Enhancing employability skills and graduate attributes through work-integrated learning

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Abstract

Universities need to be strategic about engaging employers in employability skill development and evaluation. This paper demonstrates how one university successfully did this using a work-integrated learning program. The School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University features a five-month, full-time internship at the end of each degree. Over a three year period Southern Cross University engaged employers as external assessors to evaluate key employability skills and graduate attributes gained by students during their studies. This process provided important feedback to the university, students and industry on the development and assessment of key skills. This type of strategic approach to engaging employers provides a deeper understanding of how skills developed in the classroom can be further enhanced and applied within the workplace while helping to ensure an appropriate match between education and labour market demands.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the process of engaging employers to provide feedback on student skills can be embedded in work-integrated learning to assist students, employers and the university. Exploration of the following questions supports this overarching aim:

- How do employers rank the importance of the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management’s nominated graduate attributes/employability skills?
- What ratings do employers give on student performance in the workplace for each of these skills?
- Are there significant gaps between employer-ranked skill importance and actual student skill performance?
- How do employers rate student work performance and employability at the end of their three-year degree?
- Are there specific skills and attributes which may help predict student employability?

The methodology included analysis of 330 supervisor evaluation forms from all final year students completing internships in tourism, hospitality and events industries across a three year period. These data were used to gain an externally based quantitative assessment of students’ workplace performance of key employability skills and graduate attributes at the end of their studies.

The findings show that employers rated students highly on their attainment of graduate attributes and employability. By ranking the importance of nominated skills against skill importance and skill performance, gaps in expectations could be identified and the notion of potential predictors of graduate employability emerged. It also identified priority skills for development and how this information can be used to improve relationships between industry and academia, curriculum, overall
graduate learning outcomes and quality assurance processes. These outcomes can be vital in developing a better match between industry labour market requirements and tertiary education programs.

In summary, taking a strategic approach to engaging employers in assessing student skills in the workplace is effective and allows employers to become an integral part of curriculum development and the quality assurance processes.

Introduction

In Australia’s current environment of funding cuts and the increasing focus on quality assurance mechanisms, universities need to be even more strategic about engaging employers in developing and evaluating the graduate attributes and employability skills of their students. By way of introduction, examples of commonly cited employability skills include communication and team work. Graduate attributes also include these same two qualities plus others such as intellectual rigour and ethical practice. More detailed examples and definitions of the overlaps between employability skills and graduate attributes will be discussed in the Background section of this paper.

This paper demonstrates how the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University successfully took a strategic approach to embedding employer evaluations into its work-integrated learning program to benefit students, employers and the university/School. For programs that prioritise industry relevance and industry partnerships, this project demonstrates how it is possible to embed an effective means of maintaining strong industry partnerships and evidence-based curriculum improvement and quality assurance. Since 2007 Southern Cross University has engaged with employers as external assessors to evaluate key employability skills and graduate attributes gained by students during their studies. This information is gathered twice a year, providing systematic feedback on student/new graduate performance in the workplace and industry satisfaction as well as perceptions of the quality and content of the School’s degrees.

This paper demonstrates how strategically embedding the process and feedback from employer evaluations in work-integrated learning can benefit students, employers and the university. In supporting this overarching aim, the actual results and the utility of the information provided by employers across 2007, 2008 and 2009 is assessed including:

- The importance employers place on the School’s nominated graduate attributes/employability skills and how employers rank these.
- How employers rate student performance in the workplace for each of these graduate attributes/employability skills.
- Identification of any significant gaps between employer ranked skill importance and actual student skill performance.
- An overall analysis of student work performance and employability at the end of students’ three year degrees.
- Investigation of skills and attributes which may help predict employability of students.

Also identified are some of the benefits and limitations of this process. Future directions for improved benchmarking of employability skills and continued involvement of employers in the work-integrated learning evaluation processes are also considered.

Much is published on the importance of achieving mutually beneficial relationships with industry, but there is little detail on how to achieve this (Oliver 2011; Orrell 2011). Also limited is information on
This paper presents an innovative approach on how universities can better integrate and formalise the process of providing employers with a strong and valid voice on their training requirements and expectations. It also demonstrates how to strategically develop an empirical evidence base that can enhance curriculum content and design, something identified as lacking in many Australian undergraduate business schools (Jackson 2009), and something that work-integrated learning provides the ideal context for achieving.

Establishing such an evidence base is particularly important, given the increasing emphasis on knowledge economies and increased focus on effective workplace learning as being a key aspect of a nation’s wealth, well-being and development of social capital (Down 2006). Using quality assurance methods that effectively incorporate employer feedback assists this process. This paper reviews and explains the successful three year implementation of such a process.

**Background**

The benefits of work-integrated learning to students, industry employers and educational institutions are widely acknowledged. For example, Dressler and Keeling (2011) summarised over 100 research studies of student benefits from work-integrated learning around academic, personal, career and work skill development themes. An international review of 19 research studies on the benefits of work-integrated learning to employers found more than 30 distinct advantages, ranging from improved recruitment and retention through to gaining higher-quality, more productive employees (Braunstein et al. 2011). Universities can gain advantage through work-integrated learning to differentiate courses, improve graduate employability career paths, renew curriculum, develop staff and align resources (Crump & Mary 2011). This paper outlines further advantages that can be gained by all three stakeholders from using work-integrated learning to strategically evaluate and develop graduate attributes and employability skills.

The work-integrated learning program incorporated in Southern Cross University, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management degrees requires a minimum 20 week, 600 hour internship (compulsory work placement) for each of its four main degrees: Bachelor of Business in Tourism Management; Bachelor of Sport Tourism Management; Bachelor of Hotel and Resort Management; and Bachelor of Business in Convention and Event Management. Enrolment in the four core internship units and completion of assessment requirements equate to one semester of full-time study credit.

Internship units are key elements of the work-integrated learning program and are core subjects in each of these degrees, allowing students to complete internships at different stages of their study, for example, during summer breaks, or concurrently with part-time studies, and/or with multiple employers. The term ‘internship’ is used interchangeably with ‘work-integrated learning placement’ or ‘work placement’ units in this paper. Students can choose to undertake their internship anywhere in Australia or internationally (visa regulations permitting). The majority of students complete their internship during their final semester by working full-time for one employer in their chosen industry sector. On completion of the internship, students are able to stay with their employer as a permanent employee if a position exists, because they have completed their studies. This presents a valuable opportunity for the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management to gain employer evaluations of
graduate attribute and employability skill levels at the final stage of a student’s degree. It is also an effective way of measuring ‘brand new’ graduate employability skills because the end of work-integrated learning placement is also the starting point for graduate employment. This is particularly pertinent to strategies of employer engagement, given that approximately 90% of employers indicate a willingness to retain interns at the completion of their placement and 60–75% of students stay on with their internship employer.

The integrated approach to embedding the work-integrated learning program and scaffolded development of graduate attributes and employability skills is illustrated in figure 1. Industry is a key strategic partner in this process, with opportunities for students and employers to interact at the annual Tourism and Hospitality Careers Day from Year 1. Combined with exposure to weekly, emailed job advertisements, students gain an introduction to the expectations of employers and types of entry-level roles available. This assists in clarifying links with subjects studied and potential employment outcomes, a motivational factor important in student engagement, retention and academic performance (Lizzio & Wilson 2010).

Figure 1 Southern Cross University, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Work Integrated Learning Process

Year 2 concentrates on further preparing students to undertake their work-integrated learning placement and involves industry in mock interviews and guest presentations in the core Professional Development for the Workplace unit. The final semester of Year 3 is generally when students enrol in the internship and work full-time with an internship employer for approximately five months. Careful mapping of graduate attributes across the process has been undertaken to better track and facilitate learning outcomes.

Employability skills

Alongside the focus on graduate attributes, universities have increasingly prioritised employability over the last decade (Oliver 2008, 2011). Employability skills are intertwined with graduate attributes, with some seeing ‘employability skills’ as a subset of ‘graduate attributes’ (Precision Consultancy 2007). Others see the terms as interchangeable, for example, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) stated on its website that, ‘In the higher education sector, graduate employability skills are generally referred to as graduate attributes’ (DEEWR 2013). They go on to define employability skills as:
the non-technical skills and knowledge necessary for effective participation in the workforce. They can include skills such as communication, self-management, problem solving and teamwork. They are also sometimes referred to as generic skills, capabilities, enabling skills or key competencies.

This overlaps definitions of graduate attributes, but also alludes to a list-based approach to defining employability. List-based frameworks of employability, while pragmatic, are based on the premise that it is possible and desirable to clearly define all elements of employability. One of the better known of these frameworks is the Employability Skills Framework, developed by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia (DEST 2002). This includes eight employability skills: communication; team work; problem solving; initiative and enterprise; planning and organising; self-awareness; learning; and technology. More recently a new employability skills framework has been proposed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to overcome identified limitations (Ithaca Group 2012) and spans the whole education sector. Research, however, indicates that employers often value more than what can be contained in such skills-based lists (Hinchcliffe & Jolly 2011; Holmes 2001, 2011; Tomlinson 2012), and thus serves as an important reminder of potential limitations arising from such convenient frameworks.

Further demonstrating how intertwined graduate attributes and employability skills have become is Yorke’s (2006) widely accepted definition of employability, which Oliver (2011) notes, echoes the graduate attribute statements of many universities. Yorke defines employability as:

> a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes — that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke 2006, p.8)

This definition focuses on the individual and does not take into account the impacts of external factors such as economic climate, labour market supply and demand and other issues such as disability and availability to work. To overcome this potential weakness, there is a need to consider the broader contextual influences on employability and the differing dimensions underpinning this concept, including human capital, skills, social reproduction, positional conflict and identity (Tomlinson 2012).

Overall, there is a well-established link between employability and graduate attributes within Australia, UK, Europe and USA, (see, for example, Hager & Holland 2006) and Yorke (2010) presents a strong rationale for incorporating employability into university curricula. These concepts will be further explored in the next sections.

Graduate attributes

To better understand the links between employability and graduate attributes, it is important to consider how we define graduate attributes. We are increasingly hearing terms such as generic skills, generic attributes, graduate attributes, work readiness and employability skills, with many of these terms being used interchangeably. It is important to differentiate between the meanings of these terms, however, as they have implications for the role and importance of work-integrated learning in developing and evaluating such skills. While generic skills, or generic attributes, are often used interchangeably with graduate attributes, Hager and Holland (2006) note that generic attributes should be considered as a meta-level term that refers to skill components, attitudes, values and dispositions that are important for all roles in life, but in particular to prepare for the workplace and are typically significant components of improved teaching and learning initiatives. Hager and Holland
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(2006, p.2) assert that within a higher education context, *graduate attributes* is the most appropriate term and define these as:

- thinking skills, such as logical and analytical reasoning, problem solving and, intellectual curiosity;
- effective communication skills, teamwork skills, and capacities to identify, access and manage knowledge and information; personal attributes such as imagination, creativity and intellectual rigour; and values such as ethical practice, persistence, integrity and tolerance.

There is agreement that graduate attributes are considered by many as an orientating statement of education outcomes, used to inform curriculum design and the provision of learning experiences at a university (Barrie 2009) and are work and life skills that are:

- recognised globally as a critical outcome of modern university education ... provide the context in which disciplinary knowledge is demonstrated and are seen to underpin university graduates’ capacity to perform effectively in an increasingly globalised and complex workplace and to contribute within a diverse community. (de la Harpe et al. 2009, p.1)

The interwoven nature of employability skills and graduate attributes can be better understood by considering more of the history and meaning behind graduate attributes. Graduate attributes have been increasingly spotlighted since the 1990s (Barrie 2004; Campbell 2010; Hager 2006; Precision Consultancy 2007). Barrie et al. (2009) contend that this aligns with how universities and governments within Australia are affirming the need for university education to focus on the development of graduate attributes, including links to government funding, quality assurance and curriculum development projects.

The recent introduction of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) Provider Registration Standards further emphasises the importance of graduate attributes to the tertiary sector. TEQSA requires universities to, ‘provide for appropriate development of key graduate attributes in students’ (2011, p.14) and have ‘effective arrangements to assure the quality of student work placements, practicum and other forms of work-integrated learning in the course of study, including assuring the quality of supervision’ (p.16). Such legislation emphasises the need for universities to not only develop graduate attributes, but to provide evidence of this development. This paper demonstrates how it is possible to efficiently and systematically maintain such an evidence base by integrating data collection processes into existing systems and processes. By taking a strategic approach to engaging and partnering with employers in helping to develop and evaluate graduate attributes, the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management has found that work-integrated learning can be used to develop graduate attribute and employability skills while also gaining meaningful industry feedback on student/new graduate performance in the workplace. Developing a strong partnership with industry helps employers to better understand the content of the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management degrees, positively influencing employer beliefs as advocated by Cai (2013) and gives industry a formal role in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the students and curriculum. This paper makes a contribution to the call for research to address gaps relating to effective, sustainable collaborations and partnerships (Reeve & Gallacher 2005).

That universities should actively ensure students are ‘work ready’ seems to be the underlying assumption of a number of recent Australian learning and teaching reports centring around graduate attributes (see for example de la Harpe et al. 2009; Oliver & Whelan 2011; Smith et al. 2009; Taylor & Thompson 2009) and industry and government reports (AC Nielsen Research Services 2000; ACCI 2002; Australian Industry Group & Deloitte 2009; Ithaca Group 2012; Precision Consultancy 2007) and the Bradley Review of Higher Education(2008). The importance of learning and developing graduate
attributes and employability skills through experiential learning opportunities in the rich and complex workplace environment is emphasised by a number of researchers (see, for example, Beckett & Mulcahy 2006; Cranmer 2006; Te Wiata 2006). Work-integrated learning provides a useful and appropriate means of accommodating the disciplinary contextualisation of graduate attributes noted as important for definition and development (Barrie 2006; Bowden, Hart, Trigwell, & Watts 2000). There is also evidence that graduate attributes can strengthen the underpinning pedagogies of work-integrated learning, as well as influence and motivate support for developing appropriate graduate attributes (see, for example, Barrie et al. 2009; Boud & Solomon 2006).

The main differentiating factor between employability skills and graduate attributes is that at the heart of employability is a focus on getting and maintaining satisfying employment, whereas at the heart of graduate attributes is the bigger picture emphasis on citizenship. Employability can be viewed as a subset of graduate attributes, and work-integrated learning thus becomes an appropriate environment for developing these integrated skills. This paper refers to both graduate attributes and employability skills throughout as a reminder of the difference in emphasis that comes from close examination of these terms. This project is designed to evaluate ways of measuring the development of graduate attributes and employability skills during work-integrated learning and how this information can be used to benefit students, employers and universities.

Method

The methodology for this study is based on the analysis of data collected from employers about the workplace performance of students completing internships in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University.

After experiencing difficulties in gaining feedback on their graduates in the workplace, the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management revised its existing supervisor evaluation form to incorporate a set of graduate attribute questions. By doing so, it was possible to obtain meaningful feedback from employers who were in roles that allowed them to make reliable and valid comments about students who were technically on the verge of being new graduates.

The newly revised supervisor evaluation form was piloted in late 2006—early 2007 and formally introduced from Semester 2 in 2007. This paper includes an analysis of the 330 forms returned from Semester 2 in 2007 until the end of Semester 2 in 2009. From 2008 onwards, all employers completed the new form as a compulsory component of each internship student’s university assessment requirements.

The form asked employers to rate student performance on 15 identified skills as well as to rank the importance of those skills. This list of skills was kept to a single page and comprised:

a. Capacity to learn new skills and procedures  
b. Appropriate personal presentation and grooming  
c. Punctuality and attendance  
d. Computer skills  
e. Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts  
f. Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management  
g. Written communication skills  
h. Interpersonal communication skills  
i. Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence  
j. Commitment to ethical standards and professionalism
k Proactive, responsive and adaptable to change
l Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy)
m Have the analytical and problem solving skills needed to work effectively
n Capacity for co-operation and teamwork
o Positive work attitude and work ethic

This list was based on a combination of skills and attributes historically assessed through work-integrated learning by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management with the addition of graduate attributes that had been contextualised to the disciplines taught by the School as part of a university-wide project on graduate attributes. This list is mapped against the university and the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management’s contextualised interpretation of the university graduate attributes in table 1. Through mapping this list it is possible to see that the graduate attributes of intellectual rigour and reflective practice would be more appropriately assessed through separate assessment items, which would be marked by academic staff.

Historically, Computer skills; Appropriate personal presentation and grooming; and Punctuality and attendance were specific employability skills that could be deemed to contribute to overall industry professionalism and had always been assessed enthusiastically by supervisors in earlier versions of the Supervisor Evaluation form. At first glance, these skills do not obviously map to the broader Southern Cross University graduate attribute of Command of an area of knowledge. However, they were retained as assessable items because they are deemed to fall within the concept of ‘discipline knowledge’, because they are specific components of knowing what is needed to make a smooth transition into professional settings.

Students were briefed on the assessable skills contained in the supervisor evaluation forms prior to starting their work-integrated learning placement. Separate unit evaluation results over the years confirmed that students believed the supervisor evaluation form was a worthwhile addition to their learning and a valuable assessment item.

Employers were made aware of the requirement to complete the supervisor evaluation form as a condition of hosting a student on work-integrated learning, prior to being allowed to advertise potential work-integrated learning vacancies. All employers indicated their willingness to meet this obligation and received a hard copy of the form as part of their welcome information pack. This ensured advance awareness of the types of skills on which they would be assessing students and helped to build understanding of the types of skills and abilities expected to be developed and demonstrated by students.

Based on the data collected, an employer-based quantitative assessment of students’ workplace performance of the 15 key employability skills and graduate attributes at the end of their studies was generated. Employer assessment of skill performance and skill importance were rated on a 5-point Likert scale and a paired sample t-test was used to compare how employers rated students on each skill compared with the importance the employer placed on the skill. Multiple regression was also used to identify potential predictors of employability. There was a 100% return rate of forms, providing robust data on student attainment of these skills based on approximately five months in the workplace.
Table 1  Southern Cross University and School of Tourism and Hospitality Management graduate attributes 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southern Cross University graduate attributes</th>
<th>Graduate attributes contextualised to discipline – School of Tourism and Hospitality Management</th>
<th>Elements assessed by supervisors in the supervisor evaluation form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual rigour – a commitment to excellence in all scholarly and intellectual activities, including critical judgment.</td>
<td>• Demonstrate a commitment to excellence in all scholarly and intellectual activities.</td>
<td>Not assessed by supervisors – instead assessed by academic staff through a written report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity – a commitment to achieving imaginative and creative responses to intellectual, professional and social challenges.</td>
<td>• Be creative, strategic and critical thinkers with highly developed problem solving skills.</td>
<td>• Have the analytical and problem solving skills needed to work effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical understanding and a commitment to the highest ethical standards and sensitivity to moral issues and conflicts.</td>
<td>• Demonstrate an understanding of ethical standards and professionalism.</td>
<td>• Commitment to ethical standards and professionalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command an area of knowledge to enable a smooth transition to professional or other scholarly settings.</td>
<td>• Demonstrate substantial knowledge of tourism and hospitality industries within both local and international contexts. • Have a deep understanding of those skills relevant to working and managing in tourism and hospitality. • Demonstrate awareness of the cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management.</td>
<td>• Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts. • Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management. • Computer skills. • Appropriate personal presentation and grooming. • Punctuality and attendance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong learning – the ability to be responsive to change, to be reflective in practice and to be information-literate in order to update one’s knowledge through independent and self-directed learning.</td>
<td>• Be lifelong independent learners, reflective in practice, and information literate. • Exhibit a positive work attitude and work ethic in order to achieve successful outcomes.</td>
<td>• Capacity to learn new skills and procedures. • Positive work attitude and work ethic. • Proactive, responsive and adaptable to change. • Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy). NB: Reflective practice – not assessed by supervisors – but is assessed by academic staff in a separate assessment item.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective communication and social skills – the ability to communicate and collaborate in ways that are appropriate in scholarly, professional and social settings.</td>
<td>• Communicate effectively, and be self-aware and empathetic. • Demonstrate understanding of team dynamics and the ability to be effective team members.</td>
<td>• Written communication skills. • Interpersonal communication skills. • Capacity for co-operation and teamwork. • Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural awareness – a global world view encompassing a cosmopolitan outlook as well as local perspective on social and cultural issues, together with an informed respect for cultural and Indigenous identity.</td>
<td>• Be culturally tolerant and demonstrate appropriate intercultural competence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

This section examines the results of supervisor evaluation feedback from employers relating to the following analyses of student/new graduate skills and attributes:

- ranking of skill importance
- rating of student skill levels
- comparison of skill importance with skill rating
- rating of student overall work performance
Employer rankings of skill importance

For the years 2007, 2008, 2009, all employers were asked to rate the importance of each of the 15 designated skills to their organisation on a scale of 1—5 (1 = very low and 5 = very high). This was done at the end of their student’s five-month internship placement.

The mean ratings of the employers’ perceived importance of each skill was analysed using a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with alpha set at 0.05. Assumptions of normality were satisfactory. Mauchly’s Test of Sphericity was significant $\chi^2(104)=1121.31, p<0.05$ and thus the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used to interpret the model. Thus the 15 skills were not considered to be equally important, $F(8.09, 2158.68)=77.98, p<0.05$. Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using the built-in SPSS ‘repeated’ contrasts comparing each skill to the one immediately above it.

The mean ratings of the employers’ perceived importance of each skill across the three years are shown in table 2 in ranked order. This provides useful operational information, which can be used by work-integrated learning lecturers and administrative staff when preparing students for internship and briefing them on specific skills that School of Tourism and Hospitality Management internship and graduate employers are seeking. This information is particularly useful when teaching students about how to brand and present themselves in written applications and at the interview because it helps them to better understand the types of skills and experiences that are sought after by employers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Importance of skill to employer</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Positive work attitude and work ethic</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Capacity for cooperation and teamwork</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interpersonal communication skills</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Punctuality and attendance</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Capacity to learn new skills and procedures</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Commitment to ethical standards and professionalism</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Proactive, responsive and adaptable to change</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Appropriate personal presentation and grooming</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Have the analytical and problem solving skills needed to work effectively</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy)</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/ intercultural competence</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lines in table 2 denote where there is a statistically significant difference between skill rankings. This tells us that, while Positive work attitude and work ethic and Capacity for cooperation and teamwork can be ranked as 1 and 2 by employers, there is no statistically significant difference
between these two skills. Instead, they can be considered as a cluster of skills that are equally important and, together, are the most valued by employers. Tier B forms the second most valued cluster of skills and Tier C is the third most valued cluster of skills. Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence stands on its own in Tier D and Tier E contains the lowest ranked cluster of skills.

Employer ratings of student skill levels

For the years 2007, 2008 and 2009, all employers were asked to rate their internship student’s actual skill levels at the end of their placement for each of the 15 designated skills, using a scale of 1—5 (1 = very low and 5 = very high). Employers could also enter a score of Unable to assess as not all skills are relevant or demonstrable in all internship roles.

The mean ratings given by employers for student performance of each skill level was analysed using a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with alpha set at 0.05. Assumptions of normality were satisfactory. Mauchly’s Test of Sphericity was significant $\chi^2(104)=427.94, p<0.05$ and thus the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used to interpret the model. It was found that performance levels of skills were not considered to be equal $F(10.70, 2301.44)=54.91, p<0.05$. Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using the built-in SPSS ‘repeated’ contrasts, comparing each skill performance level with the one immediately above it.

The mean rating of the employer’s assessment of student skill performance levels is shown in table 3 in ranked order and this provides useful information that work-integrated learning lecturers and administrative staff can use when briefing and preparing students to undertake a work-integrated learning placement.

The lines in table 3 denote where there is a statistically significant difference between skill performance levels. This tells us that while Positive work attitudes and work ethic and Punctuality and attendance and Capacity for cooperation and teamwork can be ranked as 1 and equal second by employers, there is no statistically significant difference between the performance levels of these three skills. Instead, they can be considered as a cluster of skills that have been performed equally well by students, and have been labelled Tier A. Tier B forms the next cluster, containing ten skills that have been equally rated by employers. Tier C contains the lone skill of Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management. Tier D contains the lone skill of Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts.

It is noteworthy that the Tier A skills of Positive work attitudes and work ethic and Capacity for cooperation and teamwork performance levels are rated most highly by employers as these skills were also identified as being the most important to employers.

It is interesting to note that Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts is in the bottom tier of skills for both level of value by employers and level of performance rating. This result raises interesting questions relating to curriculum content and what can be learnt at university versus what is learnt ‘on the job’.
Table 3  Employer rating of actual student skill level, 2007, 2008 and 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Skill level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Positive work attitude and work ethic</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Punctuality and attendance</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Capacity for cooperation and teamwork</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Appropriate personal presentation and grooming</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Capacity to learn new skills and procedures</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Commitment to ethical standards and professionalism</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Proactive, responsive and adaptable to change</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Interpersonal communication skills</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy)</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Have the analytical and problem solving skills needed to work effectively</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of Unable to assess responses for all skills was analysed to identify skills with a higher than 5% response rate and five skills were identified. These were: Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management (14.80%, 49 cases); Computer skills (11.17%, 37 cases); Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts (6.95%, 23 cases); and Written communication skills (6.34%, 21 cases); and Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence (5.76%, 19 cases). These relatively high response rates highlight the importance of context for skill evaluation and that not all graduate attributes can and will be assessed by all employers, which needs to be taken into account during degree-wide embedding and assessment of graduate attributes and employability skills.

These results provide a better understanding of the priority skills of the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management employers and can facilitate benchmarking comparisons with other tourism and hospitality educators as well as with other industries nationally and internationally. The annual monitoring of these skills allows identification of trends and maintains a feedback loop with industry, the curriculum and students. Such information provides timely and relevant evidence on which academics can base curriculum and assessment decisions and on which the ongoing School of Tourism and Hospitality Management mapping and embedding of graduate attributes can be overseen.

Evaluating how employers rate the importance of each skill against the student skill levels

A paired samples t-test was conducted on results of the Supervisor Evaluations from 2007, 2008 and 2009 to compare employer ratings of the importance of each particular skill to the organisation with the student’s actual skill level. By doing this, we can gauge whether or not there is a significant difference between the types of skills that employers value and how well students are demonstrating these skills. Results are shown in table 4, and are ordered by effect size and then t-value. Alpha was set at 0.05, and assumptions of normality were met. There were no statistically significant differences
between importance levels and skills for four of the 15 skills. This may indicate that employer needs and the level of student skills in these areas are well matched.

For the remaining 11 skills, employers rated the importance of each skill to their organisation at a statistically significant higher level than the rating of the student actual skill level. These skills are shaded in table 4 and ordered from most significant difference to least.

Table 4 Comparison of employer nominated skill importance level with the actual rated level of student skill performance - overall 2007, 2008 and 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p*</th>
<th>r2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication skills</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>10.55</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the analytical and problem solving skills needed to work effectively</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to learn new skills and procedures</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive, responsive and adaptable to change</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>6.77</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive work attitude and work ethic</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity for cooperation and teamwork</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to ethical standards and professionalism</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(information literacy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality and attendance</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>0.454</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate personal presentation and grooming</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>0.640</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>0.910</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05 (two-tailed)

Using Cohen’s guidelines (1988, pp.82–3), the difference between the employer-nominated importance of Interpersonal communication skills and the student actual skill level is considered large (r²=25%). As there is a large difference between importance and skill level, this result highlights the importance for educators to develop student interpersonal communication skills. This result can also be used when teaching units leading up to the internship placement to highlight the workplace relevance of assessments, activities and theories designed to enhance student skills in this area. From a curriculum design perspective, identifying that there is a large difference between importance and actual skill level justifies maintenance and possibly even an increase of activities and assessments that foster interpersonal communication skills.

The next six skills have an effect size of greater than or equal to 9% but less than 25% and are thus considered medium differences (Cohen 1988, pp.82–3). The remaining four skills that are less than 9% have small differences, between the importance of the skill and the actual performance level. These results also provide evidence to students and curriculum designers of the potential discrepancies
between skill importance and performance levels, as identified by employers, and can be used to justify curriculum innovations targeted at developing priority skills.

Being able to monitor skills with a large, medium or small level of difference between their importance to employers and the level of student performance may act as a barometer of how well students are being prepared to perform such skills in the workplace. Being able to monitor the differences between employer priorities and student performance levels across the years may also help university teaching staff to better identify and address potential areas of weakness within students and the curriculum.

Student overall work performance

During the years, 2007, 2008 and 2009, employers were asked to rate their student’s overall work performance during the internship as if they were a regular staff member using a scale of 1 (Lowest rating or extremely poor performance) to 10 (Highest rating or exceptional performance). Figure 2 outlines the percentage of employers rating students from 1—10, across 2007, 2008 and 2009. For the three-year total, there were 329 valid responses and the mean rating was 8.33 (SD = 1.37). There were four non-responses. The majority of employers rated student overall performance as 8 or above (80%) and 91.9% of employers rated their intern’s performance as 7 or above. Approximately one in five students was rated as a perfect 10 (19.5%). Across the three years, five (1.73%) poor student performance evaluations (rated as less than 5) were received.

Figure 2 Rating of the student’s overall work performance

It is valuable for operational and marketing purposes to be able to monitor these trends across the years. The ability to allocate a rank of poor student performance can also act as a ‘quick alert’ or red flag, signifying potential problems between students and employers. Monitoring and clarification of such issues helps to avoid similar problems in subsequent years.
Overall employability

During 2007, 2008 and 2009, employers were asked to rate their overall willingness to employ their internship student at the end of their placement if a position were available. It was clearly stated on the Supervisor Evaluation form that this rating was not a binding commitment to employ the student. Employers rated students on a scale of 1—10 with 1 being Definitely not — under any circumstances and 10 being Emphatically yes. A scale of 1—10 was used here to facilitate comparisons with historical data contained on the older versions of Supervisor Evaluation forms. Figure 3 outlines the percentage of employers rating students from 1—10 across 2007, 2008 and 2009. There were 329 valid responses and the mean rating was 8.76 (SD = 1.88). There were four non-responses. Over half of the employers rated their willingness to employ their student as a perfect 10 (51.98%). The majority of employers rated their student as 8 or above (82.68%) and 89.97% of employers rated their willingness to employ their Intern as 7 or above. Across the three years, 16 Student Evaluations (4.86%) were rated as poor (that is, less than 5) on this scale.

Figure 3  Employer’s willingness to employ the student

Poor ratings for this item are also treated as ‘red flags’, signalling possible problems with employers or students that need to be addressed before new students can be placed with these employers again. Each case is investigated by the internship unit assessor and similar issues to those raised under Student overall work performance were identified. These ranged from unsuitable employers, to poor fit with the organisation, through to underperforming students. These results also affirm the need for additional assessment items and separate monitoring processes with the ability to check in with both supervisors and students throughout their internship, which can in many instances circumvent issues before they become serious problems.

The relationship between the number of hours worked and the employer’s willingness to employ was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were
performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was a small positive correlation between the two variables, $r=.18$, $n=310$, $p<.05$ with higher numbers of hours worked associated with a higher willingness to employ. This result lends support to maintaining and supporting longer internship placements of 15–20 weeks rather than shorter five-week placements.

Examining which skills might predict willingness to employ

A standard multiple linear regression was conducted to assess whether performance in any of the 15 designated skills might predict overall employability. A multiple regression was performed between the employer’s willingness to employ the student as the dependent variable and performance ratings for the 15 designated skills as independent variables.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Mahalonobis distance with $p<0.001$ was used to identify eight cases, (2.4%) as multivariate outliers and following protocols from Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) and Pallant (2007), these were deleted. The remaining sample size of $N = 206$ exceeds minimum recommendations for reliability of $N≥50+8m$ (where $m =$ number of independent variables) (Tabachnick & Fidell 2007, p.123). Assumptions of linearity are of concern, with a curvilinear relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables indicated. This does not invalidate the results but may weaken them (Tabachnick & Fidell 2007), and thus caution is recommended regarding wider generalisability of these results. Tolerance diagnostics were run and the lowest tolerance was 0.37, which is within recommended bounds (Pallant 2007; Denis 2011).

Table 5 displays the unstandardised regression coefficients (B), the standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$), and significance levels. The adjusted $r^2$ value of 0.54 indicates that over half of the variability in the decision to employ a student is explained by the model as a whole, $F(15,191)=17.17$, $p<.001$. Five skills were identified as statistically significant: Capacity to learn new skills and procedures; Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy); Positive work attitude and work ethic; Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts; and Computer skills. These are shaded in table 5 and will now be discussed in further detail.

The variable of Capacity to learn new skills and procedures makes the strongest, unique and statistically significant contribution to explaining the model ($\beta=.36$) and uniquely explains 5.76% of the variance in willingness to employ the student. Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy) made the second strongest statistically significant contribution ($\beta=.22$) and uniquely explains 1.76% of the variance in willingness to employ the student. Positive work attitude and work ethic made the third strongest statistically significant contribution ($\beta=.17$) and uniquely explains 1.25% of the variance in willingness to employ the student. Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts made the fourth strongest statistically significant contribution ($\beta=.14$) and uniquely explains 1.14% of the variance in willingness to employ the student.

Computer skills made the fifth strongest statistically significant contribution ($\beta=-.13$) and uniquely explains 1.04% of the variance in willingness to employ the student. As there is a negative correlation between Computer skills and Willingness to employ, these results imply that the poorer the student’s computer skills, the more likely an employer is to employ the students. This unlikely result indicates a potential problem with the model and so the Computer skills result should be treated with caution.
Considering that Computer skills is also rated in the lowest tier of importance to employers, this negative correlation warrants further investigation and analyses.

### Table 5  Impact of intern skills on employer willingness to employ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S E B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to learn new skills and procedures</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(information literacy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive work attitude and work ethic</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity for cooperation and teamwork</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate personal presentation and grooming</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive, responsive and adaptable to change</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication skills</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality and attendance</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to appreciate different cultural perspectives/intercultural competence</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to ethical standards and professionalism</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the analytical and problem solving skills needed to work effectively</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of cultural, environmental and economic impacts of tourism and hospitality management</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( r^2 = .57 \)  
Adjusted \( r^2 = .54 \)  
\( F(15,191) = 17.17 \)  
p<.001.

Overall, these results suggest that student performance in the first five skills may help predict the employer’s willingness to retain or offer ongoing employment to the student if a position were available; however, these results are to be treated with caution and flagged for future comparisons and analysis.

### Discussion

This paper provides an example of how work-integrated learning can be strategically used and placed at the end of a degree to cost-effectively engage industry participants in evaluating student performance of graduate attributes and employability skills. The School of Tourism and Hospitality Management’s work-integrated learning program is intentionally located at the end of the degree as four capstone units and thus is ideally positioned to generate feedback from employers on the actual skills levels of students at the end of their undergraduate studies. As the Supervisor Evaluation is returned at the end of students’ degrees it also acts as a measure of ‘brand new’, employer-assessed, graduate skill levels. Being able to gain employer feedback at this stage of the student’s studies provides valuable insight and judgment of students by a key stakeholder in the tertiary education process — the employer. Gaining this feedback at the end of each study session provides an immediacy that allows timely evaluation of curriculum innovations or deficits.

Moreover, this feedback is provided by supervisors who have worked with Southern Cross University students for up to five months full-time and therefore can provide meaningful feedback on actual student performance within the workplace context. The approach used by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management could readily be adapted by other education providers or faculties to
strategically gather evidence on the graduate attributes and skills valued by employers; identify any
shortfalls in the performance levels of these skills and attributes; and continuously improve
curriculum to ensure development of skills that are important to industry. The results of this project
have implications for students, employers and the university, and there are a number of
considerations raised that may benefit other learning institutes seeking to strengthen their industry
partnerships. For programs that prioritise industry relevance and industry partnerships, this project
demonstrates how it is possible to embed an effective means of maintaining strong industry
partnerships and evidence-based curriculum improvement and quality assurance.

Implications for students

The results of this study have a number of implications when preparing students to undertake their
work-integrated learning placement. The Supervisor Evaluation helps to create a tangible measure
linking university and School of Tourism and Hospitality Management graduate attributes with industry
and workplace performance. It does this by clearly outlining assessable skills and setting clear
expectations of the types of capabilities expected to be displayed and evaluated during work-
integrated learning placements. Six-monthly updated ratings of skill importance by employers, fed
back into the School systematically, lend credence to their relevance and demonstrate to students
how graduate attributes can be more than an academic abstraction and have value to long-term
career success and citizenship. For instance, when preparing students for internship placement, being
able to show the significant gaps between the employer ratings of skill importance and student skill
levels for 11 of the 15 skills can help to focus students on potential areas for increased attention
during their on campus studies and their work-integrated learning placement. As part of this project,
it was identified that modifications should be made to the Supervisor Evaluation form to include an
industry identifier. In future, this will facilitate easier analysis of the results by industry segment to
see what trends emerge and may improve the utility of this information for students seeking
employment in specific sectors.

Ratings of skill importance can also be benchmarked to broader statistics representing employers’
views such as the Graduate Outlook Survey released annually by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA). It
asks employers to rank the key selection criteria used for graduate recruitment purposes. It is
interesting to note that from 2008 to 2012, the top three skills have remained constant: Interpersonal
and communication skills (written and oral); Passion/Knowledge of industry/
Drive/Commitment/Attitude; and Critical reasoning and analytical skills/Problem solving/Lateral
thinking/Technical skills (Graduate Careers Australia 2009, 2012).

From 2009, employers were asked to rate their satisfaction with graduates on the employability skills
of technology; learning; teamwork; communication; problem-solving; initiative and enterprise;
technical skills from their course; planning and organising; and self-management (Graduate Careers
Australia 2012). Over the four years, employers consistently reported that graduates met or exceeded
their expectations on skill levels (ranging from 92—98.7%).

This benchmarking provides students with valuable comparisons and commonalities, but also draws
attention to the fact that such skills lists are variable and contextual. Communicating these results to
students as part of preparation for work-integrated learning placements also opens the doors to their
informed engagement in critiquing employability skills and graduate attributes (ideally through work-
integrated learning assessments), especially as such engagement is a vital requirement often lacking
in many universities (Jackson 2009).
Some graduate attributes relating to employability skills are most effectively developed and assessed in the workplace (Cranmer 2006; Mason et al. 2009). This study demonstrates that it is possible to engage employers in providing effective and meaningful feedback to students and university staff about how students demonstrate and perform such skills in the workplace. Giving students responsibility for setting appointments with supervisors to gain written feedback on the final Supervisor Evaluation form is also good practice for the formalised performance review systems that graduates are likely to experience during their working lives. This part of the process has also been key in reducing administrative follow-up by university staff, freeing up additional time for student troubleshooting and consultations. Employers are often so enthusiastic about their role in educating students on work-integrated learning that they take on a mentoring role. Such employer engagement facilitates a stronger three-way learning partnership, which students regularly rate in course evaluations such as the Australian Graduate Survey as the highlight of their three-year degree.

Implications for employers

When considering the implications of this project for employers, it is important to remember that it is one part of a larger industry engagement strategy by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. As part of this strategy, this project is important in providing a clear voice and opportunity for formalised, systematic input by industry into the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management’s university curriculum. Research supports such involvement by industry (Cranmer 2006) and addresses industry complaints about the ineffective nexus between academia and industry and the subsequent criticisms that university students are underprepared for the workplace (Australian Industry Group & Deloitte 2009; Precision Consultancy 2007). The fact that in most cases the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management internship supervisors oversee students for five months creates a sense of ownership and pride in student achievement, as evidenced by the mentoring roles that many employers take on. Given that 33% of 2007 employers had previously participated in the program, with this figure rising to 50% in 2009, such repeat involvement helps to deepen the partnership between industry and tertiary education. This increased familiarity helps to establish realistic expectations of student and new graduate ability and performance levels by industry employers and helps to shape industry confidence in the program as advocated by Cai (2013).

Typically, employers comment on the benefits of being involved in work-integrated learning as having the opportunity to engage with ‘genuinely interested and enthusiastic’ students who ’provide the company with fresh and new ideas which are learnt during their studies’ (Supervisor Evaluation, 2009). They also see the benefits of taking an active role in training students at the end stages of their degree as a means of identifying the best and brightest of graduates before they have actually graduated. As a work-integrated learning employer, organisations can potentially gain a five-month head start in the graduate recruitment process. This is corroborated by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management in-house records, which indicate that approximately 60–75% of students stay on with their internship employers. Through the systematic analysis of supervisor feedback, this project elevates the role and contribution of employers to a more formal status, a fact that can be used advantageously in marketing strategies by employers and the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management.

This paper provides an example of the type of employability and graduate attribute skills profiles that can be developed for a group of industry employers by strategically identifying and collating their feedback on student performance in the workplace. The ranking and rating of skills that are important to this group of tourism and hospitality employers may prove to be a useful resource for industry because it provides an evidence base of professional skills, tailored to their industry, which can contribute to building a stronger industry profile and encourage wider debate and consideration of the
skills that are most important to succeeding within these industries. An improved profile may be beneficial in attracting and retaining high-quality recruits to industry (Wang, Ayres & Huyton 2009). An improved industry dissemination strategy of these results by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management will assist this process and it is recommended that a promotional flyer similar to the Careers Australia, Graduate Outlook publication is developed for School of Tourism and Hospitality Management employers.

Implications for the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management and Southern Cross University

This project is an example of a pragmatic approach to engaging employers as strategic partners and external assessors. This strategic partnership enhances the development of graduate attributes and employability skills by engaging employers to provide evidence of satisfactory attainment and performance of identified graduate attributes and employability skills by students and new graduates. This project shows it is possible to gain a 100% response rate by employers for a questionnaire on student attainment of graduate attributes in the format of the Supervisor Evaluation form. Logistical factors such as deadlines for the completion and design of the form have been carefully implemented to ensure maximum benefit and relevance of feedback to the university and students without unduly taxing employer resources. Data collection was incorporated into an existing 60% work-integrated learning administration role and seems more efficient than the periodic approaches of Monash University’s system of employer feedback on graduate attributes (Nair & Mertova 2009). The continuous nature of Southern Cross University’s feedback encourages timely incorporation into the curriculum and using the capstone work-integrated learning units satisfies the identified need for task authenticity (Cooper et al. 2010; Patrick et al. 2008). Linking this feedback to the assessment of key graduate attributes is also important, given the strong quality assurance imperatives within the tertiary education sector and the identified difficulties in trying to assess graduate attributes and employability skills.

An example of curriculum development arising from this project occurred when formal and informal feedback from some employers indicated a lack of Excel skills was problematic for students. Once recognised as an issue, it was possible to feed this information into the regular course reviews, which found that changes to assessments in two units had created this situation. Consideration was thus given to re-introducing assessment items designed to develop these skills. In the short-term it was also possible to convey this information directly to potentially affected students preparing to go on work-integrated learning placements and advise them that they may need to ensure their Excel skills would meet industry expectations (for example, with online tutorials provided by the university). This example raises an important question about whether formal Supervisor Evaluation feedback may make it easier for employers to feel comfortable in providing more frequent informal feedback and warrants further monitoring.

This project has also highlighted a number of results with marketing value to the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. For instance, when considering the students’ overall work performance and employability ratings, this study demonstrates that the vast majority of the School’s students are meeting industry expectations as eminently employable. When students/new graduates are rated on the same performance criteria as experienced employees, more than 90% of employers rate their students as 7 or higher on a 10-point scale, with approximately one in five being rated as a perfect 10. This compares favourably with the results of the overall employability of students, with over half of the employers rating their students as a perfect 10 for their organisation, and approximately 90% of employers rating their willingness to employ their student, if a position existed, as 7 or higher on the
10 point scale. This may also highlight that, while skills and those linked to designated graduate attributes may be important, ultimately it is the combined overall effect of these attributes and more that are perhaps just as important if not more so than the individual parts. It is important from a university policy and academic perspective that we do not lose sight of this.

Engaging employers to provide formal feedback on those skills that are of most importance to them keeps the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management closely linked to industry trends and expectations, an issue that is central to the School’s mission, ethos, operational and marketing strategies. Since embarking on this project a number of industry-based graduate attribute and work readiness studies have emerged (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Caballero, Walker & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz 2011; Dredge et al. 2012; Harvey & Shahjahan 2013; Oliver et al. 2011), so it would be useful for the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management to review the skills and attributes being assessed by these projects and consider the merits of revising current Supervisor Evaluation items to facilitate wider benchmarking and quality assurance practices.

The TEQSA quality assurance requirements are also becoming better understood, so monitoring the Supervisor Evaluation data to ensure that the relevant skills are being assessed and that an appropriate evidence base is being established is well under way. Additionally, relevant industry accreditation schemes should also be monitored to assess whether additional skills need to be added to the Supervisor Evaluation form. The results of this project ensure that the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management is well placed to provide adequate evidence to meet these quality assurance and benchmarking demands.

Other considerations

Knowing which skills employers deem most important can also assist in making more informed curriculum and assessment choices and which take the viewpoints of employers, academics and students into account. As these skills and their ratings are integrally linked to graduate attributes, it emphasises the importance of agreeing upon, establishing and then monitoring the relevance of those graduate attributes, not only on an operational level but also at the policy, industry and academic levels.

The preliminary findings of this paper, suggesting that abilities in certain skills such as Capacity to learn new skills and procedures; Ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources (information literacy); Positive work attitude and work ethic; Knowledge of the industry/sector within both local and international contexts; and Computer skills may be predictors of employers’ willingness to employ, lend further support to ‘employability’ as a complex and multifaceted construct. The fact that less than 11% of Willingness to employ is explained by these five attributes reminds us that there are many more factors that go into the decision to employ than just the 15 skills nominated by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. Remembering this can help to keep the graduate attribute/employability skills debate in perspective and raises interesting research opportunities — the identification of the definitive skills that are predictors of Willingness to employ. Further investigation will be useful when making curriculum design and assessment decisions.

The observation of students and employers by work-integrated learning academic and administrative staff during this project raised additional research questions. One example is that Written communication skills, which was rated in the third tier of importance to employers, was identified as a potential ‘dissatisfier’ to events sector employers. Shortfalls in this skill had employers rapidly contacting university staff to complain. These observations were reported by work-integrated learning staff and, although anecdotal, warrant further monitoring and investigation. Adding in an industry
identifier to the Supervisor Evaluation form will facilitate further exploration of the concept of potential industry satisfiers and dissatisfiers.

Considering that, when employers were asked to rate student skill levels, there were more than 5% Unable to assess responses for five of the 15 designated skills, it is important to identify those skills that present evaluation difficulties to employers and therefore monitoring issues. Alternative methods for assessment of these skills consequently need to be incorporated within the relevant units across the curriculum. When relying on work-integrated learning units to assess graduate attributes, it is important to be aware that not all roles will require the application and demonstration of all skills, so work-integrated learning should not be seen as the catch-all solution, but rather, one of a number of possible integrated assessment methods. This emphasises the importance of monitoring and mapping graduate attributes across the whole curriculum and being aware of the types of skills and graduate attributes with a higher likelihood of not being comprehensively assessed by industry.

Conclusions

This study provides three years of evidence by which to evaluate the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management’s graduate attributes in the context of the university-wide graduate attributes as well as broader national trends regarding graduate attributes. The results of this project support consideration of employability and graduate attributes as an integrated package of skills and attributes. While it is possible to gain feedback on specific skills and to monitor the rank order of such skills, there are limitations to this process because the overall work quality of students and graduates and the willingness of supervisors to employ students is much more than just the sum of a skills list. However, if these limitations are taken into account, this information is useful and has considerable benefits for students, employers and universities.

Benefits to students included:

- being able to access an evidence-based industry view on the importance or otherwise of graduate attributes and employability skills to better prepare for work placements
- gaining a better understanding of potential skill gaps to assist in better preparing for work placements
- being able to benchmark skills that are important to School of Tourism and Hospitality Management employers against broader graduate skill surveys
- gaining meaningful feedback on their skill levels in the workplace as assessed by employers.

Benefits to employers included:

- being given a more formalised role in educating current and future industry employees
- contributing to raising industry profiles and helping to attract high-quality staff.

Benefits to the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management:

- establishing an effective evidence-based quality assurance process that can be integrated into existing work-integrated learning staffing roles and processes
- developing an evidence base to assist in better preparing students for work placement and graduate-recruitment processes
• having useful data for benchmarking, curriculum development and monitoring of industry needs and trends

• recognising the potential marketing value of results for course promotion.

By identifying the skills and attributes that can be assessed by industry partners, Southern Cross University takes a strategic approach to engaging industry in developing students’ employability and graduate attributes and contributes to a broader evidence base by which to make important future curriculum decisions. This information can be used to improve relationships between industry and academia and improve curriculum, overall graduate learning outcomes and quality assurance processes and provide a better match between labour market requirements and educational programs.

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