

An Exploratory Review of the Challenges Faced by Lecturers of Tourism Research Methodology in South Africa

Abstract

Tourism higher education is an emerging discipline, more specifically tourism postgraduate study. Within these tourism postgraduate qualifications, the module research methodology is a common module. The tourism higher education landscape is in a state of volatility, affected by macro and micro environmental forces, the latter specifically relevant to the Generation Z cohort of current students. There are also specific challenges in the perception of research methodology as a module by students. This paper sought to explore challenges faced by lecturers of tourism research methodology in South Africa as a high-level benchmarking study using semi-structured interviews. We employed a thematic data analysis approach to analyse the interviews and by means of a constructivist epistemology, discuss these results and make recommendations in this regard. These recommendations call for the promotion of a constructively aligned competency-based research methodology curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum, tourism higher education, tourism research methodology

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Introduction

With increased global uncertainties, such as the pressures of global warming, climate change and other environmental factors there is a call for greater naturalistic approach to tourism education and research (Han, 2021) that considers the environment. In addition, the influence of Generation Z and their dynamics as the current student cohort in higher education needs to be considered in curriculum design in order for students to develop more authentically (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). The neoliberal social-economic world of today is disrupting the tourism higher educational landscape requiring a greater need for agility in overcoming socio-economic challenges (Slocum et al., 2019). The metamodern world (Vermeulen et al., 2010) of the current and near future may have a dramatic effect on how higher education institutions will have to adapt their curricula in order to remain relevant. Unforeseen disruptions in the higher educational landscape may also require the increased dexterity and adaptability of higher educational institutions (Mokoena & Hattingh, 2023) in how their curricula and modes of instruction are realised. From the aforementioned, there is a clear need for higher education institutions to develop curricula and produce research that makes a constructive and meaningful impact in the metamodern world in order to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Elmassah et al., 2022). The research capacity of higher education institutions is intrinsically linked to the development of future researchers, with the first line of development resting with postgraduate curricula. Although research into postgraduate curriculum design has provided a robust discourse, there is a lack of focus on the core developmental module of research, namely research methodology. The landscape of tourism higher education curricula and, more specifically tourism research methodology as a module within these curricula, is faced with numerous challenges, related to the macro and micro environment. In this paper we pursue an exploratory review of the challenges faced by lecturers of tourism research methodology at higher education institutions in South Africa.

Literature review

It is often forgotten that the student is the most imperative stakeholder in any curriculum. It is evident that the cohort of students constituting today's higher education landscape are inherently different from previous cohorts from a few years or decades ago. The consideration of the learning environment is crucial, especially as generations evolve, bringing forth unique characteristics that distinguish them from their predecessors, and as such, higher education environments need to cater to the distinctive needs of the new generation – Generation Z (Jaleniauskiene & Juceviciene, 2015). Generation Z essentially comprises students born between 1995 and 2012; these students offer a unique set of attitudes, societal norms, and behaviours (Levin, 2019). This generation brings forth a suitcase of challenges for HEIs. This cohort, also known as 'digital natives', has grown up in a globally connected world. They are accustomed to technology, especially those around information technology and communication (Daukseviciute, 2016). This generation is resolute that they have a voice, and they are not fearful to demonstrate their opinions (Browne & Foss, 2023), which in some cases have been violent, such as in South Africa. Browne & Foss (2023) found that this generation reportedly felt cheated and let down by the higher education sector. They felt that higher education is not inspirational, not worthwhile nor academically challenging.

Some students have been openly questioning the role and purpose of higher education and Browne & Foss (2023) warn that the Generation Z cohort in higher education does not adhere to the norm of complacency. Higher education institutions need to actively engage with Generation Z students, providing them with curricula in the appropriate vernacular and tools to shape a new agenda for the world. It calls for a commitment to the sustainability agenda, hands-on problem-solving experiences, teamwork with stakeholders, and increased involvement of research students in disseminating transformative research. Higher education curriculum developers need to be proactive in collaborating with the next generation to contribute



to positive societal transformation. Not adapting may, in effect, jeopardise the future of higher education (Browne & Foss, 2023).

With a challenging cohort of students, it is vital that higher education practitioners, move away from the traditional teacher-led method of teaching to a more holistic student-based teaching andragogy through which active learning takes place by both facilitators and students. Although this is the desired state for higher education, there are often challenges. Sheldon et al. (2011) outline the main challenges that faced tourism higher education a decade ago and which may still be relevant today. Firstly, there is passive reproduction of learning opportunities, which Roberts (2019: 63) refers to as “passive education”. This implies that educators repetitively reproduce a set of learning opportunities that are not updated for the needs of the real world, thus developing graduates who are ill-prepared for the workplace (Sheldon et al., 2011). These lecturers may be aware of the educational rhetoric on the issue and the social need for more authentic knowledge construction as opposed to knowledge absorption by students, however, there are very few proactive strategies implemented to move away from this convenience (Roberts, 2019). Secondly, the concentration on the theoretical end objective instead of the means may thwart authentic learning. This exists when tourism education does not adequately provide opportunities for students to develop and master problem-solving skills and other critical skills required for the industry. In such a case, curricula focus predominantly on achieving set content driven outcomes as opposed to competency-based outcomes (Echols et al., 2018). The tourism industry is constantly faced with workplace-specific problems and many curricula today still focusses predominantly on theoretical methods of solving problems and not the actual outcome of the problem implying a need for associated critical thinking skills (Sheldon et al., 2011). Thus, the learning may be considered static and not authentic (Slabbert et al., 2009) as they may not assist in the self-development of students to face real-life problems in the real-life world of work.

Universities have also been criticised for developing graduates that do not possess the required leadership skills, resulting in a lack of development of future leaders (Sheldon et al., 2011). Tourism curricula should provide students with opportunities to take ownership of their own learning, engage in a desire for lifelong learning, and make valued contributions to the society around them (Oosthuizen et al., 2019). Tourism is seen as a catalyst in the transformation, utilisation, and provision of socio-economic opportunities for communities to take control of their own self-regulated development, contributing to the overall sustainability of the industry. Almost a decade ago, there was a call for the need for learning that embraces leadership practice to deal with rapid and somewhat unpredictable economic and social upheaval (Trudeau-Poskus & Messer, 2015). Today, with global pandemics, natural disasters, climate change, and socio-political dynamics, it is imperative that tourism curricula also target the self-development of graduates as leaders to effectively manage these challenges. Fidgeon (2010) and Airey (2014) highlight another area of concern in tourism higher education, which pertains to the quality of research outputs and research-focused graduates. The challenge arises from the recruitment of underprepared students and the subsequent production of inferior research (Airey et al., 2015). Bridging the gap between research and research education is crucial to address the neo-liberal landscape in which tourism higher education operates (Airey, 2014). In the post-COVID-19 world, there is a heightened need for astute awareness of the role of tourism and the development and implementation of associated mechanisms to manage tourism for sustainability (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021).

Compared to other fields of study and professions, tourism may be considered a relatively new field of academic specialisation. The first formal tourism qualification appeared in the form of a course in hotel management in 1922 at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration in the USA (Scotland, 2006). In 1969, the first four-year programme with travel and tourism as a major was established, also in the USA (Scotland, 2006). It was not until the early 1990s that tourism education gained recognition as a viable field of specialisation, and during this period, it began to emerge in the South African education landscape. In South Africa, tourism was first offered as a module in the high school curriculum in 1996, and formal higher education qualifications in tourism also emerged at that time (Dube, 2014). Today there exist a large number of formal tourism qualifications in South Africa (Bob, 2023) and there is also a subsequent increased need for postgraduate tourism qualifications, evident in the number of registered NQF8 qualifications. Table 1 provides an overview of NQF 8 qualifications registered with SAQA. These qualifications are entry-level postgraduate qualifications, aimed at, amongst others, to develop the research proficiencies of students.

Table 1: Registered NQF8 tourism qualifications offered in South Africa

Name of qualification	NQF Level	Provider
Bachelor of Arts Honours in Recreation and Tourism	8	University of Zululand (UniZulu)
Bachelor of Arts Honours in Tourism	8	University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and North-West University (NWU)
Bachelor of Arts Honours in Tourism Development	8	University of Johannesburg (UJ)
Bachelor of Arts Honours in Tourism Management	8	NWU
Bachelor of Arts Honours: Heritage and Tourism Studies	8	UKZN
Bachelor of Arts Honours: Tourism	8	UKZN
Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Tourism Management	8	University of Pretoria (UP), Nelson Mandela University (NMU), University of South Africa (UNISA), NWU
Bachelor of Science Honours: Geography: Eco-tourism	8	UP
Bachelor of Social Science Honours: Heritage and Tourism Studies	8	UKZN
Master of Business Administration: Tourism Development	8	MANCOSA
Master of Business Administration: Travel and Tourism	8	UKZN
Postgraduate Diploma in Ecotourism	8	Durban University of Technology (DUT)
Postgraduate Diploma in Recreation and Tourism	8	UniZulu
Postgraduate Diploma in Tourism Management	8	TUT, Vaal University of Technology (VUT), DUT, Central University of Technology (CUT)
Postgraduate Diploma: Heritage and Tourism Studies	8	UKZN
Postgraduate Diploma: Management: Tourism and Leisure	8	University of Cape Town (UCT)
Postgraduate Diploma: Tourism Management	8	UNISA

Source: SAQA (2022)



A common denominator amongst all these qualifications is the inclusion of a compulsory research methodology module. However, these modules are mostly unpopular with students (Humphreys, 2006) as students often find these modules boring, challenging and difficult to relate to (Schultze, 2009). This may make students negative and disengaged from learning leading to poor pass rates (Schultze, 2009). In order to provide input towards transforming a curriculum, it is vital to understand the underlying challenges that exist in the profession. For this reason, benchmarking in curriculum development is vital as it ensures that the curriculum under development is relevant and contemporary (Szende et al., 2019). This allows for programme task team and curriculum developers to learn from experiences at other higher education institutions. For this reason, this study sought to explore the challenges faced by lecturers of tourism research methodology in South Africa.

Research method and design

This study employed a constructivist qualitative research design to gather empirical evidence by means of structured interviews. As evident from Table 1, multiple higher education institutions in South Africa offer NQF8 qualifications in the field of tourism. To facilitate domestic benchmarking, we collaborated with South African colleagues who lecture research methodology at these institutions. Using our professional network, we reached out to colleagues responsible for tourism research methodology modules, as well as HODs at institutions where we did not have an existing network. In total, 10 institutions were contacted and we received 9 names of potential participants. The inclusion criterion for the study was that potential participants should currently be lecturing a research methodology module for at least 2 years to ensure expertise and experience. These colleagues were selected based on expert sampling as we deemed them experts in their respective fields. An information leaflet detailing the study was sent to each of the 9 potential participants via email. Subsequently, dates and times for possible interviews were determined. In total, 8 responded positively towards participation, but 2 were eliminated as they did not meet the 2 years' experience inclusion criterion. In the end, 6 participants were willing to take part in the study. Individual online semi-structured interviews were held with each participant during September 2023 and recorded and transcriptions generated on Microsoft Teams, after consent to do so was received from the respective participants. Once the transcriptions were cleaned, they were analysed by means of thematic analysis, more specifically descriptive phenomenology. This approach to qualitative data analysis strives to describe, observe and understand a phenomenon aligned to the relationship between an individual and their living world, or profession (Schurink et al., 2021).

Results and discussion

In terms of participant profile, participation was received from colleagues at the University of South Africa, North-West University, Vaal University of Technology, University of Pretoria, Cape Peninsula University of Technology and Central University of Technology. Of the 6 participants, 5 were female and 1 was male. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in reporting the results. Interviewees were posed with the question 'please describe the challenges that you face in facilitating research methodology in your professional environment'. The thematic analysis revealed 10 main themes related to challenges experienced.

Table 2: Challenges in the curriculum

Main theme	Codes
Poor reading and writing abilities of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor academic writing skills. Poor ability to read for meaning. Lack of exposure to academic articles in undergraduate qualifications. Poor skills in practising citations and referencing.
Content heavy curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over reliance on theory with little practical application. High reliance on tests. Students unable to apply learning in class an in assessments due to poor application of application-based learning in undergraduate qualification.
Misalignment of curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too few notional hours to cover all that is required. Some students expect to learn about research in general but the curriculum only aligns to academic research. Some supervisors unfamiliar with NQF8 outcomes and supervising at NQF9 level.
Assessment challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor quality tests as assessment tools. Unauthentic testing such as MCQs. Static testing due to nature of theory. Poorly aligned summative assessments.
Rigidity of the curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inflexibility in facilitation and assessment. Teaching and learning not aligned to outcomes. Lecturers lacking expertise in all fields of research. Bureaucratic processes.
Low motivation among students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are not motivated to learn. Compulsory module deemed boring and irrelevant by some students. Only students that want to study further are engaged. Students do not prepare for lessons. Poor class attendance. Plagiarism conducted by those students not motivated.
Low motivation among lecturers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturers not stimulated due to poor student moral, engagement and creativity.
Challenges of Generation Z	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instant gratification. Aware of their rights
Influx of artificial intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inauthentic evidence of learning.
Silo effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor integration between modules.

During all interviews, the first and most common challenge identified was that of poor reading and writing abilities of students. This was particularly related to poor academic writing skills, an inadequate ability to read for meaning, a lack of exposure to



academic articles in undergraduate education, perhaps associated with the challenge of reading, as well as poor skills in practicing citations and referencing. This challenge has resulted in the acceptance that students are not adequately prepared for further study, and lecturers are having to devote a significant amount of time to assist students in 'catching up'. This is particularly relevant to the issue of academic writing and the development of competencies in the use of citations and referencing. This has resulted in insufficient time devoted to the facilitation of learning of the research methodology learning outcomes. P2 mentioned the following regarding the lack of notional hours assigned to the curriculum: "if you really think about it and you think about the notional hours that they supposed to put in and what they supposed to deliver, It's too much."

Currently, the tourism research methodology curricula at various higher education institutions in the sample seemingly are structured around a content-driven curriculum that significantly involves theoretical testing as well as structured assignments. This reliance on tests has been identified in the interviews as an issue as, in some cases, the quality thereof is lowered to make assessment 'easier' for students and to increase success rates. P1 mentioned that they "try to make it as simple as possible for them (the students)". This has been done, for example, through the use of multiple-choice question assessments which one participant questioned as not being suitable for assessing application and authentic learning at this high NQF level. One reason for including a high number of tests is due to their apparent ease of use for large groups and the ability to accommodate the problem of insufficient notional hours.

As a result of the above, it was noted in the interviews, that there was an inclination to use static testing (also referred to as passive assessment by Roberts (2019) due to the nature of theory, which implies the continued use of previous tests. An inability to apply learning in class and in assessments due to poor application of learning in undergraduate qualifications has led to the use of 'parrot learning' (memorisation) among students. Students are not empowered to think critically and apply their learning to real-life case studies in undergraduate education and therefore find it difficult when applied for the "first time" in advanced and postgraduate diplomas. Effectively, we believe this to be indicative of a shortcoming of constructivist learning in the undergraduate curricula. The interviews also revealed that there is a trend related to perpetual assessment at some higher education institutions in order to continuously reassess a student until they pass. P4 mentioned the following in this regard:

My thing about continuous assessment is that they get a second chance. So, we have an opportunity A and an opportunity B. (If) you don't pass opportunity A, then you have opportunity B. What we did in the past and we thought that is our policy, but then we found out it's not our policy is that a student cannot get more than 50% for your (their) assessment B, but that was apparently never a policy, and then afterwards someone said (that) the Dean or someone said no, but we mustn't do that. But I find it unfair. Actually, you know this thing is students who did not submit a first assessment as opposed to someone who did everything on time can still get the full benefit and the full mark for the work.

This action sets a precedence that perpetuates the problem even further to postgraduate study. N interviewee revealed that in some cases, a report was marked, one examiner passed the student, and another one failed the student. There is increased pressure to appoint a third examiner and then a fourth examiner until one of them passes the student, which compromises quality and the reputation of the institution and ultimately the profession of higher education. We believe that this assessment strategy cannot be deemed authentic assessment or authentic learning. It may result in higher success rates but also in students not adequately prepared for further study who are then granted access to further study which creates the problem of perpetual students that are not adequately equipped for the real world of work or for the real world of academic research. In addition, the result of these actions demotivates those students who do not perform well once they commence their postgraduate learning journeys. The rigidity of learning opportunities was also identified as a challenge during the interviews. Within this theme, the inflexibility in facilitation and assessment was identified. This implies due to large class sizes, the unpreparedness of students and an inadequacy of lecturer competencies, poorly developed learning opportunities and assessments are not easily adapted to the need of students. One interviewee mentioned that they consider themselves an expert on quantitative research and as a result, learning opportunities and assessments are mostly skewed towards this form of research which disadvantages a student that may be interested in qualitative research. In addition, the interviewees perceived that facilitation and assessment are not always effectively aligned to the outcomes of the module. For example, P1 mentioned that "the outcome is to produce a research paper and then all they do is a research proposal, which I mean is obviously completely different because they never conducted the research".

In addition to the above, P6 noted a challenge related to the rigidity of curriculum design due to bureaucratic processes. As a result of these rigid processes the agility of curriculum transformation is curtailed. P6 mentioned that "that's one of the fights that I have had and you know, because our systems are structured in in such a way that once a qualification has been approved through all the CHE, DHET and SAQA channels, it's really difficult to then change a lot of the structure and everything". Thus, we are of the view that the design of these curricula are not constructively geared towards adaptability and as a result these curricula may often already be archaic when implemented considering the time it takes to develop these curricula through the macro curriculum design process. Research methodology is a compulsory module in all advanced diploma and postgraduate diploma/Honour's qualifications in tourism. There is a concern that a large proportion of students are not motivated to learn as they see very little or no benefit in the subject to them or as P6 mentioned, these students are not familiar with the 'language' of research methodology. Students are said to find the subject overly theoretical, boring and not applicable as some do not have intentions of continuing further study to masters. "Sometimes students already come with a defeated attitude to say, you know, I've been told that research methodology is difficult" (P6). This may also be related to very low levels



of class attendance among students. P2 mentioned that “they (the students) just completely don’t have any interest in research because they hate reading, they hate their topic, they don’t see themselves doing research, so why should they? But it’s now the subject that they have to pass. So, they do the bare minimum in that, so there’s definitely a problem with that”. This may also lead to frustration among lecturers, for example P4 mentioned the following “I hope that this module would spark something in them to (want) know more or to learn more, or to continue with research as research for me, it’s like a passion. So, I would like to see some of that passion coming through in the students as well to be intrigued by what they’re learning and that they want to pursue further studies”. Lecturers may be passionate about academic research but students may not be, which may lead to demotivated lecturers themselves. Some participants mentioned that they are not stimulated due to poor student morale, engagement and creativity.

The challenges brought by underprepared students and low interest in the module have also brought with it further problems associated with lecturer practise, for example, P4 mentioned that they have been inclined to “sort of spoon feed the students. So, it means that I tried to make it as easy as possible”. The pressure of underprepared students and the associated insufficient notional hours has led to lecturers providing students with structured learning opportunities and assessments where students are obligated to use set templates and guidelines. This I believe once again benefits only those students who prefer Quadrant B thinking. P4 indicated their challenge in this regard:

...if I don’t give the template what I get back is not a good standard document and then we simply don’t have the time to rework and rework the research and that is, that’s part of the process of research, but we also need to push these students to go through in one year in the advanced diploma and one year in the postgraduate diploma, so sometimes I feel like some students need a lot of more guidance, maybe more time or more guidance.

The above quote once again details the time pressures placed on lecturers and as such the inclination to implement lecturer-led teaching and assessment is heightened.

The challenges of the current Generation Z cohort were also revealed during the interviews. P1 referred to them as the ‘Google generation’ where instant answers and instant gratification are demanded. These students are well informed about their rights and have advanced knowledge of technology and the use thereof, for example, with artificial intelligence applications such as ChaptGPT. The emergence of artificial intelligence applications, especially in the post-COVID-19 landscape has emerged as a concern for the colleagues that were interviewed. It has become apparent that students are increasingly using artificial intelligence platforms to complete assignments, abstracts, and literature reviews. This is particularly prevalent with demotivated students who are known to use artificial intelligence dishonestly and are also known to have higher inclinations to plagiarise work as opposed to students that are academically driven. The overall poor preparedness of students for postgraduate study may be illustrated through an example provided by P3. They indicate that at some institutions students who have applied for further study at the Master’s level are required to write a research methodology entrance assessment even though they already have successfully completed a postgraduate diploma or Honour’s degree at NQF8. An academic record is perceived to no longer be an authentic indicator of a student’s learning, in part due to the challenges discussed above. This provides a clear indication of quality perceptions of NQF8 qualifications, predominantly related to research methodology modules at advanced diploma and postgraduate diploma levels. This is a clear challenge that highlights the need for transformation of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Interviews with South African colleagues in revealed that there are professional challenges in the curriculum development and instructional design of the module research methodology. A common thread amongst these challenges is the nature of the curriculum and the exit level outcomes, which predominantly align to the achievement of content-based targets as opposed to competency-based skills, which makes the curriculum boring for students (Humphreys, 2006; Schultze, 2009) leading to demotivation. The modules are overly theoretical which leads to the problem of a high reliance on static and perpetual testing which does lead to authentic learning and thus compromises the quality of a curriculum. These tests are seen as beneficial and as such there is a need for the advancement of alternative and more authentic assessment strategies that lead to the constructive learning of research competencies as opposed to content rote learning. The perpetual problem in this regard may continue should these underprepared students be admitted to postgraduate study. One strategy to break away from this shortcoming is for curriculum developers to consider making exit level outcomes more agile and not content specific. This should lead to greater flexibility in the achievement of a constructively aligned curriculum. The challenge associated with the Generation Z cohort was also evident during the interviews. The dynamics of this cohort of students means that we can no longer continue offering curricula in higher education that do not relate with these students. Should a Generation Z student not perceive any benefit in the curriculum then there is a seemingly increased chance for disinterest and demotivation. Curricula need to be developed within real world contexts and in a language that is relative with this generation in order to make the curricula more digestible. Curriculum should constructively incorporate contemporary technology such as artificial intelligence that may aid in more authentic learning. This study provides a high-level overview of the challenges experienced by colleagues lecturing research methodology. This module serves as a vital developmental opportunity for students to articulate vertically into a postgraduate qualification. Challenges exist that affects the quality of these curricula which requires rigorous further investigation and discourse in order to promote the quality and effectiveness of these curricula. We recommend the transformation of the curricula towards a constructively aligned competency-based curriculum.



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