

## **TOURISM GRADUATE READINESS AND EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS OF EVENT MANAGEMENT GRADUATE COMPETENCIES**

**Lisa Welthagen**

Centre for Sustainable Tourism, Department of Tourism Management, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa.

### **Abstract**

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are under increasing pressure to improve graduate employability and ensure that the academic experience received by the students assists them in acquiring the competence, knowledge and skills required to function well in their selected industry. Employability for graduates is viewed as a combination of personal qualities, knowledge, techniques, and the capacity to reflect on experience constructively. This article aims to analyse research conducted at the University of Technology to investigate graduates' perceptions of how their university qualification contributed to work readiness in the event industry and the employer's perceptions of their competencies. The research is a mixed methods approach using a structured questionnaire administered among University of Technology students between 2021 and 2023. Of the 121 registered students, 110 completed. Most respondents indicated that the event management curriculum gave them a theoretical basis to apply their knowledge in the industry and that the delivery of curricula supported growth in intellectual and social competencies, which benefited them working in the industry. Fourteen interviews were conducted with event industry practitioners. Findings from the interviews facilitated an in-depth understanding of the skills and competencies expected in the event industry in South Africa and the challenges thereof.

**Key Words:** Competencies, Curriculum, Employer, Higher Education, Skills, Work Readiness

### **Introduction**

Due to the rapidly changing global conditions and best practices to promote innovation in education, higher education curriculum developers are constantly under pressure to modify their curricula to create highly educated and skilled graduates who are prepared to contribute productively to the workplace's objectives (Grande & Estebanez, 2020; Khoo, Zegwaard & Adam, 2020; Kim, Serkova & Jonbekova, 2024). With that said, employers expect graduates to exhibit fundamental workplace skills, competencies and personal attributes that offer an effective transition into the workplace (McCartney & Kwok, 2022). Therefore, it is a crucial part of building a knowledge-based economy to consider collaboration between the tourism industry and higher education (McCartney & Kwok, 2022; Okolie, Nwajiuba, Eneje, Binuomote, Ehiobuche &

Hack-Polay, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). As indicated by Ruhanen (2005) and Walters and Ruhanen (2019), there is a constant struggle to strike a balance between theory and practice so that graduates can apply their knowledge in the workplace and that employers value a set of skills in addition to technical proficiency and subject knowledge (Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009; Uffindell, 2017). According to Kanesan and Abdullah (2013), employability skills are the knowledge and "soft skills," or non-technical abilities, needed to function well in the workplace. In addition, transferable skills such as attitude and social skills enable employees to make reasonable decisions and think critically. Based on the literature, these skills and competencies include *Professional/academic competencies* (theoretical knowledge), holding of knowledge relating to the latest industry standards and paradigms – the foundation for being able to work and solve problems and incorporating the knowledge base using the four "C's" – critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, and collaboration (Ahmed, 2022). Methodological competencies are the transfer of theoretical knowledge into application-based problems. Applied knowledge, reasoning, planning, decision-making and problem-solving skills, continuous improvement, and project management skills are often expected (Scodras, Alsbury-Nealy, Colquhoun, Yeung, Jaglal & Salbach, 2022). Social competencies, on the other hand, are being able to deal with people, communication, acceptance of responsibility, teamwork, conflict management and interdisciplinary communication are expected (Butterworth & Strauch, 1994; Mellard & Hazel, 1992). Interpersonal competencies are self-discipline, creativity, a positive work attitude as well as the ability to work as a team, self-esteem, and motivation (Yoel, Akiri & Dori, 2022).

One of the main goals of bridging or closing the gap between higher education (graduates) and industry is to establish initiatives where curriculum design links educators in higher education and industry, which demonstrates the necessary skill sets and knowledge for graduates to work in the industry (McCartney & Kwok, 2022) since higher education needs to ensure that students have the required skills to enter the world of employment as young graduates struggle to find work that matches their skills (Uffindell, 2017; Zeidan & Bishnoi, 2020). The focus, therefore, lies on aiming to close the gap by connecting curriculum design with academics and the industry to prepare the students adequately for the needs of the industry and workplace (Alhelalat, 2015; McCartney & Kwok, 2022; Uffindell, 2017). In South African higher education context, a disjuncture between graduates and the 'world of work' (the industry) exists. Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA) admits there has been a displacement between what is happening in Higher Education and what is happening in the industry (THENSA, 2022). Currently, many higher education institutions in South Africa offering tourism and event management qualifications require students to complete a three to six-month credit-bearing

Work Integrated Learning component (THENSA, 2022). This study aims to create an in-depth understanding of the skills and competencies expected in the event industry in South Africa, the challenges faced, and how there can be improved collaboration between industry and higher education for the benefit of graduates.

### **Literature Review**

It has been discovered that cooperation and partnerships between higher education and the tourist and hospitality sectors are essential to creating a knowledge-based economy (Sobaih & Jones, 2015). However, there is an ongoing tension to balance theory with practice to have the skills and knowledge students require upon graduation to work in the tourism and hospitality field (Ruhanen, 2005; Uffindel, 2017). One principal aim of bridging or closing this gap is to create actions where curriculum design connects educators and industry, helping prepare students adequately with the skills and knowledge sets needed for a career in the hospitality industry (Alhelalat, 2015). The fundamental presumption held by policymakers is that Higher Education should significantly impact society and assist with job creation and growth (Suleman, 2016). As a result, Higher Education institutions should be conscious of the economy's demands and adapt their curricula accordingly (Suleman, 2016). However, Chi and Gursoy (2009) state that if there is *“a relevant, up-to-date industry curriculum, graduates are likely to possess the knowledge and skill sets required for a successful career”*. The capabilities that employers and recent graduates of higher education need have changed due to recent changes in the labour market. Employers, specifically in the tourism and event industry, require staff that are creative, innovative, able to problem solve, work in teams, manage their time and have good communication and presentation skills (Karaca-Atik, Meeuwisse, Gorgievski & Smeets, 2023; Cyphert, Holke-Farnam, Dodge, Lee & Rosol, 2019). These skills allow higher education graduates to integrate into a working environment successfully, and therefore, less pressure is placed on the employer to provide training programmes (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). York and Knight (2004) stated that learners learn the best when applying their theory and knowledge through experience. Therefore, higher education institutions must consider including more experience in the curriculum. However, a concern raised is that traditional higher education institutions focus on transmitting knowledge and very little on entry-level personal and social skills (York & Knight, 2004).

### **Higher Education In South Africa**

In South Africa, three categories of public higher education institutions exist as a result of changes to the country's higher education system: Universities of Technology (vocational programs offering diplomas, higher education certificates and degree programs), Comprehensive Universities (academic and

vocational studies offering bachelor's degrees and technology qualifications), and Traditional Universities (academic offering bachelor's degree programmes). Higher Education in South Africa conforms to the National Qualifications Framework, a systematic method for recording the credits allocated to each level of learning attainment is the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which makes sure that the knowledge and skills acquired are recognised across the country (Badat, 2010). The objectives of the NQF apply to an integrated framework for learning achievements, to facilitate access to education, training, and career paths, and to promote quality education. These objectives are developed to provide full personal development for each learner. The NQF levels are indicated in Figure 1.

NQF Levels Explained			
CHE - Higher Education Qualifications - Sub Frame Work	Doctoral Degree Doctoral Degree Professional	10	-
	Master's Degree Master's Degree Professional	9	-
	Bachelors Honours Degree Postgraduate Diploma Bachelor's Degree	8	Occupational Certificate
	Bachelor's Degree Advanced Diploma	7	Occupational Certificate
	Diploma Advanced Certificate	6	Occupational Certificate
	Higher Certificate	5	Occupational Certificate

**Figure 1:** NQF Qualification Framework  
 Source: Badat (2010)

Although higher education encourages graduates to have a more holistic thinking, the industry requires twenty-first-century skills to integrate and balance work and life after graduation (Doughty, Sinnema, McKillop & Dixon, 2019; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). These skills are developed to assist students with gaining employment in the industry, especially the events industry, which requires personal attribute skills such as innovation, creativity, problem-solving skills, etc (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). In addition, they are also required to possess social and cross-cultural skills to collaborate with people from different backgrounds (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Doughty et al., 2019). Broader literature has proved that possessing 21st-century skills is essential for maintaining a sustainable career (Habets, Stoffers, Heijden & Peters, 2020; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). However, studies conducted in many countries consistently indicate that there is a vast skills gap among higher education graduates (Tran, 2018; Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009) which initiates the call for higher education institutions to improve the quality of teaching and skills training to

better equip graduates for the industry. According to Tran (2018), a skills gap is a “significant gap between an organisation's current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals”. Furthermore, a skills gap exists when an employee deems a graduate incapable of carrying out their duties (Tran, 2018). Recent studies consistently report that higher education graduates cannot carry out the necessary work duties expected by the employer (Sin & Amaral, 2017; Tran, 2018; Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009). According to Suleman (2016), various methods have been adapted to define a set of skills employers deem important. Competencies, on the other hand, are the ability to accomplish a task and are divided into generic (soft) and subject-specific (hard) competencies. Generic (soft) competencies are related to skills and knowledge. Subject-specific (hard skills) competencies are obtained through curricula exclusive to a particular discipline and academically relevant to industry preparation (Kanesan & Abdullah, 2013).

There is a range of different conceptual frameworks to define these skills. Compared to technically focused, vocationally oriented, or hard skills, relational skills are frequently called generic or soft skills. The skills needed by employers, however, were compiled by Olivier, Freeman, Young, Yu and Verma (2014) into five broad clusters: employability skills, which include the capacity to meet demands, be flexible and adaptable, learn on one's own, develop new ideas, and innovate; teamwork and interpersonal skills; IT skills; and foundation skills, which include written and oral communication, problem-solving, and critical analysis (Olivier et al., 2014). Jackson and Chapman (2012) state that numerous potential causes exist for the persistence of skill gaps among graduates. Firstly, a model of the non-technical skill set required by the industry has not yet been determined. In addition, unclear terminology of competencies allows industry stakeholders to perceive competencies terms differently. Secondly, if higher education is not clear on the exact requirements of a non-technical skill set, it is highly unlikely the appropriate mix of embedded skills will be attended to, therefore rendering current employability frameworks misleading and subjective.

According to a study by Selvadurai, Choy and Maros (2012), many industry stakeholders indicate five main categories of generic skills (Figure 2). These are considered mandatory for graduates entering the industry. These include problem-solving and planning (a very important skill associated with event planning) and the ability to retrieve and handle information. In the event industry, research and data collection is considered important. Communication and presentation skills are imperative in the event industry, as is social interaction between attendees, guests, and delegates. Lastly, personal/individual attributes include self-confidence, commitment and passion for your work.



**Figure 2:** Generic skills identified by event industry stakeholders  
Source: Selvadurai, Choy and Maros (2012)

### Higher Education In Event Management

In South Africa, higher education in event management can provide an opportunity for various career choices in the events industry. Table 1 indicates the institutions that provide event management programs.

**Table 1.** NQF level 5 – 8 Event Management Qualifications in South Africa

NQF level	Name of qualification	Name of provider
5	Higher Certificate in Event Management	University of Mpumalanga
5	Higher Certificate in Events Management	MANCOSA Pty (Ltd)
6	Diploma in Event Management	Prestige Academy (Pty) Ltd
6	Diploma in Event Management	Tshwane University of Technology
6	Diploma in Event Management	Stadio (Pty) Ltd
6	Diploma in Event Management	Private Hotel School (Pty) Ltd
6	Diploma in Event Management	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
7	Advanced Diploma in Event Management	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
7	Bachelor of Commerce in Event Management	Stadio (Pty) Ltd

7	Bachelor of Commerce in Event Management	Prestige Academy (Pty) Ltd
8	Postgraduate Diploma in Hospitality, Tourism and Event Management	Cape Peninsula University of Technology

### **Graduate Readiness And Industry Employability**

After graduating from University, the industry requires twenty-first-century skills to gain employment in the industry, specifically, the event industry, which requires innovative, creative and problem-solving skills (Doughty, Sinnema, McKillop & Dixon, 2019; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). Additional research provides evidence that there is a vast skills gap in graduates, not only in South Africa but globally (Habets, Stoffers, Heijden & Peters, 2020; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023; Tran, 2018; Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009). This calls for Higher Education to raise the standard of instruction and promote skill development to better prepare graduates for the workforce (Tran, 2018). A *"significant gap between an organisation's current capabilities and the skills that it needs to achieve its goals"* is what Tran (2018) defines as a skills gap. Moreover, a skills gap occurs when an employer believes a recent graduate cannot perform their job obligations (Tran, 2018). According to numerous recent studies, higher education graduates are frequently unable to perform the essential job activities that an employer requires of them. (Sin & Amaral, 2017; Tran, 2018; Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009).

García-Aracil, Monteiro and Almeida (2021) have identified perceptions of generic and field-specific skills, like oral communication and critical thinking, as important factors that influence undergraduates' self-perceived employability in the context of higher education. In a study conducted in Australia, event managers were asked to identify pre-defined knowledge and attributes that they deemed important in the event industry. These included project management, budgeting, time management, business planning, human resource management, contingency management, marketing, sponsorship and network. The attributes included vision, leadership, adaptability, organisational skills, communication, marketing and people skills (Arcodia & Barker, 2003).

Increasing awareness of the necessity of continuing to train event management experts is emerging as the number of events rises and the discipline of event management develops (Arcodia & Reid, 2002; Arcodia & Barker, 2003). Hiring graduates with relevant training and experience can satisfy several objectives and will assist in sustaining the delivery and professionalism of high-quality events (Arcodia & Barker, 2003). Knowledge and skills can be theorised and learnt however personal attributes are synonymous to the personal characteristics of a graduate and represent the qualities such as traits, values

and attitudes of a person. These attributes are more difficult to develop however essential in the execution of an event. In a study conducted by Perry, Foley and Rumpf (1996), ten predefined knowledge attributes were highlighted as important for the event industry. These included legal/financial knowledge, management knowledge, public relations and marketing knowledge, economic knowledge, and contextual knowledge. The essential personal attributes of a good event manager were identified as vision, leadership, adaptability, high organisational skills, good communication skills, marketing skills and people management skills. To promote best practices in the event industry, the Events Industry Council (EIC) launched the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) program in 1985 to promote knowledge and performance in nine domains and twenty-eight skills. The qualification is based on professional experience and education (CMP, 2017). In South Africa, the Council of Event Professionals Africa (CEPA) provide designations to individuals based on a review of their education, work experience, work ethic and skills. The candidates are required to write an online assessment as well as provide a portfolio of evidence to qualify for the industry designation which is based on three levels: associate, practitioner and professional (CEPA, 2024).

According to Büth, Bhakar, Sihag, Posselt, Böhme and Sangwan (2017), statistics reflect that approximately 60 % of all graduates do not get employment in the industry directly after graduation which indicates that graduates are perceived by the industry not to be readily employable. This gap is identified as missing methodological and personal competencies which relate to critical thinking, problem-solving and thinking ‘out of the box’. In recent years, to bridge this gap in the event industry Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs (internships/placements/practicum/industry attachment/job shadowing/volunteering) have continued to gain recognition as a tool to advance students in hard and soft skills and provide the ability for graduates to become “work ready”. However, a lack of collaboration between higher education and industry and, a lack of experience of graduates can hinder the purpose (Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009; Tran, 2015; Doughty et al., 2019; Okolie, Nwajijuba, Eneje, Binuomote, Ehiobuche & Hack-Polay, 2021). The framework for WIL involves three main stakeholders: graduates, employers and higher education providers. Based on the employability framework developed by Jackson and Chapman (2012), that suggests employability and work readiness skills are generic across disciplines and countries, consist of working effectively in a team, communicating effectively, self-awareness, analysing data and using technology, problem-solving, developing initiative and enterprise, self-management, social responsibility and developing professionalism.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a convergent mixed methods design in which the quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and analysed separately. A quantitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate to determine students' workplace readiness, and a qualitative methodology to understand the event industry's expected competencies and skills of event management graduates, the challenges experienced, and the recommendations to close the gap between industry needs and higher education institutions' offerings. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with industry stakeholders/practitioners.

### **Quantitative**

The questionnaire for this section of the study was based on a self-administered online survey through Survey Monday, and the target respondents included undergraduate students in an event management program at the University of Technology. The total population of undergraduate event management registered for Work Integrated Learning between 2021 and 2023. There were 110 respondents of the 121 registered students. These students had completed work-integrated learning (WIL) for six months or had worked in the event industry at the University of Technology. The study covered all genders with an age range of 19 years and above. The list of students was obtained from the WIL office within the Department. Before data collection, consent was obtained from respondents. The online survey included four sections: a cover letter with the introduction and consent, demographic questions, qualification information and departmental support. Students were asked to indicate their level of preparedness (knowledge and skill) for the qualification (5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to disagree strongly) and, lastly, the support they received from the Department (5-point Likert scale from very poor to excellent).

The data obtained from the questionnaire were collected, tabulated, analysed, and interpreted. The statistical techniques were used to understand the study's data further, including frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and u-test. Frequency was used to get the number of respondents who answered the questions accordingly. Percentage was used to get the percentage of the respondents in terms of their demographic profile. Weighted mean was used to evaluate the respondents' readiness for the event management program regarding knowledge, skills, personality, and departmental support. The ranking was used to determine the positional importance of responses in the questionnaires regarding the answers of the graduates based on the scale used.

**Table 1:** Qualification Rating.

Variable	Mean	Interpretation	Ranking
1 The qualification provides theoretical foundation	4.24	Strongly agree	5
2 Qualification prepared me to apply my knowledge	4.30	Strongly agree	1
3 Qualification is relevant to the program content	4.26	Agree	3.5
4 Course content is relevant to the industry	4.19	Agree	7
5 Course content is up to date	4.26	Agree	3.5
6 Qualification prepared me adequately for the industry	4.10	Agree	8.5
7 Qualification prepared me for advanced courses	4.08	Agree	9
8 Most subjects were relevant to my industry	4.10	Agree	8.5
9 Qualification contributed to personal development	4.21	Agree	6
10 Qualification provided competency for graduate level	3.98	Agree	11
11 Software programs were helpful in the industry	3.83	Agree	12
12 Qualification allowed me to further my studies	4.29	Agree	2
13 I was able to critically analyse new ideas/processes	4.25	Agree	4.5
14 Qualification supported me to develop skills	4.25	Agree	4.5
15 Assisted me in establishing working relationships	4.06	Agree	10

The results in Table 1 reflect that the students strongly agree that the Event Management qualification provided a theoretical foundation and knowledge and prepared them to apply it. Furthermore, there was confidence and agreement that the qualification content was up-to-date and relevant and prepared them for work in the industry. The graduate students were confident that the qualification assisted them in critically analysing new ideas and processes in the industry. Among the low result items, the graduate students indicated that software programs were helpful in the industry, establishing working relationships and the ability to be a team leader and prepare for advanced courses. This indicates a need to provide the industry with a more competent graduate. According to McCartney and Kwok (2022), employers expect graduates to have workplace skills, competencies and personal attributes that offer an effective transition into the workplace. Ruhanen (2005) and Walters and

Ruhanen (2019) further suggest that employers value a skill set in addition to technical proficiency and subject knowledge and that it is a constant struggle to find a balance between theory and practice so that graduates can apply their knowledge in the workplace (Hernandez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009; Uffindell, 2017).

**Table 2:** Departmental Support Rating

Variable	Mean Interpretation Ranking		
The overall rating of the program	4.00	Good	2
Departmental teaching ability	3.97	Good	4
Overall quality of the curriculum	3.98	Good	3
Updated information provided	3.90	Good	5
Departmental use of innovation	3.68	Good	6
Departmental support for students	3.51	Good	7
Lecturer support for students	4.13	Excellent	1

The findings of Table 2 indicate that the student graduates hold departmental support in high regard, with an overall rating of satisfied. The graduates reflect that they are happy with the support received from the department, from teaching ability to lecturing support. The highest-ranked variable is the lecturer support for the graduate students, and the lowest is the use of innovation. Although the University constantly strives to stay updated with technology, this needs more attention. According to Jackson and Chapman's (2012) employability framework, teamwork, self-awareness, data analysis, technology use, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise development, self-management, social responsibility, and professional development are the employability and work readiness skills required across disciplines. The way events are planned and implemented has been completely transformed by event management software and innovation, allowing them to automate several tasks.

**Table 3:** Two-sample Wilcoxon rank-sum (Mann-Whitney) test

Factor	Number of observations	Rank sum	Z	P-value
Support Rating				
Satisfaction Category				
Satisfied	63	87	-3,175	0,0015
Dissatisfied	7	2398		
Quality Rating				
Satisfaction Category				
Satisfied	63	2391	-3,029	0,0025
Dissatisfied	7	94		

Mann Whitney was undertaken to study the difference in mean ranks among the study groups. Results showed that the mean rank for support rating perceptions by the students categorised according to their satisfaction group were statistically significantly different. A Mann-Whitney U-Test showed this difference was statistically significant,  $Z=-3.175$ ,  $p=0.0015$ . Furthermore, the quality rating by students' satisfaction categories differed significantly at 5% level,  $Z=-3.029$ ,  $p=0.0025$ . The findings indicated that the satisfied category's mean rank was higher than the dissatisfied category.

### **Qualitative**

Several studies indicate that thematic saturation can be reached in qualitative research after 12 – 17 interviews (Francis et al., 2010). These recommendations were used as a benchmark; thus, this study reached saturation after 17 successful interviews. The study included semi-structured interviews of event industry professionals: Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) – O1-O13, academics A1- A4 and event associations EA1. The criteria for selection were those event industry professionals that had provided Work Integrated Learning to students between 2021 – 2023. The academics included those who had taught event management students for at least 3 to 5 years.

### **Interview Location And Guide**

The interviews elicited the attitudes, opinions and experiences of event graduates they had mentored or supervised. The interviews were conducted using Teams and were recorded and transcribed with written and signed permission from the participants. Ethical clearance for this study was approved through the ethics committee (FCRE2023/FR/03/009-MS (2)). The interviews were approximately 20 to 30 minutes in duration. They encouraged the participants to speak freely about their expectations and experiences; the data would be generated from the industry practitioners' own words. The three key questions answered by the participants included:

*What are the main skills and competencies required for the event industry?*  
*What challenges were encountered by the event management graduates?*  
*How can these challenges be overcome and the gap between higher education and industry be closed?*

**A thematic framework was utilised to identify the key topics (themes 1 – 3).**

### **Pretesting**

Before the interviews, a pre-test was conducted among two academics from a University of Technology to ensure that the research questions met the study's objectives.

### **Interview Findings**

The analysis revealed three key themes reflecting the event industry's perceptions. These included employability skills and competencies required by graduates to gain employability and work readiness in the event industry, challenges encountered by the industry overcoming the challenges and closing the gap.

To identify and determine if graduates are “work ready” for the events industry, it was important to investigate the skills and competencies the industry deems essential to enter the industry. The complexity surrounding the industry's needs was put forward, and there was consensus amongst the industry practitioners that there are a diverse set of skills required to enter the event industry of which many of these falls into the domain of personal attributes which are not usually included in the curriculum of Higher Education in South Africa.

### **Employability Skills And Competencies (Theme 1)**

Participants' findings indicate that it is important for graduates to possess both professional and methodological, social and personal competencies. Professional competencies (theoretical knowledge) Holding of knowledge relating to the latest industry standards and paradigms – the foundation for working and solving problems in a company. Methodological competencies – transfer of theoretical knowledge into real application-based problems. Applied knowledge, social skills, problem-solving, planning skills, continuous improvement and project management skills are often expected. Social competencies – dealing with people, communication, teamwork, conflict management and interdisciplinary communication are expected. Personal competencies – Self-discipline and positive work attitude, as well as presentation skills and the ability to learn new things.

### **Key Employability Skills Indicated By Participants**

Here are the employability skills identified, categorized into professional competencies and personal attributes.

### **Professional And Methodological Competencies**

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* Literacy And Mathematical Skills	* Written Skills	* Entrepreneurship Skills
* Communication Skills	* Research Skills	* Time Management
* Tech Savvy	* Project Management	* Problem-Solving Skills
* Application And Critical Thinking Skills	* Administration	

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### Personal And Social Attributes

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* People Management Skills	* Passion For One's Job	* Adaptability To Different Environments
* Flexibility	* Creative Thinking	* Creativity
* Engaging With A Broad Spectrum Of People	* Marketing Oneself	* Independence
* Listening Skills	* Presentation Skills	* Punctuality
* Customer Service	* Trustworthiness	* Teamwork
* Empathy	* Responsibility	* Professional Presentation
* Confidence	* Motivation	* Determination
* Willingness	* Innovation	* Friendliness
* Discipline	* Leadership	* Patience
* Resilience	* Business etiquette	* Maturity
* Multi-tasking ('wear multiple hats')	* Communication etiquette	

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From the above, it can be concluded that the industry's expectations are consistent with the findings of (Werner, Junek & Wang, 2022; Kanesan & Abdullah, 2013; Ahmed, 2022; Selvadurai et al., 2012; Buth, Bhakar, Sihag, Posselt, Bohme & Sangwan, 2017; Khoo, Zegwaard & Adams, 2020).

### Challenges Experienced By Industry, Academia And Association Practitioners (Theme 2)

To better understand the challenges that the industry experiences with event management graduates, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with higher education graduates. Issues relating to poor personal attributes were consistently identified in the literature and by the participants.

Participant EA1 indicated that *"many graduates feel entitled and once graduated feel that they know it all and should not be starting at lower levels but should be offered management positions"*, furthermore there is a huge mismatch between expectations of employees and employers".

Participant O9 indicated that many of the students struggle to adapt theory to practice, struggle with time management and adjust to the long hours demanded by the event industry. Participant A2 indicated that many graduates (students) lack responsibility and time management and often hand in

assignments late; their communication skills are poor (this could be due to their cultural backgrounds), and they cannot work as a team. Furthermore, it indicated that a lot of “babying” is going on. The students resist teamwork and do not want to participate. Participant O5 felt that “students struggle to balance work time and personal life due to the long hours expected by the events industry”. Participant O6 raised concerns that *“the industry is moving at a very fast pace, and there is no time to spend hours training students to get them up to speed with what is happening in the industry”*.

There was consensus amongst some of the participants that we are also seeing the effects of COVID and the students that have come through the online system with minimal practical and application experience, which is extremely important in the events industry.

Participants O4, O6, O7, O8, A1, O2, and O1 indicate that the graduates struggle with customer service and take time to adjust to dealing directly with clients. Communication in both oral and written form is essential, as is communication etiquette. Although they have a communication subject (A1), this does not provide the customer service element they face in the industry. Participant O12 indicated that it is very time-consuming to train, mentor, motivate, and mentally prepare students with no industry experience and sees this as time-consuming; therefore, he prefers to employ people who have experience.

A1 indicated the students are *“not open to more advanced projects and lack entrepreneurship skills and knowledge on how to run their own businesses.... They do not see the potential of starting a business in the events industry. The students also lack the ability to problem solve, do not have the essential communication skills or critical skills, and often lack responsibility... this can be seen in time management, expecting lecturers to solve their problems. Students need to be more dedicated towards their studies, the institution should provide more practicals, and the assessment policies should be revised”*. In addition, the participant raised the issue that there should be more emphasis on personal skills and encouragement of practical application. As mentioned by the academics, providing personal and social skills can be challenging in traditional universities as the focus is more on transmitting knowledge and theory. In addition, the event industry is evolving and fast-paced; unfortunately, changing curricula takes time as these have to be implemented following procedures set in place. In addition, participant A3 indicated that many students admitted to event management were not their first choice of study. *“There should be a more stringent recruitment process to ensure that the correct students are being recruited for the correct programmes and perhaps in some way aligned to the student's personality”*. Participant O13 indicated that the students were unprepared for an office environment and did not understand how an event's elements and the process fit together.

A study conducted by Tran (2108) indicated that graduates in the United States lacked soft skills more than technical skills, specifically communication, managerial and supervisory, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and project management skills. These skills are seen as essential skills in the event environment.

### **Closing The Gap And Overcoming The Challenges (Theme 3)**

There was a general understanding between industry and academia that closer collaboration should take place between higher education and industry. Participant EA1 said, "I would like to see closer collaboration with academia and working together on mentorship programs, guest lecturing, and skills workshops". Participants O6 and O8 shared the same view. Participant O5 indicated that graduates must be upskilled on personal attributes to be 'work ready'. In addition, most participants indicated that mentorship, leadership and time management programs were essential in the events industry. There was consensus amongst the participants that the event industry is very diverse, and each area has its own set of skills and students should be encouraged to work with the area that best suits their personal attributes where their strong skills can be recognised. Among the industry practitioners, there was a high regard for the Work Integrated Learning element, a six-month compulsory module in the event management qualification. Some participants highlighted the value of this module; however, one participant mentioned that they felt it was time-consuming to train the students and that they constantly needed supervision.

Participant O13 indicated that students should be encouraged to complete their WIL in more than one event environment to be exposed to all event elements. In addition, the participant indicated that Higher Education institutions should be more selective of their admissions as they admit students who have a keen interest in events and have the personal attributes that accompany being an event manager. Many of the graduates are best suited for other industries and not events.

### **Conclusion**

The participants and event management practitioners considered the above skills important and relevant to the events industry. These results are consistent with many studies conducted worldwide, confirming and documenting a high regard for personal attributes in the event environment. This indicates that industry and higher education should collaborate and be involved in advisory forums and curriculum development. However, it is noted that the challenge to traditional higher education training is that the focus is on knowledge skills and not practical skills. Industry, however, mentioned that developing more effective

personal and social skills is by adding more actual experiences into the curriculum, including field visits, guest speakers and workshops. In addition, assessments should strive to include more case studies and practical applications to the event industry. Various tasks could be emphasised to promote personal attributes such as time management and project management by ensuring students hand in tasks on time, and if not, there are consequences. Objective assessments should be encouraged to promote social skills, and the curriculum should be aligned to provide a strong, relevant and experience-based learning environment conducive to developing personal and social skills by applying the knowledge based on cognitive and analytical skills. The findings of this study will assist higher education to consider personal skills when re-curriculating.

In terms of student readiness, the study indicates that graduate students are provided with a theoretical foundation in the event industry and a place to apply their knowledge. In addition, the student graduates were happy with the departmental support they received from their University of Technology. However, there is a concern that “assisted you in establishing good working relationships and the ability to be a team leader” and software programmes offered in the qualification assisted me in the industry”. It is clear in the literature that the event management industry requires graduates with specialised capabilities and that they favour graduates with the necessary skills and qualifications. Graduates must have strong knowledge and personal attributes to strengthen their employability options. Consequently, higher education institutions must recognise the skills of employability demanded by the event industry. The current study's findings confirm that event management graduates generally believe they are work-ready and have the necessary skills; however, findings from the industry tell a different story. Moreover, in the current time of technological advancements, additional technological skills are required, specifically in the event industry.

### **Contributors**

*Dr. Lisa Welthagen, Centre for Sustainable Tourism, Department of Tourism Management, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa.*

### **Corresponding Author**

*Dr. Lisa Welthagen, Centre for Sustainable Tourism, Department of Tourism Management, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa. Contact: [WelthagenLC@tut.ac.za](mailto:WelthagenLC@tut.ac.za)*

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