Evaluating current Tourism Management education assessment at an institution of higher learning in Johannesburg

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Introduction

- When assessment does not reflect an understanding of learning as a multidimensional and integrated tool, it is ineffective and fails to allow us to improve the students learning experience.

- There should be constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) in which the theory connects the abstract idea of a learning outcome to what the lecturers actually do to assist students learning and what students learn in reality.

- Up to 40% of South African students drop-out of university in their first year.

- The complex nature of student attrition from education courses and modules, makes it clear that each higher education institution needs to determine the extent of its own attrition problem and to ascertain how it can be useful to students as they pursue their educational goals.

- Failing students, will further add to the estimated 25% unemployed category of citizens, which is a major predicament in South Africa.

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- Ecotourism is the fastest growing segment of the travel industry – growing worldwide by 30% each year.

- According to forecasts of the World Trade Organization (WTO), southern Africa could be looking at over 300% growth in tourist arrivals by 2020.

- South Africa has one of the fastest growing tourism markets in the world and it is now a significant sector contributor to the country's GDP, comparable with the resources sector for the first time in South African history.

- In 2004–5, South Africa attracted a total of 6.7 million visitors. According to Myburgh & Saayman (2002), it is virtually impracticable to separate a tourism experience in South Africa from a nature experience.

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Rationale for the qualification

- Since ecotourism is a form of tourism which minimizes negative impacts, contributes to conservation, directs economic benefits to local people and further provides opportunities for local people to enjoy natural areas (Fennel, 2008), it is important that it be managed effectively.

- It should be managed in accordance with industry best practice so as to become financially viable while simultaneously also attaining environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable ecotourism outcomes (Weaver, 2008).

- Students who achieves this qualification will be empowered to integrate ecotourism management and leadership knowledge together with that of customer service which includes caring for all stakeholders.

- The qualification in Ecotourism Management thus advances South African priorities with regard to sustainability, conservation and community development priorities.

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Proposed qualification

- Providers of ecotourism management education in South Africa, which are predominantly universities of technology, offer Diplomas in Ecotourism Management which reside under the field of Services and the sub-field of Hospitality, Tourism, Travel, Gaming and Leisure.

- These diplomas are at level 6 in the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and have 370 credits.

- Ecotourism has been proposed as a type of sustainable tourism that is expected to significantly boost conservation and development in especially the rural communities of South Africa and the SADC region in general.

- This qualification has been internationally benchmarked.

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Learning assumed to be in place and access to the proposed qualification

- A minimum of 26 points is required from the National Senior Certificate. There are a number of compulsory and recommended subjects:

- Compulsory subjects:
- English, 4 points
- Biology or Natural Science, 4 points
- Mathematics, 3 points or Mathematics Literacy, 4 points
- Life Orientation, 3 points
- Any other 3 subjects totalling 12 points
- Total 27: with Maths Literacy
- Total 26: with Mathematics

- Recommended subjects: Tourism, Geography, History, Computer Studies, Accountancy
- There is also a possibility of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) status.

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Expected outcomes of the qualification

The students are required to develop a number of competencies including the ability to:

- select and use a range of procedures and techniques to solve routine problems and identifying and solve problems where responses to problems show that critical and creative thinking has been used to make responsible decisions.

- work within a system within a wider context and in relation to society and be able to work effectively with others as a member of a team, group, organisation or community.

- the capacity to take responsibility for one's learning within a structured learning environment and organising and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively.

- the skills to effectively gather information, to analyse and present such information after thorough evaluation

- to present and communicate information coherently and reliably using the basic conventions and formats of an academic/professional discourse. They must communicate effectively using visual, mathematical and/or language skills in oral and/or written presentations.

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- interpret and apply the operational symbols, procedures and techniques of adiscipline or field. Using science and technology effectively and critically; showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others.

- comprehensive knowledge of the main areas of one or more disciplines or fields and demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

- to develop a sound understanding of a discipline or field's key terms, rules, concepts, established principles and theories.

- evaluate personal learning and to identify personal strengths and weaknesses.

- the capacity to take personal responsibility for learning within a structured learning environment.

- reflect on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively.

- participate as responsible citizens in the life of local, national and global communities.

- sensitivity towards different cultures, assigned meanings and perceptions across a range of social contexts.

- developing entrepreneurial opportunities.

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Current student attrition rates

- Tourism education is one avenue of employment creation. The industry requires a trained workforce, and education institutions such as VUT can therefore not afford to have inordinately high attrition rates. An effective modality of assessment is associated with stronger academic outcomes, lower attrition rates and higher retention rates.

- Where students experience greater satisfaction with their educational endeavours by a more personalised and social constructivist approach to higher education in which assessment is meaningful, they tend to complete their courses and go on to graduate.

- The transition from secondary education to higher education calls for academic adjustment, and also includes dissimilar social demands (Eggens *et al.* 2008).

- The teaching strategies employed by tourism academics require investigation so as to ascertain if they should be revisited and answers arrived at, as to their impact on attrition rates.

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Purpose of the research

- To determine if the modality of assessment is a contributing factor to the high attrition rates of tourism students in general at the Vaal University of Technology.

The objectives were to:

- analyse and evaluate the current state of assessment of the existing tourism management course and how this impacts on students progress or lack of progress with their studies and ultimately attrition.

- determine and analyse the internal assessment factors contributing to the attrition rate of tourism students.

- To ascertain if self-evaluation and other techniques could be the panacea for high attrition rates

- draw conclusions and make recommendations in respect of assessment modalities

Limitation of the study

- The results cannot be generalised to other Universities and can only be applied to Campus X and VUT can learn from this experience.

Methodology

- An analytical survey method was used for this study, based on a literature review and a descriptive quantitative study.

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Literature review

- Research demonstrates a very negative relationship between student perceptions of poor quality teaching and attrition rates. Callan, (2005) has confirmed that the poor quality of teaching staff and lecturers that do not have relevant industry experience, are two primary reasons for student attrition from courses.

- Polesel *et al* (2004), in an Australian study of student attrition at TAFE campuses, has shown that students most frustrated with the quality of teaching they experience are most likely to dropout without completing their studies.

- Lecturers and, to a lesser extent, peers may also act as "cultural brokers" that affect student attrition (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008).

- How lecturers assess students is critical to the retention of students.

- Formative and summative tests which are generally standardized tests', provide important information about student learning, but they do not necessarily provide an entirely accurate picture of a student's capabilities.

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- The literature is clear that apart from the usual assessment techniques that are employed by lecturers, self-evaluation is a modality that can yield excellent results if applied systematically.

- Students judge the quality of their outputs, based on evidence and explicit criteria, the purpose of which is to achieve better in the future.

- Once students know how to assess their own progression in a course, and when they can do so against identified and challenging quality standards, they tend to demonstrate greater and improved outputs which motivate them to do even better.

- Self-evaluation on student performance is particularly convincing for especially complicated assignments.

- Encourage collaborative and cooperative learning and self evaluation.

- Students must be engaged early on in their academic year of study.

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Quantitative study

- A descriptive quantitative study was undertaken, utilizing a questionnaire for data collection. According to the OED (Oxford English Dictionary 1988), quantitative can be defined as determining the relative proportion of components, or measurable in quantity and study as to examine closely, in order to learn thoroughly or to arrange by thought.

Demarcation of the field of study

- For purposes of this study, the target population was restricted to Campus X in Johannesburg. It comprised 76 Tourism Management students, both male and female, from diverse cultural, language and educational backgrounds.

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Data collection method

- Structured self-administered questionnaires were disseminated to respondents in the study.

- The questionnaire incorporated structured questions, related to demographic data as well as to study information. The demographic aspects included age, gender, place of origin and current place of residence.

- Study information included first year of registration, source of finance for studies, coursework, academic input, language, interpersonal interaction and lecturer style. A number of open-ended questions were asked and closed-ended questions were answered by making use of a five-point Likert-scale ranging from "unimportant" to "very important", and from "no influence" to "major influence".

- These questions were primarily used to determine if students experienced difficulties with assessment, which skills were learned, modality of assessment used and suggestions for the provision of improving assessment modalities.

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Statistical analysis

- Once the collection of the data was completed it was captured by the researcher and then processed by a statistician and interpreted by the researcher.

- Descriptive statistics, namely a factor analysis and correlation analysis were performed to establish the core internal and external causes for the high attrition rate and to ascertain if there was indeed a relationship between this and assessment modalities employed by lecturing staff.

Research questions

- Which internal factors contribute to high attrition rates of tourism students?
- Is there a relationship between assessment modality, failure and attrition rates?
- What can be done to improve assessment lower attrition rates?

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Findings

- What the lecturers currently suppose about teaching modality and the constructivist learning theory, conflicted with one another, and in most cases conventional test modalities not aligned with outcomes based education began to rear their heads.

- How lecturer's perceived assessment greatly influenced learning by students.

- Lecturers assessed students regularly, but instead of stimulating greater student productivity, it has the opposite effect.

- When asking students to reflect on their poor performance, the main reason cited was poor and unqualified lecturing staff.

- 84% of the respondents disagreed with the statement "most academic staff in the tourism course take an active interest in my progress". Some 68% of the respondents disagreed with the statement "lecturers usually give helpful feedback on my assessment".

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Table 1. Understandability of Assessment Modality Requirements

Outcome	Student response	%
Students that found assessment techniques difficult to understand due to lecturer non or poor explanation	47 students	61,8%
Students that did not find assessment difficult to understand due to past experiences at high school or other	29 students	38,2%
Total	76 students	100%

- Table 1 shows that most of the respondents found assessment method to be a barrier to their studies. It was clear that some tests emphasized knowledge reproduction (77% of respondents).

- There was great tension between a constructivist approach to teaching and objectivist assessment practices.

- The lecturers only regarded formal tests as valid assessment procedures and included informal methods like observations of students working in groups.

- The dynamic and constantly changing role of the lecturer and the changing educational environment were not helpful in selecting appropriate assessment modalities.

- If we desire lecture rooms to be meaningful places where students achieve academically, student participation, equality, inclusiveness and social justice are critical aspects to consider (Hargreaves & Fullan). Students must share leadership and responsibility for learning but must in turn be assessed fairly and wisely.

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- In the current South African higher education scenario, traditional assessment practices are no longer sufficient.

- Lecturers at Campus X and elsewhere need to develop assessment literacy and their capacity to examine student data and understand it and also need to reassess their assessment modalities and engage with experts in assessment on which techniques could be more suitable for a given group of students.

- Poor assessment strategies which were ineffective, encouraged students to exert less effort, and very poor performance lead to high attrition.

- Self-evaluation was never considered as one possible avenue to improve assessment in general.

- Students often had to provide verbatim answers to questions posed failing which they were assessed as poor achievers.

- Students received very little feedback on assessments so that they were unable to identify their weaknesses and improve in future tests.

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Table 2. Significant issues reported affecting poor academic results Important issues

Important issues	Students in agreement	%
Learning skills are taught	21	27
Mentoring/tutoring on assessment issues and techniques are absent	56	74
I feel confident of completing the course	28	74
I am very concerned about assessments	39	51
I have poor self-confidence	13	17
I have enough time to study	69	91
Tests are too objective	45	59
Assessment should include more analytical questions and case studies	64	84
Lecturers expect answers verbatim from textbooks	57	75
We receive variety in assessment types	20	26
Lecturers have heavy workloads and don't have time to guide us appropriately	41	54
Campus X only wants our money	17	22

- Whilst work is done in classes, the efficiency of assessment techniques and lectures is certainly questionable. Very often assessment is viewed by lecturers as being distinct from the learning process.

- It is seen as something that is done to students at the end of a module/course/semester to ascertain what they know and what they don't know.

- Whilst designing, offering and assessing a module or course, it is critical that the lecturer know and be able, to effectively communicate to the students what that course or module is proposing to accomplish.

- What the student should be able to do upon completing the course or module, and what they will have to demonstrate in order to pass it are equally important.

- Where these issues are not clear, a higher dropout rate results as students fail and then opt to leave a course.

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Table 3. Autonomy of learning and assessment

Important issues	Students in agreement	%
Students feel they can take responsibility for learning within a supervised environment	13	17
Students feel they can evaluate their performance against given criteria	14	18
Students take the initiative to address any shortcomings they find	11	14
Students take decisions about and responsibility for their actions	21	27

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- The tourism lecturers at Campus X claim that it is not factual mastery at which their assessment is intended.

- In reality, their assessment modality is far from suitable and does not reflect the lecturers statements.

- Most of the Campus X tourism lectures are widely disliked and were felt to be inefficient --each assessment is a ''surprise package''.

- 85% suggested that the workload for especially tests, is too great, and while some put extra work in, the assessment is far from challenging.

- Where there are assessment methods in place requiring less complex analysis and synthesis, or where these demand far less in terms of student responses, these tend to diminish the quality of learning and impact negatively on attrition rates.

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Lecturer assessment preparation basic questions for consideration

- Is the assessment always aligned with the learning outcomes?
- Is the assessment associated with the teaching methods?
- Are my assessment modalities appropriate?
- Do I use varied methods of assessment?
- Is formative assessment used?
- Is summative assessment used?
- Is continuous evaluation used?
- Does the lecturer know what is being assessed?
- Has the lecturer considered cultural and language diversity issues in assessment?
- Does the lecturer provide students with a clear understanding of how assessments are marked (pass/fail/diagnostic feedback/grades etc)?
- Could the lecturer have opted for group or peer assessment?
- Do the assessments meet the individual student needs?
- Are the assessment criteria made available in rubrics?
- Have you considered self-evaluation as one strategy to use for assessment?
- Does the assessment assess student capacity to analyse and synthesise new information and concepts, or is it simply recalling information?
- Are assessments designed to assess relevant generic skills as well as subject specific knowledge and skills?
- Are assessments checked to ensure no inherent biases may disadvantage a any group of students?
- Do students have any choices in assessment tasks and weighting?

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Recommendations

- Assessment must be varied and challenging and the most important question is which modalities of assessment should be used.

- CASS is most effective when there are several distinct learning outcomes which are achieved at certain junctures during the module. The case for examinations is not conclusive. They may help reduce plagiarism, but only give the student one opportunity or sometimes two, to demonstrate their capabilities.

- Continuous assessment provides a far more reliable estimate of a student's true academic ability and also indirectly measure the student's capacity to manage time and handle stress (Brown, 2001).

- Self-evaluation which is a combination of the self-judgment and self-reflection components of an effective assessment model, can improve learning.

- Lecturers must improve their poor assessment techniques and teach students how to evaluate themselves effectively.

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- At Campus X, assessment is rather late in any given semester and as such little time is available for feedback.

- The use of the internet could be effective for on-line discussion so students can assist each other with projects and assignments..

- Lecturers need to from the outset providing clear marking criteria to students on assessment and should as a given make past assessments and model answers readily available to students.

- Students must be guided and supported in their studies and have needed resources for academic/study skills available, possibly online.

- The lecturing staff should all be sent on regular training in assessment modalities and assessment mentoring must be provided for inexperienced markers.

- Lecturers should adopt appropriate assessment modalities and self evaluation should be encouraged.

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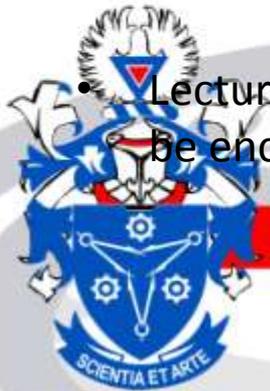
- Lecturers must strive to encourage students to improve their learning and guide them to enhance their performance. Only through effective assessment can the students' strengths and weaknesses be identified.

- The assessment method used must assess the stated learning outcomes and should not go beyond the expected learning outcomes.

- The methods used to assess learning must be innovative and challenging and not conform to an undesirable and narrow range.

- Some staff at Campus X have huge misconceptions about assessment and must taught develop the appropriate skills which will serve them and their students in good stead and make them confident in their skills as lecturers where they can employ a much greater variety of assessment techniques.

- Lecturers must thus make the benefits of assessment perceptible to students and create collaborative conditions for their professional learning.

- Quality assurance of the assessment process is an important process.

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Further research

- There are many hurdles inherent in education which impact negatively on student retention.

- Future research involving Campus X and VUT, could be to uncover the diverse ways in which lecturers could design lectures and assignments so as to bring to the fore greater personalisation, motivation, reflective learning, enjoyment and higher levels of student retention.

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Conclusions

- Constructivism makes it clear that learning is effective when students actively make meaning of what they are presented with by lecturers, in ways that build and confront their schemas about the world.

- The effective designing of assessments is thus a challenge for all academic staff since not all methods of assessment are equally accessible and indeed fair to each and every student.

- It is of primary concern that lecturers design learning outcomes and plan teaching and learning activities and especially assessments that will produce desired outcomes and encourage students to complete a course or module without feeling incompetent, which often results in high attrition.

- Assessments need to be fair indicators of achievement and must be reliable and valid. They should encourage critical thought, creativity and ultimately, the generation of new knowledge.

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Expected positive outcomes:

- Knowledge will be added to the current literature base of tourism education and assessment in higher education institutions in South Africa.

- Specific internal and external reasons for high attrition rates will be determined which can allow for the development of intervention strategies.

- A repeat of poor assessment modalities can be avoided

- Recommendations will be made regarding improvement strategies for assessment at Campus X as well as VUT.

- It is anticipated that the guidelines provided in this paper, will assist lecturers at both Campus X and VUT, to refine their approaches to assessment in practice.

- The guidelines and examples should however, only be seen as possible paradigms and should not be considered as prescriptive or final in any form.

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Thank you!

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