

# Covid-19 Impact on Future Study Choices: Will Students Consider a Tourism Qualification Post Pandemic?

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**Abstract:** The Covid-19 pandemic devastated various industries, with the tourism sector suffering the most. The tourism industry, which relies mainly on the movement of people, was interrupted for several months as governments instituted restrictions and regulations to prevent further spread of the virus. These restrictions put the industry at a standstill, putting much strain on the economy. With businesses closing, many people became unemployed, and those who remained had their salaries and wages reduced. The high unemployment rate in the country, worsened by Covid-19 and other external forces, presented challenges to exit-level tourism students. The current study investigated the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the future of studying towards a tourism management qualification. A qualitative research approach was adopted where the exit-level tourism students at a university of technology were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. Thematic and constant comparative analysis methods were used to analyse the emerging themes and compare the responses from the participants. The study revealed mixed feelings about the tourism management course. While others regretted enrolling to the tourism program, some remained optimistic that the industry would reopen and recover and present better opportunities for them. Prospective tourism industry staff, particularly tourism management students, have become uncertain about the likelihood of getting job opportunities in the industry. This raises a question about how the pandemic has influenced the future of studying tourism management in higher learning institutions. The study contributes to the understudied phenomenon of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on influencing future enrolments in tourism courses.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 Pandemic; Curriculum Development; Social Learning Theory; Qualification Choice

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## 1. Introduction

The year 2019 was punctuated by the eruption of the stubborn and ferocious Covid-19 pandemic which to say the least, halted all travel and business operations into the year 2021 (Gosling et al., 2020; Makuzva & Mabaleka, 2021; Makuzva & Ntloko, 2022). All the industries in the world suffered the defeat from the notorious Covid-19, however, the tourism sector – a travel-reliant industry suffered the most from the pandemic and the travel restrictions that were instituted by various governments (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020, Fakir & Bharat, 2021). The travel restrictions such as national and international lockdowns were deemed to be the solution to curb the rapid spread of the pandemic (Fakir & Bharat, 2021), thus, in a way unintentionally destroying the once famous and ever-growing travel and tourism industry. In the South African context, many people were working in the tourism industry, however, with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, several tourism businesses closed down, multitudes of people became unemployed, and those who remained working had their salaries and wages massively reduced (Bama & Nyikana, 2021). Undoubtedly, exit-level students (those students in their final year and who were about to join the tourism industry from 2020) witnessed all these events unfolding. South Africa also already has a serious unemployment crisis (Anakpo & Kollamparambil, 2022), and with the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating the situation by decimating the travel and tourism industry, one would ponder on how the tourism exit-level students viewed this conundrum. Given this background, the current study investigated the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the future of studying towards a tourism management qualification.

## 2. Literature Review

Despite a considerable amount of literature (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Abbas et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2022) on the impacts of Covid-19 on the tourism industry, its effect on the future studying towards a tourism qualification is highly overlooked (Tiwari et al., 2020). This could be reinforced by the fact that more focus is glued on the impacts affecting the industry alone (Ali et al., 2017) whenever a threatening external factor arises, thereby neglecting the fact that tourism is also a field of study that can be influenced by the external factors (Seraphin & Yallop, 2020). Some scholars (Ali et al., 2017; Camargo & Gretzel, 2017; Hales & Jennings, 2017) posit that the events taking place in the industry have resulted in the redesigning of the curriculum and new

pedagogic in tourism studies. Thus, Tiwari et al. (2020:1) attest that there is a mutual relationship between what is taking place in the industry and the education system. This reciprocal assimilation between the tourism industry and the studying of tourism at higher learning institutions such as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) could be influenced by the events taking place in the tourism industry which in turn may shift the view of the industry from the students who are about to get in the crippled industry by the Covid-19 pandemic. From a learning perspective, Tiwari et al. (2021:4) submit that “tourism education provision follows the trend in the industry.” Learning is defined as “a process that leads to change, which occurs as a result of experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning” (Ambrose et al., 2010:3). This school of thought (Ambrose et al., 2010) further argue that learning is not something done to students, but rather something students themselves do and it is the direct result of how students interpret and respond to their experiences. Bandura (1999) denotes that learning can happen through social interactions and in this case, the students could be interacting with friends and or relatives who could have their jobs interrupted or at most lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand the trends that could influence the social learning of higher education students.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, undoubtedly, tourism had been one of the highest job-creating industries across the world, accounting for one in ten jobs globally (Meyer & Meyer, 2015). In the South African context and before the pandemic, of every twenty-two working people, one person is working in the tourism industry (StatsSA, 2018). This equally means the university students at institutes of higher learning could be directly linked to a relative or a family member who works in the tourism industry and, through the impact of the pandemic on massive job losses, could have influenced their views of this susceptible to external factors industry. To date, there is growing interest in the impacts of the pandemic on the economic and social elements and earlier studies (Ataguba, 2020; Lone & Ahmad, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020; Verschuur et al., 2021; Muresherwa et al., 2022a) neglected the effects of the pandemic on the sustainability of studying tourism management during the pandemic era.

This could be a stimulating call for the redesigning of the tourism curriculum so that it blends with the current situation which is defined by the ramifications of the external forces such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Lee and Hallak (2018) support the view that the learning of tourism in higher education could propel the competitiveness of the industry, however, in a situation like the Covid-19 pandemic where students can socially learn from the practical consequences of the fragility of the industry at home, the sustainability of this program could have been impacted at higher learning institutions. Tiwari et al. (2020:5) restate that “tourism education must evolve at the same pace as the industry.” This could be true considering the normal way of doing things, but, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a gap between the teachings at higher education and the practice taking place in the industry and students may opt to follow the practical ramifications of the pandemic thereby influencing negatively on the future enrolment of this course at institutes of higher learning. This gives this study the impetus to investigate the perspectives of exit-level students on studying tourism management based on the Covid-19 pandemic situation that has shrouded and marauded the tourism industry. The perspectives of the exit-level students could provide the department of tourism and events management at institutes of higher learning like CPUT with fundamental information which could assist in assessing the sustainability of this course. Hence, this study, therefore, seeks to close this understudied phenomenon.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the Social Learning Theory (SLT) which was proposed by Bandura in 1971. The theory is rooted on the premise that the decisions individuals make are influenced by social behaviour (Bandura, 1971). Guided by the SLT, it can be predicted that just like any other industry affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the perspectives of the exit-level students could have been shifted based on the social interaction with the people who are or were working in the industry and lost their jobs as well as the daily news about the Covid-19 pandemic and how it brought the tourism industry to a complete halt. Therefore, the SLT (further developed to Social Learning Cognitive Theory (SLCT) (Bandura, 1999) fits neatly in this study as it entails that learning occurs through social interactions which then result in imitating and modelling of the observed behaviour of others (Nabavi, 2012:5). Green and Peil (2009) argue that the SLT “provides a framework for understanding, predicting and changing human behaviour.” This theory assists in providing the foundation into the understanding of the behaviour or attitude of students may have towards a certain qualification, is shaped by the experiences they directly or indirectly come across during the social interaction period. Therefore, the SLT was used as a guide to aid the understanding of the views of exit-level tourism management students in influencing future students to

study this course which could lead to the sustainability of this program at institutes of higher such as CPUT. The following section, therefore, presents the methodology that was deployed in this study.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

A qualitative descriptive design (Kim et al., 2017) was conducted in this study as it provides candid descriptions of experiences as well as participants' perceptions (Sandelowski, 2010). The study on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected how a selected academic qualification is perceived by exit-level students has not been well researched, thus adopting a qualitative descriptive approach was considered practical especially that there is little known about the topic (McCombes, 2019; Doyle, 2020). In addition, the authors chose the descriptive design for its ability to acknowledge the subjective nature of the problem as well as recognise the diverse experiences of the participants (Bradshaw et al., 2017). In this study, the researchers were concerned with understanding individual students' experiences in the unique Covid-19 context.

#### **3.1 Sampling Method**

Most qualitative research adheres to the non-probability sampling methodology, and descriptive research is not an exception to this rule (Doyle, 2020). In most cases, purposive sampling is the main method of choice for descriptive research, and a variety of approaches for purposive sampling have been outlined (Palinkas et al., 2015). As a component of the sampling framework, many researchers make use of a variety of methods such as convenience, opportunistic, or snowball sampling (Doyle, 2020; Madziva & Chinouya, 2022; Muresherwa et al., 2022b). Exit-level students enrolled for the Advanced Diploma in Tourism Management qualification at a university of technology who were available and willing to participate in the study were virtually interviewed.

#### **3.2 Research Instruments and Ethical Consideration**

The participants in the interviews gave their informed consent before any of the interviews were carried out. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic and difficulty in getting students onto campus or to suitable venue(s) for a face-to-face interview, online platforms which included Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra were used to virtually connect with the study participants. The issues that were discovered through the literature study served as the basis for a list of questions that guided the semi-structured interviews. The protocol for the interview comprised of open-ended questions that provided the interviewer with the opportunity to probe, or clarify, and to examine the unique areas of knowledge or expertise of the study participants. The primary goal of the interview schedule was to gain a better understanding of how exit-level students enrolled on an Advanced Diploma qualification perceive studying towards a tourism qualification especially in the face of the Covid-19 crisis which devastated the global tourism industry. Each of the responses is denoted by the letter 'R,' as well as a specific number that serves to differentiate each individual respondent from the others. Using letters to identify or categorise the study participants was done to protect the respondents' confidentiality throughout the entirety of the research process. The study was approved by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development in July 2021.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

Sandelowski (2000) notes that data collection methods in descriptive research are diverse and usually aim to determine what, who and where of phenomena under investigation. Although most semi-structured qualitative interviews are conducted in a face-to-face setting (Kim et al., 2017), the contemporary world has seen several tools and online applications developed to permit data collection from any part of the globe. Researchers are increasingly turning to telephone and online methods because of their increased adaptability, lower costs, and simplicity of use for both participants and researchers (Doyle, 2020). Additional advantages include maximising variety sampling and examining experiences from a national or worldwide perspective.

#### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Most qualitative studies rely on content and thematic analysis to make sense of the collected data. In the current study, the researchers used thematic analysis which provides a more purely qualitative account of the gathered data, which in most cases, is richer and more detailed (Doyle, 2020). The collected data were recorded, transcribed, and later loaded onto AtlasTI software to assist with the analysis. In trying to get more insights from the data, the researchers had to first sort the collected data (transcriptions) based on the level of detail provided from each question that the participants were asked. Some comments and reflections from the interviews were

inserted to assist in providing meaning to the data (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). Through consistent checking of the interview transcripts and comparisons of those transcripts to voice recordings and comments (notes) made during the interviews, every effort was made to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. The researchers went on to closely examine the data, identifying similar phrases, patterns, emerging themes, and associations of these themes (Howitt, 2019).

In interpreting the data, the researchers followed Sandeklwoski (2010)'s suggestion of carefully examining the 'un-interpreted' participant's quotations to help answer the study questions and achieve the objectives of the study. A thematic summary of the findings was reported together with the relevant interpretations. In order to accurately convey the information obtained from the source, direct quotations were utilised throughout the discussion. These direct quotations were cautiously selected based on several factors including that they represented the general consensus or common feeling and experience among the participants or highlighted a key theme or used to illustrate key examples as gathered from the data.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The sample consisted of twelve exit-level students studying towards an advanced diploma in tourism management at a university of technology in South Africa. The study participants' age ranged from 21 to 30 years with more females ( $n=10$ ), and only two males. The average age of the participants was 24.3, which is an age group that is faced with high unemployment in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Table 1 shows the profiles of the study participants. The exit-level students who participated in the study came from four of the nine South African provinces and these were Western Cape ( $n=5$ ), Eastern Cape ( $n=3$ ), Northern Cape ( $n=3$ ) and Free State ( $n=1$ ).

**Table 1: Study participant profile**

#R	Gender	Age	PoO in SA	Was studying TM at CPUT your first choice?	If participant have a F/R/N who works in the tourism industry
R1	F	25	Western Cape	No	No
R2	M	23	Northern Cape	No	Yes - Friend retrenched
R3	F	22	Western Cape	No	Yes - Friend retrenched
R4	F	22	Eastern Cape	No	Yes - People lost jobs
R5	F	30	Northern Cape	No	Yes - Relative retrenched
R6	M	21	Eastern Cape	Yes	Yes - Friend retrenched
R7	F	26	Eastern Cape	No	Yes - Friend retrenched
R8	F	23	Western Cape	No	Yes - Friend retrenched
R9	F	22	Western Cape	No	Yes - Friend retrenched
R10	F	23	Western Cape	No	Yes - Friend contract not renewed
R11	F	30	Free State	No	Yes - People got retrenched
R12	F	25	Eastern Cape	No	Yes - Neighbour retrenched

**Key:** #R=Respondent, M=Male, F=Female, PoO in SA=Province of origin in South Africa, CPUT=Cape Peninsula University of Technology, TM=Tourism Management, F/R/N=Friend, Relative or Neighbour, Source: Authors' construction

In trying to ascertain interest of pursuing a tourism qualification, the participants were first asked to indicate if studying towards a tourism qualification at CPUT was their first-choice study program. Nearly all the participants indicated that tourism was not their first-choice study program with only one (R6) who enrolled on the program since it was the one the student wanted to pursue. The first qualifications of choice which the participants had selected despite finally registering for a tourism course were: Education, Nursing, Dental Technology, Hospitality Management (R6 & R12, though it has linkages to tourism), Filming, Political Studies, and Public Administration. To find out if the participants had a better understanding of Covid-19 challenges on the tourism industry and its people, it was considered worthwhile to ascertain if they were associated with anyone working in the tourism industry (either a close friend or relative or even a neighbour). Association with someone whose industry had been shuttered by the effects of Covid-19 would thus bring more insights since the participants could have witnessed the impact closely through either stories or personal observations. Apart from (R1), all the study participants confirmed that they knew or had someone close to them who works in the tourism industry, a sector that was severely affected by the pandemic. This showed that the challenges brought by Covid-19 were

witnessed closely by most of the participants and could have influenced their attitude towards a tourism qualification and even their propensity to recommend it to any future applicants.

The researchers further enquired how these relatives, friends, family, and anyone known to participants were affected by Covid-19. The responses converged to loss of jobs through retrenchments, downsizing of companies, as well as some, getting their salaries reduced as companies' strategies to survive and recover from the devastation. The following are some of the excerpts which emanated from the interviews showing how different people known by participants were affected by the pandemic.

*"... I do have a neighbour back at home who is a hotel manager was not retrenched but their salary was seriously cut."* ([R12] - 25-year-old female from the Eastern Cape)

*"... I know a couple of people who were retrenched, and some their contracts were not renewed"* ([R11] - 30-year-old female from the Free State)

*"... a friend was retrenched due to Covid because the company was downsizing"* ([R10] - 23-year-old female from the Western Cape)

*"... some of my classmates got retrenched"* ([R2] - 23-year-old male from the Northern Cape)

Since the beginning of the lockdown (from March 2020 in South Africa) caused by Covid-19, many business owners were forced to make challenging choices in order to ensure their companies' continued existence. The strain placed on a company's financial resources tops the list of challenges that can be experienced by small and medium firms, as well as by large corporations. Several business owners considered retrenchment while others laid off staff since there was no travel taking place. These decisions left thousands of people without jobs especially those in the tourism sector, an industry that relies heavily on the movement of people and was considered to be one of the super-spreaders of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The researchers also wanted to understand how the situation in the tourism industry (caused by the Covid-19 pandemic) influenced the participant's learning towards a tourism qualification. The responses to this varied and was expressed emotionally with the students remaining 'hopeful' and 'optimistic' that this would come to pass. Those who took the 'optimistic stance' continued to support the tourism management qualification and taking advantage of the new learning modalities introduced to permit teaching and learning to continue. One participant (R1) who did not have any close associate working in the industry remarked, *"... the tourism industry has been heavily hit by the coronavirus, but despite this ... my goal is still towards finishing my qualification via online learning/virtual sessions"* an indication and belief of the resilience nature of the tourism industry (Prayag, 2020; Ntounis et al., 2022). One participant felt 'discouraged' about the situation, and in her narration, one could see the frustration and an element of 'regret' as illustrated in the following quotation:

*"... at first, it was very discouraging, especially at the beginning of the lockdown because the tourism industry was facing its worst stage because of the outbreak of Covid-19 ... it seemed like you're studying for something that doesn't exist anymore ... So, it feels like oh my goodness, why am I studying for this tourism course during this worst period. This did influence my learning and of course my attitude towards studying the tourism course. At this stage, I would ask myself, what is going to happen since people can't travel..."* ([R3] - 22-year-old female from the Western Cape)

Reflecting on the negative impact Covid-19 had on studying towards a tourism qualification, another student made the following remark:

*"... the current situation is that Covid-19 has impacted the tourism industry a lot due to travel restrictions. Hotels, restaurants, travel agents, airlines and tour operators are closed due to Covid-19. For us tourism students we are regretting studying the tourism course because of the current situation"* ([R7] - 26-year-old female from the Eastern Cape)

While others got discouraged especially that they did not know when travel was going to resume, some were concerned with their studies. Adapting to online learning modality was a new thing to both instructors and students and presented several challenges which included the process of transitioning from face-to-face to online learning which required a lot of time and resources. More time needed to be devoted to quickly adapt as well as resource challenges (devices and data) to effectively continue with the teaching and learning journey. One participant (R8) found it difficult to change from the traditional teaching and learning modality the newly way that resulted from Covid-19 effects. Others found the 'new normal' bringing in opportunities and

entrepreneurial skills in people, mainly with the online way of operating. The following excerpts captured some of the participants' feelings were regarding the Covid-19 situation:

While one respondent shared the view that:

*"... it was very hard to adapt to online learning, especially now that I am doing my fourth year, but I don't know most of my classmates. It's so sad what's going on in the industry and makes me think about my future in the tourism industry"* ([R8] - 23-year-old female from the Western Cape)

Another respondent echoed the same sentiment highlighting difficulties associated with virtual learning modality and the effects of the pandemic presented to the industry:

*"... It is a bit challenging as the industry is currently dead, and you are still studying for something you not so sure about getting a job. Also, to concentrate while attending sessions online is a bit of a challenge compared to when it is face-to-face."* ([R12] - 25-year-old female from the Eastern Cape)

Meanwhile, one respondent saw the whole episode presented by the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity for creativity and innovation and stated that:

*"... my main aim is not all about getting a job but learning how the industry is all about and the pandemic has also contributed in people to think outside the box as they are starting to open small businesses. So, towards learning it has been okay as I had to do things online"* ([R11] - 30-year-old female from the Free State)

The study revealed how the Covid-19 pandemic affected exit-level students and their perceptions about the tourism management qualification. From the study, it was apparent that some showed 'inability to cope' with the Covid-19 situation, resulting to a feeling of 'regret'. While there were also those who felt 'discouraged and hopeless', some displayed 'mixed views' about what was happening. There were those who remained 'hopeful and optimistic' and would encourage others to still consider enrolling towards a tourism qualification. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected not only the tourism industry but academic institutions particularly those offering tourism qualifications since the way these courses are viewed by students could have changed. It is important to note that when students learn, they usually learn from those closer to them, their social circles (Senior & Howard, 2014). As a result of this, the changes that happens in any environment have the power to influence perceptions regarding a phenomenon. In this light, when students witness how people have been affected by the impact of the pandemic, it influences how they would pursue the hard-hit industries and qualifications that prepares people for such industries. Consequently, the propensity to either recommend or not recommend would depend on how the phenomenon is perceived by the participant.

#### **4.1 Limitations**

The current qualitative research study relied on the experiences and perceptions of exit-level students pursuing a qualification in an area which has seen much devastation because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the findings in the present study are only applicable to the contexts where the study was undertaken, and the views and perceptions are those of the limited number of participants. Nevertheless, the findings of this study should not be generalised but serve to provide insights into the reality perceived by exit-level students as a result of the pandemic which affected the tourism and hospitality industry. It is thus advisable to expand on this study in different contexts and use different research methods which could improve understanding of the phenomenon.

### **5. Conclusion and Implications**

The Covid-19 pandemic non-selectively affected several industries in many ways and the institutions of higher learning were also not spared. With the serious ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic noted in the tourism industry, its effects also spread to the way students perceive the benefits of pursuing a qualification in tourism management. As noted from the SLT and the study results, people acquire knowledge from their social circles and the same goes on for university students who study to secure job opportunities or run a business after their studies. Consequently, the events that take place in the industry environment have a direct influence on the way students view certain qualifications especially if the qualification sits in the industry like tourism which is susceptible to the external factors. Therefore, if the industry is more prone to external forces such as the Covid-19 pandemic, it negatively influences the propensity to recommend the qualification to anyone hence, affecting the sustainability of the course especially in developing countries where the effects of the pandemic were severe.

Despite the catastrophic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the higher education sector, it is also noted that an opportunity to explore online learning as a teaching and learning modality emerged. The virtual teaching and learning modality have been embraced post the pandemic by institutes of higher learning. Higher education institutions continue to address the challenges related to this learning modality through providing students with data and devices that enable the learning process to continue.

The results of this study also imply that, instead of teaching the students to become job seekers, focus should also be on equipping students with entrepreneurial skills that enable them to own and run their businesses. Therefore, this calls for the redesign and alignment of the tourism course curriculum to allow a better transition into industry and business. Moreover, as this study was only conducted from a qualitative viewpoint, a quantitative study of this nature could be undertaken, and the results be compared with the qualitative outcomes. This could provide a holistic understanding of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning. Lastly, as this study was only conducted in one department, a similar study could be undertaken in other academic departments to establish the extent of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' learning process post the pandemic.

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