

Technical and vocational skills development through Open, Distance and Flexible Learning: a case of the Hospitality and Tourism sector in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The technical and vocational skills development in Namibia has seen a major shift in the past years with the establishment of the Industry Skills Committees' under the Namibia Training Authority and lately the development of Tourism Training Namibia an online training platform for all in the hospitality and tourism sector.

These initiatives are aimed at ensuring the technical and vocational skills development is done in an open, distance and flexible way of learning. To provide the skills needed by the industry to accelerate employment and economic development.

The paper will provide an overview of the work of the Industry Skills Committees' ensuring that the technical and vocational skills are developed according to industry needs to avoid mismatch. Furthermore, the paper will also enlighten listeners on the training platform developed for the Namibian hospitality and tourism sector. To enable people to learn new skills and upgrade their existing knowledge to remain relevant, useful and provide state of the art services to the customers. The method used is desktop review using internet as a source of information and document review to validate the information gathered.

The review revealed that technical and vocational skills is crucial for national development and should be given high priority especially in the 21st century where most countries are aiming to become knowledge society or knowledge based economy. These skills should be developed through Open, Distance and Flexible Learning since it is the most appealing and accommodating way of learning.

The paper will conclude by highlighting some recommendations for players in the open and distance learning fraternity to tap on the emerging field of technical and vocational field to offer more courses.

INTRODUCTION

The technical and vocational skills development has been receiving priority in recent years in Namibia to provide opportunities to all Namibians to learn new skills and upgrade their skills. This priority has been made possible by the establishment of the Namibia Training Authority to regulate the provision of technical and vocational education and to provide funding. This resulted in the expansion of vocational training centres, establishment of Industry Skills Committees for each sector and establishment of vocational training providers (Namibia Training Authority, 2013).

The Industry Skills Committees advises the Namibia Training Authority on the industry skills needs. Specifically, the role of the Industry Skills Committees is to oversee, the Namibia Training Authority work of engaging with the industry in order to ensure that vocational education and training arrangements meet the needs of industry in terms of their coverage, content and quality. The Industry Skills Committees ensures that the vocational education and training system is developed in a way which meets the needs of the labour market and the skills needs of industry (Namibia Training Authority, 2013). The Hospitality and Tourism Industry Skills Committee advises the Namibia Training Authority on all hospitality and tourism industry needs.

It is clear that the key to Namibia's development lies in using education to develop the intellectual capabilities of its tourism workers. To develop technical and vocational skills tourism workers need to interact with each other. Bates identifies two forms of interaction crucial to learning namely individual which is the interaction of the student with the learning materials and social activity which is the interaction of students with each other and the learning materials (Bates, 1995). The value of learning by interacting and discussing with others has roots in Vygotsky's social development theory (Learning Theories 2012). Vygotsky maintains that students learn better when they interact with their peers under the guidance of a tutor or teacher who facilitates the learning process, than by learning independently (Learning Theories 2012). He also believes that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development (Learning Theories 2012). In any group there are always those who are more knowledgeable on the topic of discussion than others. The interaction between the tourism workers will therefore result in those with less knowledge on the specific topic learning from the more knowledgeable ones.

On the other hand, Personalised, regular support and feedback on their online activities and assignments, provided by the tutor are essential for reducing dropouts (Alexander, 2001) and increasing student satisfaction (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen & Yeh. 2008).

For many years, Namibia has been importing skilled and experienced human capital to fill the gaps that exist in the labour market. In 2004, Namibia adopted a Long Term Perspective Plan, Vision 2030. Under this Vision, the country would operate a totally integrated, unified, flexible and high quality education and training system that would prepare Namibian learners to take advantage of the rapidly changing global environment. The ultimate objective is to balance the supply and demand in the labour market so as to achieve full employment in the economy. This is thus the key factor to Namibia's Vision of becoming a prosperous and industrialised nation, developed by her human resources, enjoying peace, harmony and political stability (National Planning Commission, 2012).

According to National Planning Commission, 2012, human resources development and institutional capacity building have been identified as some of the prerequisite strategic objectives for achieving the Vision, and for the implementation of the National Development Plans. The demand for qualified human resources in Namibia is high and will become even more intense in response to economic growth. However, the scarcity of skilled labour hinders effective and efficient programme and project delivery.

In 2012, the National Planning Commission developed the National Human Resources Plan and its associated implementation tools to guide the Government, private sector, civic organisations and training institutions on how to invest into industries with high growth and employment potential and into critical skills to meet the current and emerging developmental challenges (National Planning Commission, 2012).

The National Planning Commission, 2012 further indicated that Namibia shows signs of constant growth in secondary and tertiary industries indicating its capacity to sustain an industrial economy. It is stated that tertiary industries are the biggest contributors to employment thus indicating the potential for an up-skilling of the labour force. Moreover, various Government initiatives, combined with its commitment to creating a favourable business climate, with adequate social justice policies, are strong foundations for the country's economic development now and in the future.

Additionally, the National Planning Commission, 2012 stated that Namibia's potential for economic and employment growth is further hindered by the existence of mismatches between supply and demand of skilled workers; the opportunity cost of employment; labour regulations; low level of labour productivity in the manufacturing sector; insufficient investment in sustainable rural development; and gender, age and geographic disparities in terms of employment, disfavours women, youth and rural populations. These are seen as obstacle for Namibia to compete effectively and efficiently globally.

In order to support and help to improve the economic growth of the country, Namibia has been investing extensively in the education system by ensuring free access to primary and secondary education, expanding the secondary schools system by allowing enrolment in vocational education at the end of the junior secondary phase and by establishing entrepreneurship training. These important initiatives were put in place to enhance access, quality and efficiency of the educational system in the country (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Despite all these concrete initiatives, human resources development in Namibia still faces important challenges that have a negative impact on student persistence and success, learning outcomes and the preparedness of Vocational Training Centres and university graduates for the high-skilled job market. In addition, the higher education and vocational training systems have a limited capacity to absorb learners. This is evidenced by the low participation rates in higher education and its limited capacity to directly contribute to knowledge creation (National Planning Commission, 2012).

The technical and vocational skills development in Namibia has seen a major shift in the past years with the establishment of the Industry Skills Committees' under the Namibia Training Authority and lately the development of Tourism Training Namibia an online training platform for all in the hospitality and tourism sector.

For many years Government has been calling on private sector to invest in skills development by offering scholarships and establish training institutions to allow many Namibians to have access to education. It is against this background that the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit or GIZ and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism together with other relevant stakeholders have initiated the support, development and establishment of the Online Tourism Training Platform.

PURPOSE

This paper is therefore designed to provide a comprehensive overview of the skills development in the tourism and hospitality sector in Namibia. In the quest for excellence through tourism development it is important to also consider the skills in the Namibian tourism sector. The sector needs well qualified tourism human resources at all levels that are able to understand the needs of the visitors and the vitality of efficient and friendly customer service. Therefore, the importance of training cannot be over emphasized.

The paper concludes by highlighting some recommendations for players in the open and distance learning fraternity to tap on the emerging field of technical and vocational field to offer more courses.

METHODOLOGY

Apart from the desktop review this study is governed by the belief that the social world of the participants of this study can only be understood from their standpoint (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The subjective nature of this study places it in the interpretivist paradigm. To achieve the aims of this study document review and internet as source was chosen. Thomas (2011) defines case study as "analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods" (p.23) Which in this particular case includes desktop and document review.

The method used is desktop review using internet as a source of information and document review to validate the information gathered.

FINDINGS

The Tourism Training Namibia web-platform is designed to answer the training needs of the tourism industry in Namibia. The platform allows training providers to advertise themselves and their courses (Shifeta, 2013). In addition, the platform is developed with technical assistance from Namibia E-Learning Centre and application Training & Management GmbH in the frame of a GIZ project with financial support by the Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (Germany). The platform is endorsed by the Hospitality Association of Namibia (HAN) and the Goethe-Centre/NaDS Windhoek (Tourism Training Namibia, 2013).

Tourism Training Namibia (TTN) is a Platform offering all about training and education for the tourism sector in Namibia. Namibia's tourism approach is well-known world-wide and often serves as best-practice sample in many aspects, be it community-based tourism or eco-tourism or simply the hospitality of Namibia's people as well as the world renowned guests farm system.

However, vocational and management capacity development of tourism related personnel is very costly (Tourism Training Namibia, 2013).

This platform is of its own kind in Namibia and for the first time brings together demand and offers for training in the tourism sector of Namibia. Additionally, it offers various information in and around the tourism sector focusing specifically on training in and for the whole tourism sector in Namibia. This clearly shows that Namibia is working on tackling the challenges of skills shortage identified in the National Human Resources Plan.

The Tourism Training Platform offers training through Open, Distance and Flexible Learning. This platform is initiated by taking into account the ever changing technology and by allowing as many Namibians as possible to have access to education any time.

The main objective of the Tourism Training Platform Namibia is to provide an innovative tourism training platform for Namibia in order to ensure both the creation of a transparent tourism market and training in the sector as well as the capacity development of the various stakeholders involved (Shifeta, 2013). The platform brings together major and smaller players from within the tourism industry and the education sector. It further offers opportunities to widen training access improve quality of training and increase training opportunities in the tourism sector.

The platform have different components ranging from gathering of tourism training and employment information, pilot course development, marketing and process concept development, stakeholder networking and training of stakeholders and partners. The training platform aims to meet the needs of the end consumer/user /Employer (Shifeta, 2013). Tourism workers can inform themselves about career options, find training offers and identify training provided that meets their career needs. Additionally, training providers are able to introduce themselves and their courses on offer and find training participants and manage courses. In addition, Tourism Training Namibia offers a fully functional online training system that allows training providers to run online training courses and allows participants to learn anytime, anywhere in a more open, distance and flexible learning.

In totality, the platform is a clearing house mechanism for the Namibian tourism sector in that it made information about training and job opportunities available online anytime. This becomes important especially for learners and job seekers as they have a one stop shop where they can find all information regarding training and job opportunities in one place (Shifeta, 2013). Furthermore, the platform stand to gain additional human skills in training management, training development and technical skills for the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and relevant stakeholders involved. The platform is a quality assurance mechanism in tourism training in cooperation with the Namibia Training Authority and Namibia Qualification Authority (NQA).

Despite the development of the training platform, funding for the training remains a challenge as many people who need skills are lowly paid or unemployed. However, with the imposition of vocational education and training levy, this could change for the better.

CONCLUSIONS

The review revealed that technical and vocational skills is crucial for national development and should be given high priority especially in the 21st century where most countries are aiming to become knowledge society or knowledge based economy. A knowledge economy can be defined as production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technological and scientific advance as well as equally rapid obsolescence. The key components of a knowledge economy include a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources (Powell & Snellman, 2004, p.2)These skills should be developed through Open, Distance and Flexible Learning since it is the most appealing and accommodating way of learning.

Therefore, a well established training platform should enable people to have access to training at any time and whenever people require training. However, it should be noted that acquisition of skills alone is not sufficient to eliminate unemployment and poverty in Namibia. Provision of training is a prerequisite, but a lot more needs to be effected to maximize the utilisation of the training platform. Funds availability, awareness creation, motivation and encouragement and public private partnership should be promoted if the result of the training platform is to be realised.

In most situations change is not easily accepted. Jack Welch in Paulo (2007:34) argued that, "Willingness to change is strength, even if it means plunging part of the organization into confusion for a while". Meaning, it is realized that there is nothing perfect and an innovation aiming at bringing about some improvement should be tried, "by criticizing everything new, attempts for innovations get thwarted and old and defective system is allowed to continue" (Paulo, 2007)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although, the training platform is still relatively new, it is crucial that awareness is created for the platform to benefit all Namibians. Thus, this paper recommends that;

- There is a need for funds to be availed for Namibians who would like to further their studies through the online training platform. This should be directed to people already employed with industry experiences to be on par with the current development in the industry.
- Public private partnership should be emphasised to ensure strong collaboration, support, sharing of resources, avoid duplication of efforts and ensure sustainability.
- To ensure that TVET skills offered through Open, Distance and Flexible Learning remains relevant to industry needs, it is crucial that regular communication and consultation among various stakeholders is maintained at all levels such as development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.
- The Namibia Training Authority should make use of the training levy to encourage organisations to allow their employees to make use of the online training platform by reimbursing or subsidising training costs for trainees.
- To ensure that the online training platform contributes to national development meaningfully, trainees should be encouraged to become entrepreneurs in order to create jobs for themselves and others. This will reduce the unemployment rate in the country and encourage sharing of skills.
- The online training platform should be extended to other sectors to ensure that more courses are offered and people who are interested in other fields are catered for.

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