

Are Learning Preferences of Tourism Management Students at Universities of Technology Addressed?

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DOI: 10.34190/IRT.20.065

Abstract: Graduate employment competitiveness remains a key focus area for both private/public higher education (HE) providers in South Africa. For key industries, including the tourism industry that contributed 8.6% to total GDP in 2018 and employment totalling 1.5 million jobs in the country, issues of academic performance and graduate competitiveness become critical. Global academic opinion continues to indicate that it is becoming challenging to remain competitive due to the perceived phenomenon of the disengaged (and at times disgruntled) student. This could be attributed to a misalignment of practice offering and student experience at HE institutions. Thus student and institutional practices must be interrogated, to assess the causes of students' disengagement from their learning environment. A learning environment definition in South African education includes teaching practices, places where learning occurs, as well as student learning styles as part of the definition. In tourism studies learning occurs in the classroom, in the field and on virtual platforms where interaction across these platforms builds knowledge. This study aims to explore the preferences of the learning environment of tourism management students at selected Universities of Technology (UoT) in South Africa. A mixed methodology approach will be employed to collect data pertaining to the learning environment of tourism programmes within selected UoTs in South Africa.

Keywords: curriculum design, higher education, learning styles, teaching practices, tourism studies, tourism industry

1. Introduction and study background

South African education has gone through various restructuring processes since the dawn of democracy, including but not limited to: "education finance reform, curriculum reform, and the teacher rationalization process" as research indicated in the Report on Education Change in South Africa: 1994-2003 (Worldbank.org, 2004). With the continues focus to transform the education sphere in the country, the years 2015 to 2017 saw dialogue focusing more on students, than on university processes, as discussions included "flexible learning pathways to ensure student success and retention; understandings of curriculum and its relationship to institutional culture; and the use of the wide range of linguistic, cultural and experiential resources which students and staff bring to the classroom" (University of Cape Town, 2018). Although these developments were taking place at government level, 2015 to 2017 were marred by student unrest. The "#FeesMustFall" student movement focused attention on South African university, with students questioning pedagogical practices, and other issues including funding models, and the lack of transformation in the universities (Langa, 2016), as counter inclusive to previously disadvantaged students (Crowther, Strydom and Dzansi, 2018). As a result of the unrest, discussions at higher education shifting to how institutions of higher learning could improve student engagement for a more meaningful learning experience (Moyo, 2019).

The continued discussion around transformation of education in South Africa, has centred around the idea of seeking an identity of an African centric curriculum (Department of Education (DoE), 2008), with transformation of education from a consumption value point becoming critical (Alstadsaeter and Sieverstsen, 2009; DoE, 2015). Academics understand that the current university students, have unique set of values, including that the students are influential, are attracted to trends, and are strongly opinionated (Coomes and DeBard, 2004; Shatto and Erwin, 2016; Cilliers, 2017), which are all characteristics which require a shift in how the prefer to learn. Added to these unique value sets, the advancements in technology are also a force that enables a transformation of teaching and learning in UoTs (Pavlik, 2015:113).

The issue with the current students who have strong opinions, are creative, and possess unlimited information at their disposal to promote self-learning, have learning and teaching preferences that must firstly be discovered, before any meaningful learning is perceived to take place (Lange, 2017). At this stage there is a gap where universities are testing suitable teaching and learning models and practices to adopt to the learning preferences of the students, with limited tangible results, proving problematic on throughput (Pitre, 2014; Bourke, 2018; Crompton and Burke, 2018).