to one year and positioned at the end of the course.

"Before we get therein it being enough, I think even the timing is not good...It could be one year most probably... a lot of students have been losing jobs because of this theme of finishing and going back to school." (Respondent 2)

According to Kajermo et al. (2017), for many years, there has been disagreement regarding the best WPBL duration, and it is still up for debate. The authors suggested that the duration of WPBL should be tailored to the unique learning outcomes and needs of each student.

Yorke and Knight (2019) agree with this notion, stating that there is no consensus on the ideal duration for WPBL, with durations ranging from a few weeks to a year or more, and further emphasising that the duration of WPBL should be determined by the learning objectives, industry requirements, and prior knowledge and experience of the students.

5.3.16.2 Subtheme 2: The timing of WPBL commencement

According to Respondent 1, the adequacy of the six-month period for student placement depends on the specific organisation involved. Certain organisations restrict student placements to one or two specific areas, whereas others facilitate student placements across various departments monthly.

"I would think it is sufficient, but it depends on each organisation, for example, I mentioned that we were placed in a different department every month, you know so that was sufficient because we were exposed in all these different departments. I did find that in some organisations students will be placed in one or two areas because that's what the organisation has at the time. So, it will be sufficient." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 3 asserts that the current six-month duration allocated for student preparation may not adequately equip them for employment, suggesting that a more extensive timeframe of one year would be more suitable. However, when compared to other educational institutions, the duration of six months appears to be sufficient for achieving the necessary qualifications.

"Uh, definitely no, so they do need more time. I think a year, that's how normally your internships would be. A year is sufficient for you to get enough experience." (Respondent 3)

The respondent stated that the temporal arrangement of WPBL is inadequate, as it has the potential to discourage or place students at a disadvantage when they are required to forgo job opportunities to pursue further education. It is suggested that the timing be adjusted to one year at the culmination of the course, thereby enabling students to capitalise on potential employment prospects prior to the conclusion of their academic pursuits.

"Before we get there in it being enough, I think even the timing is not good. In terms of taking students into the working environment and you find that there's an opportunity in their company, but still, the student needs to go back to school and finish another six months which now discourages or disadvantages students. I think firstly that needs to change. It could be one year most probably and that one year should be at the end of the course." (Respondent 2)

The central focus of the discourse revolves around the sufficiency and temporal arrangement of the half-year period of WPBL for students who are in the process of equipping themselves for future employment within the realm of ecotourism. According to Respondent 1, the adequacy of the six-month period for student placements depends on the specific organisation in which the students are placed. It is suggested that the duration of the course be extended to one year, allowing students to capitalise on potential job prospects that may arise while avoiding the risk of forfeiting such opportunities due to the requirement of attending lectures. In addition, it is essential to consider the timing of the internship period to prevent students from being disadvantaged by avoiding job opportunities due to their obligation to resume their studies.

5.3.17 THEME 16: CURRICULUM ENHANCEMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE ECOTOURISM QUALIFICATION

The respondents were asked the following question: “What informed the decision to enhance the curriculum of the undergraduate ecotourism qualification?” From their response, the following were uncovered:

5.3.17.1 Subtheme 1: Adaptation to a changing work environment

One of the primary objectives of sustainable development is to ensure that all communities possess the necessary skills and competencies relevant to their respective activities. Nevertheless, the deficiency in skills continues to pose a significant obstacle within the various communities involved in the practice of ecotourism (Kruger and Steyn, 2019).

The current situation has reached a level where a significant portion of individuals involved in ecotourism within these communities are facing challenges in securing diverse employment opportunities, consequently impeding sustainable community development. Mnisi and Ramoroka (2020) assert that the present cohorts predominantly prioritise the pursuit of fulfilling their fundamental necessities, often neglecting considerations for subsequent generations. According to the respondents, the curriculum underwent enhancements in response to the evolving national and international landscape.

"Adapt the curriculum to speak to what is to what is happening now. As well, because we are in our fourth industrial revolution, where everything is digitalised. We've also changed so..." (Respondent 1)

The importance of poverty reduction, particularly in developing nations like South Africa, is as significant to ecotourism as sustainable development. The nation has emerged as a preferred destination for international tourists from various countries owing to its abundant natural resources in the form of biodiversity, despite its historical isolation resulting from apartheid (Mbaiwa, 2021). Hence, the need for a skilled workforce for the growth of the industry is a necessity. The communities of South Africa are experiencing a rise in the ecotourism sector, which plays a significant role in the pursuit of sustainable development objectives such as promoting quality education, fostering gender equity, facilitating skill development, and enhancing the overall health conditions of these communities (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2019). Therefore, the presence of a proficient labour force is imperative for the advancement of the industry. The incorporation of the fourth industrial revolution and the imperative for digitalisation were also considered during the curriculum redesign process. The advent of new digital technologies has facilitated significant advancements in various sectors, including manufacturing, healthcare, hotels, cities, and territories. The introduction of Industry 4.0 signifies the disruption of established norms and necessitates the adoption of fresh perspectives and paradigms by scholars, managers, and individuals seeking to thrive in an evolving and intricate landscape. The tourism industry is actively engaged in digital transformations, often referred to as Tourism 4.0 or Smart Tourism, to a significant extent (Pencarelli, 2020). The rationale behind the decision to enhance the curriculum of the undergraduate ecotourism qualification was based on the necessity to adapt to the evolving environment and to address the institutional, professional, and global changes, notably the digitalisation associated with the fourth industrial revolution.

This is consistent with the GST, which emphasises the need for adaptation and change in response to external pressures (Luhmann, 2012). Furthermore, as the fourth industrial revolution has brought about digitalisation, which has transformed various industries, including the tourism industry, the need to adapt to the current era has been highlighted. This is consistent with Lewin's (1951) theory of change, which contends that change is driven by both internal and external factors, and that new ideas and innovations emerge as a result of interactions between these factors. This emphasises the significance of continuous evaluation and improvement in the educational system.

5.3.17.2 Subtheme 2: The integration of new content and entrepreneurship emphasis in the revised qualification: Alignment with DUT's ENVISION2023 trajectory

In the previous subtheme, it was revealed that the curriculum was redesigned to align with contemporary practices. Hence, it was important to ascertain whether the revised curriculum was in line with the overarching trajectory of DUT. Based on the collected feedback, it was determined that the revised undergraduate ecotourism qualification incorporates modifications to select modules, involving the removal of outdated content and the inclusion of novel information. The modifications also encompassed the process of decolonising certain modules and incorporating feedback from industry stakeholders.

"Now some of the information has been changed and some have been scrapped and then a new information has been added. And some of the modules are decolonised with an integration of industry feedback." (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 asserts that the revised curriculum is aligned with the trajectory of DUT. The inclusion of new content and the omission of information from the revised qualification modules serve as proof of this alignment.

"Yes, I would say yes, because what I've seen is the modules have changed. Now some of the information has been changed and some have been scrapped and then new information has been added." (Respondent 2)

When asked the following question: "What is your take on the emphasis on entrepreneurship by the Durban University of Technology?", it was uncovered that the respondents have different views on the emphasis on entrepreneurship by DUT. Respondent 1 sees it as necessary to make a shift towards entrepreneurship to solve current problems.

"With the enforcement of entrepreneurship, it means that as lecturers in the department, we also need to make a shift and lean towards entrepreneurship in everything we do... In this generation we are experiencing new problems, and these problems, need solutions and we can only get those solutions from the ideas of students and through pursuing entrepreneurship." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 3 acknowledges the challenges of starting a business but believes it is a good drive in the current economic situation.

"It's a good strategy, it's a good thing to do even though it's easier said than done... It's such a good drive for entrepreneurship... But it's also a challenge... There's so much that still needs to be done just to shift your mindset because starting a business is not an easy thing." (Respondent 3)

Respondent 2 sees it as a great move, necessary for the changing world, and a solution to unemployment.

"It's a great move, something that is inevitable... The mindset should change... Mine should shift from being a graduate that is looking for a job... to being their own employer and starting their own business... It's a great move and it does change some lives and will still change lives... in the fight against unemployment." (Respondent 2)

It is widely acknowledged by all participants that the prioritisation of entrepreneurship necessitates a fundamental change in perspective towards adopting an entrepreneurial mindset. The undergraduate ecotourism curriculum at DUT is designed to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue careers in ecotourism. Within the framework of this research, the Theory of Change is useful to enhance the ecotourism qualification curriculum at DUT by discerning the necessity for modification, strategising for modification, executing modification, and evaluating its efficacy. This section provides an overview of the factors that have influenced the need for curriculum advancement.

5.3.18 THEME 17: PANDEMIC DISRUPTION: EFFECTS ON TEACHING, LEARNING, AND WPBL

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 virus caused a great disruption in every facet of human lives and endeavours, and higher education is no exception. With the declaration of lockdown measures and the social distance rules, it thus meant that students of ecotourism could not learn as they used to during this period. Considering this, the theme explores the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning and WPBL. The theme is discussed under the subthemes below. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational process have presented significant difficulties for both students and educators alike. Respondent 1 emphasises the challenges encountered by individuals during the shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning, underscoring the difficulty of adapting to this new mode of education. Furthermore, the respondent asserts that a significant proportion of students continue to express a strong desire for in-person interactions and engagement.

Respondent 1: "Challenges would mainly be of social, social challenges, for example with having to transition from your contact lectures to the digital or your teams, your federal lectures, or, you know, your multimodal type of learning. But I think the transition was it, it was hard to adapt for a lot of people, but it has gotten better over time." (Respondent 1)

Respondent 3 mentions that the university was not initially prepared for online learning and that students faced challenges such as access to technology and data. Over time, the challenges have improved, but the transition to online learning has also brought up new challenges, such as the difficulty of demonstrating certain subjects online and finding ways to assess students without compromising quality. Tiwari, Séraphin and Chowdhary (2021) propose the adoption of ambidextrous management in tourism education during the post-COVID-19 phase. In essence, it is imperative for educators to develop proficiency in delivering courses through diverse modalities to effectively address the immediate and foreseeable challenges posed by teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This entails adapting to incremental innovations to navigate the short- and medium-term impacts while also proactively anticipating future demands from industry and students and implementing radical innovations to offer cutting-edge curriculum.

"So, I would say just initially, I think now things have gotten so much better and stable because we have been prepared. However, I don't think that the university was ready for online learning. It's been a conversation that was had for a long time, even when I studied, there was BlackBoard there was that was never used, so it was always something that was there as an option. But really, nobody had to explore, and nobody even thought it was possible. So COVID-19 basically forced us to start exploring all those things that we thought were impossible and start dealing with the challenges. Student's access to technology, student's access to data became a nightmare initially and just them being able to use teams." (Respondent 3)

Respondent 2 notes that COVID-19 has caused a shift to online teaching, but it was a success as the pass rate was not bad and some students were able to do their in-service training. However, the new era of teaching has also brought challenges, such as companies not allowing students to go to work for their in-service training.

" We entered a new era of teaching via the internet which was a success because the pass rate was not bad and some students were able to do their in-service training although it was not normal because some of the companies were strict in terms of the numbers of students coming in and also, we're going level 1, level 5 and then everything stopped. So, it has been a challenging part." (Respondent 2)

The impact of COVID-19 on WPBL has been negative, as companies were not allowing students to go to the places and practice. This caused a problem for students, who were unable to receive the same level of experience and training as they would have prior to the pandemic.

"COVID-19 strike everything or everyone has been stricken. There has been a problem, a very huge problem, because companies were not allowing students to go the places and practice." (Respondent 2)

The comprehensive assessment of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the domain of education, encompassing both teaching and learning, as well as the implementation of WPBL, reveals that the transition process posed significant difficulties for all stakeholders. The transition from conventional face-to-face instructional settings to virtual online learning posed significant challenges for students, educators, and administrators in terms of adjustment. Many students encountered challenges regarding the availability of technology and data, as well as difficulties in adapting to unfamiliar platforms such as Teams. The academic faculty encountered challenges in devising effective methods for online instruction and evaluation that maintain the same level of quality. However, it should be noted that the pass rate was satisfactory, and a portion of the students managed to successfully fulfil their in-service training requirements, despite the considerable difficulties posed by the stringent regulations enforced by certain companies. The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the exploration of novel pedagogical approaches while simultaneously posing numerous obstacles and complexities. The data presented in Figure 5.14 represents the collective responses obtained from an online interview conducted with the academic staff members affiliated with the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. Upon initial examination, it becomes apparent that the interview yielded several recurring terms, namely learning, workplace, experience, environment, students, ecotourism, and organisations. The data indicates that the participants used these specific words frequently throughout the course of the interview.



Figure 5.14 Word cloud depicting the common words extracted from the interview.

In accordance with the General Systems Theory adapted for this research, the abrupt shift to online learning caused by COVID-19 disrupted the system's interdependent components and posed difficulties for students and academic staff. On the other hand, in line with the Theory of Change, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled DUT, the Department of Ecotourism, to adopt new teaching and learning strategies, which can be viewed as a systemic shift. The growing demand for enhanced sustainability within the tourism industry has resulted in the development of novel educational programmes and instructional settings (Camargo and Gretzel, 2017; Hales and Jennings, 2017; Ali, 2022). Given the inherent characteristics of tourism and hospitality education, certain practical courses may necessitate the use of professional equipment that is typically found in industrial settings. Consequently, it is imperative for academics in the field of tourism and hospitality to investigate the adaptation of conventional pedagogical approaches to guarantee that online courses maintain a level of quality equivalent to that of in-person courses (Fong, Law and Ye, 2021). The worldwide restrictions have been found to impact more than 80 percent of the global student population, as reported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, numerous nations have enacted localised closures that have had an impact on millions of learners and students. The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed numerous challenges on the global education system. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the necessity of implementing innovative strategies and measures to enhance the education system across all levels. As a result, there has been a noticeable shift in the field of education, particularly in the domains of tourism and hospitality as well as other areas of business education.

Regarding the ramifications of COVID-19 on students' perceptions of their career trajectories, it is evident that certain university students may experience uncertainty regarding their professional paths even upon completion of their studies. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on students in higher education were the subject of a study by Aristovnik et al. (2020). The findings revealed that a significant proportion of students, specifically 42.6%, expressed concerns regarding their future professional trajectories during the global lockdown period. Each person possesses unique discernment when it comes to selecting a profession, which is influenced by factors such as their aptitude, available opportunities, personal interests, and alignment with their educational background. Moreover, the field of global literature offers a substantial body of analytical evidence pertaining to various factors that impact the process of career decision-making. These factors encompass the role of familial influence, individual abilities, personal passions, self-efficacy, potential obstacles, belief systems, gender dynamics, racial considerations, and the sense of belonging (Rainey et al., 2019). The following section presents data obtained from ecotourism students who completed their six-month WPBL programme in traditional ecotourism organisations.

5.4 SECTION 3:

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS - STUDENTS PLACED AT TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM ORGANISATIONS

This section provides a detailed examination of the experiences and outcomes of students who were assigned to traditional ecotourism organisations for their six-month WPBL programme. This third section of the chapter provides a thorough examination of the students' involvement in ecotourism environments, revealing the tangible implications of their educational and instructional experiences.

5.4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF ECOTOURISM STUDENTS ENGAGED IN WPBL ACROSS TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM AND CONVENTIONAL TOURISM ORGANISATIONS

Two significant demographic factors of the ecotourism students who enrolled in a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and underwent WPBL as a requirement to complete their undergraduate qualification will be presented in the first part of this section.

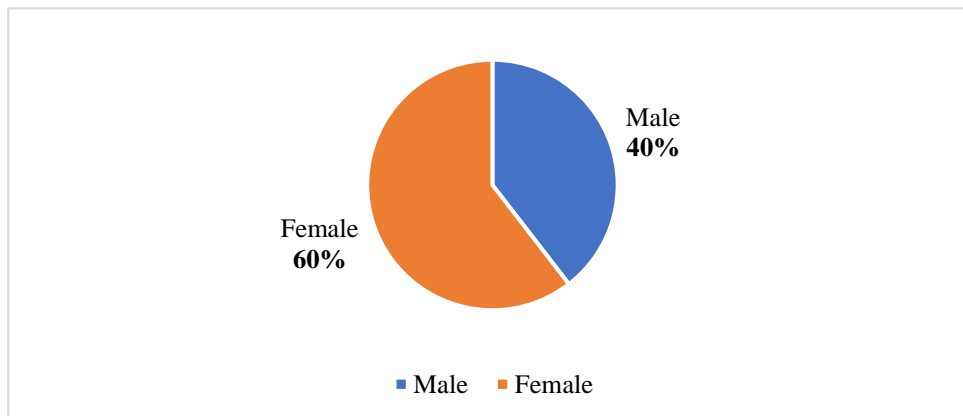


Figure 5.15: Gender of ecotourism students placed across traditional ecotourism and conventional tourism organisations

Figure 5.15 shows that the majority of students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management are females (60%), with a small percentage of males (40%). In contemporary discourse, universities are increasingly regarded as formidable institutions that possess substantial global influence.

A notable development in their evolution in the current millennium is the emergence of ‘living laboratories,’ a paradigm in which universities function as active agents, facilitators, creators, and problem-solvers in matters of environmental impact (Purcell, Henriksen and Spengler, 2019). This revelation transcends the conventional notion of a business ecosystem (Kim, Park and Seol, 2018), which entails the engagement not only of conventional actors and stakeholders in higher education but also of non-governmental organisations, local entities, students, educators, non-profit organisations, the environment, and the local community (Reid, 2018; Thomsen, Muurlink and Best, 2018). Universities are assuming a leadership role in creating sustainable development objectives. This entails that, within their stated mission, these institutions consider initiatives aligned with these objectives, including initiatives to transform the university campus into an environmentally conscious space, thereby effecting changes within the community in the context of sustainable development. Thus, universities must adopt a proactive environmental stance, with campuses serving as exemplars of ecosystem rejuvenation that could potentially be embraced by urban centres (Mangrich et al., 2019). Nonetheless, there is a scarcity of literature that explains the behaviour of university students regarding ecotourism, even though such studies are desperately needed as new generations demonstrate a greater concern for environmental stewardship. According to some studies, while many university students have a positive attitude towards the environment, they do not engage in pro-environmental behaviours (Moradhaseli, Ataei and Norouzi, 2017).

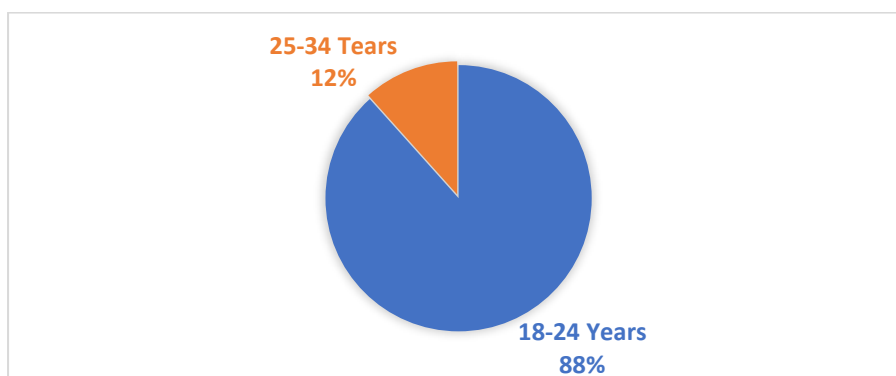


Figure 5.16: Age of ecotourism students of ecotourism students across traditional ecotourism and conventional tourism organisations

Figure 5.16 indicates that most of the students are concentrated in the 18–24 age group, while a minority of 12% falls in the 25–34 age group.

The next part of this section details the focus group interview conducted with students placed at traditional ecotourism establishments for their WPBL. The focus group was conducted with two different groups, identified as Group 1 and Group 2. The analysis of the data obtained from the semi-structured questions led to the identification of subthemes and relevant themes. Table 5.3 highlights the emerging themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysed data. In this study, a total of 43 students participated. Among them, 26 students were assigned to traditional ecotourism organisations for WPBL, encompassing focus groups 1 and 2. Conversely, students in focus groups 3 and 4 were placed in conventional tourism organisations, for a total of 17 students. Hence, a greater proportion of students, constituting 60% of the placements, were assigned to traditional ecotourism establishments, whereas 40% were allocated to conventional tourism organisations. The data collected from focus groups 3 and 4 will be subjected to detailed analysis in Section 5.5 of this thesis.

5.4.2 THEME 1: MOTIVATION FOR ENROLLING IN THE ECOTOURISM COURSE

This theme explores the motivation behind the students choosing to enroll for a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. Figure 5.17 visually presents several motives that were uncovered from the data transcribed, including lack of initial knowledge about ecotourism, interest in travel and exploring, understanding the focus on conservation, and giving back to communities and nature, learning about ecotourism from conversations with others, and seeing opportunities in the field of ecotourism.



Figure 5.17: Motivation by students for enrolling for a National Diploma in Ecotourism

Table 5.3: Identification of themes and subthemes by ecotourism students placed in traditional ecotourism organisations

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Motivation for enrolling in ecotourism course	Subtheme 1: Unfamiliarity with ecotourism at the onset Subtheme 2: Interest for travel and a curiosity for exploration Subtheme 3: Understanding the focus on conservation and giving back to communities and nature Subtheme 4: Exploring career prospects within the field of ecotourism Subtheme 5: Chance encounter: a second choice turned opportunity in ecotourism Subtheme 6: Second Choice/Acceptance into the Course
Theme 2: Classification of the placement organisations as either conventional tourism or traditional ecotourism organisations	Subtheme 1: Employment of local communities Subtheme 2: Environmental conservation and education Subtheme 3: Offering services and activities related to ecotourism
Theme 3: WPBL learning experiences	Subtheme 1: Exposure to different departments and divisions within the organisation Subtheme 2: Limited exposure to ecotourism- related activities
Theme 4: Understanding of WIL and WPBL	Subtheme 1: Practical learning and application of classroom knowledge Subtheme 2: Skills development beyond university
Theme 5: Workplace induction and preparation for WPBL	Subtheme 1: Preparation for WPBL Subtheme 2: Adequacy of workplace induction Subtheme 3: Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Subtheme 4: Introduction to the workplace and staff Subtheme 5: Allocation of mentors and supervisors
Theme 6: Student perspectives - Anticipations and alignment with the WPBL programme	Subtheme 1: Navigating the transition - Expectations versus Reality in WPBL Subtheme 2: Allocated industry supervisors' limited awareness of ecotourism and student roles in WPBL Subtheme 3: Limited opportunity for students to select placements aligned with their ecotourism interests
Theme 7: New knowledge and skills acquired during WPBL	Subtheme 1: Communication and problem-solving skills Subtheme 2: Forming lifelong relationships and networks Subtheme 3: Learning practical skills in various departments Subtheme 4: Developing leadership skills Subtheme 5: Skills in self-regulation

Theme 8: Enhancing the organisational and WPBL experience	Subtheme 1: Recommendation to endorse organisations for future WPBL placement Subtheme 2: Need for thorough evaluation and monitoring of the WPBL programme Subtheme 3: Allocation of relevant duties and tasks to students Subtheme 4: Formal structure to guide workplace mentors on duties aligned with WPBL programme outcomes. Subtheme 5: The imperative of dual WIL coordinators - Ensuring gender representation and student safety
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Source: Generated by author

5.4.2.1 Subtheme 1: Unfamiliarity with ecotourism at the onset

A portion of the participants possessed no prior understanding of ecotourism prior to enrolling in the diploma programme. The individuals possessed knowledge pertaining to conventional tourism and travel, yet they lacked familiarity with the distinct principles and methodologies associated with ecotourism.

"First, I did not know what ecotourism was." (Respondent 3, FG1)

"To be honest, ma'am, I did not know about ecotourism at first." (Respondent 4, FG1)

"Ma'am, to be honest, I did not know about ecotourism firstly." (Respondent 5, FG1)

These responses highlight a common problem among students who might only learn about ecotourism concepts after enrolling, highlighting the need for a more thorough introduction to the field before or at the beginning of their academic journey. This initial lack of familiarity with ecotourism aligns with Objective 1, which aims to identify the necessary and lacking ecotourism discipline-specific skills. The gap in foundational knowledge represents a challenge in meeting this objective, as students enter the programme with varying levels of understanding. Furthermore, addressing this gap is critical for Objective 2, which examines the factors contributing to the lack of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. The initial unfamiliarity with the field is a critical factor that could contribute to skill deficiencies, as students may struggle to grasp advanced concepts without a solid foundational understanding.

The findings also pertain to Objective 3, which aims to explore the development of WPBL as a means to address skills gaps in ecotourism. Effective WPBL should include an orientation phase that addresses these initial gaps in knowledge, thereby ensuring that students are better prepared to engage with and benefit from workplace experiences.

This initial unfamiliarity highlights the need for clear pathways from initial conditions, such as lack of awareness about ecotourism, to the desired outcomes of comprehensive understanding and skill acquisition (Weiss, 1995). By addressing the foundational knowledge gap early, the program can create a more effective learning trajectory that leads to better outcomes in WPBL. Addressing this issue in accordance with SDG 4: Quality Education ensures that students receive a thorough introduction to their field of study, which is critical for achieving educational quality.

This also supports SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by preparing students more effectively for the workforce, as a well-rounded understanding of ecotourism principles enhances their employability and effectiveness in the field.

5.4.2.2 Subtheme 2: Inclination toward travel and a curiosity for exploration

A portion of the respondents expressed their motivation to pursue the national diploma programme due to their keen interest in travel and passion for exploration. The individuals perceived tourism as a professional domain that would afford them the opportunity to engage in travel and explore novel destinations, all the while making a positive impact on environmental preservation and supporting local communities. The individuals were attracted to the prospects offered by ecotourism and exhibited enthusiasm for acquiring further knowledge on the subject.

"I just heard the name 'tourism', I knew it was something to do with travel and I love travelling." (Respondent 3, FG1)

"So, I just said to myself, I would like to be in the part that is about giving back to community." (Respondent 4, FG1)

"Since I am doing it right now, I see that it has many opportunities." (Respondent 5, FG1)

In contrast to these findings, studies on the environmental consciousness of university students show that, in general, this population has a high level of interest in interesting global problems such as climate change (Shafiei and Maleksaeidi, 2020). University students recognise that environmental issues are serious, and they adopt a positive attitude towards these issues despite engaging in a few environmentally friendly behaviours during their daily activities (Gurbuz and Ozkan, 2019).

5.4.4.3 Subtheme 3: Understanding the focus on conservation and giving back to communities and nature

Some of the respondents expressed their motivation to enrol in the diploma programme due to their comprehension of ecotourism's emphasis on conservation efforts and its commitment to benefiting both communities and the natural environment. The individuals expressed a keen interest in further exploring the potential of utilising tourism as a means to foster favourable social and environmental outcomes.

The individuals acknowledged the significance of safeguarding natural resources and advancing sustainable development, perceiving ecotourism as a means to accomplish these objectives. The details pertaining to the subject matter are expounded upon in the excerpt provided herein.

"From my first year, I heard that ecotourism is about giving back to communities and nature conservation." (Respondent 4, FGI).

"Now I know it deals more with conservation and it is what I know now about ecotourism, about conservation." (Respondent 3, FGI).

"Ecotourism is about giving back to communities and the environment." (Respondent 5, FGI)

One respondent indicated that their knowledge of ecotourism was acquired through an interactive dialogue with a tour guide during their travel experience. This implies that word-of-mouth communication could potentially serve as a significant mechanism through which individuals acquire knowledge about ecotourism and develop a vested interest in pursuing a professional trajectory within this domain. Additionally, it points out the significance of disseminating information regarding ecotourism and advocating for its advantages among individuals who may lack familiarity with the notion.

"I got to know about ecotourism through that conversation [with a tour guide]." (Respondent 8, FGI)

Andarani et al. (2018) posit that ecotourism entails conscientious travel to a natural environment where the preservation of the ecosystem and the enhancement of the local community's well-being are central objectives. Similarly, the emphasis is placed on fostering an ethos of environmental stewardship, focusing on excursions of limited scope to mitigate the ecological, cultural, and behavioural impacts associated with widespread tourist activities (Wondirad, 2019). Conversely, Stronza, Hunt and Fitzgerald (2019) define ecotourism as any recreational pursuit explicitly involving the observation or utilisation of living organisms in their natural habitat, often accompanied by an element of environmental education, minimal environmental impact, a commitment to sustainability, and, in certain cases, direct support for local conservation initiatives. The spectrum of ecotourism activities demonstrates regional variation, with the majority orienting towards immersive engagement with the natural surroundings (Huang et al., 2020).

The selection of locales designated for such endeavours is contingent upon the scale of the sites themselves (Agius et al., 2019).

5.4.2.4 Subtheme 4: Exploring career prospects within the field of ecotourism

According to one participant, a multitude of prospects in the field of ecotourism were observed. This implies that certain individuals are attracted to the discipline due to their perception of its potential for professional advancement, employment prospects, or other advantageous outcomes. Additionally, this observation implies that there could be an increasing need for individuals possessing specialised knowledge in the field of ecotourism. Furthermore, it indicates that this industry may present a wide range of career opportunities for individuals who are inclined to pursue a profession in this area.

"Since I am doing it right now, I see that it has many opportunities." (Respondent 5, FG1)

5.4.2.5 Subtheme 5: Chance encounter: a second choice turned opportunity in ecotourism

One respondent expressed that ecotourism was not their initial preference, but they were compelled to register for the course upon receiving acceptance. The participant also encountered a range of opportunities within the discipline in their initial year of academic pursuit.

"At first it was the course I had as my second option because for the first one I did not get accepted but got accepted for ecotourism. " (Respondent 6, FG2)

The rationales behind the decision to pursue a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management are multifaceted and encompass a diverse array of considerations, including individual passions, professional prospects, and a commitment to fostering beneficial outcomes for both the natural environment and indigenous populations.

5.4.3 THEME 2: CLASSIFICATION OF THE PLACEMENT ORGANISATIONS AS EITHER CONVENTIONAL TOURISM OR TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM ORGANISATIONS

The respondents were asked if they would categorise the organisation they were placed in as an ecotourism organisation.

Based on the collected responses, it was found that all participants unanimously acknowledged the affiliation of their respective placement organisations with the domain of ecotourism, albeit in varying capacities. The rationale provided was classified into subthemes outlined in Figure 5.18 below.

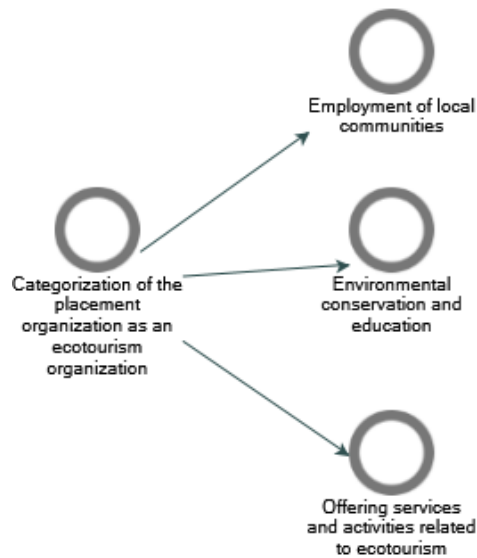


Figure 5.18: Categorisation of the placement organisations as ecotourism organisations

5.4.3.1 Subtheme 1: Employment of local communities

According to the respondents in focus group 1, the placement organisations demonstrate a connection to ecotourism by employing individuals from the local community and actively engaging in conservation initiatives, which include activities such as community engagement, camping, hiking, and adventurous activities. One of the respondents, identified as Respondent 7, highlights the association between the private game reserve in which they were placed and ecotourism due to the predominant employment of local individuals. The respondent further observes that the recruitment of non-local employees is challenging within this context.

"Yes, the organisation is linked to ecotourism, if I were to give one example, most people, um, that work there are local people. So yes, that is linked to ecotourism." (Respondent 7, FG1)

"The lodge is linked to ecotourism as it supports the local community and gives back to it." (Respondent 5, FG1)

"This organisation and ecotourism are linked as they emphasise the importance of conservation, education, and taking care of the environment." (Respondent 6, FG1)

Equally, some of the respondents from focus group 2 mentioned that the organisation at which they were placed emphasises employment opportunities for local communities. Most of the employees in the reserve were from nearby communities, and the conservation manager had frequent meetings with the locals to understand their employment needs.

On the community development side, most of the employees in the reserve were from the nearby communities from the area. In addition, the conservation manager had frequent meetings with the local communities and interactions with the local communities to find out about who needed employment and for them to give their CVs, etc. so there was also I would use emphasis on employment of the local community members (Respondent 18, FG2).

The organisation also provides training opportunities for the employees to acquire relevant skills.

One of the main things that I observed was that the community was a very big factor, for instance, the conservation manager ensured that for the people that were already part of the reserve, it was not just employment, but they were also getting a lot of relevant skills. Even though some of the people did not get an opportunity to get formal education but working at the reserve exposed them to several relevant skills, by providing numerous training opportunities (Respondent 20, FG2).

Furthermore, the organisation hires local community members with indigenous knowledge to serve as interpreters for tourists. The respondents agree that the organisation can be classified as an ecotourism establishment due to its focus on employing and empowering local communities.

“Where I was placed as well, there were a lot of people who were employed in the park who were from the local village, especially when it comes to indigenous knowledge. For instance, tourists would come, and they would spot a bird for example, and they would ask about the bird and then you get someone from the community who would interpret and let them know what it is, so I felt that kind of you know experience really makes the park an actual ecotourism establishment.” (Respondent 25, FG2).

5.4.3.2 Subtheme 2: Environmental conservation and education

The respondents categorised the placement organisation as ecotourism due to the initiatives that are focused on conservation and education, especially regarding endangered marine species and wildlife.

"Within the organisation, there were a lot of environmental education initiatives, which include knowledge about endangered marine species. There was a huge emphasis on conservation especially for marine wildlife and for local people and tourists to travel responsibly." (Respondent 15, FG2).

According to them, the organisation instilled a conservation ethic, and local people were involved in enforcing laws and seeking solutions to issues like poaching.

"There was a great conservation ethic in a sense that even when we're driving into the reserve, if you see litter or a piece of paper, we would stop and pick it up, just to instil that understanding that this is an environment that we need to take care of, and your actions should show that you uphold the values of ecotourism. Even with the animals, the local people were involved in the enforcement of laws, for instance if there were issues with poaching the rangers would interact with the local community and seek solutions from them. In addition, there were a number of educational initiatives directed to the local community about the importance of conserving these animals eliminating human-wildlife conflicts, etc. This was to ensure that the community is knowledgeable and understands their impact in the sustainability of the reserve." (Respondent 20, FG2).

Furthermore, educational programmes were implemented with the aim of raising awareness within the local community regarding the significance of animal conservation and the need to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts. The significance of wildlife was also emphasised, and the engagement of the local community in interpreting and educating tourists about it was encouraged.

"There was a lot of wildlife especially plant species, birds, and snakes. Tourists would come, and they would spot a bird for example, and they would ask about the bird, and then you get someone from the community who would interpret and let them know what it is, so I felt that kind of experience really makes the park an actual ecotourism establishment." (Respondent 25, FG2).

5.4.3.3 Subtheme 3: Offering services and activities related to ecotourism

According to Respondent 8, the placement organisation provides various activities, such as camping and hiking, that actively engage the local communities. Additionally, the organisation offers support for adventurous activities.

"Yes, ma'am it is indeed. I mean they offer services such as camping hiking like different types of hiking including um, they involve the communities in all the activities, and we camped for six months next to the river, so we used to take people on adventurous activities." (Respondent 8, FG1).

Similarly, Respondent 5 highlights that the establishment provides a range of ecotourism-related services, organises events, operates a restaurant, and also plays a role in educating individuals and contributing to the local community.

"Yes, ma'am um the lodge I can say it is very much linked to ecotourism because it offers the service of tourism like a restaurant, and events but on the other side Jozini tiger lodge does educate people and support the local community, it gives back to the community so that's how it is interlinked to ecotourism." (Respondent 5, FGI).

The aforementioned statements collectively suggest that the organisations mentioned are involved in offering services and conducting activities related to ecotourism. These activities include hiking, camping, and educational initiatives focused on local communities and the natural environment. The active involvement of the community in various activities, including those of an adventurous nature, serves to underline a strong connection to the principles of ecotourism. The respondents from both focus groups 1 and 2 confirmed that their respective placement organisations demonstrate a tendency to employ individuals from the local area and involve the community in their activities, in accordance with the principles of ecotourism. Additionally, they highlighted the organisations' commitment to the dissemination of knowledge and the provision of support for conservation initiatives. The feedback received indicates that the placement organisations have strong connections to ecotourism through their employment strategies, community involvement, and provision of services and activities related to ecotourism. Furthermore, based on the feedback received, the organisations demonstrate a significant commitment to the preservation of the environment and the promotion of education, along with a resolute dedication to the principles of ecotourism. Significantly, there exists a pronounced focus on the employment and enhancement of skills within local communities, coupled with their active engagement in conservation efforts. Furthermore, the organisations attach great importance to indigenous knowledge, utilising it for the purpose of interpretation and educating guests. Collectively, these observations validate the organisations' adherence to the principles of ecotourism.

5.4.4 THEME 3: WPBL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

This theme explores the students' WPBL experiences at their various ecotourism organisations. The theme is detailed under the following subtheme and visually presented in Figure 5.19 below:

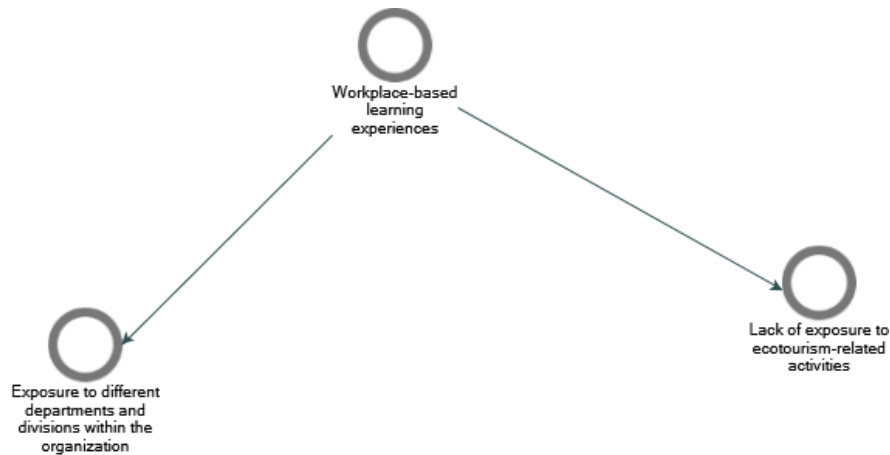


Figure 5.19: WPBL experiences

5.4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Exposure to different departments and divisions within the organisation

In this subtheme, the respondents were queried regarding their exposure to various departments or divisions within their respective organisations during the course of their WPBL. The responses exhibited variability contingent upon the specific organisation. During the research conducted at a private game reserve, the respondents were exposed to a total of seven distinct departments, namely housekeeping, reception, food and beverage, weddings and functions, kitchen, and maintenance. Nevertheless, the participants were not afforded the chance to serve as tour guides.

“At the private game reserve, we were exposed to seven different departments if I remember correctly, it was housekeeping, reception, food and beverage, weddings and functions, kitchen, and maintenance. However, we didn't get an opportunity to be tour guides.” (Respondent 4, FGI).

“We were not given any managerial roles during our in-service training.” (Respondent 1, FGI).

At the organisation, the respondent was only exposed to housekeeping and reception due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing access to the nature reserve.

“We were only exposed to housekeeping and reception, and we did not get the opportunity to go to the nature reserve due to COVID.” (Respondent 3, FG1).

The adventure park, being in its nascent stage, lacked formal departmental structures, resulting in the respondent being responsible for a wide range of tasks, including maintenance, guiding, and managing restaurant and bar services. Nevertheless, they were not assigned any managerial positions.

“At the adventure park, we did everything from maintenance, guiding, restaurant, and bar services, hosting adventure activities, park planning and expansion activities. However, we were not exposed to any managerial roles because there were already permanent staff there.” (Respondent 8, FG1).

“So, when we were there for in-service training, we were with the guys that were enrolled for a qualification in tourism management, so we all trusted and were given exactly the same tasks. So, we did not even get a chance to go do things or work at the marine office since we do modules such as you know biology, but we did not get a chance to do that and get that marine experience.” (Respondent 14, FG2)

In general, the responses suggest that the extent of exposure to various departments varied based on the organisation and its organisational framework.

5.4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Limited exposure to ecotourism-related activities

Respondent 14 from focus group 2 conveyed a sense of disappointment regarding their WPBL experience. They expressed a desire for a more pronounced environmental emphasis, anticipating engagement in activities such as tour guiding and immersion in the natural surroundings, particularly given the organisation's location within a game reserve. However, they noted a tendency to treat ecotourism in a manner akin to general tourism, with a primary focus on hospitality and tourism operations, lacking the integral ecological component. Notably, they missed an opportunity to broaden their experiential learning by not having access to the game reserve and marine division. Furthermore, the preference for hiring individuals from the local community for emerging job opportunities, while beneficial for community development, may present a potential challenge for those originating from outside the area. These dynamics warrant consideration to ensure equitable access to opportunities for all participants.

"I was expecting to do things such as tour guiding and whatsoever because realising where the organisation is located, there is a huge game reserve, so I was expecting to do something like tour guiding and get the natural experience out of it but then, instead when we got there, we realised that they just treat ecotourism like tourism in general." (Respondent 14, FG2).

"We really did not understand the difference between tourism and ecotourism." (Respondent 18, FG2).

Respondent 17 from focus group 2 voiced a sense of discontentment with their placement experience, expressing a sentiment that they were not gaining the anticipated exposure to ecotourism. They noted spending a considerable amount of their time assigned to housekeeping duties, which they believed to be incongruous with the educational objectives of ecotourism students. This mismatch between their academic pursuits and the tasks assigned left them feeling deprived of a substantive learning experience.

"During this time, I felt I was not getting enough experience I was not getting exposed to what ecotourism truly is." (Respondent 17, FG2).

Moreover, respondents expressed the challenges they encounter when being assigned to the conservation department. Several individuals also observed the struggle involved in securing the appropriate positioning.

"We had to fight to be put into the conservation division." (Respondent 17, FG2)

"So, where I was placed, we had to fight, we had to write emails we also had to communicate with our WIL coordinator to intervene and let supervisors and mentors know what type of experience we need as ecotourism students." (Respondent 18, FG2).

"I am not saying I am against housekeeping, but it is not right for an ecotourism student to be doing housekeeping for most of the time during their placement." (Respondent 17, FG2)

The statements above raise a notable concern, particularly considering the students' intended acquisition of WPBL pertinent to ecotourism. It is plausible that this situation stems from the organisations' apparent prioritisation of housekeeping responsibilities over tasks directly aligned with ecotourism. This observation warrants thoughtful consideration, as it potentially impacts the quality of the students' educational experience in this context. These experiences reflect issues related to Objective 2 of the study, which aims to identify the factors contributing to the lack of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism.

The mismatch between students' expectations and their actual WPBL tasks suggests that current placements may not effectively bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, thereby contributing to deficiencies in discipline-specific skills. These findings underline the need for a more focused approach in the design and management of WPBL opportunities, particularly in relation to Objective 3, which aims to determine how to develop WPBL to bridge skills gaps. Bridging the skills gap requires placing students in roles that align with their academic focus and providing access to relevant activities. The findings are also pertinent to Objective 4, which explores the purpose of curriculum enhancement. The feedback suggests the need for curriculum adjustments that include more practical exposure to ecotourism-related activities and ensure that WPBL opportunities align with the program's educational objectives. This issue also ties into SDG 4: Quality Education, which emphasises the importance of providing relevant and practical learning experiences. Addressing the disconnect between students' expectations and their actual WPBL tasks can contribute to improved educational outcomes and better prepare students for their future careers in ecotourism.

5.4.5 THEME 4: UNDERSTANDING OF WIL AND WPBL

This theme explores the students understanding of WIL and WPBL. In the interview discussion gathered with participants of focus groups 1 and 2, several of the students shared their understanding of work-integrated learning, as illustrated in Figure 5.20.

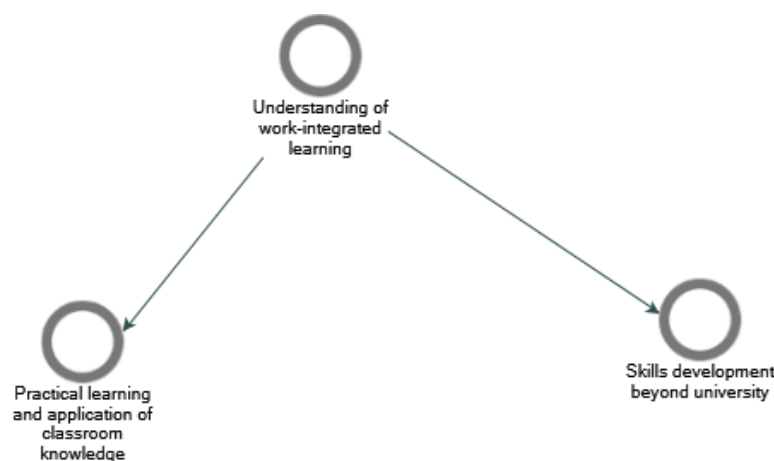


Figure 5.20: Understanding of WIL

5.4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Practical learning and application of classroom knowledge

The respondents involved in the second focus group discussion concur that WPBL encompasses experiential learning and the utilisation of theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom within a professional setting. The respondents harboured initial anticipations of transferring their classroom knowledge to the professional setting, yet swiftly recognised that the actuality of the workplace entailed acquiring distinct knowledge and adapting to unforeseeable circumstances. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that WPBL offers a valuable avenue for acquiring hands-on experience and engaging with professionals in a professional setting, thereby facilitating the acquisition of crucial skills such as mindfulness and emotional regulation.

"I thought that I was going to take everything that I had learned in class and basically apply it to the workplace...I thought it was going to be interesting, I thought that if I go there probably, I will go to the game reserve, and I would get to experience those things and get a lot of information on the animals. But then when I got there after I did my in-service, I realised that no, it was kind of different. It was totally different because I had to learn different things." (Respondent 14, FG2)

"My understanding of WIL or WPBL is to take everything that you have learned in the class and apply it practically. Basically, I would say that Wil is practical learning." (Respondent 16, FG2)

"What it does, it brings the practical element to the syllabus and everything that we do in class. [...] it felt like I was behind the scenes of how the reserve runs. [...] WIL taught me to be mindful, it taught me to be considerate, and so those are some of the things that I feel I would have just overlooked if I just went straight from varsity to employment without work-integrated learning." (Respondent 17, FG2).

"It is something which allows you to interact with the place and the people." (Respondent 21, FG2)

"I thought WPBL would teach us how to handle different kinds of people. And indeed, when we got there, I got the opportunity to learn more about my emotions how to control them in the workplace." (Respondent 26, FG2).

Based on the perspectives shared by participants in focus group 1, it was found that WIL) and WPBL serve the purpose of acquainting students with real-world and external contexts, thereby equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge for successful integration into professional settings.

"My understanding of workplace-based learning is that it helps students by exposing them to practical and external environments. My expectation was that we wanted to be treated as staff when we got into the workplace and to be treated professionally." (Respondent 4, FG1).

"My understanding of it is that it is structured to make students understand what is expected of them when they get to the workplace after completing their qualifications. I expected that the industry was demanding, especially where I was placed, which was mainly a place for entertainment. My expectations were exceeded, for instance, there were only a few staff, and we ended up doing most of the work. I worked from 06:00 - 6:30 in the morning on weekends and events until 5:00 AM, and on the same day, we had to wake up at 6:00 and prepare the campsites for more visitors. Those were some of the things that changed my perception of WIL or should I say, WPBL." (Respondent 8, FG1).

The respondents emphasise a significant aspect of the students' expectations during their WPBL, they anticipated being given a professional standing, unlike regular staff members. However, there were instances where these expectations were not met, and students expressed their feelings of exploitation and being stretched beyond reasonable limits. It is worth noting that WIL is intentionally designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of workplace dynamics, and in some instances, it surpassed the students' initial anticipations, offering them invaluable insights into professional environments.

"Before I started Inservice, I used to think WIL was just practicing what you have studied in class. But when I got to the workplace, everything changed. We were exposed more to what the organisation does, and we worked long hours, sometimes being exploited. It taught us about people and organisations and the behaviour that is expected, like respect." (Respondent 5, FG1)

The experiences of the respondents reveal a nuanced understanding of WPBL, where the integration of classroom learning with practical experiences provides significant educational benefits but also presents challenges. This aligns with Objective 1, which aims to identify the requisite and lacking ecotourism discipline-specific skills. The feedback indicates that while WPBL can enrich students' practical knowledge, there is also a need for better alignment between classroom instruction and workplace expectations to address skills gaps. Furthermore, Objective 3, which focuses on developing WPBL to bridge skills gaps, finds relevance in these insights. The experiences of the participants indicate that we should design WPBL to more effectively meet students' professional expectations and incorporate clear connections to classroom learning.

The reflections also touch upon SDG 4: Quality Education, highlighting the importance of providing practical, relevant learning experiences that prepare students for real-world challenges and opportunities. While WPBL offers valuable opportunities for practical learning and professional development, there is a need to address the gaps between students' expectations and actual experiences. Enhancing WPBL structures to better integrate classroom knowledge and provide realistic professional experiences can have a significant positive impact on students' educational outcomes and career readiness.

5.4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Skills development beyond university

The respondents emphasised that WPBL offers opportunities for skill enhancement that surpass those available in a conventional classroom environment. This opportunity provides individuals with the chance to acquire practical experience, engage in interpersonal interactions within a professional setting, and develop a comprehensive understanding of the practicalities of the working world. The programme additionally facilitates the cultivation of skills in domains such as emotional regulation, adaptability, and mindfulness among students.

"To conclude I would say WPBL is designed to give us skills we would have not been able to obtain at the university, in a classroom setting." (Respondent 14, FG2).

"WIL also teaches you and it gives your perspective into other people's lives, and how to interact with them. It forces you to understand the real world of work." (Respondent 17, FG2)

"It is something which allows you to interact with the place and the people." (Respondent 21, FG2)

According to the respondents, WPBL offers a significant opportunity to enhance one's comprehension of the practical aspects of the professional environment and develop effective interpersonal skills for engaging with diverse individuals. Additionally, this practice facilitates the acquisition of emotional regulation techniques and the cultivation of crucial aptitudes that extend beyond the confines of traditional academic instruction. Moreover, WPBL can offer a conducive setting for students to cultivate emotional regulation skills and acquire the ability to effectively handle their emotions within a professional context. The acquisition of these skills holds significant value in attaining success across various professional domains, and WIL can serve as an efficacious means of cultivating them.

"I thought workplace learning would teach us how to handle different kinds of people. And indeed, when we got there, I got the opportunity to learn more about my emotions how to control them in the workplace." (Respondent 26, FG2)

The above statement highlights the importance of interpersonal skills and emotional control in the workplace, which are skills that can be developed through WPBL. Respondent 14 from focus group 2 perceives this as a significant and valuable aspect.

"In terms of the skills that I developed during my placement; I understood the importance of interacting with people including the employees as well as guests. I would say that really sharpened my experience and skills however in terms of what I learned in class, the theory, I did not get the opportunity to apply it." (Respondent 14, FG2)

The collective feedback indicates that WPBL is widely regarded as a profoundly valuable experience, one that equips students with essential skills and a deeper understanding of the professional realm. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the programme is not without its limitations and constraints. There is a discernible desire for a more seamless connection between classroom instruction and the practical aspects of the workplace. Moreover, students are encouraged to take a proactive role in actively seeking out and capitalising on learning opportunities within their respective work environments. These considerations highlight the dynamic nature of WPBL and its potential for even greater effectiveness in nurturing future professionals. These reflections align with Objective 1, which focuses on identifying the requisite skills for ecotourism and the role of WPBL in developing these skills. The emphasis on skills such as emotional regulation and interpersonal interactions is crucial for preparing students for success in their professional careers. Additionally, this feedback connects with Objective 3, which explores the potential of WPBL in bridging skills gaps. The insights suggest that while WPBL is beneficial, there is room for improvement in ensuring that students can seamlessly apply their academic knowledge in professional settings.

5.4.6 THEME 5: WORKPLACE INDUCTION AND PREPARATION FOR WPBL

The central focus of this theme pertains to the individuals' accounts regarding their encounters with workplace induction and their level of readiness for WPBL. In general, the experiences of the participants exhibit a range of perspectives, as depicted in Figure 5.21. Certain individuals express a sense of sufficient readiness for WPBL, whereas others indicate a perceived lack of adequate preparation.

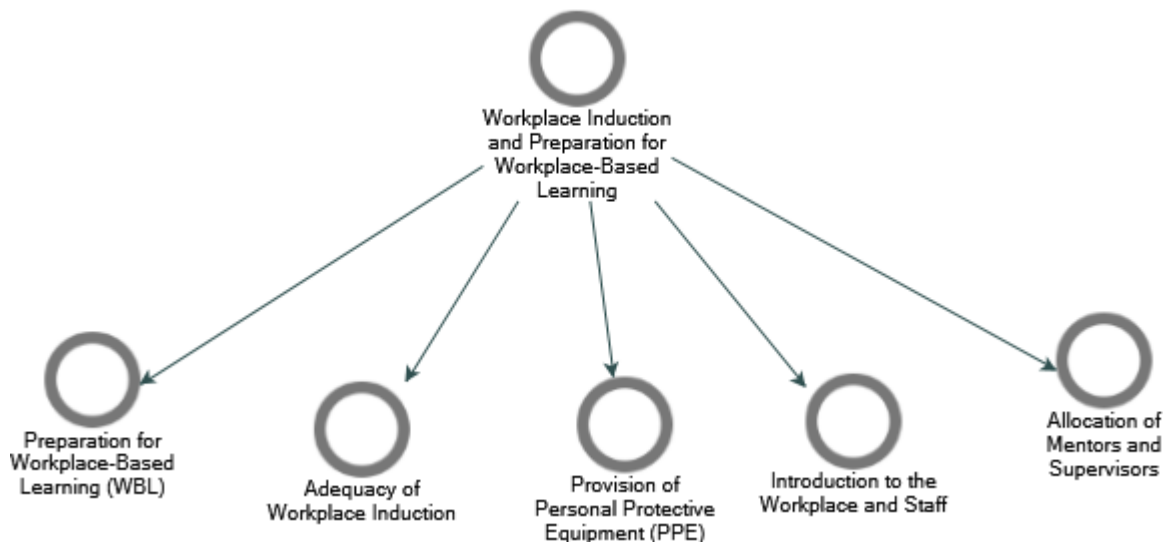


Figure 5.21: Workplace induction and preparation for WPBL

5.4.6.1 Subtheme 1: Preparation for WPBL

A number of students have shared their experiences regarding the preparatory measures taken for WPBL. They emphasise the existence of a structured workplace induction process, which is a testament to the commitment of the Department of Ecotourism to adequately equip students before commencing their WPBL. Specifically, students mention engaging in workshops organised by the department, designed to prepare them for the WPBL experience. These sessions featured insights from fellow students who had previously completed their WPBL, generously sharing their initial experiences to provide valuable insight into what the training would involve. This proactive approach is essential to a smoother transition into the work environment for participating students.

"On the side of the university the fact that the workshops that occurred 2 weeks before we started our WIL, there were students who were invited to be part of those workshops who had done their WIL before so sharing their experiences with us help me to sort of anticipate what is next for me when I start my in-service training." (Respondent 14, FG2)

The work preparedness sessions provided by the Department of Ecotourism, as reported by students, were primarily focused on interview readiness. Nevertheless, it is evident that many students perceive these sessions as insufficient in adequately preparing them for the entirety of their work experience.

More specifically, there was a recognised deficiency in addressing broader elements such as comprehending expectations, adhering to professional conduct, and effectively navigating potential obstacles in the professional environment. This observation draw attention to a potential area for improvement in the preparation process to augment the comprehensive spectrum of work-related skills and aptitudes.

"The only thing that came out of those workshops was preparing for interviews but not necessarily the entire work experience, what is expected from us when we get there, how to conduct ourselves, how to handle issues etcetera so no the university did not prepare us." (Respondent 15, FG2)

"The workshop to be honest didn't do much in terms of preparing us, it was not enough so to answer the question, I personally did not feel adequately prepared to start with in-service training." (Respondent 16, FG2)

The department implemented proactive measures to arrange a workshop prior to the commencement of the WPBL. During these sessions, students who had successfully completed their WPBL generously shared their own experiences. These accounts provided valuable insights for current students, offering them a glimpse into what they could anticipate during their training period. This thoughtful initiative played a pivotal role in preparing students for their upcoming WPBL experiences.

"A week or two before we commenced our WIL there was this workshop where people came in and told us what we could expect, we had students who had been and done their WIL so to some extent cool math university did prepare us." (Respondent 17, FG2)

"The workshop that my classmates keep mentioning I felt it only focused on preparing us for interviews how to answer interview questions, but it was not in depth in terms of preparing us to change our mindsets on what to expect when we start our in-service training." (Respondent 18, FG2)

5.4.6.2 Subtheme 2: The adequacy of workplace induction

While it is evident that there was preparatory workshop induction for the students with respect to WPBL, it was critical to know if these workshops were adequate. The respondents had different experiences with workplace induction. Some received proper training and were adequately prepared for their job, while others had little to no induction and were expected to learn on the job. Some respondents had workshops and orientation tours that prepared them for their work placement, while others were not given any proper induction or introduction.

The lack of proper induction can lead to difficulties in the workplace and affect job performance. These are captured in the excerpt below.

"When we got to the organisation on the 16th of November 2021, we were not shown much about the place and who the people were. The only person who introduced themselves to us was the manager. The rest, we learned as we go. In terms of office space and who occupies a particular office, that was something we were not told, we learned as we go. There was no proper induction, no proper introduction."(Respondent 6, FG1)

"On the day of arrival, the owner of the place, took me on the orientation tour and showed me what the adventure park is all about and what it actually provides. He showed me every activity that is done there, so I would say, yeah, I did receive training. But the problem I faced was there were changes in organisations to which I was supposed to be placed, and that happened three times. When I went there, I was totally blank." (Respondent 8, FG1)

"When I got to the workplace, I did not receive any form of training. We only had a meeting where we were told a few things about work arrangements and duties, and we were shown where we will be staying for the duration of WIL. The following day when we commenced our work placement. We were introduced to our mentors who were managers in the various departments. When I started, I was in the reserve department, and my mentor did show me what needs to be done and how it needs to be done before I could do it. I was shown how to do it and what is expected." (Respondent 10, FG1)

"From campus, we did have workshops that prepared us for work placement, but when we got to the reserve, they set us in the conference room and explained to us that they would like from us and what they didn't want us to do. They explained everything, and we were then allocated and split into different departments. When we got to our department, the allocated mentor would then explain to us that we will need to know and what we will need to learn." (Respondent 11, FG1)

5.4.6.3 Subtheme 3: Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

According to respondents, there was an allocation of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks and sanitizers, to make the implementation of COVID-19 safety protocols easier. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) differs across different workplaces. Several participants reported that they received comprehensive guidance and training pertaining to their job responsibilities and the corresponding expectations. Likewise, additional individuals have documented a deficiency in all-encompassing workplace orientation, resulting in their assumption that they acquire job-related knowledge without prior instruction.

The aforementioned disparity underscores the significance of implementing uniform and efficient onboarding protocols for all students engaged in WPBL.

"I can say according to the institution, I was given the masks, the sanitizer, the name tag was for my safety during COVID-19. When I started, I was in the reserve department and my mentor did show me what needs to be done and how it needs to be done before I could do it, I was shown how to do it and what is expected." (Respondent 10, FG1)

"As the previous speaker has indicated and from the institution, we were given PPE for COVID-19. We were given masks and instructed to always wear them especially when we are helping guests who were at the establishment and outdoor site." (Respondent 6, FG1)

These differing experiences highlight the importance of implementing uniform and effective onboarding protocols for all students participating in WPBL. Consistent and thorough orientation can help ensure that all students receive the necessary information and training to perform their roles safely and effectively, regardless of their specific placement.

5.4.6.4 Subtheme 4: Introduction to the workplace and staff

The respondents indicate diverse degrees of familiarity with the work environment and personnel. Certain respondents reported receiving a guided tour of the workplace and being formally introduced to the staff, whereas others did not have this experience. In certain instances, respondents were provided with a comprehensive initiation process that encompassed instruction on the responsibilities and anticipated performance standards associated with their employment. Conversely, in other instances, a formal initiation process was absent, necessitating on-the-job learning.

"When I started, I was in the reserve department and my mentor did show me what needs to be done and how it needs to be done before I could do it, I was shown how to do it and what is expected. But when I got to the workplace, I did not receive any form of training. we only had a meeting we were told a few things about work arrangements and duties and we're short where we will be staying for the duration of WIL, the following day when we commenced our WIL, we were introduced to our mentors who will managers in the various departments". (Respondent 10, FG1)

"When we got to the organisation on the 16th of November 2021, we were not shown much about the place and who the people were. The only person who introduced to be the manager, they introduced themselves to us. The rest, we learnt as we go. In terms of office space and who occupies a particular office, that was something we were not

told, we learned as we go. There was no proper induction no proper introduction". (Respondent 6, FG1)

"When we got to the private reserve, they set us at the conference room, and they explained to us that they would like from us and what they didn't want us to do, and they explained everything, and we were then allocated and split to different departments." (Respondent 11, FG1)

"On the day of arrival, the owner of the place it took me on the orientation tour and showed me what is the adventure park all about, and what it actually provides and what it's all about". (Respondent 8, FG1)

These varied experiences highlight the importance of a uniform and thorough orientation process in WPBL programs. Comprehensive introductions to the workplace and staff are crucial for ensuring that students are well-prepared and can effectively integrate into their roles. This practice aligns with SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, which emphasises the need for fair and productive work environments, including proper training and support for new employees.

5.4.6.5 Subtheme 5: Allocation of mentors and supervisors

Respondents shared their positive experiences of being assigned mentors or supervisors during their WPBL. These mentors were instrumental in providing guidance and support throughout the duration of the programme. They took the time to clarify the essential knowledge and skills that students needed to acquire, providing hands-on demonstrations of how to effectively manage their duties. This mentorship dynamic enriched the learning process for the students, ensuring they received comprehensive guidance tailored to their specific tasks.

"When I started, I was in the reserve department and my mentor did show me what needs to be done and how it needs to be done before I could do it. I was shown how to do it and what is expected." (Respondent 10, FG1)

"We were then allocated and split to different departments. When you got to your department then the allocated mentor will then explain to you that you will need to know and what you will need to learn." (Respondent 11, FG1)

These positive experiences with mentors are essential for effective WPBL and are aligned with SDG 4: Quality Education, which emphasises the importance of inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. The presence of knowledgeable mentors enhances the educational experience by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the professional environment.

5.4.7 THEME 6: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES - ANTICIPATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH THE WPBL PROGRAMME

This section focuses on the profound insights shared by students regarding their anticipations and how they perceive the alignment of their academic experiences with the practical components of the WPBL programme. Figure 5.22 further enhances this comprehension, offering a visual representation of the subthemes that have emerged from the collective student responses, providing a clear and insightful overview of their sentiments on this crucial aspect of their education.

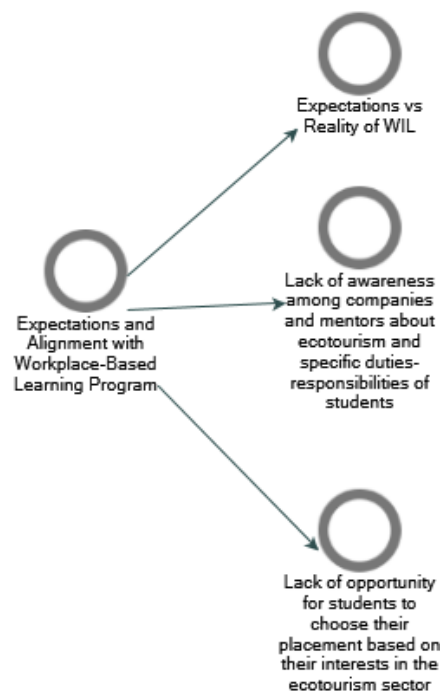


Figure 5.22: Expectations and alignment with WPBL

5.4.7.1 Subtheme 1: Navigating the transition - Expectations versus Reality in WPBL

Although many individuals approached WPBL with a positive outlook, it became apparent that there was a significant disparity between their initial expectations and the actual experience. A case in point is Respondent 4, whose anticipation leaned towards a more theoretical emphasis. However, reality unfolded as a more hands-on and practical approach, contrasting with the initial envisioned trajectory. This discrepancy highlights the importance of aligning students' expectations with the actual nature of the WPBL programme, ensuring a more accurate representation of the learning experience.

"I thought it would be more theoretical than practical, but I was surprised to find out that it was the opposite. I got hands-on experience and was able to apply what I had learned in class to real-life situations." (Respondent 4, FG2)

Respondent 11 in focus group 2 expressed an initial expectation of acquiring a deeper understanding of their particular industry. However, the actual outcome of their experience placed a greater emphasis on the development of general workplace skills.

"I expected to learn more about the specific industry I was interested in, but I ended up learning more about general workplace skills like communication and teamwork." (Respondent 11, FG2)

Respondent 12 from focus group 2 expressed an initial anticipation that WPBL would be a straightforward endeavour. However, the actual experience proved to be demanding and necessitated that the individual venture beyond their accustomed state of ease.

"I thought WIL would be easy, but it was actually quite challenging. I had to step out of my comfort zone and adapt to a new environment and new tasks." (Respondent 12, FG2)

The expectation of Respondent 14 was to transfer their classroom knowledge to a professional setting. However, the actual experience entailed acquiring novel information that diverged from their prior classroom learning.

"Before I did my WIL, I thought that I was going to take everything that I had learned in class and basically apply it to the workplace. But then when I got there after I did my WIL, I realised that no, it was kind of different. It was totally different because I had to learn different things." (Respondent 14, FG2)

The expectation of Respondent 17 was not explicitly articulated. However, the actual outcome was that the WPBL programme afforded them an insightful comprehension of the inner workings of the professional environment and imparted valuable interpersonal skills.

"When I got into work, in the conservation department, it felt like I was behind the scenes of how the reserve runs. For instance, yes there were modules that prepared us such as biology, but when you get there, you get to understand fully what it takes to sustain a reserve and to make it function properly. WIL also teaches you and it gives your perspective into other people's lives, and how to interact with them." (Respondent 17, FG2)

These observations demonstrate the disparity between students' anticipations and the actuality of WPBL. Providing students with a comprehensive understanding of what to expect can help align their expectations with the actual experience, thus improving the effectiveness of the WPBL programme.

5.4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Allocated industry supervisors' limited awareness of ecotourism and student roles in WPBL

The respondents indicated that the organisations and mentors assigned to them lacked a comprehensive grasp of the concept of ecotourism as well as a clear delineation of the specific tasks and obligations that the students should have been exposed to. According to the findings, mentors exhibited limited familiarity with the subject matter of the course and demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding the objectives and purpose of the students' participation, thereby resulting in insufficient guidance and support throughout their experience with the WPBL approach. The following statements provide a summary of the aforementioned information.

"From my observation, I would say they were not aware of what I was supposed to be exposed to. As one of my classmates has indicated, everything there we had to learn on our own. For instance, when we asked for the mentor to sign certain things and documents, they didn't know what the documents were about and why. So, they didn't have an understanding of what we are there for, they only told us that we can only be of assistance at the reception and housekeeping, that's all." (Respondent 3, FG1).

"Our mentors were not told about our course and what we need to specialise on and how. In addition, the organisations were replaced, I feel that some were really not for us who do ecotourism. So, I feel for some of the students they were placed in establishments that do not really offer ecotourism because there were few. Mentors only shared with us what they knew, for example, it shows any psychology they are costing this is accommodation food and beverage in the spa, so you can tell that some of the

things are not really ecotourism-related there are more of tourism activities." (Respondent 5, FG1).

"Mentors or rather organisations they really don't have a clue what are we supposed to be specialising on as ecotourism students. So, they end up just giving us you know, experience of whatever offerings or services they had."(Respondent 8, FG1)

In addition to the aforementioned, certain respondents were assigned to establishments that did not provide opportunities for ecotourism. Conversely, other respondents were exposed to the offerings or services available at these establishments, which may not have been directly associated with ecotourism. Consequently, students frequently encounter assignments that fall outside the purview of their specialised field or are deprived of opportunities to acquire pertinent competencies.

"I feel for some of the students they were placed in establishments that do not really offer ecotourism because there were few." (Respondent 5, FG1)

Moreover, a subset of the respondents indicated that their mentors facilitated opportunities for them to engage in activities that were not directly associated with the field of ecotourism. The individuals received instruction in various domains, including psychology, lodging, culinary services, and wellness amenities. These subjects primarily pertain to conventional tourism endeavours rather than ecotourism. According to their report, mentors exhibited a lack of comprehension regarding the concept of ecotourism and the specific tasks and obligations that students should be acquainted with.

"Mentors only shared with us what they knew for example it shows any psychology they are costing this is accommodation food and beverage in the spa so you can tell that some of the things are not really ecotourism related there are more of tourism activities." (Respondent 5, FG1)

"So, they end up just giving us you know, experience of whatever offerings or services they had, so in our case since we were at the adventure park...he did not know what to do with us." (Respondent 8, FG1)

Equally concerning to the students, Respondent 5 from focus group 1 disclosed that students were requested to help in various departments during peak season without a specific emphasis on ecotourism education or responsibilities. Of greater concern is the lack of explicit instructions given to the students regarding their roles and responsibilities as ecotourism students amidst these circumstances.

"We were only placed, whenever it was peak season and there was high demand and there was pressure, we would assist today for instance if there was high demand at the kitchen, we would go assist at the kitchen, if there was high demand at the restaurant we would go assist at the restaurant, if there was pressure and housekeeping we would go assist at housekeeping so there was we were just placed just to assist in these departments whenever extra hands were needed. They honestly didn't understand what we needed to learn as ecotourism students and what are we supposed to do." (Respondent 5, FG1)

This lack of directed learning and focus on ecotourism responsibilities suggests a need for better alignment between students' roles and their educational goals. Overall, these findings reveal the need for improved communication and training for industry supervisors and mentors about the specific requirements and objectives of ecotourism students. This would help ensure that students receive relevant guidance and experience that aligns with their academic and professional goals.

5.4.7.3 Subtheme 3: Limited opportunity for students to select placements aligned with their ecotourism interests

The students conveyed a strong inclination to acquire comprehensive knowledge in their respective fields of interest prior to their placement. One respondent highlighted the lack of opportunity provided to them to express their preference for a particular department based on their individual interests. However, the placements were determined exclusively according to staffing requirements. It is noteworthy that a participant demonstrated a proactive stance by initiating contact with the WIL coordinator one month in advance of the designated placement period. The individual expressed their preference for being assigned to an organisation that prioritises environmental concerns, leading to their placement in a game reserve, which coincided with their personal interests. This exemplifies the significance of affording students an opportunity to express their preferences, ultimately augmenting the probability of a more gratifying and equitable placement experience.

"We did not get the opportunity to choose. Before placement and even when we got to the workplace and the organisations would have different departments and you were never asked which of the following departments would you like to be placed or spend more time in because it is something that you are interested in so the opportunity to choose you know before placement and even during placement was never there."

No one cared what your interests were only placed in departments because there was a shortage of staff in that department." (Respondent 14, FG2)

"On my side yes, I did approach the WIL coordinator a month before WIL commenced and made a request to be please placed at any organisation that has an environmental element hence I was placed a game reserve." (Respondent 16, FG2)

The respondents approached their WPBL programme with a diverse range of expectations. Some anticipated acquiring practical skills relevant to their courses, while others anticipated immersing themselves in tasks and responsibilities associated with ecotourism. However, they encountered a common challenge in that their respective organisations or mentors demonstrated a limited understanding of ecotourism, and the specific roles students were intended to undertake. Consequently, many found themselves placed in organisations that did not offer activities aligned with ecotourism. This mismatch led to a sense of dissatisfaction among students, as they were exposed to services unrelated to the field. Additionally, during peak seasons, respondents were often assigned tasks across various departments, lacking a specific focus on ecotourism-oriented learning. Despite these difficulties, it is noteworthy that all respondents persevered and completed their six-month WPBL within the same organisation. This steadfast commitment emphasises their commitment to the programme, even in the face of challenging circumstances.

5.4.8 THEME 7: NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ACQUIRED DURING WPBL

Acquiring new knowledge and cultivating essential skills are imperative for students. This theme delves into the transformative learning experiences of ecotourism students placed within ecotourism organisations. Based on the transcribed data, the following section delineates the specific knowledge and skills that students reported acquiring during their placements and is further visually presented in Figure 5.23.

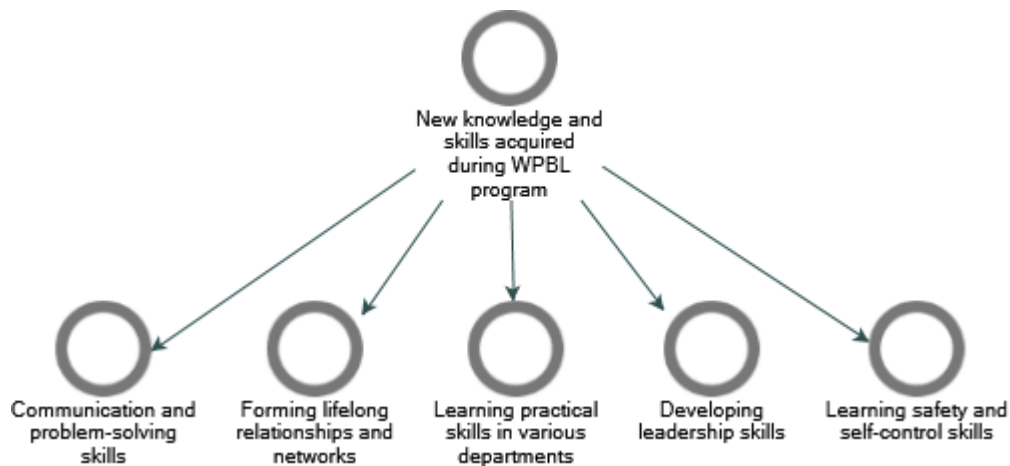


Figure 5.23: New knowledge and skills acquired during WPBL

5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Communication and problem-solving skills

The two respondents mentioned the positive learning experience they had in terms of communication and problem-solving skills. Both individuals acquired the ability to effectively engage in communication with diverse individuals and effectively manage interactions with various types of guests. Additionally, they acquired problem-solving abilities for managing difficult customers.

"The good things that I learned at the organisation was communication." (Respondent 3, FG1)

"For me I learned to communicate with people yeah problem-solving skills." (Respondent 5, FG1)

Respondent 8 specifically highlighted the experience of dealing with difficult customers and learning to adapt to different types of guests.

"The positive thing that I experienced was exposure to handling guests, problem-solving and dealing with difficult customers. You learn to deal with different types of guests you learn to communicate with them, and you get to engage with some of the guests that were more knowledgeable, and you learn from them as well through those interactions." (Respondent 8, FG1)

Similarly, a subset of participants from the second focus group indicated that they acquired knowledge pertaining to organisational systems and communication through their engagement in work-related activities.

The individuals obtained information pertaining to property management systems, the notable advantages of Apex Plus, and effective communication strategies with tourists. Additionally, the participants acquired knowledge on strategies for managing their emotions and upholding a professional demeanour within the context of the tourism sector.

“The positive thing about my work experience is that I got to learn about a lot of things, such as property management systems that the organisation was using, and all other systems that they were using. I got a lot of experience in that. In terms of being able to communicate effectively that was a skill that I learned as well in a professional manner.” (Respondent 14, FG2)

“In the tourism division within the organisation, I worked at reception, and I got the opportunity to learn about the systems that they use, such as apex plus point. I've also got to know how to communicate with tourists and to constantly use the English language as the medium of instruction.” (Respondent 18, FG2)

“Amongst the most important things that I learned is patience and containing your emotions. There were many instances where you would be wrongfully accused of something that you didn't do, and you had to control your emotions and not cry in front of you know.... other colleagues and so forth so I think there's a very important skill when you're in the tourism industry because you're constantly deal with people daily so being able to contain and control yourself is very important it's something that I learned from my experience.” (Respondent 26, FG2)

The respondents also indicated that they acquired self-assurance and proficient communication abilities throughout their WPBL programme.

“For me it was a very holistic experience, in a sense that, I got to know how to communicate effectively, I learned that just because you know how to talk it doesn't mean people understand what you are saying so I learned that. I also develop my confidence, especially because I was in a male dominated environment, so I learned how to you know make a point and be stand and stand for what I believe in regardless of who I was talking to. In addition, I also learned to also communicate and still have a voice despite my age as well just because I'm young it doesn't mean I'm unable to make a positive contribution.” (Respondent 17, FG2)

They learned to communicate effectively in a professional manner and gained confidence to make a point and stand for what they believe in.

“In terms of being able to communicate effectively that was a skill that I learned as well in a professional manner.” (Respondent 14, FG2)

They also mentioned that they acquired the ability to engage in effective professional communication and developed the self-assurance to articulate their viewpoints and advocate for their beliefs.

"I learned how to communicate with other people, meet new people and new personalities, either from work or from outside work." (Respondent 24, FG2)

The WPBL programme provided respondents with substantial opportunities to enhance their communication and problem-solving skills, increase their confidence, and develop a better understanding of professional interactions and organisational systems.

5.4.8.2 Subtheme 2: Forming lifelong relationships and networks

A noteworthy aspect highlighted by several respondents was the cultivation of meaningful relationships and the establishment of valuable networks throughout their WPBL programme. Additionally, they highlighted the opportunities that had arisen for them to excel in their leadership skills, a capability that is crucial not only in initiating connections but also in fostering and sustaining professional relationships. These dynamic highlights underscore the numerous benefits that the WPBL experience can provide for students in their journey towards professional growth and development.

"I also met some of the best people there and in that way, I formed lifelong relationships and networks which I think is something very important to be able to create networks." (Respondent 17, FG2)

"I also got an opportunity to be a tour guide. I also went to the conservation division we were exposed to a variety of duties that even manages to so for instance I got to lead certain you know mini projects so that gave me leadership skills." (Respondent 18, FG2)

These experiences highlight the significant impact that WPBL can have on students' professional development by providing chances to cultivate crucial skills, establish valuable connections, and construct networks that can aid in their career advancement.

5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Learning practical skills in various departments

Throughout their WPBL, the respondents acquired a diverse array of practical skills that significantly enriched their educational journey.

These encompassed a deepened understanding of organisational systems, adeptness in effective communication with both tourists and colleagues, the cultivation of leadership proficiencies, and the acquisition of hands-on capabilities across various departments, ranging from housekeeping to conservation efforts. Additionally, they gained valuable exposure to the difficulties of law enforcement and safety protocols, providing them with a well-rounded skill set that will be utilised in their future endeavours.

"The positive thing about my work experience is that I got to learn about a lot of things, such as property management systems that the organisation was using and all other systems that they were using. In terms of being able to communicate effectively, that was a skill that I learned as well in a professional manner." (Respondent 14, FG2)

"I got the opportunity to learn about the systems that they use, such as Apex Plus Point. I've also got to know how to communicate with tourists and to constantly use the English language as the medium of instruction. And then, in the housekeeping division, I learned how to make a bed. I also went to the conservation division, where we were exposed to a variety of duties that I even managed to do, so for instance, I got to lead certain, you know, mini projects, so that gave me leadership skills. I also got to work with an ecologist in the reserve, and sampling plants was something that I learned how to do. Additionally, I got to learn how animals are introduced in the game reserve. Also, because we did culling, we also got the opportunity to learn how to use a firearm. There was so much because we also form part of the law enforcement team within the reserve, so we learned how to install these cameras and monitor the cameras for safety within the reserve. We got exposure to using the various systems of communication and codes in instances of danger." (Respondent 18, FG2)

Furthermore, the aforementioned experience has equipped them with the capacity to engage in effective communication with diverse individuals and cultivate professional connections, a skillset that bears great importance in their professional advancement and maturation.

"I would say the good thing that came out of my WIL it was I learned how to communicate with other people, meet new people and new personalities, either from work or from outside work." (Respondent 24, FG2)

5.4.8.4 Subtheme 4: Developing leadership skills

Although not extensively discussed by all respondents, a few did acknowledge the acquisition of leadership abilities through their involvement in WPBL. The acquisition of leadership skills may have been facilitated by assuming responsibilities, spearheading projects, or being exposed to diverse workplace scenarios that necessitated the application of leadership abilities.

"In the housekeeping division I learned how to make a bed I mean that's a skill on its own, I also got an opportunity to be a tour guide. I also went to the conservation division we were exposed to a variety of duties that even manages to so for instance I got to lead certain you know mini projects so that gave me leadership skills." (Respondent 18, FG2).

The account by Respondent 8 highlights a crucial aspect of their journey, the cultivation of leadership abilities. This growth was particularly evident through their active involvement in mini projects during the WPBL. This first-hand experience not only enhanced their leadership skills but also provided a tangible demonstration of their ability to take initiative and guide projects to success.

5.4.8.5 Subtheme 5: Skills in self-regulation

In an expressive reflection, Respondent 26 from focus group 2 gives emphasis to a crucial attribute in the ecotourism industry, emotional regulation and patience. These qualities, as evidently noted, are essential in a field where daily interactions with people are the norm. The ability to maintain composure and extend patience proves invaluable in providing positive and enriching experiences for both tourists and industry professionals alike.

Among the most important things that I learned is patience and containing your emotions. There were many instances where you would be wrongfully accused of something that you didn't do, and you had to control your emotions and not cry in front of you, other colleagues, and so forth. So, I think there's a very important skill when you're in the tourism industry because you're constantly dealing with people daily, so being able to contain and control yourself is very important. It's something that I learned from my experience." (Respondent 26, FG2)

Respondent 18 from focus group 2 emphasises the significance of acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to comport oneself appropriately and ensure the well-being of the group during game drives and walks, as well as when encountering potentially hazardous wildlife.

"Another important skill is safety; I don't know how to phrase it, but for instance, how to conduct yourself and take care of your group when you go for game drives, when you go for walks, and what to do when you approach dangerous game." (Respondent 18, FG2)

The sentiments conveyed in the aforementioned statements collectively emphasise the utmost importance of acquiring skills related to safety and self-control within the ever-changing context of the ecotourism industry.

These proficiencies are crucial elements that contribute to both the welfare of individuals involved and the efficient and harmonious operation of the industry. Table 5.4 summarises and integrates the findings, highlighting how different aspects of the WPBL experience relate to each other, contributing to the study’s objectives of understanding discipline-specific skills and the efficacy of WPBL in attaining these skills.

Table 5.4: The integration of some emerging subthemes in relation to the findings for students placed at traditional ecotourism organisations

Subtheme	Findings	Relevant cross-references: subtheme integration and academic perspective
5.4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Practical Learning and Application of Classroom Knowledge	WPBL facilitates the application of theoretical knowledge in professional settings, providing hands-on experience. Students faced a learning curve with new knowledge and skills.	<p>5.4.7.1 Subtheme 1: Discrepancies between expectations and reality impact classroom knowledge application.</p> <p>5.4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Allocated industry supervisors' limited awareness of ecotourism and student roles in WPBL mentors' understanding of ecotourism affects practical application.</p>
5.4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Skills Development Beyond University	WPBL offers skill enhancement opportunities beyond the classroom, including emotional regulation, adaptability, and interpersonal skills.	<p>5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Communication and problem-solving skills were notably enhanced.</p> <p>5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3 Subtheme 3: Learning practical skills in various departments: Practical skills across departments, including leadership and hands-on tasks, were acquired.</p>
5.4.6.3 Subtheme 3: Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	PPE provision varied; some received comprehensive training, others lacked structured orientation.	<p>5.4.6.4 Subtheme 4: Variation in workplace introduction affected orientation experiences.</p> <p>5.4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Limited mentor awareness of ecotourism influenced PPE and safety protocols.</p>
5.4.6.2 Subtheme 2: The adequacy of workplace induction	Workplace introductions varied; some received thorough orientations, others did not, impacting their integration and learning.	<p>5.4.6.3 Subtheme 3: Adequate orientation, including PPE provision, correlates with better onboarding.</p> <p>5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Effective introductions aid in better communication and problem-solving.</p>

5.4.6.5 Subtheme 5: Allocation of Mentors and Supervisors	Positive experiences with mentors providing guidance; quality varied.	5.4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Limited mentor knowledge about ecotourism affected guidance. 5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Effective mentorship contributes to problem-solving and communication skills.
5.4.7.1 Subtheme 1: Navigating the Transition - Expectations Versus Reality in WPBL	Notable gap between expectations and actual WPBL experiences; many faced unexpected practical challenges.	5.4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Practical learning and application of classroom knowledge Discrepancies between expected and actual applications. 5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Practical skills learned differed from initial expectations.
5.4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Allocated Industry Supervisors' Limited Awareness of Ecotourism and Student Roles in WPBL	Mentors lacked understanding of ecotourism and specific student roles, affecting assignment relevance.	5.4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Skills development impacted by mentors' limited understanding. 5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Skills learned were sometimes unrelated to the field of study due to mentor awareness.
5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Communication and Problem-Solving Skills	WPBL improved communication and problem-solving skills, including handling difficult customers.	5.4.8.2 Subtheme 2: Networking and relationships also contributed to improved communication skills. 5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Learning practical skills in various departments : Practical experiences enriched problem-solving and communication abilities.
5.4.8.2 Subtheme 2: Forming Lifelong Relationships and Networks	WPBL facilitated the formation of professional relationships and networks, enhancing leadership skills.	5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Effective communication supported networking. 5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Diverse departmental experiences facilitated relationship-building and leadership development.
5.4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Learning Practical Skills in Various Departments	Students gained a broad range of practical skills, including leadership, communication, and technical tasks.	5.4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Skills beyond academic knowledge were a key WPBL benefit. 5.4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Communication and problem-solving skills were developed through hands-on experience.

Source: Generated by author

WPBL is important in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application (Ziegler, Chipanga, and Magoda, 2020). Therefore, understanding WPBL fully necessitates cross-referencing several subthemes to reveal complex links among its elements.

This study explores important conclusions from a synthesised Table 5.4, clarifying WPBL experience strengths and limitations. First, mentoring turns out to be absolutely fundamental in WPBL. Analysing the success of mentoring (5.4.6.5) helps us see how it interacts with other aspects. Mentoring, in particular, affects the useful application of classroom knowledge (5.4.5.1) and communication skills (5.4.8.1). This interdependence emphasises how good mentoring shapes students' professional development in various aspects of the WPBL process.

Table 5.4 does however, also highlight areas where expectations differ from actual experience. For instance, it's intriguing to observe the disparity between students' expected and actual learning outcomes (5.4.7.1). Furthermore, mentors' ignorance of ecotourism (5.4.7.2) creates restrictions that may compromise the general quality of WPBL visits. These differences highlight the need for focused treatments to match expectations and improve mentor-student relations. Furthermore, the table provides a complete picture by linking comments on workplace introduction (5.4.6.4), PPE provision (5.4.6.3), and practical skill development (5.4.8.3). This combined view guides programme design and execution, enabling teachers and practitioners to maximise WPBL opportunities. Regarding professional development, WPBL has clear advantages. Key results are better communication, problem-solving techniques, and more professional networks (5.4.8.1 and 5.4.8.2). These skills improve students' career readiness and help their chosen fields flourish over time.

5.4.9 THEME 8: ENHANCING THE ORGANISATIONAL AND WPBL EXPERIENCE

The overarching theme of recommendations pertaining to the organisation and work placement experience encompasses several subthemes. These subthemes encompass the necessity for comprehensive evaluation and monitoring of the pertinence of skills being acquired, effective and transparent communication with mentors, appropriate allocation of duties pertaining to conservation and environmental responsibilities, as well as the imperative for a formal structure to provide guidance to mentors in fulfilling their duties. Another subtheme is the importance of clear outcomes being communicated to students and the need for two WIL coordinators, one male and one female, to represent both genders and better understand the challenges faced by students.

Overall, the recommendations suggest a need for better communication, monitoring, and support from both the organisation and the department to ensure a more beneficial and well-rounded work placement experience for students; these are further illustrated in Figure 5.24.



Figure 5.24: Recommendations for the organisation and WPBL

5.4.9.1 Subtheme 1: Recommendation to endorse organisations for future WPBL placement and the need for thorough evaluation and monitoring of the WPBL programme

The students propose that DUT, specifically the Department of Ecotourism, should implement rigorous monitoring and evaluation procedures to assess the quality of WPBL. Additionally, they recommend establishing effective communication channels between the department and mentors and implementing a comprehensive and well-documented framework. Furthermore, it is imperative that the mentors possess comprehensive readiness to cater to the needs of ecotourism students.

Moreover, the assignments assigned to students must be in accordance with the desired outcomes. In general, the students hold the belief that implementing these enhancements would render the organisation an even more favourable choice for WPBL.

"Yes, I would definitely recommend this organisation for future placement. I think it is a great organisation. I mean, to have that brand in your CV, it would be beneficial." (Respondent 17, FG2)

"I would recommend that any other students get the opportunity to go to this organisation, but what I would emphasise is that the institution, the university, really monitors the type of experience we are getting versus the type of experience we are supposed to be getting. I would recommend thorough evaluation, more frequent visits, and clear communication with mentors so that they give us relevant duties and tasks." (Respondent 24, FG2)

"Yes, I would recommend placement at this organisation, but there must be a very clear, well-documented structure from the institution to the workplace mentors and supervisors on what work-integrated learning is about, specifically for us who are in the field of ecotourism. Clear outcomes should be communicated so that whatever tasks we are given, they are aligned with the outcomes." (Respondent 25, FG2)

"Yes, I would certainly recommend this organisation, but on the condition that mentors are fully prepared for ecotourism students. From my experience, there were a lot of things that we could have done that would have helped us in the ecotourism field, but we never got an opportunity to do those things." (Respondent 26, FG2)

The respondents suggested that a comprehensive assessment and ongoing supervision of the work placement experience initiative be conducted. The importance of clear communication and structured guidelines for mentors and supervisors was underscored, with the aim of ensuring that the tasks delegated to students are pertinent and congruent with the outcomes of WPBL.

5.4.9.2 Subtheme 2: Allocation of relevant duties and tasks to students

The respondents recommend that the organisation and the institution allocate relevant duties and tasks to the students. It is recommended that mentors in the field of ecotourism undergo comprehensive preparation and are provided with explicit objectives to effectively align tasks with these outcomes. The aforementioned statement emphasises the importance of establishing a comprehensive framework that encompasses the entire organisational hierarchy, ranging from the educational institution to the mentors and supervisors in the workplace.

This framework is crucial in order to ensure the successful implementation of work-integrated learning initiatives.

"I would recommend thorough evaluation, more frequent visits, and clear communication with mentors so that they give us relevant duties and tasks. Speaking from my own experience, I was very limited in that all the duties that I ended up doing for the six months were hospitality-related, and I never got the opportunity to do anything related to conservation like some of my classmates". (Respondent 24, FG2)

"But on the condition that mentors are fully prepared for ecotourism students. From my experience, there were a lot of things that we could have done that would have helped us in the ecotourism field, but we never got the opportunity to do those things. For future students, the experience should not only be limited to duties related to hospitality, but more conservation, environmental, and outdoor responsibilities should be allocated to students". (Respondent 26, FG2).

"Yes, I would recommend placement at this organisation, but there must be a very clear, well-documented structure from the institution to the workplace mentors and supervisors on what work-integrated learning is about specifically for us who are in the field of ecotourism. Clear outcomes should be communicated so that whatever task we are given is aligned with the outcomes". (Respondent 25, FG2)

5.4.9.3 Subtheme 3: Formal structure to guide workplace mentors on duties aligned with WPBL programme outcomes

Based on the findings of the data analysis, it was revealed that certain respondents from focus group 2 express a favourable view towards their placement institution. However, they also express a desire for a more formalised framework that provides guidance to workplace mentors regarding the specific tasks to assign to students. This framework would also ensure that these tasks are aligned with the intended outcomes of the WPBL programme. It is argued by proponents that the existing informal approach deprives students of authentic learning experiences and that implementing a more structured approach would benefit both students and mentors.

"I would also recommend a formal structure, you know, that will guide the workplace mentors on really what are the duties that they're supposed to be giving students that are aligned with the outcomes of WIL. Instead of just the invitation saying, take these students, see what you do with them, that is very informal, and it robs students of the actual experience." (Respondent 26, FG2)

"Yes, I would recommend placement at this organisation, but there must be a very clear, well-documented structure from the institution to the workplace mentors and supervisors on what work-integrated learning is about, specifically for us who are in the field of ecotourism. " (Respondent 25, FG2)

The above call for a formal structure to guide workplace mentors and students' responsibilities may be connected to the concern that these mentors are not adequately prepared. For instance, respondents from focus group 1 believed that the mentors at their workplace were not adequately informed about their course or what was expected of them in terms of providing relevant experience. Respondent 3 suggests that the mentors at the workplace should be better informed about the course outcomes and what is expected of them to assist students in gaining relevant experience. The suggestion is to have an engagement between the mentors or organisations and the Department of Ecotourism to educate them about ecotourism before the placement.

"First and foremost, improvement should start with educating the mentors at the workplace on what we need to cover when we get there. Also, what is expected from the mentors to assist us in getting the relevant experience. So, what would have helped when we got to the organisation was for mentors to be better informed about our course and the outcomes of WIL, but instead we did not get that. Mentors were just busy with their usual daily routine, and that did not contribute much to enhancing the experience for us. It is best that mentors or organisations meet with DUT and have an engagement so that they are educated on what ecotourism is. When we got to the workplace, even our mentors kept asking us what ecotourism is, and we had to explain it to them, which shows they do not know what it is, so it would have been better if DUT could educate these organisations before they place us." (Respondent 3, FG1)

In a similar vein, the viewpoint shared by Respondent 13 in focus group 1 posits that the Department of Ecotourism should assume a proactive stance in supervising the onboarding procedures at newly established facilities where students are assigned. The aforementioned oversight plays a critical role in ensuring that mentors possess adequate knowledge about the WPBL programme and that students are effectively integrated into the organisational framework. This observation demonstrates a preference for proactive strategies aimed at improving the quality and efficacy of WPBL.

"I think our department should also visit, check, and pay close attention to these types of establishments. These establishments are still fairly new, therefore close monitoring by our department is necessary, particularly to monitor the structure of the organisation or establishment and see how we are integrated into that structure as students." (Respondent 13, FG1)

In addressing the above concern, Respondent 12 from Focus Group 1 proposes that the implementation of continuous supervision of students during their placement would contribute to enhancing their comprehension and adjustment within the professional environment.

"What I suggest is constant monitoring of students when they are exposed to WIL. That will definitely help a lot in terms of improving their understanding and adaptation in the workplace. That, for me, was the biggest issue that we faced during our in-service training at the private game reserve. No one from the institution came to check up on us, to monitor and check how we live and how we have adapted. The last time we ever saw anyone from DUT was when we were dropped off at the workplace. We ended up looking like a flock of lost sheep because we had no herder and no one to lead us, particularly from the institution." (Respondent 12, FG1)

Respondent 1 proposes that it would be beneficial for the department to conduct visits and closely monitor establishments that are currently experiencing growth in order to facilitate the effective integration of students within the organisational framework.

"Okay, I would comment on the side of the institution that sometimes we are placed, like myself, at establishments that are still growing, so you find that there are too few staff members and just us, DUT students. I think our department should also visit, check, and pay close attention to these types of establishments. These establishments are still fairly new; therefore, close monitoring by our department is necessary, particularly to monitor the structure of the organisation or establishment and see how we are integrated into that structure as students." (Respondent 13, FG1)

Additionally, Respondent 9 proposes that it would be beneficial for the department to conduct follow-up measures in order to ascertain whether students are indeed obtaining the intended educational experience.

"The Department should make a follow-up on whether we are getting the experience that we are supposed to receive since WIL is under academic courses." (Respondent 9, FG1)

The voices of the respondents resound with a common concern, the absence of vigilant oversight and assistance from the department during their WPBL. They expressed disappointment that no representative from the department took the initiative to visit and assess their performance in the workplace. This perceived lack of support left them adrift, yearning for guidance in unfamiliar terrain. Additionally, some participants underscored the pivotal role the department should play in monitoring the organisational structure, especially in the case of new placements. This oversight is viewed as a crucial factor in ensuring that students are fully integrated into the establishment and gain the necessary experience and exposure.

This perspective highlights the significance of structured support mechanisms for an enhanced WPBL experience.

5.4.9.4 Subtheme 4: The imperative of two WIL coordinators for ensuring gender representation and student safety

In order to ensure the representation of both genders, Participant 25 in focus group 2 suggested appointing two WIL coordinators, one male and one female. The participant expresses the opinion that, as a female student, the presence of a male WIL coordinator may pose challenges in comprehending the distinct obstacles encountered by female students. Hence, the individual opines that the presence of two coordinators, each representing a distinct gender, would enhance inclusivity and foster a more comprehensive support structure for students.

"The most burning and important recommendation that I would like to put forward is that we have two WIL coordinators one being male and one being female. I think if you're a female and you have a male WIL coordinator becomes very difficult even for them to put themselves in their shoes as a woman because. I feel yes some, of the challenges we face as students are common, but they differ in terms of what males encounter and what we as females encounter. So, I think from the start of the institution you know, not just for the department but the institution as a whole they should be WIL-coordinators that represent both genders." (Respondent 25, FG2)

According to the input provided by Respondent 5 in focus group 1, it is recommended that the department take necessary measures to guarantee the well-being and security of students within their work environments, with a specific emphasis on addressing the issue of accommodations for students placed in the private sector.

"Our department should ensure safety of the students in the workplace. Like accommodation if they are in private sectors because some organisations, they don't provide accommodation." (Respondent 5, FG1).

In essence, the respondents have offered valuable recommendations to enhance the WPBL experience. Additionally, they emphasise the importance of a thorough evaluation and monitoring process for the programme. It is essential to allocate relevant duties and tasks to students, as well as provide structured guidance to workplace mentors. A clear communication of programme outcomes to mentors is highlighted, as is the proposal for dual WIL coordinators representing both genders to oversee WPBL.

These suggestions collectively aim to ensure that students receive a meaningful work placement experience that aligns with their programme objectives within a nurturing and inclusive environment. Respondents expressed concerns about the need for enhanced mentor education on course outcomes and improved institutional support throughout placements. Additionally, they highlighted the critical aspects of safety and accommodation for students, particularly in private sector placements. Furthermore, there is a strong call for ongoing institutional follow-up to ensure students receive the intended educational benefits from the WPBL programme, aligning it with their academic courses. Additionally, close attention is directed to newly established organisations and the seamless integration of students within their operational framework. In the subsequent section, a comprehensive account of the focus group interview will be presented, encompassing students placed in conventional tourism settings. This investigation involved two distinct groups, referred to as Group 3 and Group 4, each comprising nine participants. When the data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed in a planned way, a set of subthemes and relevant overarching themes emerged that gave important new information about the topic being studied.

5.5 SECTION 4

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS - STUDENTS PLACED AT CONVENTIONAL TOURISM ORGANISATIONS

This section describes the focus group interview with students who were placed in conventional tourism settings. A focus group session was held with two distinct groups, that is, groups 3 and 4, each consisting of 8 and 9 students, respectively. Subthemes and pertinent themes were found after the data from the semi-structured questions were analysed. Subthemes and pertinent themes were found after the data from the semi-structured questions were analysed. The emerging themes and subthemes that resulted from the data analysis are highlighted in Table 5.4.

5.5.1 THEME 1: MOTIVATION AND POST-ENROLLMENT EXPERIENCES IN THE NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN ECOTOURISM MANAGEMENT

This theme delves into the underlying motivations that may have influenced the students' decision to enrol in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. The respondents in the aforementioned focus groups offered diverse justifications for their decision to enrol in the course, as depicted in Figure 5.25.

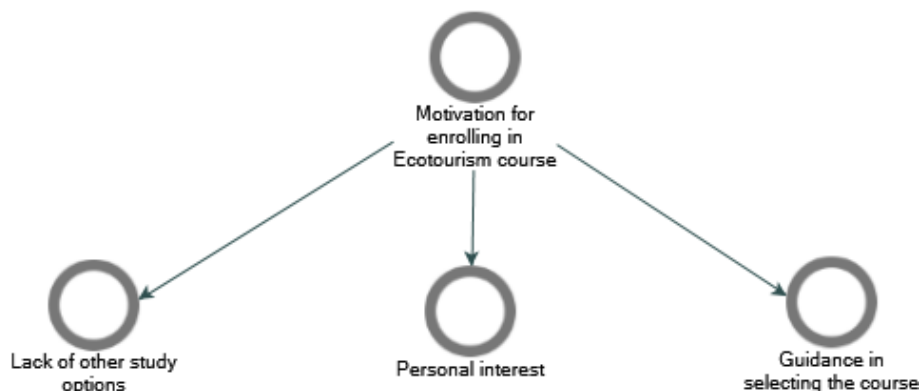


Figure 5.25: Motivation for enrolling for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management

Table 5.4: Identification of themes and subthemes by ecotourism students placed at conventional tourism organisations

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Motivation and post-enrollment experiences in the national diploma in ecotourism management	Subtheme 1: Discovery of a new interest in ecotourism Subtheme 2: Exposure to conservation and travel opportunities Subtheme 3: Career opportunities and versatility of the qualification
Theme 2: Core services in student host WPBL organisations	Subtheme 1: Hospitality Group Subtheme 2: Municipal Local Development Office Subtheme 3: Museum Subtheme 4: Classifying the placement organisation as an ecotourism entity
Theme 3: Exposure to various organisational departments during WPBL	Subtheme 1: Encounters with various departments or divisions Subtheme 2: Limited exposure to ecotourism-related tasks
Theme 4: Student familiarity with WIL and WPBL	Subtheme 1: Previous experience and knowledge Subtheme 2: Integration of theoretical and practical learning Subtheme 3: Mismatch between academic content and practical experience Subtheme 4: Learning through work experience and exposure Subtheme 5: Unpaid work experience
Theme 5: Preparedness and Completion of WPBL	Subtheme 1: Adequacy of preparation for WPBL by the institution Subtheme 2: Lack of preparation for WPBL by organisations Subtheme 3: Inability to complete the six-month WPBL period due to COVID-19
Theme 6: New knowledge acquired during WPBL	Subtheme 1: Communication and customer relations Subtheme 2: Leadership and interpersonal skills Subtheme 3: The acquisition of culinary expertise with the practise of ethical integrity Subtheme 4: Confidence in public speaking
Theme 7: Recommendations for the organisation for future placements	Subtheme 1: Positive feedback and recommendation for the organisation Subtheme 2: Negative and mixed feedback as well as unwillingness to endorse the organisation for future WPBL placement Subtheme 3: Mixed experience, depends on the programme
Theme 8: Grasping the discipline-specific skills and knowledge essential for ecotourism	Subtheme 1: Entrepreneurship and business opportunities

Theme 9: Recommendations to improve WPBL	Subtheme 1: Ensuring WIL coordinator support and facilitating timely, adequate work placement preparation Subtheme 2: Clear policies regarding work hours and compensation
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Source: Generated by author

5.5.1.1 Subtheme 1: Discovery of a new interest in ecotourism

One respondent stated that they initially had little knowledge about the course. However, they seized the opportunity because they were eager to avoid idle time at home. One respondent shared their experience of being motivated to pursue the course as a result of their cousin's passionate endorsement of nature conservation. For the third respondent, enrolling in the course was a secondary option, but they quickly developed a deep appreciation for it, particularly recognising the rich content related to nature.

"I did not know anything about the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management, I got an opportunity, and I took because I didn't want to stay at home. At first year, I didn't like the qualification to an extent that I applied for other qualifications in DUT. I was not accepted then I continued with it." (Respondent 5, FG4)

"I wanted to do nature conservation, my cousin told me about ecotourism, and I was informed that it somehow related to nature conservation, then I applied and enrolled for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management." (Respondent 7, FG4)

"My only focus was studying, regardless of the qualification." (Respondent R4, FG3)

"I have always been interested in ecotourism and I want to pursue a career in this field." (R6, FG3).

"I was advised by Business Law HOD to enroll for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management." (Respondent 4, FG3)

The primary impetus for enrolling in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management seems to arise from deliberate course selection, a sincere interest in ecotourism, and a proactive evaluation of future employment opportunities within the industry. The aforementioned observations are in strong agreement with the opinions shared by participants in both focus group 1 and focus group 2. A variety of factors, such as personal interests, professional objectives, and a desire to have a positive impact on the environment and local communities, influence people's decisions to pursue a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. A subset of students who registered for the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management possessed a limited understanding of the programme at the outset. Nevertheless, as they advanced through the educational programme and engaged in experiential learning activities, their interest in and comprehension of the concept of ecotourism underwent a significant transformation. For example, Respondent 5 initially enrolled in the programme with the aim of pursuing a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).

However, over time, they developed a strong interest in biodiversity conservation and also found great pleasure in exploring different travel opportunities.

"I did not know ecotourism, [...] I enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management with the aim of doing a PGCE after completing the qualification. I studied and loved the conservation of biodiversity content. I learned and experienced that travelling is good because I also went on a trip." (Respondent 5, FG3)

These findings are consistent with the studies conducted by Sangpikul and Batra (2007) and Cini and Passafaro (2019), both of which suggest that the younger demographic generally possesses a restricted comprehension of ecotourism. According to Sangpikul and Batra (2007), it is advisable to disseminate environmental and ecotourism knowledge through a combination of formal and informal channels. Formal channels encompass educational institutions, such as schools, colleges, and universities, which can offer specialised courses on the subject matter. According to the findings of Kasim and Wickens (2020), the inclination of young individuals towards environmental concerns can be attributed to their personal travel experiences or the acquisition of knowledge from informal channels such as television or the internet. According to the eighth respondent, their understanding of ecotourism was limited until they were approached by a member of the Student Representative Council (SRC). Nevertheless, motivated by their inquisitiveness, they independently undertook a research endeavour to evaluate the suitability of the qualification and were gratified to ascertain its congruence with their personal interests and professional goals.

"I was not aware of ecotourism. SRC members came to us and asked if we had level 5 in geography and life science. We were then taken to the department, and we were enrolled. I then did research about the qualification. I found out that I made a good choice by joining ecotourism." (Respondent 8, FG3)

This implies that imparting adequate education and information to young individuals regarding their initial encounter with ecotourism can substantially augment their travel experiences and foster a heightened understanding of the significance of environmental conservation. It is important to acknowledge that the acquisition of knowledge about ecotourism is currently facilitated by a wide range of formal and informal channels. However, it is crucial to recognise that there are certain limitations in the process of obtaining this knowledge. The availability of comprehensive information regarding specific areas may not always be adequately provided by government and private sector sources.

Additionally, traditional media platforms used in tourism campaigns may not effectively engage young audiences or motivate them to explore the intricacies associated with ecotourism (Buffa, 2015).

5.5.1.2 Subtheme 2: Exposure to conservation and travel opportunities

A number of students expressed their appreciation for the conservation and biodiversity components of the qualification, in addition to the chance to engage in travel and explore various regions across the globe.

"I studied and loved the conservation of biodiversity content. I learned and experienced that travelling is good because I also went on a trip." (Respondent 5, FG3)

"I enjoyed the fact that we got to learn about different cultures, different plants, and different animals that are all over the world. It was a good experience, learning about different things." (Respondent 6, FG3)

"We got to go on a lot of trips, learn a lot of things, and we also got to interact with people from different countries." (Respondent 8, FG3)

The above statements highlight the positive experiences of certain students in regard to their engagement with the subjects of conservation and biodiversity, as well as the valuable prospects of travel and exploration in diverse regions across the globe. The participants expressed their gratitude for the chance to acquire knowledge about diverse cultures, flora, and fauna, deeming it a highly beneficial encounter. It appears that these factors have influenced the students' inclination towards pursuing a professional trajectory in the field of ecotourism.

5.5.1.3 Subtheme 3: Career opportunities and versatility of the qualification

Several students expressed initial uncertainty regarding the employment opportunities associated with the programme. Upon gaining knowledge regarding the multifaceted nature of the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management and the wide array of employment prospects across diverse sectors, their conviction in selecting this field of study grew stronger. The students emphasised that the acquisition of a diploma equips them with a diverse set of skills and knowledge that can be effectively utilised across multiple industries. The adaptability of individuals is of great significance in a dynamic labour market where competencies and expertise that can be utilised across various industries are in high demand.

Several students also indicated a desire to pursue advanced studies in the field of ecotourism, citing its captivating nature and abundant opportunities as motivating factors.

"I was then motivated to believe that I would find employment, though some people are shocked and always ask what I mean when I mention that I am doing a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. I am aware of and confident about my qualifications, though." (Respondent 2, FG3)

"I enjoy this qualification, and I am planning to study further in this field with ecotourism as I enjoy this qualification." (Respondent 3, FG3)

"I can be able to work in any industry because I have a diploma in Ecotourism Management." (Respondent 6, FG3)

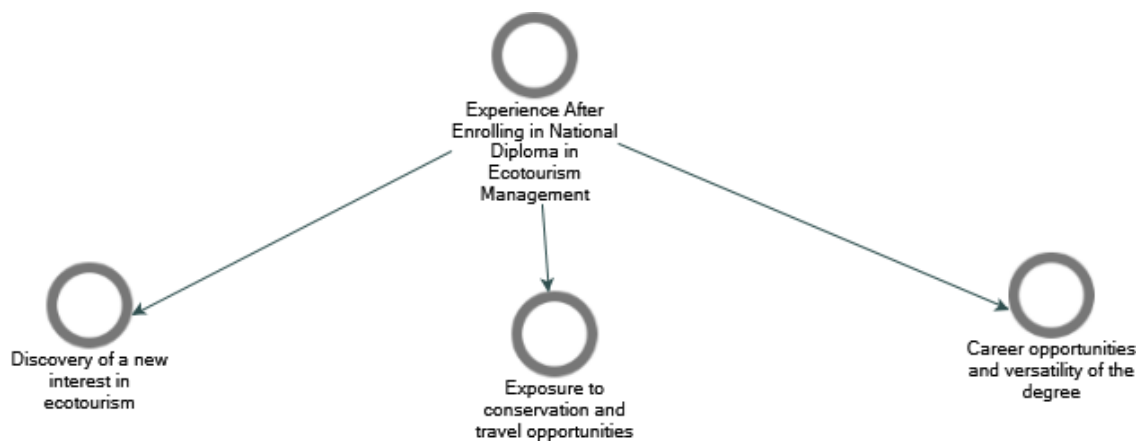


Figure 5.26: Experience after enrollment in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management

The empirical evidence indicates that students generally have a positive perception of the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management programme offered at DUT. The key subthemes are further shown in Figure 5.26. The study identified several themes and subthemes related to students' experiences and perceptions of the programme. One of the main themes was the motivation for enrolling in the programme. Some students were initially unaware of the programme or had different career goals in mind, but eventually chose to enrol due to advice from others or a newfound interest in ecotourism. Several students discovered a new interest in ecotourism after taking courses and going on field trips, while others enjoyed the conservation and travel opportunities provided by the programme.

Additionally, some students were initially unsure about the career prospects of the programme but became more confident in their choice after learning about the versatility of the degree and the potential for job opportunities in various industries.

5.5.2 THEME 2: CORE SERVICES IN STUDENT WPBL HOST ORGANISATIONS

The focus of this section pertains to the fundamental services provided by placement organisations, as indicated by multiple participants. The range of core services offered during the work placement exhibited variation among the participants. The subsequent section will address the subthemes that have been identified.

5.5.2.1 Subtheme 1: Hospitality Group

The organisation comprises various amenities, such as a coffee shop, conference centre, bed and breakfast, and lodging facilities. As per the participants' responses, their responsibilities encompassed a diverse range of duties, including overseeing the reception area, providing support for guest inquiries, addressing their needs, managing reservations, and handling telephone inquiries. Respondents 6 and 7 explicitly indicated that they were assigned to a hospitality group where they gained exposure to various units, including a coffee shop, conference centre, bed and breakfast, and accommodation facilities. Additionally, they documented their experience of rotating across various divisions within the organisation, which involved undertaking tasks such as reception duties, managing bookings, interacting with guests, handling phone calls, and working in housekeeping. Respondent 1 also indicated employment at the Hospitality Group, which aligns with the experiences of Respondents 6 and 7. Additionally, Respondent 1 expressed a particular inclination towards working in the events and bar departments, citing satisfaction derived from customer interactions and collaborative teamwork. Respondent 9 was assigned to the Hospitality Group and had the opportunity to work in four different departments, leading to a varied experience that encompassed responsibilities in reception, the kitchen, housekeeping, as well as the bar and restaurant. Their primary responsibilities encompassed tasks within the kitchen, bar, and restaurant sectors.

"I was exposed to four departments: reception, kitchen, housekeeping, bar, and restaurant. I was mostly working at the kitchen, bar and restaurant because we were many as students and number of staff working limited because of COVID-19 restrictions. I was doing dishes at first, and I was introduced to cooking certain meals in the kitchen. After six weeks, I worked at the bar; I enjoyed it since I was getting tips, and those tips were assisting me with transport."(Respondent 9, FG4)

5.5.2.2 Subtheme 2: Municipal Local Development Office

Based on the observations of Respondent 2, it appears that the Municipal Local Development Office exhibited a relatively subdued atmosphere. A participant in the study reported that they had received training on system usage but subsequently experienced a day where no tasks were assigned to them. Furthermore, it was observed that the department responsible for tourism was temporarily non-operational, resulting in the respondents being unable to be reassigned to an alternative division.

"I can say that the municipality is not that busy, I was working at the Local Development Office, and when I arrived, my mentor taught me how to use the system. I would stay for a day doing nothing because maybe one customer would arrive in a day. Staying doing nothing was boring yet I enjoy doing some work, in that municipality, however, I was told that I cannot work in another unit since the tourism department was closed." (Respondent 2, FG3)

Respondent 4 was actively engaged in meetings, collaborating with their mentor to disseminate valuable information to local communities pertaining to potential business prospects and effective strategies for fostering expansion. The municipality's lack of ecotourism-related activities was the driving force behind the implementation of this initiative.

"I was told that there were no tasks in the municipality since they were covid 19 however, I use to attend meetings with my mentor and teach communities about business opportunities and growth. I have developed love for entrepreneurship because the municipality did not have ecotourism related activities." (Respondent 4, FG4)

The placement within the municipality was characterised as relatively slow-paced, with one respondent noting that they frequently faced idle periods owing to a scarcity of visitors or enquirers. Furthermore, respondents expressed their inability to be reassigned to alternative units, a circumstance attributed to the temporary closure of the tourism department within the Municipal Local Development Office.

5.5.2.3 Subtheme 3: Museum

The Museum houses multiple departments, among which the education department served as the designated location for the placement of the ecotourism students. As per the participants' responses, their responsibilities entailed tasks such as providing guidance to visitors within the galleries, supervising the gallery areas, and facilitating educational tours.

Furthermore, participants expressed the importance of being able to acquire valuable knowledge from the exhibitions department and engage in various activities offered at the Learner Research Centre.

"The Museum has many departments, however. ecotourism students are posted to work in the education department. At education, we are doing gallery guiding, gallery monitoring doing gallery tours. I was not necessarily working on all the education projects," (Respondent 4, FG3)

Respondents 5 and 6 were assigned to the education department and were tasked with facilitating gallery tours and outreach programmes for visitors and students.

"We were having many departments but were placed at education department. I was to take students and visitors for gallery tours, do outreach programmes." (Respondent 6, FG4).

"One of my classmates mentioned most of the tasks, I will add that we were mostly specialising in gallery guiding. We would take customers to various galleries like birds, history, mammals, primates, etc. Though I have not studied history, I have learned in the museum about history. I can also add that the museum has its own library with birds that are very informative." (Respondent 5, FG3)

Respondent 10 had engaged in various roles such as tour guiding, placement at a coffee shop, and reception duties. However, it was observed that they were not provided with substantial work assignments or adequate mentorship.

"We were doing tour guiding, working at a coffee shop and the reception. We were told that we did not have much work to do, neither did we had a mentor and we were told that we will see ourselves what we are doing." (Respondent 10, FG4)

Respondents assigned to the museum shared that their responsibilities primarily centred around the education department, involving tasks like guiding visitors through the galleries, ensuring their proper maintenance, and conducting educational tours. Additionally, they gained exposure to various other departments within the museum, including the exhibitions department and the Learner Research Centre. During their tenure, they acquired valuable knowledge on interpretation and history, exploring galleries dedicated to birds, history, mammals, and primates. The Museum also boasted a well-stocked library containing informative articles about avian life. According to Weaver (2004), ecotourism emerged as a form of alternative tourism focused on nature and is still considered by some experts and practitioners as the most authentic form within this sector.

While assessing the key criteria of ecotourism suggests that well-preserved natural areas are ideal venues, altered environments also hold potential and may offer unique environmental benefits. Furthermore, urban ecotourism, it is increasingly acknowledged as a phenomenon with the potential for positive environmental impacts due to its ability to operate on a large scale and be contained within manageable spaces. The experience at the Museum strongly supports the argument for the integration of urban spaces into ecotourism initiatives. It showcases that urban environments have the potential to play a significant role in environmental education and conservation efforts. By offering diverse educational programmes and opportunities for visitors to engage with natural history, even in the heart of a city, urban ecotourism can effectively promote awareness and appreciation for the natural world. This experience provides valuable evidence for this study that urban areas should be recognised and utilised as important components of ecotourism. This study supports the experience at the Museum as highly relevant as an urban ecotourism experience for several reasons. First, it provides visitors with a unique opportunity to engage in natural history and environmental education within an urban setting. The Museum's galleries dedicated to birds, history, mammals, and primates provide a valuable educational experience focused on biodiversity and conservation, even within the confines of a city. Additionally, the exposure to different departments within the museum, such as the exhibitions department and the Learner Research Centre, highlights the multifaceted nature of urban ecotourism. It demonstrates that urban spaces can serve as hubs for environmental education, research, and interpretation, making them important contributors to the broader ecotourism landscape.

5.5.2.4 Subtheme 4: Classifying the placement organisation as an ecotourism entity

- Categorisation of the Hospitality Group

Respondent 6 stated that the Hospitality Group cannot be classified as an ecotourism organisation due to its limited engagement in promoting responsible travel practices and the absence of fundamental amenities like recycling bins.

“The Hospitality Group is not an ecotourism organisation; it is a hospitality organisation. There is no responsible traveling thing, they don't even have recycling bins”. (Respondent 6, FG3)

Respondent 8 and Respondent 2 both refrain from classifying the Hospitality Group as an ecotourism entity. Respondent 8 noted that clients would seek city-based activities, indicating a divergence from ecotourism, and Respondent 2 straightforwardly stated that the organisation does not have an ecotourism focus.

"Yes, clients would call and consult about things do things in the city. The organisation is not ecotourism related." (Respondent 8, FG4)

"No, an organisation is not an ecotourism-based organisation." (Respondent 2, FG4)

Respondent 1 notes that the placement organisation failed to meet the criteria of an ecotourism establishment due to the absence of local community benefits, conservation efforts, and community awareness regarding the hotel. According to the respondent, the Hospitality Group is situated in close proximity to picturesque locations; however, there appears to be a lack of adequate care provided to the local population.

"There is no benefit for local people, there is a forest, and the community is cutting the trees and there is no conservation, the local community is not even aware of the hotel. They are beautiful places near the hotel, workers once complained about not being paid, and there is no well-being of the local people however, it does not fit the ecotourism establishment criteria." (Respondent 1, FG3)

The evolving landscape of the hotel industry, characterised by an increased emphasis on sustainability and responsible tourism practices, underlines the potential for hotels to serve as invaluable learning environments for students pursuing a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. As the pandemic crisis has catalysed a paradigm shift towards more conscientious tourism initiatives, hotels have become hubs of innovation in areas such as circular economy processes, equitable community engagement, and the design of safe and enriching tourist experiences (Vargas-Sánchez, 2018; Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2020; Hu, Yan, and Casey, 2020). The transition to a tourism model that prioritises collective well-being over hyper-consumerism further reinforces the argument for hotels as pivotal learning spaces for ecotourism students (Chassagne and Everingham, 2020). By immersing themselves in such settings, students have the opportunity to witness firsthand the integration of sustainable practices, community engagement, and the prioritisation of well-being in the operations of these establishments. This not only enhances their theoretical understanding but also equips them with practical insights into how ecotourism principles can be effectively implemented in urban environments.

In essence, hotels, particularly those at the forefront of sustainable and responsible tourism practices, provide an ideal environment for students enrolled in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. Through exposure to these innovative and socially conscious environments, students stand to gain invaluable experiential knowledge that complements their academic pursuits, ultimately equipping them to be effective practitioners in the field of ecotourism.

- Categorisation of the Museum

According to Respondent 4, the Museum is characterised as a cultural heritage institution rather than an ecotourism organisation. According to the respondent, the museum provides galleries and exhibitions that present the historical and cultural legacy of South Africa, encompassing its connections with India and China. The respondent further emphasised the significance of ecotourism and the imperative to acquire knowledge regarding the historical and cultural aspects of the nation.

“The history at the Museum is interesting, it speaks about the arrival of North Africans to Southern Africa. The Northern Africans taught the San how to plant as they were only eating meat. There is even a gallery that speaks about the South African relations with India and China, SA had numerals, India had spices and China had cotton. That comes back to the current relations with these countries, which is BRICS. I have learned that ecotourism is very important, these galleries can take you through the arrival of whites in South Africa, from Cape town to KwaZulu-Natal, the history in the museum even talks about the Zulu portion of the province and the Natal portion of the province, the design of PMB, there is a lot that one must know as South Africans in the Museum.”
(Respondent 4, FG3).

In contrast, Respondent 5 contends that the Museum can be classified as an ecotourism entity due to its provision of galleries dedicated to themes like conservation, pollution, and the marine ecosystem. Additionally, the respondent highlights the presence of archaeologists engaged in research and educational activities pertaining to history. According to the respondent, the fundamental ethos of the museum revolves around the principles of preservation and conservation.

“The Museum is ecotourism-based because galleries have animals, and conservation galleries and they have a gallery speaking about pollution and its impact on the marine ecosystem. They are also archaeologists who would do research and educate about history. The whole concept of the museum is preservation and conservation.”
(Respondent 5, FG3)

The museum, situated in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, is recognised as an institution with an essential role in imparting knowledge about the historical narrative of the province. This encompasses the arrival and interactions of diverse ethnic groups, as well as the architectural layout of various environments within the province. Moreover, the museum is perceived as being dedicated to the principles of preservation and conservation. It achieves this through exhibitions featuring fauna and illustrating the repercussions of pollution on marine ecosystems. Respondent 5 emphasises the museum's contribution to advocating for the importance of ecotourism, stating that it is fundamentally rooted in this concept.

5.5.3 THEME 3: EXPOSURE TO VARIOUS ORGANISATIONAL DEPARTMENTS DURING WPBL

The central focus of the theme pertains to the degree to which students were exposed to different departments or divisions within the organisation during their WPBL, as depicted in Figure 5.27. This overarching theme includes subthemes that pertain to the extent of engagement in ecotourism-related activities, whether the exposure was limited to the realm of the hospitality industry, and the level of preparedness for the ecotourism sector. A number of respondents expressed limited access to opportunities for involvement in ecotourism-related activities, whereas others perceived their exposure to be primarily centred around the field of hospitality. Furthermore, a subset of students expressed a feeling of inadequacy in their readiness to enter the field of ecotourism as professionals. They attributed this sentiment to a lack of congruence between the theoretical concepts covered in their coursework and the practical training they received.

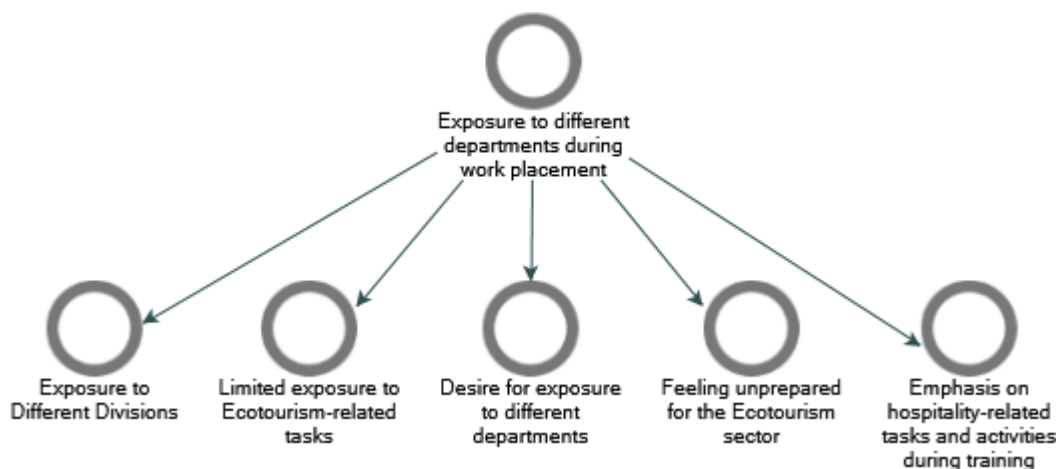


Figure 5.27: Exposure to different departments during WPBL

5.5.3.1 Subtheme 1: Encounters with various departments or divisions

A significant number of participants were provided with the opportunity to engage with various departments and divisions within their respective placement organisations. The aforementioned items encompassed:

- Reception and guest services

The respondents were exposed to reception and guest services as part of their WPBL experience. In addition, they were tasked with the responsibility of addressing incoming telephone communications, providing support to visitors, and managing various administrative duties, including the arrangement of reservations and the facilitation of check-in and check-out procedures. Additionally, they were engaged in the coordination of various events and activities for the guests, including but not limited to canoeing and hiking. The findings revealed that the participants' engagement in the activity facilitated the enhancement of their aptitude in communication and customer service, particularly in the context of interacting with individuals hailing from diverse nations and cultural backgrounds.

"I was working at the reception, answering calls, and assisting guests, I would assist in activities like canoeing and hiking." (Respondent 3, FG4).

"We were having many departments but were placed at education department. I was to take students and visitors for gallery tours, do outreach programmes." (Respondent 6, FG4).

"I was exposed at four departments, reception, kitchen, housekeeping, bar and restaurant. I was mostly working at the kitchen, bar and restaurant because we were many as students and number of staff working limited because of COVID-19 restrictions." (Respondent 9, FG4).

- Event planning and community engagement projects

Two respondents mentioned their involvement in event planning and community engagement projects during the course of their WPBL. They assumed the responsibility of coordinating and managing various events while also actively interacting with the local community.

"I was doing many activities; I was arranging events and community engagement projects." (Respondent 1, FG4).

"In this office, they were dealing with organising events." (Respondent 5, FG4).

In the tasks outlined above, respondents had been involved in organising various aspects of events, such as handling logistics, conducting marketing efforts, organising community-based events, and executing activities aimed at encouraging community participation and interaction. Moreover, they were tasked with overseeing financial matters and guaranteeing that events were executed with seamless precision and efficiency.

- Fieldwork and surveys

Several respondents possessed prior experience collaborating in a research group that specifically targeted international tourists. Through their involvement, they acquired valuable skills in conducting fieldwork and effectively engaging with individuals from various cultural backgrounds. One instance involves the account provided by Respondent 5, who recounts their involvement in a survey group specifically dedicated to studying the behaviours and preferences of international tourists. The respondents' increased confidence in engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds was facilitated through the undertaking of fieldwork and active interaction with individuals hailing from different countries.

"I was exposed to the reception and at the field since I once worked at the airport doing a survey. Our survey was focusing on international tourists, to check if they are interested in PMB. I got the skill to be more confident when dealing with people from other countries and the community at large." (Respondent 5, FG4)

- Canoeing and hiking activities

The following statement is attributed to Respondent 3 who fulfilled the role of a receptionist at an organisation during their period of WPBL. As part of their professional responsibilities, they provided support to guests by facilitating recreational activities such as canoeing and hiking. No supplementary information has been provided regarding these activities.

"I would assist in activities like canoeing and hiking." (Respondent 3, FG4).

Respondent 2 reported engaging in daily tasks without being assigned to a specific department on a rotational basis.

"We have learnt everything in various departments, we would do reception, kitchen, housekeeping, and laundry department. One would be doing all the work every day not that one is tasked to work in one department per day." (Respondent 2, FG4).

This could be interpreted as cross-training, where the students were being trained in multiple areas to enhance their skills and versatility. Respondent 3 specifically mentioned working at the reception desk but also assisting with outdoor activities such as canoeing and hiking.

"I was working at the reception, answering calls, and assisting guests, I would assist in activities like canoeing and hiking." (Respondent 3, FG4).

The preceding responses suggest that the students were afforded the chance to engage in departmental rotations as part of their WPBL encounter. This enabled them to acquire a diverse range of skills and experiences spanning multiple domains within the organisation.

5.5.3.2 Subtheme 2: Limited exposure to ecotourism-related tasks

However, it should be noted that a subset of the respondents, specifically those belonging to focus group 3, expressed that their experience with ecotourism-related tasks during their WPBL was somewhat limited. The students expressed a perception of being primarily immersed in the realm of the hospitality industry, with a perceived lack of adequate preparation for the ecotourism sector, despite their status as students specialising in ecotourism.

"In the municipality, I did do anything related to ecotourism, I was working doing tasks that mostly serviced the community. I would have loved to work at the hotels because I love cleaning and cooking yet in eMthunjaneni Municipality, I was doing nothing most of the time." (Respondent 2, FG3)

"I felt as if I was not exposed to ecotourism because there are resources that I have shared with travellers, like mountains that I have mentioned, the history of Impendle that I would have taught. I was only exposed to the Hospitality industry, not the ecotourism industry. The content I have studied on campus and the activities I have done at everglades do not mix. The community has business opportunities for Homestays however, the community is not aware of those opportunities. I was well prepared within the Hospitality sector during my in-service training however, I was not prepared as an ecotourism student." (Respondent 1, FG3)

"I was not prepared as an ecotourism student, where I was placed, it was mostly about hospitality. I can also conclude and say, I was not prepared well for the ecotourism sector." (Respondent 3, FG3)

The hospitality industry holds substantial importance as a service sector within the global economy, encompassing a range of services such as food service, hotels, and tourism (Roy and Chowdhury, 2021).

The concepts of ecotourism and responsible hospitality are not mutually exclusive but rather interwoven components of a broader movement aimed at promoting sustainable and conscientious travel practises. While it is indeed accurate that ecotourism involves a wider range of activities beyond the realm of hospitality, it is crucial to acknowledge and recognise the significance of responsible hospitality.

"I was only exposed to the hospitality industry, not the ecotourism industry. The content I have studied on campus and the activities I have done at Everglades do not mix. The community has business opportunities for Homestays however, the community is not aware of those opportunities." (Respondent 1, FG3)

"I would have loved to work at the hotels because I love cleaning and cooking yet in eMthunjaneni Municipality, I was doing nothing most of the time." (Respondent 2, FG3)

The respondents conveyed a sense of inadequacy in terms of their readiness for the ecotourism industry based on their experiences in the WPBL setting. The participants expressed a perception of limited exposure to ecotourism-related tasks and responsibilities, with their training primarily focused on the hospitality sector. This finding suggests that there might be a discrepancy between the ecotourism studies curriculum and WPBL.

"I was only exposed to the hospitality industry, not the ecotourism industry. The content I have studied on campus and the activities I have done at the organisation do not mix. I was well prepared within the hospitality sector during my in-service training however, I was not prepared as an ecotourism student." (Respondent 1, FG3).

I was not prepared as an ecotourism student, where I was placed, it was mostly about hospitality. I can also conclude and say, I was not prepared well for the ecotourism sector (Respondent 3, FG3).

These findings indicate that ecotourism students who participated in WPBL within the hospitality industry may tend to consider their acquired experience as limited to conventional hospitality jobs, hence potentially disregarding the applicability of these skills in the context of ecotourism. The existence of this disparity in perception highlights the necessity for a fundamental change in the perspective of the hospitality sector in relation to the concept of ecotourism. The importance of ecotourism and responsible hospitality in the contemporary global context cannot be overemphasised. The changes are exerting an influence on the way individuals engage with various locations, fostering a more profound sense of attachment to local communities and an increased consciousness regarding environmental matters.

Responsible hospitality organisations play a crucial role in promoting these aims by implementing sustainable practices, actively interacting with communities, and prioritising the preservation of cultural heritage. The respondents conveyed a strong inclination towards gaining exposure to various departments and divisions within the organisation in which they were assigned, with a specific emphasis on those pertaining to the field of ecotourism. The respondents expressed the perception that their WPBL programme mostly emphasised the hotel sector, lacking sufficient opportunities to engage in ecotourism-related activities and develop relevant competencies. Furthermore, the respondents expressed a sense of dissatisfaction with the level of preparedness they received from their WPBL experience in relation to the ecotourism industry.

5.5.4 THEME 4: STUDENTS' FAMILIARITY WITH WIL AND WPBL

The central focus of this theme pertains to familiarity with and comprehension of WIL and WPBL. The emergent subthemes encompassed in the responses consist of prior experience with WPBL or similar activities, the amalgamation of theoretical and practical knowledge, and the anticipation of acquiring field experience. It is important to note that the terms 'work-integrated learning' and 'workplace-based learning' may be used interchangeably in the responses provided in this study. It is crucial to acknowledge that the interchangeability discussed here does not stray from the central focus, which is on WPBL. WIL is a comprehensive term that encompasses a range of modalities. Within this framework, WPBL is a specific type of WIL.

5.5.4.1 Subtheme 1: Previous experience and knowledge

Respondent 4 indicated that they possessed prior experience as a youth ambassador at the KwaZulu-Natal Premier's Office before their enrollment in the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management at DUT. This experience was beneficial in facilitating their comprehension of WIL. Additionally, the respondent acquired knowledge pertaining to flora and fauna through the interpretive displays at the Museum. They also recognised the significance of staying informed about contemporary events, as it can have implications for the tourism industry.

"I understood WPBL because I served as a youth ambassador at the KZN Premier's Office before enrolling in DUT. I have learned that through interpretations, at the Museum, I have learned that one needs to know plants and animals. I have also

understood that one needs to know current affairs because tourism can be affected by anything happening in that country, in this instance, South Africa." (Respondent 4, FG3)

In essence, this excerpt highlights the significance of prior experience and knowledge in moulding an individual's comprehension of WPBL.

5.5.4.2 Subtheme 2: Integration of theoretical and practical learning

Both Respondent 6 and Respondent 7 emphasised the importance of integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience during WPBL. Respondent 6 conveyed their dissatisfaction over the lack of congruence between their ecotourism studies and the content covered during the course of their WPBL.

"My understanding was that I was going to integrate what I have learned on campus with what I was doing during my in-service training." (Respondent 6, FG3)

Respondent 7 highlighted that the goal of WPBL was to gain practical experience on top of the knowledge gained in class.

"I understood that at WIL, we were to learn the experience on top of the content that we have learned in class." (Respondent 7, FG3)

Overall, the responses indicate that the integration of both theoretical and practical education is imperative for the effective execution of WPBL.

5.5.4.3 Subtheme 3: Mismatch between academic content and practical experience

Both Respondent 6 and Respondent 7 have indicated a discrepancy between the academic content and the practical experience they encountered during their WPBL. Respondent 6 highlights a disparity between their academic knowledge as an ecotourism student and the actual experience encountered. Conversely, Respondent 7 suggests that WIL is designed to offer students a chance to acquire experiential learning alongside theoretical instruction. However, the respondent indicates that their personal experience did not align with this intention, as their role primarily involved unpaid labour rather than a comprehensive learning opportunity.

"Me being an ecotourism student and was placed in a hospitality establishment, I even talked with our WIL Coordinator, I mentioned to him that, my experience was very different from what I studied." (Respondent 6, FG3)

"At WIL, we were to learn the experience on top of the content that we have learned in class. At WIL, we were workers who were not getting paid." (Respondent 7, FG3)

Respondent 8 holds the perspective that WIL is purposefully structured to provide students with educational opportunities in authentic work settings, facilitating the integration of theoretical knowledge acquired during lectures with practical experiences in the real world. The responses underscore the significance of WPBL in equipping students with tangible experiences and competencies that can be applied in their prospective future careers.

Some of the respondents revealed that WIL is learned through work experience and exposure.

"I have learned that through Interpretations, at the Museum, I have learned that one needs to know plants and animals. I have also understood that one needs to know current affairs because tourism can be affected by anything happening in that country, in this instance, South Africa." (Respondent 4, FG3)

"My understanding of WIL was that I was going to integrate what I have learned on campus with what I was doing during my in-service training." (Respondent 6, FG3).

"I understood that at WIL, we were to learn the experience on top of the content that we have learned in class." (Respondent 7, FG3)

Respondent 1 highlighted that WIL helps students build capacity by allowing them to understand the work environment and what is expected of them when they are qualified.

"WIL capacitates students to understand work environment, to see what is expected from them when they are qualified." (Respondent 1, FG4)

The above statements highlight the significance of work experience and exposure in the acquisition of practical knowledge and learning. The respondents acknowledge that WPBL offers a valuable opportunity to effectively apply and merge the theoretical knowledge acquired in academic settings with the practical skills and experiences obtained in professional work environments. Additionally, it is worth noting that the acquisition of work experience and exposure through WPBL is deemed valuable in augmenting one's knowledge and skills beyond the scope of classroom instruction.

5.5.4.4 Subtheme 4: Unpaid work experience

Respondent 7 highlights that their WPBL experience entailed assuming the role of an unpaid employee rather than providing assistance to the staff members of the organisations in which they were placed.

"At WIL, we were not assisting staff from these organisations, we were workers who were not getting paid". (Respondent 7, FG3)

The overarching thematic focus of the above findings pertains to the concept of comprehending WIL and WPBL. The subthemes encompassed within the findings consist of the following: prior experience and knowledge; the amalgamation of theoretical and practical learning; a discrepancy between academic content and practical experience; learning through work experience and exposure; and involvement in unpaid work experiences. Several participants indicated their prior experience and expertise in the field of WIL. Several individuals provided feedback on the incorporation of theoretical and practical learning during their professional experience, perceiving it as a valuable opportunity to use the knowledge acquired in an academic setting. Nevertheless, certain individuals expressed a discrepancy between the academic material they were studying and the practical experience they gained during their WPBL. This disparity arose from being assigned to hospitality facilities rather than ecotourism establishments. Another subtheme that emerged was the acquisition of knowledge through work experience and exposure. Participants emphasised the significance of learning beyond the confines of the classroom, namely through the practical application of their skills during their WPBL. A subset of participants expressed that they did not receive compensation for their efforts throughout their WPBL, perhaps influencing their overall perception of their experience.

5.5.5 THEME 5: PREPAREDNESS AND COMPLETION OF WPBL

The theme pertains to the preparedness of the students to commence WPBL and their completion of the programme within the same organisation.

5.5.5.1 Subtheme 1: Adequacy of preparation for WPBL by the institution and organisations

These responses highlight that the participants felt that the university provided them with adequate preparation for the WPBL programme. Nevertheless, a subset of respondents also conveyed their discontent with the disparity between their initial expectations and the actual experiences they encountered upon their arrival at the various organisations to commence with WPBL. This implies that although the Department of Ecotourism may have offered a certain degree of training, it may have been insufficient to meet the practical requirements of the professional environment.

*“Mentors were preparing us as we would change departments to departments.”
(Respondent 3, FG3)*

*“I was prepared by DUT, however, was not prepared by the organisation.”
(Respondent 1, FG4)*

“DUT did facilitate workshops and what was expected from us, and the way we should behave when arriving in the organisations. We are prepared by the university but did not experience what we were told we were to see or do when we come to the organisation.” (Respondent 3, FG4)

*“We were prepared as Bekwa mentioned because our WIL Coordinator did prepare us in Riverside and even when we came to our organisation, we were prepared by them.”
(Respondent 6, FG4)*

“On the university side, we were prepared, we learned for two days.” (Respondent 8, FG4)

Higher education institutions are facing rising pressure to enhance their efforts to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for future employment. This pressure is further intensified by the widespread utilisation of graduate employment indicators to evaluate their success (Jackson and Meek, 2021). According to Rowe, Jackson and Fleming (2023), when considering the preparation of university students and workplace supervisors for WIL, it is crucial to acknowledge and tackle several aspects, including confidence, that contribute to fostering engagement and a sense of belonging. This is essential to establishing possibilities that effectively involve students in the workplace community.

5.5.5.2 Subtheme 2: Inability to complete the six-month WPBL period due to COVID-19

The subtheme addresses the question of whether the respondents completed all six months of their WPBL in the same organisation. Most respondents reported completing the full six months of their WPBL. However, some respondents were unable to complete the full six months of WPBL due to various reasons, such as the closure of the organisation due to COVID-19 restrictions. This impacted their ability to fully engage in their roles and achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. Respondent 7, for example, reported not being able to complete the full six months of WPBL due to COVID-19. No other participants reported any difficulties in successfully completing the programme.

"I did not complete the whole 6 months; we were advised not to come to work because of COVID-19." (Respondent 7, FG4)

The above view is also supported by others from focus group 3 who shared the following:

"I didn't do 6 months; I did 3 months. The facility did not have water and electricity, the establishment was closed." (Respondent 1, FG3)

"I did 3 months; staff was identified to have been affected by COVID-19. I was told to stop coming from work." (Respondent 2, FG3)

"I did 5 months, the hotel was closed and sold to someone else. The new owner did not consider calling us to come back to our WIL." (Respondent 3, FG3)

5.5.6 THEME 6: NEW KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED DURING WPBL

The theme addresses the responses from the respondents about the new knowledge they acquired during their WPBL programme. The subthemes that emerged from the responses related to new skills acquired during WPBL were communication, interpersonal, leadership, and technical skills. Many respondents reported improving their communication and interpersonal skills, which were necessary for interacting with customers and working effectively in teams. Some respondents also mentioned learning leadership skills, such as taking responsibility and guiding others. In terms of technical skills, respondents reported learning computer and basic office skills, as well as specific skills related to their industry, such as cooking and food service. Overall, the WPBL programme provided opportunities for respondents to acquire new skills and apply their knowledge in practical settings.

5.5.6.1 Subtheme 1: Communication and customer relations

The subtheme of communication and customer relations is a common thread in the responses, with several students noting that they developed their communication skills through their WPBL experiences. Specifically, they learned how to interact with customers and communicate effectively with colleagues in the workplace. One student even noted that their organisation forced them to communicate and talk more than they normally would. Additionally, one student mentioned that they gained leadership skills, which likely involved strong communication abilities as well.

"I learnt the basics of being a receptionist, mainly communication and customer relations." (Respondent 8, FG4)

"I gained communication and leadership skills." (Respondent 7, FG4)

"Communication skills, that organisation forces one to talk and talk in when embarking on a certain project." I improved my computer basic skills." (Respondent 5, FG4)

A study by Satria, Kaihatu, and Pranata (2019) identified soft skills that are developed through ecotourism activities, specifically focusing on interpersonal skills. These interpersonal skills encompass effective communication, likability, empathy, compassion, warmth, tolerance, openness, adaptability, and self-control. The development of effective communication skills and the cultivation of positive interpersonal relationships can be fostered through contact between visitors, local guides, and members of the local community. Additionally, the provision of a conducive learning environment that fosters the development of interpersonal skills within the context of ecotourism activities is anticipated to serve as a crucial asset for individuals in effectively surmounting the obstacles and hardships encountered in their personal and professional lives.

5.5.6.2 Subtheme 2: Leadership and interpersonal skills

In general, interpersonal skills are essential in the workplace, particularly in the service industry. Effective communication, leadership, and responsibility are important aspects of interpersonal skills, and the development of these skills can be a significant benefit of participating in a WPBL programme. Some of the participants mentioned acquiring leadership skills during their WPBL experience.

These skills include interpersonal skills and responsibility. One participant mentioned training new in-service training students, indicating that they had developed some level of leadership experience during their WPBL programme.

"I gained communication and leadership skills. I was also given the responsibility of taking charge of the team." (Respondent 7, FG4).

"I have learned interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and responsible. I was responsible to open and close the office, at some point, I trained new in-service training students that came after me in that organisation."(Respondent 3, FG4).

"I learnt to be responsible for my work and accountable to my colleagues and superiors." (Respondent 6, FG6).

The above statements suggest that the respondents acquired the ability to assume responsibility for their tasks and demonstrate accountability towards their peers and supervisors. Certain respondents were additionally assigned the task of assuming leadership roles within a team, thereby facilitating the cultivation of their leadership abilities. The acquisition of responsibility emerged as a significant element of the respondents' personal and professional growth within the WPBL programme. These findings highlight the importance of communication as a fundamental skill that students in the field of ecotourism should cultivate during their WPBL experiences. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognise that this aptitude can also be cultivated in non-traditional ecotourism or conventional tourism settings. This skill comprises multiple dimensions, including proficient communication, favourable reception from others, demonstration of empathy and compassion, display of warmth and acceptance, adaptability, and the exercise of self-regulation. The cultivation of effective communication skills and the establishment of meaningful interpersonal connections are actively fostered through interactions involving tourists, local guides, and local communities. Likewise, the cultivation of skills such as adaptability, understanding, compassion, and acceptance towards rural environments is facilitated through immersive activities such as nature guiding and exploration, river investigation, and engagement with local communities. The diverse array of experiences within conventional tourism environments offers a valuable educational context for the development and refinement of crucial interpersonal abilities.

The creation of this specialised educational setting, aimed at cultivating interpersonal skills within the context of ecotourism, is anticipated to have a significant impact on equipping students in this field with the essential resources to not only excel in their professional endeavours but also effectively navigate the complexities and challenges that may arise in various aspects of life. This highlights the wider relevance and importance of developing communication abilities beyond the traditional context of workplace-oriented education in the field of ecotourism.

5.5.6.3 Subtheme 3: The acquisition of culinary expertise with the practise of ethical integrity

Respondent 1 in focus group 4 expressed that they acquired proficiency in culinary skills and ethical integrity through their engagement in WPBL. The respondent engaged in a discussion regarding the acquisition of culinary expertise related to various breakfast preparations while also highlighting the importance of integrity within the culinary sales domain.

“I learned to cook various types of breakfast, I learned to be honest since we used to sell in the kitchen.” (Respondent 1, FG4)

5.5.6.4 Subtheme 4: Confidence in public speaking

Respondent 5 from focus group 3 mentioned that they gained confidence in public speaking and acting skills during their WPBL programme. They discovered this skill when they visited the art and culture department and learned through experience while at the Museum.

“When we arrived, we were told that one was allowed to visit other department other than education. I went to Art and culture, I have learnt and witnessed that I am good with acting. I can talk, however was not confident to do presentation, I learnt that experience while at the museum.” (Respondent 5, FG3)

The responses indicate that WPBL afforded students the opportunity to acquire practical skills that may not have been attainable within a traditional classroom environment. These skills encompassed various aspects, including hands-on involvement in administrative duties as well as exposure to the difficulties of tourism and hospitality operations and front office management. Additionally, students have reported the acquisition and enhancement of several soft skills, including but not limited to communication, leadership, and responsibility. The students also gained additional information and skills.

The newly acquired information encompassed areas such as communication and customer relations, leadership, and culinary expertise. Moreover, the newly acquired skills included effective communication, interpersonal skills, and a sense of responsibility, along with the ability to prepare various breakfast dishes and maintain honesty within the culinary scope.

5.5.7 THEME 7: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ORGANISATION FOR FUTURE PLACEMENTS

The prevailing sentiment among respondents was largely positive, as four out of the five respondents expressed their recommendation for the organisation in the context of WPBL. The findings revealed two subthemes that emerged from the respondents' responses: the organisation's provision of informative content and its suitability for the implementation of WPBL. One respondent reported a negative encounter and expressed their reluctance to endorse the organisation for future WPBL opportunities.

5.5.7.1 Subtheme 1: Positive feedback and recommendation for the organisation

All the respondents from focus group 4 except for Respondent 2 recommended the organisation for WPBL placement for students in the future. They cited the organisation as informative, helpful in gaining new skills and knowledge, and a good place to gain practical experience. They also acknowledged the contribution of the organisation to preparing them for the world of work. The respondents had a positive experience with the organisation and would recommend it to others.

“Yes, I will recommend that organisation for other students to do in-service in that organisation.” (Respondent 8, FG4)

“Yes, I will recommend the organisation to be used for in-service students, the place is informative.” (Respondent 7, FG4)

“Yes, I would recommend that organisation for in-service training.” (Respondent 5, FG4)

“Yes, I will recommend that organisation be considered for in-service training for students in the future.” (Respondent 3, FG4)

5.5.7.2 Subtheme 2: Negative and mixed feedback as well as unwillingness to endorse the organisation for future WPBL placement

Some respondents had negative experiences and would not recommend their organisations to other students. Issues included a lack of care for students, a focus on making money, poor networking opportunities, being treated like a full-time employee, a lack of communication about policies, placement in municipalities with political issues, and a lack of learning opportunities in their field of study.

"No, I will not recommend that organisation for the students to do in-service training in the future." (Respondent 2, FG4).

Respondent 1 in focus group 3 expressed a negative recommendation for the organisation based on several factors, including a perceived lack of concern for students, a primary focus on financial gain, insufficient networking opportunities, and an antiquated physical atmosphere.

"No, I will not recommend the organisation I was serving at. They don't care about students, they only focusing on making money. There is no network in that area, the establishment didn't even have a TV, one cannot enjoy working in an environment where is not updated what is happening in the world." (Respondent 1, FG3).

Similarly, Respondent 8 expressed reservations with the establishment, including concerns about being regarded as a full-time employee rather than a student, inadequate communication regarding policies, and ultimately being terminated from their position.

"I will not recommend that establishment, after arrival, it ends that you are a student. You are treated as a full-time employee. I did not come to work, and I was fired yet our WIL coordinator communicated with them. I only knew about their policies when I was dismissed yet I was not told about them when we arrive." (Respondent 8, FG3)

Likewise, Respondent 2 advises against placing ecotourism students in municipalities due to politics and lack of ecotourism-related learning opportunities.

"The institution must not place ecotourism students in municipalities, another thing is that there is too much politics in these municipalities. They are fights that develops from these political fights, they are nothing from ecotourism that I have gained in the municipality." (Respondent 2, FG3)

Two respondents had mixed experiences and would recommend the organisation for specific programmes. One respondent expressed a lack of recommendation for the organisation in terms of its suitability for ecotourism management students, while suggesting it as a viable option for students pursuing tourism or hospitality management.

“I wouldn’t recommend an ecotourism management student to go and work there but I can recommend a tourism or hospitality management student to work there.” (Respondent 3, FG3)

Another respondent would recommend the Museum for ecotourism students but did not provide a recommendation for other programmes.

“I have witnessed that every content that I have done in ecotourism Biology, the plants gallery, the primates gallery and even requirement of education officer posts, yes, I can recommend the museum for an ecotourism management student.” (Respondent 4, FG3).

The above theme shows a range of viewpoints on recommending the various organisations for future WPBL placement. Some respondents had poor experiences and would not recommend the organisation to students. They highlighted a lack of compassion for students, a focus on profit maximisation, being treated as full-time employees, and not learning anything relevant to the field of ecotourism. However, several respondents had mixed experiences and would only recommend the organisation to certain programmes or disciplines of study. They noted that the programme and focus may affect the experience.

5.5.8 THEME 8: GRASPING THE DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE ESSENTIAL FOR ECOTOURISM

This theme explores the understanding of discipline-specific skills and knowledge required for ecotourism employment and improvements to the WPBL programme. The theme is discussed under the subtheme below.

5.5.8.1 Subtheme 1: Entrepreneurship and business opportunities

The responses highlight that the work placement experience helped the students develop entrepreneurial skills and identify business opportunities in the ecotourism industry. The students were motivated to start their own businesses and saw the value of entrepreneurship in the industry.

They were equipped with knowledge and skills that enabled them to identify gaps in the industry and create opportunities to address those gaps. The experience of working with mentors who had experience in entrepreneurship and business development was valuable for the students.

"I am seeing myself as an entrepreneur, and the modules that I have studied have equipped me in those aspects. The experience I had in my in-service training really assisted me. My mentor was doing a master's in development and entrepreneurship, he assisted me with entrepreneurship development." (Respondent 1, FG4)

"I have witnessed that I need to create opportunities and start my own business instead of waiting for employment." (Respondent 10, FG4)

"I have developed a business opportunity, having to start my establishment and close the gaps that I have seen in the organisation I was placed." (Respondent 2, FG4)

"I was motivated by my mentor that; I should consider owning my business instead of working for someone else and understood that I don't like to work with anything that is related to guiding." (Respondent 3, FG4)

The evolving characteristics of modern employment are fostering a growing demand for innovation and entrepreneurial skills within organisational contexts. There is a growing trend among both small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) and larger organisations to seek evidence of entrepreneurial capabilities in graduates (Smith et al., 2021). The authors further state that Australian universities are making efforts to incorporate entrepreneurial experiences into their curriculum by implementing entrepreneurial WIL as a pedagogical approach. This approach aims to enable learners to enhance their enterprise capabilities. In the context of South Africa's growing economy and the prevalent issue of high youth unemployment, it becomes imperative to solidify the position of integrating entrepreneurship skills development within WPBL. This approach seeks to empower students by enhancing their entrepreneurial acumen. Through initiatives like innovation incubators, bootcamps, and interdisciplinary industry-community projects, students actively engage in collaborative efforts with industry and community stakeholders. In this way, they utilise their evolving entrepreneurial skills to identify potential opportunities and create value. Drawing on the research findings, this study suggests a crucial consideration in the design of the WPBL curriculum. The primary focus of WPBL should be on fostering entrepreneurial experiences that prioritise the augmentation of learners' entrepreneurial capabilities.

This holds particular relevance for South Africa, given its dynamic economic landscape and the pressing need to address youth unemployment through initiatives that empower them with essential entrepreneurial skills.

5.5.9 THEME 9: RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE WPBL

This theme explores various approaches to improving the effectiveness of WPBL programme, as perceived by the participating students.

5.5.9.1 Subtheme 1: Ensuring WIL coordinator support and facilitating timely, adequate work placement preparation

The respondents articulated a desire for increased support and organisation from the coordinators tasked with supervising WIL in the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. One participant proposed the idea of assigning assistants to WIL coordinators to assist with administrative duties. On the contrary, another respondent advised submitting WPBL applications in advance to ensure sufficient time for preparation before beginning the placement. The recommendations emphasise the need for improved support and coordination to enable a smoother and more efficient work placement experience for students.

"WIL coordinators must have assistants to help him or her with other administrations." (Respondent 8, FG4).

"Applications for WIL must be done in time and in advance so that everything will be prepared well before leaving to work in these organisations." (Respondent 7, FG4).

The Council on Higher Education (2011) states that university instructors, in collaboration with WPBL administration personnel and the department or programme head, should take measures to guarantee that the departmental budget and resources adequately cover the financial and logistical support required for implementing the programme. This is crucial for ensuring the quality of the WIL curriculum, specifically its efficacy in fostering engagement and learning, student satisfaction with the experience, and a risk management strategy that proactively addresses potential contingencies and incorporates administrative measures to handle possible eventualities. Financial resources are essential for covering the costs associated with hiring additional personnel and facilitating transportation for staff members to their respective worksites, among other expenses.

5.5.9.2 Subtheme 2: Clear policies regarding work hours and compensation

This subtheme highlights the importance of having clear policies in place to ensure that students have a positive and fair work placement experience. Having policies that clearly outline work hours and compensation can help prevent misunderstandings and ensure that students are treated fairly. Respondent 2 suggests that there should be clear policies in place that outline the expected number of work hours for students during their in-service training and what should happen if students end up working beyond the agreed-upon number of hours.

"DUT must have a Memorandum of Understanding with an organisation that takes students for in-service training that will state that students must be exposed in one, two, and three and they must work these number of hours, the policy should state that should a student is working over the agreed number of hours, an organisation should consider paying those students." (Respondent 2, FG4).

Respondent 8 proposes that it is imperative for organisations to acknowledge that during WPBL, students are present to acquire knowledge and skills rather than being subjected to exploitative treatment. Furthermore, the respondent advocates for the allocation of sufficient personnel within organisations to mitigate the reliance on students for the completion of all tasks and activities associated with daily operations.

"Organisations must know that we come to learn in their establishment not to be slaves. Organisations must show that they are established with staff not to rely on WIL students to do all the tasks and activities for their day-to-day running's (Respondent 8, FG3).

The above may be connected to the fact that some of the students were not paid during the WIL while others were paid a pastry amount. Respondent 4 mentioned,

"We were receiving a stipend of R3500 per month." Other respondents mentioned, "We were not paid a cent."

The above statements suggest that some students received financial compensation during their work placement experience while others did not. Some respondents believed that money was important and recommended that all students receive fair compensation for their work. The table provided below summarises the findings of this study, illustrating the extent to which each cohort of participants successfully achieved the predetermined objectives.

This comprehensive overview provides a visual representation of the successful congruence between the research objectives and the corresponding accomplishments of the participant groups.

5.10 A TABULAR SYTHESIS OF THE STUDY FINDINDS

The inclusion of Table 5.6 serves as a comprehensive index reviewing the research findings in relation to the objectives of the study, and the diverse participant groups are a crucial strategic choice for this thesis. This tabular presentation offers a structured and articulate framework for presenting multifaceted data, enabling a clear distinction of findings specific to academic staff, industry supervisors, and student focus groups, each with distinct WPBL experiences. This format facilitates direct comparisons between participant groups, providing a clear understanding of the various perspectives and experiences. Moreover, the table serves as a visual roadmap, aligning the research objectives with the attained findings for each participant category. By condensing and organising the data, it aids in the synthesis of complex information, unveiling patterns and trends that may not be readily noticeable in a narrative format. Additionally, this tabular representation is invaluable for cross-referencing specific findings, ensuring that interpretations remain firmly anchored in empirical evidence. The table stands as a pivotal tool, enhancing the accessibility, coherence, and comprehensibility of the research outcomes, thus bolstering the overall scholarly rigour and impact of the study.

Table 5.6: A synthesis of the research findings in relation to the objectives and participants of the study

WPBL INDUSTRY SUPERVISORS	OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	ACADEMIC STAFF and WIL COORDINATOR	STUDENTS PLACED IN TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM ESTABLISHMENTS FOR WPBL	STUDENTS PLACED IN CONVENTIONAL TOURISM ESTABLISHMENTS FOR WPBL (OTHER ORAGNISATIONS)
<p>Important discipline-specific skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trustworthiness and adaptability. • Communication skills. • Tour guiding and cultural tours. • Understanding of animal behaviour. and rules within the establishment. • Upkeep and maintenance. • Administrative tasks and financial management. • Conservation knowledge. <p>Skills that are lacking in ecotourism:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge about green energy and eco-friendly practices. • Understanding and enthusiasm for conservation and the environment. • Guiding skills and safety knowledge. • Customer service skills • Knowledge about the natural environment. 	<p>OBJECTIVE 1</p> <p>To identify discipline-specific skills for ecotourism and those considered to be lacking.</p>	<p>Important discipline-specific skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion for nature and the environment. • Customer service and relations. • Entrepreneurial skills. • Guiding and interpretation skills. 	<p>Skills developed through WPBL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and problem-solving skills. • Developing leadership skills. • Skills in self-regulation • Customer relations. • Entrepreneurship skills. • The acquisition of culinary expertise with the practise of ethical integrity 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six-month duration of WPBL is insufficient for students to acquire and develop discipline-specific skills. • Minimal exposure to the workplace due to COVID-19. 	<p align="center">OBJECTIVE 2</p> <p>To identify reasons for the skills gaps in ecotourism.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The placement of ecotourism students in non-ecotourism organisations perceived as disadvantageous. • Lack of diverse means of industry exposure and visits by academic staff. • Placement of students is delegated to the WIL coordinator portfolio with no input from other academic staff members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of exposure to ecotourism -related duties during WPBL. • Placement in conventional tourism organisations. • The timing of WPBL at second year. • The six-month duration of WPBL is insufficient. • Lack of awareness among companies/mentors about ecotourism and specific duties/responsibilities of students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication of clear learning outcomes and expectations for WPBL by the institution (both students and staff) to industry. • Exposing students to various divisions and responsibilities within the establishment. • Exposure to Conservation-related tasks and duties. • Incentives for good performance • Constant communication and transparency between industry and institutions and frequent visits by staff from the HEI. • Emphasis on entrepreneurship • Revise the current 6-months duration of WPBL to at least a year and on a rotational basis. • Placement of students in traditional ecotourism establishments. 	<p align="center">OBJECTIVE 3</p> <p>To ascertain how can WPBL be developed to bridge the skill gaps in ecotourism.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating industry feedback in teaching and learning • Offering skills development and training programmes within the ecotourism qualification based on industry suggestions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocation of Mentors/Supervisors. • Need for thorough evaluation and monitoring of the work placement experience programme by the institution. • Allocation of relevant duties and tasks to students. • Development of a formal structure to guide workplace mentors on duties aligned with programme outcomes. • Ensuring WIL coordinator support and facilitating timely, adequate work placement preparation • The imperative of two WIL coordinators for ensuring gender representation and student safety. • Clear policies regarding work hours and compensation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This cohort of WPBL industry supervisors did not know about or participate in curriculum advancement on the ecotourism qualification. • The industry expressed desire for a bigger role in WIL placement and curriculum. 	<p align="center">OBJECTIVE 4</p> <p>To determine the purpose of curriculum enhancement by DUT and its foreseeable implications on workplace-based learning (WPBL)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation to the changing needs by the industry, both locally and globally. • Outdated curriculum that is misaligned with current industry needs. • Alignment with DUT's ENVISION2023. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This cohort of ecotourism students did not know about or participate in curriculum advancement on the ecotourism qualification.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on integrating entrepreneurship into the WPBL curriculum. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical application and real-life experience. • Mentorship and guidance. 	<p>OBJECTIVE 5</p> <p>To compare understandings and interpretations of WPBL by students, institutions, and organisations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-the-job training. • Skill development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical learning and application of classroom knowledge. • Skills development beyond the university.

Source: Generated by author

5.11 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter, the data collected from both face-to-face and virtual interviews, as well as focus groups, was rigorously examined and classified into four distinct categories. The study included a diverse group of individuals, consisting of industry supervisors, students enrolled in ecotourism, and academic staff members affiliated with DUT. The study adhered to rigorous ethical protocols, which guaranteed the highest level of confidentiality and anonymity for the collected data throughout the investigation. The results of this study highlight the efficacy of WPBL in enhancing various essential skills such as communication, problem-solving, customer relations, leadership, and self-regulation. However, it is important to acknowledge that although WPBL showcases competence in these domains, it lacks the ability to effectively provide students with other vital, field-specific abilities that are necessary for different aspects of ecotourism. The skills encompassed in this list comprise a range of proficiencies, such as expertise in the field of conservation, implementation of eco-friendly practices, utilisation of sustainable energy sources, cultivation of environmental awareness, adeptness in providing nature guidance, adherence to safety protocols, and possessing comprehensive knowledge of the natural environment. The following section provides a comprehensive analysis of these significant findings, presenting essential recommendations based on the knowledge acquired. Furthermore, this chapter provides an interpretation of the theoretical and methodological advancements made by this study. The chapter concludes by providing an analysis of unanticipated constraints, along with recommended measures to alleviate them, and proposing potential directions for future scholarly investigations. The comprehensive examination presented herein establishes a robust basis for furthering the discussion on efficacious pedagogical methodologies in the field of ecotourism education.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The final chapter encompasses a comprehensive evaluation and synthesis of the entirety of the research undertaking. It commences with a reflective analysis of unforeseen obstacles encountered during the course of the study as well as mitigation measures to alleviate their impact. The reflective analysis in this context offers significant insights into the intricacies of the research process. Following this reflection, the chapter explores the key findings derived from the study. These findings are meticulously analysed and discussed, thereby providing valuable insights into their implications for the field of ecotourism. Significantly, they make noteworthy contributions to both the theoretical and methodological aspects of this field. A pivotal aspect addressed in this chapter is the proposition of an optimal WPBL model designed to augment disciplinary skills in ecotourism. This proposed approach represents the culmination of the study's efforts with the objective of enhancing the learning experience and skill acquisition of undergraduate students in this discipline. Furthermore, the chapter extends beyond findings and recommendations to underline the broader impact and contributions of this study. Theoretical and methodological advancements are outlined, signifying the academic value and innovative aspects of this research. The concluding section of the chapter acknowledges the inherent constraints and restrictions of the research. These limitations serve as crucial touchpoints for future researchers to consider, offering avenues for refinement and expansion in subsequent studies. In addition, the chapter articulates a set of recommendations for prospective research endeavours in the field of ecotourism. This final chapter serves as a concise summary of the entire study, offering a comprehensive overview of the research process from its inception to its conclusion. This statement stands as evidence of the thorough investigation conducted on the subject of ecotourism, focusing on the discipline-specific skills required in this field and the effectiveness of WPBL in acquiring these skills. The resolved research questions provide a solid foundation for future investigations, emphasising the significance and relevance of this study in advancing the field of ecotourism education and practice.

6.2 REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study investigated ecotourism discipline-specific skills and ecotourism skill gaps and further assessed the effectiveness of the WPBL programme in assisting undergraduate students acquire discipline-specific skills for ecotourism employment. The researcher adopted the interpretivist approach and thus relied on the views, interpretations, and experiences of the WPBL participants, that is, ecotourism students who completed their six-month WPBL programme, the traditional ecotourism organisations that hosted the students, the academic staff members, and WIL coordinators at DUT. At the core of the interpretivist paradigm is the assumption that reality is a social construct (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). A case study of DUT was adopted using a qualitative research approach. Data were generated using face-to-face interviews, online interviews, and focus group interviews. The analysis was done qualitatively using the inductive process of organising data into themes. By using this method, the researcher was able to analyse data for each of the groups of respondents' situations and make comparisons with responses. Data transcription submerged the researcher into the data, which enabled in-depth understanding. Furthermore, the face-to-face interviews allowed for direct contact and engagement with WPBL industry supervisors to understand their industry experiences. Interviews as employed in this study were also beneficial in capturing the emotions and behaviours of respondents. In terms of DUT ecotourism students and staff, the online and focus group sessions were online. Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman (2020) argue that online surveys are comparatively more convenient as they are cheaper, reach a wider audience faster, and make it easier to generate data.

6.3 REFLECTIONS ON UNANTICIPATED LIMITATIONS ENCOUNTERED DURING THE STUDY AND MITIGATION

The journey of research, particularly in the stages leading up to data collection, is not without challenges. This section provides the researcher with an opportunity to give a candid and transparent account of the difficulties experienced during the research process. This section aims to present a comprehensive and detailed examination of the challenges encountered by the researcher. Through this detailed account, the researcher aims to offer insights into the real and authentic experience and complexities of conducting research in the context of this study. Furthermore, this section highlights the researcher's ability to navigate challenges and showcases adaptability and resilience.

Ultimately, this section provides a clear account of the research process and therefore serves as a valuable contribution to the scholarly discourse surrounding the research topic. It is worth noting that while the limitations of this study were discussed in Chapter 4, the key differences with the limitations outlined in this section are that the researcher was aware of the potential limitations prior to the decision to embark on this research journey. Indeed, as early as the proposal development stage, the researcher identified potential limitations that may arise and those that confined the study to the field of traditional ecotourism, the WPBL phenomenon, and the DUT case study. Ultimately, with this section, the researcher aims to reflect on the unanticipated issues and provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research process and its associated limitations.

6.3.1 July unrests in the province of KwaZulu-Natal

The researcher's data collection schedule was altered due to the unprecedented incidents of arson and looting primarily occurring in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, which commenced on July 8, 2021. All scheduled meetings with WPBL supervisors were prearranged; however, as a result of road closures and the impairment of crucial infrastructure, such as the N2 and N3 highways and shopping centres, certain businesses were compelled to cease operations due to the ensuing consequences. Tourism establishments experienced significant negative impacts due to the inability of visitors to access these locations. As a result, numerous appointments were rescheduled to later dates, spanning up to three weeks, due to the closure of certain establishments that were selected for inclusion in this study.

6.3.2 Active COVID-19 cases at various ecotourism establishments selected for this study

Following the successful arrangement of all face-to-face interview appointments, a significant portion of these appointments had to be rescheduled due to the occurrence of active COVID-19 cases reported by certain businesses. The individuals whom the researcher intended to meet were unavailable due to their mandatory quarantine period of ten to 14 days. The duration of the data collection phase of this study was extended. Nevertheless, both the researcher and the respondents recognised and acknowledged the importance of implementing safety measures. Consequently, they mutually agreed upon alternative dates and times for appointments, ensuring a safer environment for all parties involved. The COVID-19 safety protocols, including the use of face masks and the maintenance of appropriate physical distancing, were strictly followed.

6.3.3 The exploration of geographical placement of traditional ecotourism establishments in KwaZulu-Natal: A focus on off-road terrain and remoteness

Despite intentionally choosing ecotourism establishments located in rural and remote areas, the researcher encountered several notable challenges. One of the challenges encountered by the researcher was the restricted availability of essential resources, such as internet connectivity. This limitation impeded the researcher's capacity to effectively conduct research activities, specifically in terms of contacting other respondents to verify the timing and physical location within the establishment where face-to-face interviews were scheduled to occur. Moreover, the researcher encountered safety hazards while navigating the unfamiliar terrain, necessitating the utilisation of additional resources and strategic planning to mitigate these risks. In order to address the issue of restricted network and internet access, the researcher procured supplementary SIM cards from various operating networks. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that specific regions experienced inadequate or non-existent network coverage from certain network service providers. This methodology enhanced the probability of the researcher attaining a network that exhibits extensive coverage within the designated region. In order to mitigate safety hazards, the researcher sought guidance from local authorities and tourism information centres to gain insight into the potential risks associated with different regions. Subsequently, safety protocols were devised based on this information. This encompassed the inclusion of essential items such as a first-aid kit, additional clothing, provisions for sustenance, and a supply of potable water.

6.3.4 Absenteeism and distractions during online focus group interviews

Several participants in the online focus group failed to adhere to the predetermined schedule for the interviews, as agreed upon in advance. Following the researcher's procurement of data bundles for participants, the financial burden associated with their involvement in this study was alleviated. Consequently, there was a significant depletion of time, resources, and invaluable data. Participants' constant attention to incoming calls and message notifications on their electronic devices interfered with the flow of the conversation in online focus group interviews. This study comprised a total of four slots allocated for the online focus groups. Two slots were specifically designated for ecotourism students placed in traditional ecotourism organisations, while the remaining two slots were intended for ecotourism students placed in organisations that did not meet the geographical location and setting criteria.

In order to address the issue, a participant who was unable to attend their assigned time slot was rescheduled into one of the other available slots while ensuring strict adherence to the predetermined focus grouping criteria. This intervention effectively optimised the utilisation of time and resources, thereby guaranteeing the smooth execution of the focus group interviews without the need for rescheduling the entire session.

6.4 SUMMARY OF KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study focused on identifying ecotourism discipline-specific skills and ecotourism skill gaps. The effectiveness of the WPBL programme in assisting undergraduate students acquire discipline-specific skills for ecotourism was assessed. From the discussion in the previous chapter, Table 6.1 provides a depiction of the key findings.

Table 6.1: Summary of key research findings

Key findings
1. Development of communication, problem-solving, and customer relations skills through WPBL.
2. The limitation of the six-month WPBL programme in developing other important discipline-specific skills, particularly understanding conservation and the environment, guiding skills, and safety knowledge.
3. Insufficient six-month duration of WPBL inhibits the attainment of other critical discipline-specific skills.
4. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the shortcomings of the WPBL experience for students.
5. Recommendations for improving WPBL from students, staff, and industry.
6. Heterogeneity of ecotourism students' placement in conventional tourism organisations: a comparative analysis among students, staff, and industry.
7. There are similarities in understanding and interpretation of WPBL by students, staff, and industry.
8. Emphasis on the integration of entrepreneurship in the WPBL programme.
9. The significance of industry input on WPBL placement and ecotourism curriculum implementation.

Source: Generated by author

6.4.1 The development of communication, problem-solving and customer relations skills

Ecotourism is a rapidly expanding industry, and students must be adequately prepared for it. WPBL is a teaching strategy that combines classroom theory with practical work experience to develop workplace-relevant skills and knowledge. This research indicates that WPBL is an effective pedagogical strategy that significantly enhances the development of essential skills among undergraduate ecotourism students. Effective communication is essential in the ecotourism industry, and the findings of the study indicate that the WPBL approach improves students' communication skills effectively. Students gained a greater understanding of how to interact with guests and handle customer complaints as a result of the six-month WPBL programme. Students further developed the ability to think on their feet and generate inventive solutions to complex problems. These skills are essential for success in the ecotourism industry, which is largely based on providing exceptional customer experiences. The findings of the study also emphasise the significance of leadership and self-control in the ecotourism industry. WPBL significantly improved leadership and self-control skills among the students, which are essential for managing guests, leading tours, and handling crises. For ecotourism professionals, the ability to remain calm and collected in high-pressure situations is an asset.

6.4.2 The limitation of the six-month WPBL programme in developing other important discipline-specific skills

Despite the success of the WPBL programme in developing students' communication, problem-solving, and customer relations skills as important discipline-specific skills for ecotourism, the research findings revealed some limitations. Specifically, there is still insufficient emphasis on other crucial competencies, such as knowledge of green energy and eco-friendly practices, conservation and environmental consciousness, guiding and safety proficiency, and knowledge of the natural environment. Green energy and eco-friendly practices are essential to the ecotourism industry's sustainability. Also essential is the ability to conserve and protect the environment. To ensure the safety of guests and employees, proficiency in guiding and safety is crucial. In the ecotourism industry, customer service skills and knowledge of the natural environment are indispensable for providing guests with accurate and pertinent information. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that WPBL host organisations should broaden their focus to include other relevant skills to adequately prepare students for employment in the ecotourism industry.

This can be accomplished by incorporating into the programme more diverse and engaging activities that address the essential skills and knowledge needed for success in the ecotourism industry. In this way, the programme can assist in preparing students for future careers in the ecotourism industry.

6.4.3 The duration of the WPBL programme

The significance of WPBL for the development of practical skills and knowledge among students cannot be overstated, as it allows for practical application of theoretical concepts in a real-world context. However, it emerges from the research findings that a six-month WPBL programme is insufficient for students to acquire and develop a variety of discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. The feedback from students, WPBL industry supervisors, academic staff, and the WIL coordinator advocates for a longer duration to develop industry-specific skills through authentic work experiences offered by the WPBL programme. This study emphasises that a six-month programme may not provide sufficient time for students to develop these skills to their full potential. This could be due to the complexity of some of these discipline-specific skills, which necessitate longer WPBL periods. Further, the research findings highlight the need for a re-evaluation of WPBL programme duration to ensure that students receive the necessary training and hands-on experience to develop their discipline-specific skills to their fullest potential. A longer WPBL programme could result in students who are better prepared for the needs of the ecotourism industry.

6.4.4 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating shortcomings of the WPBL experience for students

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties of providing an effective WPBL experience. Due to shutdowns and quarantine measures, students were frequently sent home, depriving them of valuable first-hand experience of working under pressure and interacting with guests in the ecotourism industry. The pandemic disrupted many aspects of daily life, and higher education was not immune. The pandemic posed several challenges for WPBL students, affecting their ability to acquire and develop discipline-specific skills. The study findings reveal that one of the most difficult challenges was the closure of places where students were supposed to work. As a result, students had fewer opportunities to participate in authentic workplace experiences, which is an important aspect of WPBL.

Furthermore, some students were sent home to quarantine, limiting their ability to participate in experiential learning opportunities even further. Another challenge was the absence of pressure and guest interaction during the WPBL programme. Working under pressure is essential in ecotourism, and it is difficult to simulate this type of environment in a classroom setting. Students were unable to fully develop their skills and knowledge without the pressure and fast-paced nature of the workplace. Furthermore, interacting with guests is an important aspect of the ecotourism industry, and the lack of guest interaction during the WPBL programme may have limited students' ability to fully comprehend the realities of ecotourism. This study therefore advocates for the development of strategies to mitigate the impact of unforeseen events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that students can still participate in authentic workplace experiences even in difficult times.

6.4.5 Recommendations for improving WPBL from students, staff and industry

The recommendations on how work-based project-based learning (WPBL) can be enhanced to address the skills gaps in ecotourism revealed distinct and recurring similarities among different groups of respondents. The industry emphasised the importance of effectively communicating learning outcomes and expectations, as well as the students' willingness to learn. Additionally, it highlighted the significance of providing students with exposure to different divisions and responsibilities within the establishment. The importance of engaging in conservation-related tasks and responsibilities, as well as providing incentives for high performance during WPBL, was further highlighted by the industry. The industry, staff, and students collectively emphasised the importance of timely and transparent communication between the industry and the institution. Additionally, they proposed the establishment of a formal structure to provide guidance to workplace mentors regarding their responsibilities in line with the desired outcomes of the ecotourism undergraduate programme.

6.4.6 Heterogeneity of ecotourism students' placement in conventional tourism organisations: A comparative analysis among students, staff and industry

The relevance of the placement position is a point of discussion among the respondents. Some believe that placement in conventional tourism inhibits a true ecotourism experience and advise against it. While others support placement in cities and conventional tourism organisations if it is within the tourism sector.

Respondents recommend placement in rural and remote areas for course-relevant exposure, while others believe that placement location is the responsibility of the student to determine. Overall, most respondents believe that placement in ecotourism establishments is important for students to understand what true ecotourism is. This research takes the stance of allowing for a diversified WPBL programme for students by not limiting placement to traditional ecotourism establishments. In line with the General Systems Theory adopted in this study, it is important to recognise changes and integrate them for the betterment of a system. In the context of this research, adopting the existence of urban ecotourism is crucial to diversifying opportunities for the attainment of discipline-specific skills. Therefore, this study argues that the attainment of discipline-specific skills for ecotourism should not be confined to the geographical placement of ecotourism organisations.

6.4.7 Similarities in understandings and interpretation of WPBL by students, staff and industry

The findings illuminated the key similarities based on the understandings and interpretations of WPBL among students, staff, and industry. The comprehension and analysis of WPBL are predominantly focused on practical application and real-life experience, mentorship and guidance, and on-the-job training. In addition, the respondents understand WPBL on the premise that it allows for skills development beyond university and is chiefly grounded on practical learning and application of classroom knowledge, as noted by academic staff.

6.4.8 Emphasis on the integration of entrepreneurship in the WPBL programme

WPBL is a significant tool for fostering an entrepreneurial mindset as it presents a unique opportunity for individuals to gain invaluable skills through exposure, interaction with stakeholders, and tackling real-world processes. This interaction has the potential to develop creativity and resilience, which are important characteristics for entrepreneurship (Mwangi and Naude, 2020). From the findings, respondents, particularly the students, noted that exposure to WPBL helped to develop entrepreneurship skills by identifying business opportunities in the ecotourism industry. The students were enthused to start their own businesses and identified the value of entrepreneurship in the industry.

They were equipped with knowledge and skills that enabled them to identify gaps in the industry and create opportunities to address those gaps. The experience of working with mentors who had experience in entrepreneurship and business development was valuable for the students.

6.4.9 Industry input on WPBL placement and ecotourism curriculum implementation

The industry has echoed their desire and need to be more actively involved in the design and implementation of the ecotourism undergraduate curriculum. This is in line with the recommendations made for constant communication and interaction between the industry and the institution. Respondents consider that a more active and engaged role in the ecotourism undergraduate curriculum will result in better alignment between what is taught in the classroom and what is needed in the workplace. They also believe that greater industry input will allow for effective tailoring and alignment of the ecotourism undergraduate curriculum to best meet current industry needs.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS DERIVED FROM KEY FINDINGS

6.5.1 Recommendation 1: Extension of the WPBL programme

The duration of the WPBL programme undertaken by undergraduate ecotourism students should be extended beyond existing standards of six months to at least twelve months. To substantiate this recommendation, Jackson and Dean (2023) suggest that extended work placements allow for students to develop a range of professional skills and prolonged exposure to practical integration and application of theory. It is therefore imperative that HEIs providing WPBL as a prerequisite for fulfilling undergraduate qualification requirements prioritise the extension of WPBL to provide greater opportunities for students to acquire the necessary discipline-specific skills in the field of ecotourism.

6.5.2 Recommendation 2: Proactive mitigation approaches to minimise negative impacts of catastrophic events such as COVID-19 outbreak

COVID-19 disrupted and compromised the learning outcomes of WPBL for students; therefore, robust mitigation strategies must be developed by HEIs and the ecotourism industry. These can include capitalising on alternative digital and remote learning tools and approaches, such as virtual internships and hybrid WPBL models that merge physical and online learning.

This can only be effective and successful through intense collaboration, engagement, and consultation between HEIs, industry, and students in the development of these models. It is imperative to have contingency measures to serve HEIs and industry during unforeseen events such as the COVID-19 outbreak to ensure the continuity of WPBL, and the safety of all parties involved. Izumi, et al (2021) state that the preparedness of universities to respond to crises and emergencies by offering access to online and remote learning environments is necessary. Additionally, Heaton, Siegel and Teece (2019) underscored the prioritisation of innovative and adaptable strategies with higher education that will enable uninterrupted WPBL despite catastrophic events.

6.5.3 Recommendation 3: Methods for establishing a formal collaborative framework between HEIs and the ecotourism industry

To produce industry-prepared graduates and successfully fulfil the learning outcomes of WPBL, collaboration between the Department of Ecotourism and the ecotourism industry is necessary. To foster transparent and timely communication between the institution and industry, a formal collaboration framework is recommended for these two entities. The adoption of a collaborative framework can help promote the sustainable growth of the ecotourism industry and ensure that students are equipped with relevant skills that are vital for the long-term economic viability of the region (Thapa, 2019). In line with this, the researcher suggests the incorporation of these key elements into the collaboration framework:

6.5.3.1 Joint planning

By capitalising on the already existing advisory board structure comprised of industry experts, the department should engage in joint planning to ensure clearer communication of learning outcomes for the WPBL programme that aligns with industry needs. One of the conditions that can be proposed is that industry board constituents should be handpicked to be the ones who mentor and supervise students during WPBL. Although the findings revealed that during WPBL, students are deployed in various divisions within organisations to provide diversity exposure to learning opportunities, at some point during the rotation, at least one advisory board member should have had the opportunity to mentor, guide, and supervise the students. This should be included as a formal condition for all members of the advisory board.

In instances where an advisory board member occupies an executive position where they seldom interact with lower-level employees, it should then be the member's responsibility to develop a plan tailor-made to suit their organisation to evaluate and monitor WPBL student supervisors.

6.5.3.2 Partnership agreements and terms of reference

These instruments can serve as a valuable mechanism for formalising agreements pertaining to the collaboration between the department and industry. Terms of reference are formal agreements that serve to delineate expectations and establish a comprehensive command of the duties and obligations of academic personnel, students, and industry stakeholders. It is imperative to establish and articulate clear parameters that define and facilitate effective communication among all relevant parties. However, in cases where there are identified gaps between the department and the industry, it may be necessary to involve other stakeholders as official partners. These stakeholders could include representatives from the Department of Higher Education Training, community organisations, scholars, representatives from other higher education institutions, and relevant Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

6.5.4 Recommendation 4: Industry-driven collaborative research

One of the fundamental pillars of HEIs is the creation of knowledge and research as well as the dissemination of knowledge through teaching (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2019). Based on the diverse expertise of academic researchers within HEIs and industry professionals, the focus on industry-driven collaborative research specifically for the ecotourism discipline should be heightened. According to Kania and Kramer (2011), the Theory of Change encompasses a process of identifying desired social outcomes, which requires collaboration and partnership between stakeholders who possess varying expertise to bring about change. The research outputs generated through this collaboration can advance both the higher education and ecotourism sectors through knowledge generation, which can ultimately enhance the WPBL learning experience for students. Academic researchers possess theoretical and methodological expertise, while industry professionals bring practical discipline-specific skills, knowledge, and experience to the table. By merging their respective capabilities and strengths, there is huge potential for the generation of academically rigorous and practically relevant research. Moreover, industry-driven research can effectively address real-world problems as it is geared towards practical solutions.

In furtherance, the WPBL experience for students can be enriched through exposure to real-world problems, thereby allowing students to apply their research skills in a practical setting. By working with academic staff and WPBL industry supervisors, students can gain a better understanding of the practical application of research and further enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are also deemed essential characteristics for entrepreneurship. By fostering such collaborations, the department, its academic staff, students, and industry can significantly contribute to the growth and development of the ecotourism industry.

6.5.5 Recommendation 5: Collaboration in advancing entrepreneurship and integration of ecotourism pillars and SDGs into the WPBL programme

WPBL experiences should focus on entrepreneurship advancement and community development by incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the pillars of ecotourism, and more specifically in the context of this study, DUT's ENVISION2030. Leveraging the diverse expertise of both academics and industry can lead to the creation of innovative solutions that address complex challenges in the ecotourism industry. These solutions can be ground-breaking prototypes of viable solutions that can be transformed into entrepreneurship advancement models and even viable businesses. According to Winborg and Hägg (2023), the integration of entrepreneurship into WPBL fosters an entrepreneurial mindset. Furthermore, incorporating SDGs into tourism education can lead to sustainable development and more responsible tourism practices Movono and Hughes (2022). The concept of the Theory of Change is applicable to this recommendation as it advocates for the emphasis on collaboration and leveraging the strengths of different stakeholders to achieve a common goal. Therefore, in this context, the goal is to advance entrepreneurship and community development in ecotourism while promoting sustainable practices through the incorporation of the SDGs, pillars of ecotourism, and DUT's ENVISION2030 into the WPBL programme.

6.5.6 Recommendation 6: Diversified student placement and embracing the evolution of urban ecotourism

The current trends in ecotourism and WPBL call for HEIs and ecotourism industry stakeholders to diversify WPBL and offer placement in conventional tourism establishments.

As Movono et al. (2020) argued, the inclusion of SDGs in tourism education can accelerate suitable development growth in the sector through responsible practices. One such goal is SDG number 11, which calls for the development of sustainable and resilient cities and communities. It must be noted that, although ecotourism is a niche type of tourism, it still falls under the umbrella of tourism, which therefore warrants discipline-specific skills that are relevant for ecotourism but can also be relevant to the broader tourism sector. The Theory of Change framework suggests that change can be achieved by identifying desired outcomes and applying a backwards approach to establish the necessary conditions and interventions (Connell and Kubisch, 1998). In this context, the desired outcome of this recommendation is the promotion of the principles of community-based tourism and entrepreneurship through the WPBL offered to ecotourism students. WPBL placement in organisations that are conventional tourism, mainly due to their urban settings, can also provide students with valuable experience and exposure to community-based tourism and entrepreneurship. This has the potential to assist students in gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities and delicate boundaries between mainstream tourism and ecotourism. In furtherance, with such exposure, students can better understand the significance of promoting diversification and the sustainability of the tourism industry as a whole. In addition, students can gain valuable insights into the evolving and dynamic nature of the ecotourism industry and its roots in the overall tourism industry.

6.6 THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The concept of research contribution encompasses various connotations. Nevertheless, the primary focus for the majority of researchers is to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields, which holds significant importance in both their professional and personal spheres (Phillips and Johnson, 2022). The concept holds significant importance within academia and extends its influence on various domains, encompassing the individual, societal, and disciplinary levels. This section will outline the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological contributions of this study.

6.6.1 Theoretical contributions

This subsection will explore the theoretical underpinnings that form the basis for the contributions made by this study.

The first significant theoretical contribution involves incorporating the General Systems Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for comprehending WPBL in the context of ecotourism. The second contribution arises from applying the Theory of Change, which serves as a guiding framework for pinpointing discipline-specific skills that hold paramount importance in the ecotourism industry. Finally, the assessment of how the evaluation of WPBL programmes influences the attainment of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. These theoretical contributions serve as the intellectual basis upon which this study builds its innovative insights and advancements.

6.6.1.1 The integration of the General Systems Theory to understand WPBL in ecotourism

The integration of the General Systems Theory offers a framework for analysing and understanding complex systems and how they interact with each other, which is particularly useful for understanding the WPBL programme offered in the Department of Ecotourism, DUT. The application of this theory in this study allowed for the identification and analysis of the interactions and roles of stakeholders involved in the WPBL programme, including students, academic staff, and industry supervisors, and their role in enhancing the efficacy of WPBL in assisting students to attain discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. Furthermore, the GST underlines the significance of feedback and adaptation in complex systems, which is particularly relevant for the WPBL programme of the Department of Ecotourism, DUT. Through the collection and analysis of feedback from industry, academic staff, and students, this study was able to put forth recommendations that are essential for the enhancement of the WPBL programme. These include, among others, as outlined in the previous section, diversifying student placement to incorporate urban ecotourism, integration of SGDs, ecotourism pillars, entrepreneurship, and DUT's ENVISION2023 into WPBL. In addition, the theory has guided this study in proving suggestions on how best the WPBL programme can be advanced to ensure relevance with the current trends in ecotourism, effectiveness in the attainment of discipline-specific skills, and alignment with DUT's strategic direction, which emphasises adaptive and responsive graduates.

6.6.1.2 The application of Theory of Change in identifying discipline-specific skills in ecotourism

The theoretical contribution of this study is anchored in the application of the Theory of Change framework, a methodology proven to be highly effective in identifying and delineating the intended social outcomes of complex interventions. Through this approach, the research was able to navigate the intricate landscape of WPBL in the context of ecotourism education. By employing the Theory of Change, the study has presented a comprehensive plan that delineates the precise steps necessary to attain the intended outcome of WPBL. This strategic delineation not only enhances the clarity and precision of intervention planning, but it also bolsters the empirical foundation upon which the recommendations are formulated. Furthermore, this study advances theoretical discourse by offering a comprehensive set of recommendations for the refinement and enhancement of the WPBL programme. It advocates for a systematic and iterative approach that integrates industry-driven research, thus bridging the gap between academic expertise and practical industry insights. This collaborative synergy leverages the theoretical and methodological strengths of academic staff in conjunction with the practical knowledge derived from industry professionals. The inclusion of industry-driven research not only makes the academic conversation more interesting, but it also leads to real research results that could help solve important problems in the field of ecotourism, especially when it comes to skill gaps. The resultant research outputs serve as invaluable assets, providing actionable insights and practical solutions that strengthen the effectiveness and impact of WPBL initiatives. The integration of industry-driven research not only enhances the scholarly conversation but also results in concrete research outcomes that have the capacity to address pressing challenges, specifically those related to skill gaps. The research outputs that emerge from this study provide actionable insights and practical solutions that can enhance the effectiveness and impact of WPBL initiatives.

6.6.1.3 WPBL programme evaluation on its contribution to the attainment of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism

This study makes a significant academic contribution by undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of the WPBL programme tailored for undergraduate ecotourism students within the Department of Ecotourism at DUT. This comprehensive evaluation transcends the scope of typical evaluation as it presents a significant progression in the discussion surrounding WPBL.

The significance of this evaluation is emphasised by its ability to provide empirical data, which is crucial in substantiating the efficacy of WPBL in facilitating the acquisition of discipline-specific skills among ecotourism students. By grounding its findings in empirical data, this study demonstrates the significant impact of WPBL on the educational development of students. Moreover, this evaluation does not merely conclude by affirming the benefits of WPBL; it critically examines the strengths and weaknesses of the program. This critical evaluation carries significant implications for the future advancement and augmentation of WPBL programs. It serves as a blueprint for refinement, enabling the programme to evolve and adapt in response to the constantly changing demands and dynamics of the ecotourism industry. Furthermore, this evaluation extends its scope beyond the confines of the immediate study context. It holds the potential to serve as a valuable reference for similar WPBL programmes not only within the field of ecotourism but also in associated fields. The insights gained from this evaluation can be used to readjust and improve WPBL programmes, tailoring them to better address the educational and professional needs of students and the industry at large. By discerning and expounding on effective strategies for teaching and learning, this study offers a tangible contribution to the evolution of best practices and approaches within the field of WPBL. The aforementioned insights possess extensive implications that resonate throughout the ecotourism industry and other related fields. They serve as a catalyst for the cultivation of a more dynamic, responsive, and effective learning environment. This, in turn, enhances the readiness of graduates to successfully navigate and thrive in the multifaceted field of ecotourism. By conducting a comprehensive assessment of the WPBL programme, this study not only offers empirical evidence to support its effectiveness but also identifies potential areas for improvement.

6.6.2 Conceptual contributions

A conceptual contribution in research refers to the original and innovative ideas, frameworks, or theoretical perspectives that the study introduces to the academic field. It involves advancing or reshaping existing concepts, theories, or models in a way that provides new insights, deepens understanding, or proposes innovative approaches to a particular subject or problem. In essence, a conceptual contribution means that the study encompasses not only the collection and analysis of data, but also the generation of new intellectual comprehension or constructs that are valuable for the academic community and potentially for practical applications in the field of study (MacInnis, 2011).

According to Corley and Gioia (2011), this contribution is typically reflected in the formulation of new theories, models, or paradigms, or in the modification or extension of existing ones, all of which serve to advance the state of knowledge in the chosen area of research.

6.6.2.1 Aligning research objectives and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A conceptual framework for ecotourism education

This research demonstrates a noteworthy conceptual contribution through the elaborate relationship between the study objectives and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each objective functions as a unique element, intricately blending with the larger framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Objective 1 establishes a comprehensive educational framework that is specifically designed to address the complex requirements of ecotourism practices. Engaging in this activity not only improves skills but also nurtures them in a fertile ground of specialised knowledge and cultivates them within a rich environment of specialised expertise, reflecting the essence of SDG 4: Ensuring Quality Education. Objective 2 encompasses a multifaceted approach, delving into the intricacies that impede the development of discipline-specific competencies in the field of ecotourism, a pursuit that aligns seamlessly with the goals outlined in SDG 8. With the purpose of shedding light, it strives to illuminate and clarify employment prospects and promote economic development in ecotourism. Objective 3 advances, based on the principle of WPBL. The programme serves as an instrument, effectively linking ambitions with practical application, thereby promoting the fundamental principles of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The WPBL not only serves as an educational platform but also acts as an empowering force, serving as a foundation for the cultivation and advancement of specialised knowledge and skills, particularly in the field of ecotourism. Objective 4 is to enhance educational programmes, a transformative pursuit that is in accordance with the principles of sustainable tourism. This refinement aligns harmoniously with SDG 12, serving as evidence of the significant influence that education can exert in preserving natural resources and fostering the well-being of local communities. Objective 5 assumes a prominent position, serving as a firm advocate of responsible tourism practices. It serves as an unwavering guard, safeguarding both natural resources and local communities from potential harm. By employing ecotourism education as a lens, this approach encapsulates the fundamental principles of sustainability, serving as a strong dedication to SDGs 12 and beyond.

Within the context of sustainable development, every objective in this study resonates harmoniously, creating a cohesive and unified composition as depicted in Figure 3.3, Chapter 3. Collectively, they form a harmonious arrangement, resonating with the profound impact that education can exert in moulding a world that is both sustainable and equitable. The complex alignment of factors not only enhances the study but also makes a substantial conceptual contribution to the field of ecotourism education and sustainable development.

6.6.3 Methodological contributions

A methodological contribution in a research study refers to the application of novel and innovative approaches for the purpose of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data. It involves the implementation of novel strategies or the modification of pre-existing ones in a manner that improves the research process, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the topic being examined. In this subsection, several notable methodological advancements that greatly enhance the research will be outlined. The application of qualitative research methods enables a comprehensive investigation into WPBL within the context of ecotourism. This methodology explores the intricate experiences, viewpoints, and knowledge of individuals engaged in WPBL, providing a thorough and all-encompassing comprehension of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the inclusion of face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors is a crucial methodological contribution. This method allows for direct and personal interactions, fostering rapport and trust, which in turn encourages respondents to provide detailed and sincere insights. Online interviews and focus groups allowed for a contemporary approach to data collection.

6.6.3.1 Qualitative research for in-depth exploration of WPBL in ecotourism

The adoption of qualitative research methodology in this study represents a seminal methodological choice, carrying significant implications for the depth and breadth of insights garnered. This methodological decision stands as a substantial contribution to the field, as it provides a unique opportunity to thoroughly investigate the WPBL in the context of the ecotourism industry. Qualitative research, with its emphasis on understanding the intricate degrees and complexities of human experiences, emerges as the ideal lens through which to examine the WPBL program. This methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences, viewpoints, and judgements of all parties engaged in the WPBL procedure.

This includes the valuable contributions of the ecotourism students who actively engaged in the programme, as well as the academic staff who designed and implemented it and the industry supervisors who provided guidance and oversight to students during their work-integrated learning experiences. Furthermore, the qualitative research approach facilitated the identification of critical skills gaps within the field of ecotourism, particularly those that are discipline specific. This is a significant achievement, as it not only sheds light on the existing deficiencies but also paves the way for targeted interventions aimed at skill enhancement. The methodological choice to employ qualitative research proves particularly advantageous in capturing the contextual intricacies and unique characteristics of both the WPBL programme and the ecotourism industry at large. It enables the study to move beyond surface-level observations, thereby enabling a more intricate comprehension of the underlying dynamics. The incorporation of face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors, coupled with online interviews for DUT academic staff and online focus groups for students, further enriches the depth and breadth of the research undertaking. This diversified approach ensures a multi-dimensional examination of perspectives, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the findings.

6.6.3.2 The use of the interpretivist approach as the underpinning paradigm to compare understanding and interpretations of WPBL among students, academics and industry

The adoption of the interpretivist approach as the foundational paradigm in this study constitutes a methodological advancement of considerable importance. It serves as an analytical framework for examining and contrasting the diverse interpretations and comprehensions of WPBL among students, academic staff, and industry professionals. The interpretivist paradigm is rooted in the recognition of the fundamental importance of subjectivity, context, and the socially constructed nature of reality. This perspective argues that both individual viewpoints and the larger social and cultural environments in which individuals exist play a crucial role in influencing their experiences and understandings of the world. This paradigm, thus, situates itself in direct opposition to reductionist methodologies that rely exclusively on measurable data. On the contrary, it acknowledges and appreciates the intricate and subtle characteristics intrinsic to the phenomena being examined. By employing the interpretivist approach, this study achieves a more comprehensive and holistic comprehension of the intricate dynamics surrounding WPBL.

It recognises that the subjective experiences and interpretations of stakeholders in the programme are integral to the overall understanding of the phenomenon. This approach enables the study to transcend surface-level observations, examining the depths of how WPBL is perceived and internalised by those directly involved. Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm fosters a research principle that emphasises collaboration and active participation. The approach prioritises the engagement of stakeholders, recognising and appreciating their expertise and knowledge. The implementation of this inclusive approach plays a crucial role in guaranteeing that the perspectives of industry supervisors, academic staff, and students are not only acknowledged but also incorporated into the essence of the research. The incorporation of diverse data collection techniques, such as face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors, online interviews with DUT academic staff, and online focus groups with students, exemplifies a commitment to fostering inclusivity and embracing a wide range of perspectives. The interpretivist paradigm serves as the fundamental basis for the methodological strength of this study. This study offers a systematic framework for analysing the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals closely engaged in the WPBL programme within the context of the ecotourism sector. This paradigm not only encompasses the intricacies of human perception but also advocates for a participatory research methodology, ensuring that the insights of stakeholders are not only recognised but also integrated into the core findings of this study.

6.6.3.3 Face-to-face interviews with industry supervisors

As a data collection tool, face-to-face interviews were used to collect data from industry supervisors in this study. Primarily, this approach facilitated the development of a robust relationship between the researcher and the supervisors within the industry. The establishment of rapport is a crucial component, as it serves as the basis for cultivating trust. When participants experience a sense of ease and establish a trusting relationship with the researcher, they are more likely to exhibit a willingness to disclose and provide detailed, sincere answers. This is particularly imperative in a study centred on a complex and potentially delicate subject matter, such as the phenomenon of skill gaps in ecotourism. The use of face-to-face interviews facilitated the researcher's ability to access non-verbal communication cues and subtle nuances present in the respondents' responses. The use of cues has the potential to convey a substantial amount of information that could be overlooked when employing alternative methods of data collection, such as surveys or written questionnaires.

Non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, can provide significant insights into the attitudes, emotions, and confidence levels of respondents when providing their answers. The inclusion of this supplementary layer of information enhances the depth and richness of the data gathered. Additionally, conducting face-to-face interviews offered the advantage of promptly addressing any potential misunderstandings or ambiguities that may have arisen from the respondents' answers. Real-time clarification is of great value in complex subjects such as skills gaps in ecotourism, where there is a wide range of perspectives. The implementation of this measure guarantees the attainment of accurate, precise, and genuinely representative data that faithfully captures the perspectives of the respondents. The selection of this particular methodology substantially improves the accuracy and consistency of the study findings. The integration of rapport establishment, utilisation of non-verbal cues, and immediate clarification of responses contributes to the development of an intense and intricate comprehension of the subject matter. The level of specificity is of utmost importance, especially when discussing matters with tangible consequences, such as the enhancement of the labour force in the field of ecotourism. Hence, the incorporation of face-to-face interviews serves as a methodological advancement that enhances the calibre and comprehensiveness of the study data, thereby facilitating a more rigorous comprehension of WPBL and its implementation within the ecotourism industry.

6.6.3.4 Using online interviews and online focus groups

The use of online interviews and focus groups in this study makes a significant methodological contribution, as it employs an innovative approach to data collection, specifically within the context of ecotourism research. This approach provides a multitude of distinct advantages that greatly augment the depth and scope of the research. The researcher employed online interviews and focus groups as a primary method to investigate the incorporation of technology in the process of data collection. The prominence of technology in various fields has led to a critical consideration in contemporary research. By using these methods in a direct manner, the study obtained primary observations regarding the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with them. Online data collection provides several significant benefits, including enhanced convenience, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. Participants have the ability to actively participate in the study from the comfort of their own environments, thereby mitigating the logistical obstacles commonly encountered with conducting in-person interviews or focus groups.

Furthermore, this approach has the potential to enhance participation rates by removing limitations imposed by geographical factors and enabling individuals to have more flexibility in scheduling. Additionally, this methodology enabled an exploration of the inherent constraints associated with online data collection techniques, including susceptibility to data security concerns such as malware and cyber-attacks. Conducting a rigorous evaluation is crucial to safeguarding the authenticity and confidentiality of the gathered information, especially within the scope of digital environments where privacy issues hold utmost significance. Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges and addresses the challenges associated with this method, including technical glitches and potential difficulties in managing group dynamics in an online setting. These insights are essential for researchers contemplating similar approaches in their own studies, offering a realistic perspective on the practical considerations and potential obstacles.

6.7 THE OPTIMAL WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING MODEL FOR ENHANCING ECOTOURISM DISCIPLINARY SKILLS: A PROPOSED APPROACH

The proposed optimal WPBL approach to refining the WPBL model aims to enhance the acquisition of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. As the emphasis on sustainable tourism increases, the need for ecotourism graduates to possess the relevant skills that meet industry needs and expectations cannot be overemphasised. This study recognises the potential for WPBL as a strategic method for addressing the skills gaps within the ecotourism industry. This study presents a proposed approach aimed at enhancing the current model of WPBL by integrating essential components to address the identified limitations in the existing model. The study findings suggest that the proposed approach has the potential to improve the attainment of discipline-specific skills and offer a comprehensive learning experience for ecotourism students. This approach is anticipated to have implications for ecotourism curriculum design and implementation, academic-industry partnerships, and policy development in the ecotourism industry.

DUT's EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Department of Higher Education and Training, South African Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), South Africa Council of Higher Education, industry and current trends.

Permeable border between Durban University of Technology and its

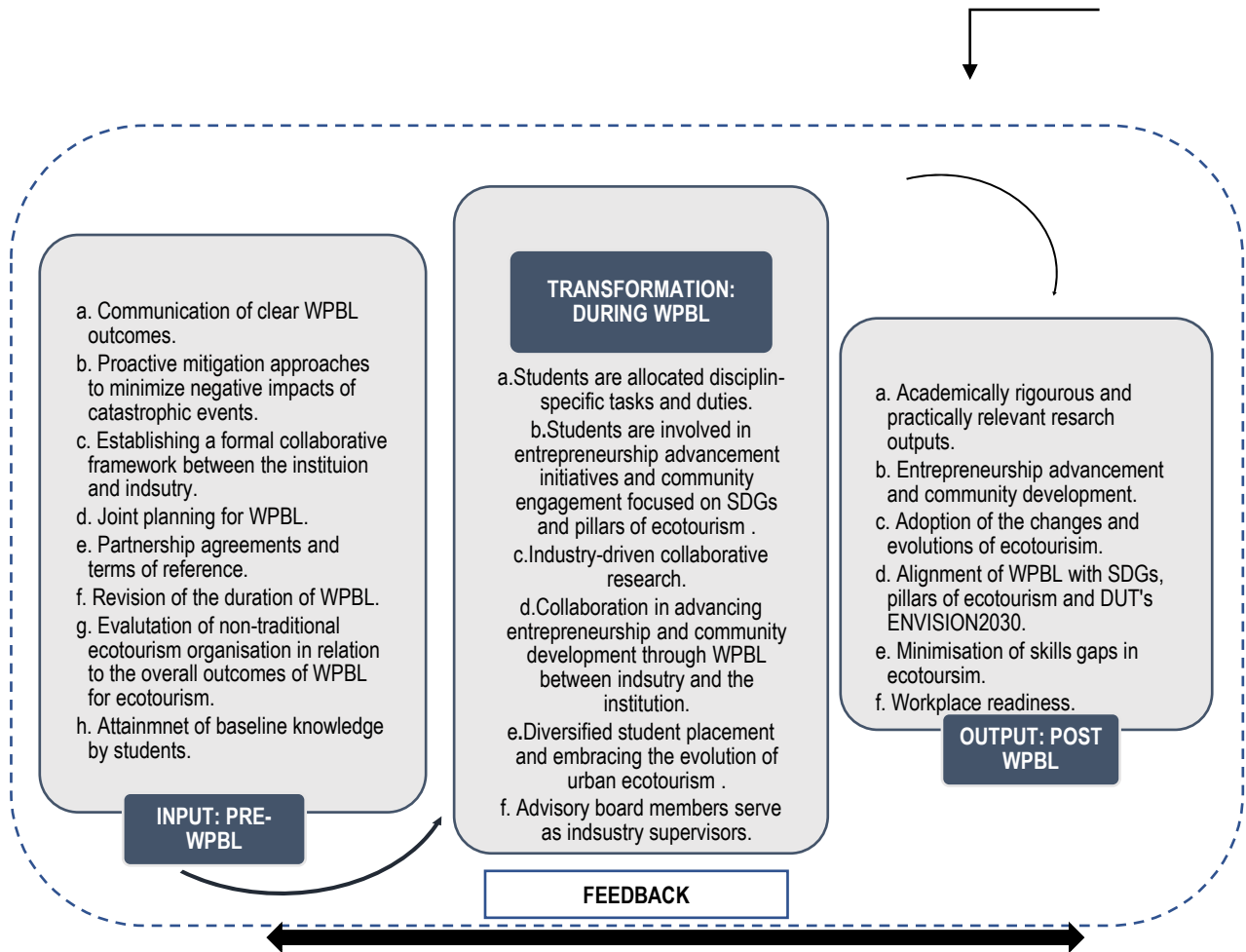


Figure 6.1: A proposed optimal workplace-based learning model for enhancing the attainment ecotourism discipline-specific skills. **Source:** Generated by the author based on research findings.

In relation to this study, the three fundamental components of the proposed optimal WPBL model are input (pre-WPBL), transformation (during WPBL) and output (post WPBL) are depicted in Figure 6.1.

6.7.1 Input

Input refers to the preparatory phase for WPBL and commences with the communication of clear WPBL learning outcomes, the establishment of a formal collaboration framework between the academic staff and industry, engagements and deliberations between the institution and industry on revising the duration of WPBL, and the evaluation of conventional tourism establishments for suitability in meeting WPBL outcomes. The input phase is crucial because it outlines the baseline level of knowledge and skills that ecotourism students need to possess before commencing WPBL. This phase further guides the academic staff and industry on how best they can plan for WPBL, with communication and collaboration at the core of the pre-WPBL phase.

6.7.2 Transformation

Transformation refers to the official commencement of the WPBL programme, and it signifies immersion experience, the skill development phase, active engagement, exposure to entrepreneurship and community development, academic-industry research collaboration, and student supervision. This is the core of the WPBL model, where ecotourism students are actively engaged in learning in the real world and are exposed to learning environments that offer opportunities for the acquisition of discipline-specific skills. Transformational experiences and engagements are designed to be immersive, experiential, and reflective. In addition, this phase of the model allows for ecotourism students to develop and refine their skills through practical application and active participation in entrepreneurship advancement and community-based development initiatives.

6.7.3 Output

The development of entrepreneurship in local communities, skill acquisition, demonstrated competence, WPBL outcomes, and research outputs produced through academic-industry collaboration are just a few examples of the components that make up output. The output phase is also characterised by the development of tangible outcomes such as portfolios, research, and entrepreneurship projects, as well as intangible outcomes such as improved communication skills and confidence and a deeper understanding of the ecotourism industry. This phase is particularly significant because it helps to demonstrate the efficacy of the WPBL programme in bridging the skills gaps and provides a basis for development and improvement.

6.7.4 Feedback

Feedback is a crucial component in the learning process, including WPBL. In the context of the proposed model, feedback is fundamental to ensuring continuous input on the learning experience. In the transformation phase, where students are actively engaged in learning in a real-world context, feedback plays a crucial role. Input about students' performance and identification of areas for improvement are derived from feedback. In turn, this allows for improvement and the opportunity to make necessary adjustments to the WPBL experience. The component of feedback in this proposed model is multi-dimensional and is derived from various stakeholders, such as academic staff, industry supervisors, and students. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of student performance and provides multiple perspectives to support their learning and development through WPBL. Moreover, feedback is not only limited to the transformation phase; it is incorporated throughout WPBL, including the input and output phases. In the input phase, feedback is needed to identify areas for additional support in preparation for the commencement of WPBL. Meanwhile, in the output phase, feedback is important for continuous evaluation, monitoring, and improvement of the WPBL programme.

6.7.5 The external environment

The external environmental components are external to DUT and are recognised as an important component as they provide resources and support for the success of the WPBL programme. These include industry associations, regulatory bodies, and all other parties that have a vested interest in the success of the institution and its graduates. External stakeholders, such as the Department of Higher Education and Training, provide guidelines and standards for WPBL to ensure that they are in alignment with national and international standards. The role of industry associations and regulatory bodies such as the South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQSF), the South Africa Council of Higher Education, and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) offers insight into the status quo of the industry and whether skills are current, relevant, and in demand. This information is useful in helping the institution tailor the WPBL programme to meet the needs of the industry and prepare students for the workplace.

6.8 A PROPOSED WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNING MODEL (WPBL) FOR ENHANCING ECOTOURISM DISCIPLINARY SKILLS INFORMED BY GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND THEORY OF CHANGE

The General Systems Theory suggests that a system is made up of interrelated components that work together towards a common goal. In the development of this model, the WPBL programme is viewed as a system that comprises interrelated components, including ecotourism students, academic staff, the workplace environment, and industry supervisors. These components work together to achieve a common goal of enhancing the attainment of disciplinary skills in ecotourism. While the Theory of Change proposes that change is a complex process of a series of interconnected activities or events, it emphasises that change is not linear and that several factors can influence the process. The WPBL programme in this study is viewed as a change process involving a series of interconnected activities, such as the initial WPBL preparation phase, the development phase of discipline-specific skills, and the attainment phase. The proposed WPBL for enhancing ecotourism disciplinary skills integrates both of these theories by conceptualising the WPBL programme as a system that goes through a change process towards the goal of enhancing discipline-specific ecotourism skills among students. By integrating these theories, the model is better positioned to address the complex and dynamic nature of the WPBL programme and provide a comprehensive framework for effective implementation. The proposed model distinguishes itself by emphasising the importance of the input phase, incorporating an immersive and experiential learning journey in the transformation phase, and focusing on mastery and demonstrated competence in the output phase. Furthermore, the proposed model incorporates feedback and the external environment. The integration of these components places the model in a better position to adapt to changes and ensure continuous improvement. This integration aligns with the selected theories as they emphasise the interdependence of system components and the implications of external factors in influencing change.

6.9 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study used a case study of Durban University of Technology, in particular the Department of Ecotourism, based in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study sought to identify discipline-specific skills for ecotourism and identify skill gaps in this niche type of tourism.

The study further assessed the efficacy of the WPBL programme undertaken by ecotourism students in helping them attain discipline-specific skills. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forth for future research:

6.9.1 Replication of the study in different contexts

The inclusion of a recommendation for replication in this study is an essential measure to strengthen the reliability and applicability of the results. It is recommended that future research endeavours focus on replicating this study in diverse contexts within the wider higher education domain. The current study has revolved around the Durban University of Technology, with a specific emphasis on the Department of Ecotourism located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The aforementioned single case study offers valuable insights into the specific skills and skill gaps within the ecotourism sector. However, it is crucial to broaden the scope of the investigation to include a wider range of higher education institutions (HEIs). This necessitates the consideration of various types of educational institutions, including universities of technology, comprehensive universities, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, and private higher education institutions. Each of these contexts is characterised by unique dynamics, structures, and educational approaches. Through the implementation of replications in a variety of settings, it is possible to determine the wider applicability of the identified skill sets and gaps. This process enhances the validity and significance of the findings on a larger scale. The recommended direction for future research will not only strengthen the existing findings but also enhance the overall understanding of discipline-specific skills and WPBL in the field of ecotourism.

6.9.2 Comparison with other industries

The suggestion to employ a comparative methodology in future research is a pivotal step towards advancing understanding of discipline-specific and skill gaps, particularly in the field of ecotourism. This methodology entails comparing the results of the present study with those of other sectors, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of shared characteristics and unique attributes. The study's focus and findings offer a solid basis for investigating the specific skill sets and gaps within ecotourism. Nevertheless, it is crucial to expand the scope of investigation by considering factors beyond the boundaries of the ecotourism industry. This comparative analysis fulfils two essential objectives. First and foremost, it enables the identification of common skill prerequisites that may extend beyond the confines of specific industries.

These shared characteristics provide insight into the core skills that are crucial for achieving success across different industries. Equally, this approach also emphasises the distinctive characteristics and specialised knowledge that distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism. Through the process of distinguishing the unique proficiencies required within this specific sector. By discerning the distinct skill sets demanded by this niche industry, deeper insights into the specialised training and education needed to excel in ecotourism are revealed. The application of this comparative perspective not only enhances the comprehension of ecotourism but also makes a valuable contribution to a wider discussion on the development of the workforce and the acquisition of skills in various industries.

6.9.3 Long-term impact of workplace-based learning (WPBL)

The findings derived from this study are those of a short-term, six-month evaluation of the efficacy of the WPBL programme in the attainment of discipline-specific skills for ecotourism. Future research can assess the long-term contributions and implications of WPBL or similar programmes on the attainment of discipline-specific skills and employment outcomes. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lasting impacts of such programmes, it is crucial to expand the investigation to include the long-term consequences. Future research efforts should therefore strive to assess the enduring impacts of WPBL or similar initiatives on the development and application of discipline-specific skills, as well as on subsequent employment outcomes. The adoption of a longitudinal perspective enables researchers to analyse the progression of skill development over a period of time, offering valuable insights into how these acquired competencies influence career paths and professional achievements beyond the immediate educational setting. Through the implementation of a comprehensive and extended evaluation, researchers are able to ascertain the lasting benefits of WPBL interventions, thereby illuminating their continued significance and efficacy in equipping individuals with the necessary competencies for achievement in their chosen fields. This research direction holds the potential to not only validate the effectiveness of WPBL programmes but also to provide insights for the development and execution of future initiatives aimed at improving the acquisition of discipline-specific skills and employment outcomes.

6.9.4 Adoption of a mixed-methods research approach

Further research can adopt a mixed-methods approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the WPBL programme, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. The present study has predominantly adopted a qualitative research methodology. However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the WPBL programme, it is crucial to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research methods. By combining these two distinct yet complementary methodologies, future research can attain a more all-encompassing comprehension of the WPBL programme's complexities and influence. Qualitative methods can provide an in-depth exploration of the intricate encounters, viewpoints, and understandings of participants involved in WPBL. The qualitative lens enables a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the qualitative aspects inherent in the learning process. Concurrently, quantitative methodologies offer the potential to collect organised, numerical data that can undergo rigorous statistical examination. This feature enables the recognition of patterns, correlations, and trends within the WPBL programme, providing a more impartial and widely applicable viewpoint. The integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies facilitates a triangulated and comprehensive analysis of the WPBL programme, encompassing subjective experiences and empirical outcomes. The adoption of this comprehensive approach not only serves to enhance the depth of understanding but also contributes to the overall validity and reliability of the findings.

6.9.5 Enhanced evaluation of workplace-based learning (WPBL) programme implementation

The present study studied WPBL from the perspective of the attainment of discipline-specific skills in ecotourism. Future studies can focus on the identification of key stakeholders and their roles, assessing the efficacy of WPBL programme delivery, and identifying the resources required for successful implementation. This suggestion calls for a systematic and comprehensive assessment of how WPBL initiatives are executed, with the ultimate goal of identifying best practices and areas that necessitate enhancement. This approach entails a multifaceted evaluation that encompasses various dimensions of programme implementation. One critical aspect is the identification and analysis of key stakeholders and their respective roles within the WPBL framework. Understanding the roles and contributions of stakeholders is pivotal to ensuring effective programme delivery and outcomes.

Additionally, future studies should scrutinise the efficacy of WPBL programme delivery. This involves a detailed examination of the methods, strategies, and mechanisms employed in delivering the programme to participants. By assessing the delivery process, researchers can pinpoint strengths to be amplified and areas that may require refinement to optimise learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is imperative to ascertain the resources required for the successful implementation of WPBL programs. This encompasses a comprehensive evaluation of the material, human, and infrastructural resources necessary to facilitate an effective learning environment. Identifying resource needs and potential gaps is instrumental in ensuring the sustainability and scalability of WPBL initiatives. Overall, the recommendation to prioritise the evaluation of WPBL programme implementation is not only methodologically rigorous but also strategically significant. This approach emphasises the necessity of ongoing assessment and improvement to maximise the impact of these programmes. By identifying best practices and areas for refinement, future research can contribute to the continuous enhancement of WPBL initiatives, ultimately leading to more effective skill acquisition and professional development outcomes.

6.9.6 Diversifying workplace learning: Exploring alternative modalities

Further investigations can explore other modalities of workplace learning, such as internships, cooperative education, and apprenticeships, to determine their effectiveness in bridging the skills gaps. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the potential of workplace learning across diverse contexts, it is imperative to expand the scope of inquiry to encompass various modes of workplace learning. This includes modalities such as internships, cooperative education, and apprenticeships. These alternative methodologies present unique benefits and dynamics in the process of acquiring skills and addressing the gap in skill levels. Internships offer individuals the opportunity to engage in immersive and practical experiences within authentic real-world environments. Cooperative education is a pedagogical approach that combines theoretical academic coursework with hands-on work experience, thereby cultivating a comprehensive learning environment. Apprenticeships provide a well-organised training programme supervised by experienced mentors, facilitating a smooth integration into the labour market. It is recommended that future studies undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of these alternative modalities in the context of ecotourism and potentially broaden the scope of analysis to encompass other industries.

This involves conducting a comparative analysis of the outcomes of these programmes in relation to traditional programmes, thus offering valuable insights into the most appropriate approach for various contexts and disciplines. Through the examination of alternative approaches, researchers can provide a detailed and all-encompassing evaluation of the various strategies that exist for enhancing skill acquisition and facilitating the integration of individuals into the workforce. This particular area of research shows potential for both enhancing the depth of comprehension and providing insights for the development and execution of future endeavours focused on improving the acquisition of discipline-specific skills and professional growth outcomes.

6.10 CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify the discipline-specific skills in ecotourism competencies and further assess the effectiveness of WPBL in assisting ecotourism students acquire the skills. Ecotourism has been recognised as a significant catalyst for economic development both on a global scale and within the South African context. Therefore, prioritising ecotourism as a key economic sector has become essential to optimise its potential impact on the South African economy. Nevertheless, a literature gap still exists with regards to the specific skills, knowledge, education, and training related to the discipline of ecotourism in South African public higher education institutions. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap and propose potential strategies for WPBL that can effectively facilitate the acquisition of crucial discipline-specific skills by undergraduate ecotourism students. The findings have responded to the fundamental research questions underpinning this research. The findings reveal that WPBL is an instrumental approach in developing the communication, problem-solving, customer relations, leadership, and self-regulation proficiencies of ecotourism students. Despite these merits, the WPBL programme still has some limitations in cultivating other important skills in the ecotourism discipline, such as conservation, guiding in the natural environment, renewable energy competencies, and safety proficiency in the natural environment. This study recommends the integration of diversified and engaging activities in the WPBL programme, such as a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship, student participation in community-based initiatives that are aligned with the core pillars of ecotourism, and most importantly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) should develop novel strategies to alleviate the negative effects of catastrophic events such as the COVID-19 outbreak on WPBL learning outcomes by investing in alternative digital and remote learning tools and methods, such as virtual internships and hybrid WPBL models that combine physical and online learning. In addition, knowledge production and research output through academic-industry partnerships can bridge the knowledge gap in ecotourism, ultimately contributing to the sustainable growth of the sector.

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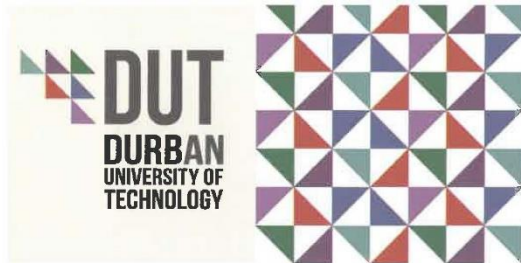
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ANNEXURES

Annexure 1: Ethical Clearance granted by Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the Durban University of Technology



Institutional Research Ethics Committee
Research and Postgraduate Support Directorate
2nd Floor, Berwyn Court
Gate 1, Steve Biko Campus
Durban University of Technology

P O Box 1334, Durban, South Africa, 4001

Tel: 031 373 2375
Email: lavishad@dut.ac.za
http://www.dut.ac.za/research/institutional_research_ethics

www.dut.ac.za

2 December 2020

Ms T P Ndlovu
A1007
Umlazi
P O Umlazi
4031

Dear Ms Ndlovu

The implications of workplace-based learning in attaining specialty skills for ecotourism employment: The medial viewpoint of Universities of Technology in South Africa

Ethical Clearance number: IREC 032/20

The Institutional Research Ethics Committee acknowledges receipt of your gatekeeper permission letters.

Please note that FULL APPROVAL is granted to your research proposal. You may proceed with data collection.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the IREC according to the IREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's).

Please note that any deviations from the approved proposal require the approval of the IREC as outlined in the IREC SOP's.

Yours Sincerely

Prof J K Adam
Chairperson: IREC



Annexure 2: Permission to conduct research granted by the Durban University of Technology



*Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support
Durban University of Technology
Tromso Annexe, Steve Biko Campus
P.O. Box 1334, Durban 4000
Tel.: 031-3732576/7
Fax: 031-3732946*

17th June 2020
Ms Thulile P Ndlovu
c/o Department of Hospitality and Tourism
Faculty of Management Sciences
Durban University of Technology

Dear Ms Ndlovu

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE DUT

Your email correspondence in respect of the above refers. I am pleased to inform you that the Institutional Research and Innovation Committee (IRIC) has granted **Full Permission** for you to conduct your research “The effects of workplace-based learning in attaining speciality skills for ecotourism employment: The medial viewpoint of Universities of Technology in South Africa” at the Durban University of Technology.

The DUT may impose any other condition it deems appropriate in the circumstances having regard to nature and extent of access to and use of information requested.

We would be grateful if a summary of your key research findings can be submitted to the IRIC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.
Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. LINGANISO', with a horizontal line underneath.

DR LINDA ZIKHONA LINGANISO
DIRECTOR: RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT DIRECTORATE

Annexure 3: Permission to conduct research granted by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife



HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

DATE:	Friday, July 16, 2021	FILE NR	
TO:	A/CEO: Mr. Ntsikelelo Dlulane	FROM:	SDF: Ms. Silindile Manyoni
CC:	A/HRDM: Ms. Mbali Ngcobo		

Request to Conduct Research Study at Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife

Dear Mr. Dlulane

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife has a standing Memorandum of Understanding with the Durban University of Technology where we host their students for the Work- Integrated Learning each year.

One of their lecturers, who is also PhD candidate, is seeking permission to conduct a research study at some of our resorts which normally host their students. Please see the attached letter.


This memo serves to request the A/CEO to support and approve this request.

Prepared by:



Ms. S Manyoni
Skills Development Facilitator

Approved/ Not Approved



Mr. N Dlulane
Acting CEO

Date: 21/07/2021

Annexure 4: Letter of information



LETTER OF INFORMATION

Dear Participant,

I am currently registered for a Doctoral Degree in Management Sciences specializing in Hospitality and Tourism at the Durban University of Technology. This requires me to conduct a study on workplace-based learning and its bearing on the attainment of speciality skills for employment in the South African ecotourism sector.

Title of the Research Study:

The implications of workplace-based learning for attaining speciality skills for ecotourism employment: The medial viewpoint of Universities of Technology in South Africa.

Principal Investigator/s/researcher: Ms Thulile Promise Ndlovu

Qualifications:

National Diploma: Ecotourism Management

Bachelor of Technology: Tourism Management

Degree of Master of Management Sciences specialising in Hospitality and Tourism

Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s: Dr Themba Msukwini

Highest Qualification: Doctor in Technology: Human Resource Management, Durban University of Technology

Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:

Workplace-based learning programs offered by external organisations is the primary focus of the study. The researcher hopes to get input from employers in the ecotourism sector on what they deem as specialist skills for ecotourism employment. Students undertake workplace-based learning as a requirement to complete their qualifications, more particularly in institutions of higher learning. The study will therefore adopt a case study approach using Durban University of Technology (DUT), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and Vaal University of Technology (VUT), which are the only Universities of Technology in South Africa that offer a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. Amongst an array of courses offered at DUT, TUT and VUT housed in various faculties, the program of interest for the purpose of the study is the National Diploma in Ecotourism Management. A lot of literature has largely focused on the tourism industry in general, however there is limited literature focusing on skills gaps in ecotourism as a subset of tourism. Ecotourism is a growing sector globally, particularly in South Africa. Ecotourism is a very specific sector; therefore, specific knowledge and skills about the sector is crucial. The study aims to fill this gap and further propose possible workplace-based learning approaches to assist undergraduate students acquire specific skills for ecotourism employment. The aim of the study is twofold. First, to determine specific skills critical for ecotourism employment in the ecotourism sector of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces in

South Africa. Second, to evaluate the efficacy of current workplace-based learning programs in assisting undergraduate students master discipline-specific skills for ecotourism employment.

Outline of the procedures and data collection

- The study will employ a cross-sectional approach which means data will only be collected over a single period, and not over two phases.
- If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed through synchronous online interviews.
- To ensure your safety and further adhere to the restrictions brought upon by the Covid-19 outbreak, focus groups will be done using online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.
- In the event where you are willing to participate in the online interview, but you are hindered by data constraints, the researcher will cover all data costs. Participation in online interviews will be of no cost to you.
- There will be no physical contact, all communication will be done virtually through platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.
- You will be requested to complete an online confidentiality agreement which will be sent to you and signed ahead of time or gathered online using a tool such as Signable or Microsoft Forms.
- Alternatively, the researcher will read the agreement to you before starting the session and ask you to agree by voice and record the answer.
- The online interview will be audio-recorded in order to accurately capture what is said. If you choose to participate in the study, you may request that the recording be paused at any time.
- You will choose your own environment, and this might sometimes be someone's bedroom or other personal space, or a public space.
- You will be informed when recording begins, paused or stopped.
- You will be offered the opportunity to listen to a copy of the video/audio recording of the interview.
- In addition, you will be given an opportunity to pre-read the consent form, informed that the recording of the interview could be stopped at any time on request and that you can withdraw at any time from the research. There will be no consequences for your withdrawal from the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to choose the day and time of the interview.
- To meet confidentiality, once collected, data will be transcribed and stored on a password protected computer and only the people involved in the project can have access to the research data.

Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:

Not applicable.

Benefits:

A thesis will be published and made available as a piece of information to contribute to the selected field of study.

Reason/s why the Participant May Be Withdrawn from the study

Your participation in study is purely voluntary and there will be no consequences should you decide to withdraw.

Remuneration:

You will receive no monetary or any other form remuneration.

Costs of the Study:

No costs are applicable to you.

Confidentiality:

Anonymity and confidentiality

Confidentiality and anonymity will be demonstrated by requesting you to sign a consent letter prior to commencing with the online focus groups. You will have a solemn right to participate and/or; withdraw from the inquiry. The researcher will obtain an informed written consent letter from you. You will be given an assurance by the researcher that the information shared would remain between the study supervisor and the researcher beforehand, in the course of and to the rear of the investigation. In an attempt to retain confidentiality, the researcher will use specific codes to describe respondents, excluding all the names and other identifiers. You will be informed of the five-year waiting period for record keeping before all the information supplied could be discarded.

Data storage and security

To reinforce data security, the researcher will activate lock out functions for screen savers. This implies that any computer used for data analysis will be configured to "lock out" after 5 minutes of inactivity. This reduces the risk of theft or unauthorized use of data in situations where the researcher working with confidential data leaves her desk and does not log off immediately.

Digital data

Digital versions of qualitative data will be held in a number of forms, including digitally recorded voice files (of interviews or fieldwork notes) held in MP3 format or similar and transcriptions of voice files held in word-processed documents. The researcher will use Protect+ Voice Recorder with Encryption which is a full-featured audio/voice recording app with which offers recording and encryption of the digital data.

Physical data security

All non-digital data will be locked away. Paper documents such as consent forms, printouts, or case tracking sheets that contain personal identifying information will be stored securely in locked file cabinets when not in use and will be handled only by the researcher.

Data disposal

Deleting files and even formatting from a hard drive might not be effective as the files might still be retrievable. The researcher will therefore physically destroy the drive in which the data from the respondents will be stored. The researcher will achieve this by using an approved secure destruction facility at which the researcher will be physically present. Physical data will be destroyed by shredding.

Research-related Injury:

This is not applicable to the nature of the study. The study does not involve any clinical trials or anything that will be tested on the participants. The researcher will collect data in two forms, which is through the dissemination of electronic questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. This will be completely voluntary, at your convenience.

Persons to Contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:

(Supervisor and details) Please contact the researcher (033 845 8839), my supervisor (033 373 2880) or the Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on 031 373 2375. -

Complaints can be reported to the DVC: Research, Innovation and Engagement Prof S Moyo on 031 373 2577 or moyos@dut.ac.za

Annexure 5: Letter of consent



CONSENT

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Ms Thulile Ndlovu about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: To be confirmed.
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

Full Name of Participant Thumbprint	Date	Time	Signature /	Right
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I, Ms Thulile Ndlovu herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

Full Name of Researcher	Date	Signature
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Full Name of Witness (If applicable)	Date	Signature
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Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)	Date	Signature
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Annexure 6: Interview schedule for industry participants

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR ECOTOURISM INDUSTRY SUPERVISORS

1. What is your knowledge and understanding of ecotourism? What does it mean to you?
2. Being in the industry, what are discipline-specific skills that are valuable to ecotourism, and have you observed any that are lacking? What can be done to fill this gap?
3. What is your understanding and interpretation of workplace-based learning?
4. Based on your observation, were students adequately prepared to commence WPBL in your organization? Did you observe any skills gaps between what the students are able to do and what you expect them to know upon placement? What were these gaps?
5. Did the WPBL program you provided equip or expose students to knowledge and skills that are specific for ecotourism employment?
6. What tasks/duties/responsibilities were given to students by your organization that were aimed at giving them the discipline-specific skills that you mentioned in question 2?
7. What measures are in place to ensure an effective WPBL program that is beneficial to students?
8. How does hosting students for WPBL benefit and disadvantage your organization?
9. During the course of the WPBL program, what should be the role of institutions of higher learning (in this case, DUT) in ensuring an effective WPBL program that will benefit the students, organization and institution?
10. Do students have a role to play in maximizing their own WPBL experience in ecotourism organizations and attaining discipline-specific skills? What is their role?
11. After 6 months of supervising students during the course of WPBL, did you observe/notice any improvement in a way they executed certain tasks? What were those? Are there any that are discipline-specific?
12. The period for WPBL is 6 months, is this period adequate to prepare students for employment in the ecotourism sector and for them to attain discipline-specific skills?
13. In your opinion, how do you feel about work placements that are not offered by true ecotourism organizations, such as city hotels instead of eco-lodges. What impacts do you think it has on the relevance of experience and specialty skills obtained by students?
14. What do you think informed the decision of curriculum enhancement of the undergraduate ecotourism qualification at DUT? What is its intended purpose and its foreseeable implications on workplace-based learning?
15. Did you or any representative in your organization have any input on curriculum? If so, what was your input?
16. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on WPBL in your organization? How did you overcome the challenges?

Annexure 7: Interview schedule for academic staff from the Durban University of Technology

ONLINE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR ACADEMIC STAFF FROM THE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING : DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

1. What are your key responsibilities in the Department of Ecotourism?
2. From experience, why do students enroll for the National Diploma/Diploma in Ecotourism in your department?
3. What selection criteria is used to enroll students? Is it sufficient to gauge if indeed students are interested in the course? What are your recommendations?
4. When you deliver content to students, how do you describe ecotourism based on your understanding, experience, and knowledge of it. Please elaborate on the key pillars of ecotourism you know and understand.
5. Does the Department of Ecotourism provide any career guidance for students enrolled to enlighten them about possible careers in this field of ecotourism?
6. What is it that you do in your individual capacity to ensure that students understand ecotourism as a niche or specialist type of tourism? Any examples of types of assessments, projects, anything at all that you incorporate in your teaching and learning that helps students understand ecotourism?
7. What can you say about student's enthusiasm and interest in the course during teaching and learning before workplace-based learning (WPBL) and after? Did you observe any change in behaviour such as change in attitude, or academic performance? Please elaborate.
8. The Durban University in particular, offers a National Diploma in Tourism Management /Diploma in Tourism as well as the National Diploma in Ecotourism. Please explain how the qualification in Ecotourism differs from that of Tourism.
9. What discipline-specific skills are valuable to ecotourism?
10. What is your understanding of workplace-based learning? What is your interpretation of it?
11. What is your role in ensuring that students are adequately prepared to commence with workplace-based learning (WPBL)? What skills and knowledge do you equip them with and how is this achieved?
12. During the course of the 6 months when students are on workplace-based learning at various host organisations:
 - 12.1 What is the role of organisations in ensuring that students get the relevant experience that meets the outcomes?
 - 12.2 What is the role of the student in maximizing their own workplace-based learning experience in gaining relevant skills?
 - 12.3 What is your role, or the role of the Department of Ecotourism to ensure efficacy of workplace-based learning, that benefits, the Department, students and host organisations?

13. What selection criteria is adopted when selecting host organisations for WPBL for ecotourism students?
14. Are you involved in the selection criteria of host organisations where students are placed?
15. In line with the previous question, if you are not involved, what hinders your involvement in this process? Would you recommend an opportunity to be a part of it?
16. With your current position and job title in the Department of Ecotourism, did you ever interact with organisations that hosted ecotourism students for the 2020/2021 period? Please elaborate on your response. If Yes, how so and how often? If No, what were the hindrances?
17. With your current position and job title in the Department of Ecotourism, do you think it is necessary to interact with these organisations, even beyond 2020/2021? How would this benefit you, the students, the Department of Ecotourism as a whole and host organisations.
18. What is currently in place in the Department of Ecotourism as a means of interaction with host organisations for the 2020/2021 period in particular, and even before. Are these means adequate? What are their pros and cons? What are your recommendations.
19. Do the organisations to which students were placed for the 2020/2021 period ALL fit the ecotourism criteria in term of service/products they are offering? Please consider the pillars of ecotourism as you know and understand them.
20. Does the Department of Ecotourism have a standard criteria to base a suitable ecotourism organisation to host students on? If it exists, please divulge what is contained within the criteria.
21. In a case where an ecotourism student is placed in an organisation that does not entirely fit the ecotourism criteria (as you know and understand it) , how does this affect of the relevance of the experience provided? Does is benefit or disadvantage the student?
22. As a follow-up question, what are some of the factors that contribute to this? (Placement at organisations that I not deemed 'ecotourism'.
23. The period for workplace-based learning is 6 months, is this period adequate to prepare students for employment in the ecotourism sector? Please elaborate and what would you recommend?
24. What informed the decision of curriculum enhancement of the undergraduate ecotourism qualification?
25. What new content is included in the newly revised qualification? Is this aligned with the overall trajectory of the Durban University of Technology?
26. What is your take on the emphasis on Entrepreneurship by the Durban University of Technology?
27. Do you have knowledge of the outcomes of workplace-based learning for your Department?
28. What has been the impact of Covid-19 in teaching and learning as well as student placements? How were challenges overcome?

Annexure 8: Interview schedule for students

ONLINE FOCUS-GROUPS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS

1. What motivated your choice to enrol for a National Diploma in Ecotourism Management/Diploma in Ecotourism?
2. Are you aware of any career opportunities in ecotourism that you hope to pursue?
3. What are the exact core service(s) offered by the organisation to which you are placed?
4. Based on your understanding of ecotourism, would you categorise the organisation to which you were placed as an ecotourism organisation?
5. While on your workplace-based learning, were you exposed to different departments/divisions within the organisation?
6. What is your understanding of work-integrated learning?
7. What is your understanding of workplace-based learning?
8. Did you have an induction on your first day of the commencement of your work placement?
9. What was your biggest expectation from your workplace-based learning program?
10. Did you feel adequately prepared to commence workplace-based learning (WPBL)?
11. Did you complete all six months of WPBL in the same organisation? If not please explain why and how it affected your experience.
12. What were your main tasks/duties during WPBL?
13. What new knowledge did you acquire during the course of the WPBL program?
14. What new skills did you acquire during the course of the WPBL program?
15. Please elaborate on what you liked best about your WPBL experience?
16. Please elaborate on what did you liked the least about your WPBL experience?
17. Would you recommend this organisation to other students? Please elaborate.
18. Is this the type of work you would like to do in the future?
19. Did the WPBL provide you with a useful experience, which has helped you in your career decision-making?
20. Was the placement useful in helping you understand the specialist skills and knowledge required for ecotourism employment?
21. Based on your experience, would you pursue a career in ecotourism?
22. How might the work placement experience program be improved?
23. Would you say your understanding of WPBL learning has changed after completing a placement program? What does WPBL mean to you now that you have been exposed to it?
24. What do you think informed the decision of curriculum enhancement of the undergraduate ecotourism qualification? What is its intended purpose and its foreseeable implications on workplace-based learning?
25. Did you and any student representatives have any input on curriculum? If so, what was your input?

Annexure 9: Editor's letter

EDITOR'S LETTER

Researchers Beyond-Borders (PTY) LTD
Umhlanga, Durban
South Africa
26 June 2023

To whom it may concern

Editing of Doctoral Dissertation: Thulile Promise Ndlovu

Title of dissertation: The implications of workplace-based learning in attaining speciality skills for ecotourism employment: The medial viewpoint of universities of technology in South Africa

This letter serves as confirmation that the aforementioned dissertation has been language edited.
Any queries may be directed to the author of this letter.



Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maleni Pillay".

Maleni Pillay
Researchers Beyond-Borders
consult@researchersbeyondborders.com
www.researchersbeyondborders.com