



# Reflections on student tourism research in South Africa

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## Abstract

In South Africa, the tourism system has seen considerable policy attention over the past twenty years. As a consequence, there has been a large body of scholarship tracing its development. Much of this work draws heavily on the contributions made in postgraduate dissertations and theses. This paper focusses on the production of South African postgraduate tourism research, and the analyses of a number of variables and themes within this particular literature. The first aim of this investigation was to unpack (among other variables) the number, flow, institutional affiliation, and themes of this research. The second aim was to furnish a reflection on the completed postgraduate research, highlighting a critique of postgraduate contributions to understanding the South African tourism system. It was found that the themes of investigation, research voices and range of variables (including institutional affiliation, race and disciplinary vantage points) have all changed considerably over time. A call is made for further in-depth content analyses of this body of scholarship.

**Keywords:** postgraduate, research, students, South Africa, tourism

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## Introduction

The year 2016 marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa*, a significant policy document that greatly impacted the development of tourism in the country (South Africa, 1996).<sup>1</sup> The explosive expansion of the South African tourism system since the 1990s was in large part a response to the significant policy prominence (the white paper being the starting point) the national government afforded tourism as a vehicle by which to achieve a range of post-apartheid developmental objectives (Visser & Rogerson, 2004). In response, extensive academic literature tracking the development and growth of tourism in South Africa has developed. Recently, a number of review papers have reflected on the contours of the South African tourism discourse (Hoogendoorn & C.M. Rogerson, 2015; C.M. Rogerson & Visser,

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is an abbreviated version of the research report, *The production of student tourism research in South Africa: Past, present and future* (Visser, 2016a), published in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Stellenbosch University.



2014; Visser, 2016b), along with an analysis of the production and consumption of tourism knowledge in the academic press (C.M. Rogerson & J.M. Rogerson, 2011).

The academic discourse, in many cases, draws heavily on research that was first presented as research degrees or was part of postgraduate research programmes. This paper is positioned at the intersection of four sets of issues or discourses and explains why this investigation has been undertaken. First, it is common practice for scholars to periodically reflect on student-generated research within a discipline or field of research interest (K. Wessels, 2008). In the field of tourism studies, this practice can be traced back to Pizaan and Chacho's (1982) contribution in *Annals of Tourism Research* and Jafari and Aaser's (1988) discussion in the same journal a few years later. In the main, these reflections are strongly focused on evaluating the quality and utility of doctoral research programmes, along with the value and the alignment of their conclusions to larger social science discourse (Han, Ng & Guo, 2015; Pearce, 2004; Dowling, Gorman-Murray, Power & Luzia, 2012). In South Africa, similar investigations have been conducted in a number of disciplines (A. Wessels, 2010; K. Wessels, 2008; Visser, 2004; Wolhuter, 2011; 2015) and for differing motives (Louw & Muller, 2014; Mouton, 2011).

Second, in South Africa there is a major policy imperative to expand research output in the form of masters' and doctoral degrees (Wolhuter, 2015). The current discourse, as Mouton (2011: 13) points out, is constructed around incentives to increase (particularly) doctoral degree production, its roots found in a series of policy documents introduced over the past decade and a half, but mainly framed by the Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa in 2001 (National Department of Education, 2001). Third, from an economic development policy perspective, there has been significant support from all levels of government to expand the national tourism system and utilise it as a vehicle for achieving a range of development objectives (South Africa, 1998; DEAT, 2000; 2002; 2003). Finally, in the light of a tourism system that has greatly expanded over the past two decades and the need to incentivise postgraduate research training, there has been a significant growth in tourism-focused dissertations and theses – reflection on which constitute the rationale behind this investigation.

The task of this investigation is to focus on the production of postgraduate tourism research and to analyse this contribution along a number of variables and themes. This objective is achieved through two sections of description and analysis. The first presents a discussion on and analysis of the number, flow, institutional affiliation, and themes of research, among other variables. The second section then provides a reflection on the completed postgraduate research, highlighting new avenues of exploration for future postgraduate research, but also for more generally academic engagements with the South African tourism system. First, however, the methodology employed in the investigation is presented.

### **Methodology and limitations**

The methodology employed in this study partly replicates aspects of Jafari and Asser (1988), Meyer-Arendt (2000), Visser (2004), A. Wessels (2010) and K. Wessels (2008). The online versions of the National Research Foundations' NEXUS database system and the South African National (ETD) Portal were consulted to compile as extensive a listing as possible of completed dissertations and theses since 1960. The subject key words of "tourism", "tourist", "travel", "traveller" and "ecotourism" were used in the data search. As was noted by Meyer-Arendt (2000), deciding whether tourism constitutes a primary focus of a dissertation or thesis is often difficult. In this investigation, for a study to be considered tourism research, the primary emphasis had to be on tourism. Consequently, studies dealing with titles such as "The role of hotels in dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the workplace", for example, were not included in the listing. On the other hand, a study title focused on the role of HIV/AIDS in the



development of the tourism-system would be included. Moreover, there was also the perennial definitional problem of separating “recreation” from “tourism”, for which a decision based on common usage of those terms had to be taken, therefore tourism was prioritised. In this respect, perhaps the best-known example of research excluded was the doctoral work of Vincent Taylor (1980).

There were many limitations to using NEXUS and the South African National (ETD) Portal as sole references for graduate-level tourism research. First, it was evident from the database that some recent theses and dissertations have not been entered into the indexing systems. Second, the indices were not necessarily complete, particularly in terms of work produced in the 1960s and 1970s, and those written in Afrikaans. Third, there was a possibility that some dissertations and theses could have been omitted, had no keywords been ascribed to them in the indices. On the other hand, if the authors did not choose to list one of the keywords, then perhaps tourism was not their primary research emphasis. Finally, only tourism-research produced at South African universities was included. Thus, if there are theses and dissertations focusing on the South African tourism system, but completed at universities outside of South Africa, they were not included. The reason for this measure was that the international listings were not comprehensive, and had a particular bias towards Anglo-American universities. In this respect, the important doctoral works of Francesco Ferrario (1977) and Scarlett Cornellison (2002), for example, were not included in this study. In the end, the point of this investigation is to discern general trends in the body of student research at South African universities.

For the 1971–2015 period, close to 700 dissertations and theses of varying formats are recorded in the following section. It is shown that nearly a sixth (108) of the total are doctoral theses and, as is to be expected, the vast majority (576) of master’s theses focused on tourism. It has to be noted that these “theses” titles cover a range of degree types. Up to a fifth of the master’s theses comprise some form of “mini-dissertation” or “research report”. Thus, a wide variety of degree types ranging MBAs and MPhils to the traditional MA and MCom are recorded in the dataset. These degrees are, as a consequence, not “equal” in scope, depth of analysis, or rigour. Owing to the extreme unevenness in the quality of these research “outputs”, the analysis in this investigation will be at a general level, as like degrees are not being compared with like. At the doctoral level, it is also important to point out that different types of degrees are at stake, ranging DTech degrees to DBAs to the more traditional PhD.

Finally, the most recent 2014 and 2015 contributions are largely ignored in the analysis as there is a considerable time lag between degrees being completed, conferred and finally registered on the relevant databases. To summarise: although no effort has been spared in trying to ensure that the list provided is as complete and correct as possible, there is a strong likelihood that there are some omissions and mistakes. To cite Andre Wessels (2010: 10) who embarked on a similar study concerning postgraduate Anglo-Boer War studies, it is not physically possible to consult all these theses (dissertations/mini-theses, etc.) personally.

### **General trends in graduate tourism research in South Africa**

This section aims to provide a broad analysis of students’ research on tourism by addressing a number of basic questions. The guiding objectives of this section are, first, to describe and analyse how many research dissertations, theses and research reports were produced and when. Thereafter, the division between doctoral and master’s degrees and the institutions where these research products were produced comes into view. This is followed by an analysis of the main geographical focus of these investigations and the general themes addressed.



## The temporal production of postgraduate tourism research

Echoing the development of tourism studies in the North American context (Gill, 2012; Meyer-Arendt, 2000), where the first PhD-theses on tourism were completed in the discipline of geography, it was within the ambit of economic geography and regional studies that student tourism research entered the South African discourse on academic tourism. The first tourism-focused graduate work was E.C.C. Muller's 1971 MA thesis (in Afrikaans): *Tourism versus land use: a geographical study of the lagoon region George-Knysna* (Toerisme versus grond gebruik: 'n geografiese studie van die strandmeer George-Knysna)<sup>2</sup>, completed at the Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg).<sup>3</sup> This was followed by the first doctorate with tourism as the main focus in the form of J.N. Steyn's *The Southern Cape tourism industry: geographical patterns and influences on regional development* (1972) (Die Suid-Kaapse toerisme bedryf: geografiese patrone en invloede op regionale ontwikkeling), also completed in Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch. The main objective of Steyn's pioneering study was to record the nature and scope of the tourism phenomenon in the Southern Cape and to evaluate the impact of these spatial patterns quantitatively and qualitatively. It was suggested that the study aimed to make it possible to identify development trends, which could, in turn, be used for the optimal harnessing of resources generally, as well as for achieving greater efficiency in the protection of leisure resources.

What was significant in Steyn's study, is that it was indicative of what tourism research in the South African discourse would mainly constitute over the following four decades. How many research students actually read this study subsequent to its appearance is not known. However, the description of the tourism resource base and its spatial patterns, its linkages to economic development (particularly employment creation), and its racial and class-differentiated focus (mainly involving white South Africans until the early 1990s) were features of many subsequent tourism studies. In addition, tourism research would, for the most part, be based in a positivist, empirical methodology, with few investigations drawing on political economy or postmodern frameworks and epistemological and related methodologies. Although the key aspects of tourism under investigation would change radically over time, this and many investigations that followed until the 1990s, would focus in the main on white South Africans and "their" tourism system. Whereas geographers produced the first tourism-research theses on the South African tourism system with more than one hundred masters and doctoral contributions to date (as will be discussed later), their contribution has proportionally declined rapidly.

Thereafter, a small number of research projects focused on tourism were completed, mainly within the disciplines of business administration and economics. Given that the rapid growth in tourist flows to South Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s was nearly halted, first by the oil crisis (1973), and thereafter by the Soweto uprising (1976), followed by PW Botha's various states of emergency (1984–1986), it is not surprising that the analysis of the tourism system was not at the forefront of the South African research agenda. The reformist government under the leadership of FW de Klerk and the end of white minority rule, however, led to a tourism boom in the first part of the 1990s, and a noticeable expansion of the tourism system.

It is in this context that the starting point of the past two decades of growth in graduate tourism-research in South Africa arose and matured. Indeed, around 90% of all graduate theses and

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<sup>2</sup> See Visser (2016a) Section 2 for thesis and dissertation references.

<sup>3</sup> The first "non-White" contribution was by C. Gilfellen (1992), entitled *The impact of tourism development on the socio-economic, cultural and morphological structures of historical mission stations in the Western Cape: Genadendal, Elim and Wupperthal* and completed at the University of the Western Cape. The second, *The strategic impact of crime on collaboration and competition in the hotel industry in Cape Town*, was authored by C. Mamelodi (1996) at the University of Cape Town.



dissertations focused on tourism in South Africa were completed after 1995, and as much as 50% in the past decade (see Table 1). That said, at the general level of South African higher education dissertation/thesis production rates, the total number of student tourism-research output does not even account for one year's thesis and dissertation output at some of South Africa's most research active universities. A first observation then is that student research focused on the South African tourism system is in relative terms negligible compared to postgraduate knowledge production.

**Table 1: Thesis and Dissertation Totals by Year and Degree Level**

Date	Doctoral		Masters		Total
	Designated	White	Designated	White	
1971	0	0	0	1	1
1972	0	0	0	1	1
1974	0	0	0	2	2
1976	0	0	0	1	1
1977	0	0	0	1	1
1980	0	0	0	2	2
1981	0	0	0	1	1
1982	0	0	0	1	1
1983	0	0	0	1	1
1984	0	0	0	2	2
1986	0	0	0	2	2
1987	0	0	0	1	1
1988	0	0	0	3	3
1989	0	0	0	1	1
1990	0	0	0	6	6
1991	0	0	0	3	3
1992	0	1	0	7	8
1993	0	0	0	7	7
1994	0	1	1	3	3
1995	0	3	0		
1996	0	0	6	12	18
1997	0	1	1	8	10
1998	0	0	6	13	19
1999	0	1	13	8	22
2000	0	1	7	10	18
2001	0	2	8	11	21
2002	2	4	8	9	23
2003	2	0	14	19	33
2004	5	6	10	21	42
2005	2	4	22	20	48
2006	1	4	17	14	36
2007	3	1	17	27	48
2008	5	7	15	13	40
2009	3	6	25	18	51
2010	4	4	26	19	53
2011	6	4	18	19	47
2012	2	3	12	20	37
2013	6	3	11	13	33
2014	3	3	7	10	23
2015	1	1	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>682</b>

Source: Author's survey

In terms of flow, it is clear (Table 1) that, following a period where there were on average around 15 projects completed annually during the late 1990s, this changed dramatically in the early 2000s. A number of issues were at stake. First, during the second half of the 1990s, the national government started to afford tourism significant policy prominence and the local



tourism system was experiencing considerable growth (Visser, 2016b). This institutional (both academic and policy) lacuna of the apartheid policy environment was finally addressed through the 1996 national *White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa* (1996) and the *Tourism in GEAR Strategy Document* (South Africa, 1998). Other influential policy contributions that followed framed much of tourism geography scholarship, including the former Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism's *Unblocking Delivery on Tourism Strategy by Government Departments* (2000), *Responsible Tourism* (DEAT, 2002), and *Responsible Tourism Handbook: A Guide to Good Practice for Tourism Operators* (DEAT, 2003). Drawing on the notion of responsible tourism, these documents outlined the key policy foundations for developing the national tourism industry. It was recognised that tourism is a key activity for national economic development and a crucial stimulus for achieving the developmental objectives of the South African government (Visser & C.M. Rogerson, 2004).

In addition, a number of postgraduate coursework master's courses were introduced at various universities. Tourism-related research was, for the most part, not completed within postgraduate degree programmes under the heading of tourism studies or management (although it is increasingly being done), but in business management, cultural and media, or development studies and geography, for example, in which students could (and did) select tourism-related research projects for the research component of their degrees. From 2004, there was a marked increase in the number of dissertations – most often MAs and MComms – but also a number of MBA mini-theses, along with a discernible increase in doctorates. The hosting of the Football World Cup in South Africa would appear to have bolstered interest in tourism-related research topics, if not so much the tournament itself.

Moreover, and perhaps a somewhat sinister interpretation, was the funding imperative for universities. Universities increasingly felt the funding crunch from a higher education system that was being “massified” at the undergraduate level (in the name of broadening access for previously excluded students) without any real additional resources (Mouton, 2012; Wolhuter, 2015). Postgraduate students, on the other hand, are generally fee-paying students who receive subsidy credits for universities from the Department of Higher Education, or are funded as part of government-sponsored skills development programmes in various state departments. This tactic at leveraging government funding was, however, soon identified by the Department of Higher Education. This resulted in changes to the national funding model for master's degrees (Mouton, 2012).

Universities only received a proportion of the subsidy income for a coursework master's and many of the recently introduced programmes in which tourism-research projects were completed subsequently began to be phased out. This had different impacts across higher education institutions. For example, nearly all geography departments halted master's programmes in the coursework format – among them tourism programmes. Among the few coursework programmes that have seemingly remained relatively unscathed by these institutional changes are, for example, programmes in development studies (in which a focus on tourism as a course elective and research report topic option would certainly make sense) and MBA degrees that are not seen in quite the same light as traditional master's degrees. All in all, proportionally, there was and remains a trend to revert to the completion of traditional full-length theses.

A recent format change, however, has been the introduction of the so-called article-based thesis or dissertation, although, on the whole, few candidates have taken this route. Some universities such as North West have, however, been particularly active in this regard. According to their records, around half of the doctoral degrees awarded in tourism and tourism management in the recent past were generated in this format.



## Institutional location of knowledge production

Although most South African universities have produced theses and dissertations on tourism, six universities dominated the production of graduate tourism-research during the first two decades or so of student tourism-research until 2002, and four since then (Table 2). Until 2002, Stellenbosch University produced the largest amount of graduate tourism research. More broadly, at that stage it was noticeable that a disproportionate number of students graduated from historically white Afrikaans universities (the Universities of Potchefstroom – NWU, Pretoria, Rand Afrikaans, as well as Stellenbosch), although other institutions, such as the University of Cape Town, have produced a steady stream of theses and dissertations on tourism since the 1970s.

**Table 2: Tourism-related Master’s and Doctoral Dissertations and Theses by University (1971–2014)**

Institution	Masters	Doctoral	Total 2002	Total since 1971
Cape Peninsula University of Technology	3	0	3	26
Central University of Technology	0	0	0	7
Durban University of Technology	0	0	0	7
Milpark	0	0	0	3
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	4	1	5	23
North West University	16	4	20	112
Rhodes University	1	0	1	9
Stellenbosch University	26	3	29	72
Tshwane University of Technology	0	0	0	7
University of Cape Town	16	0	16	48
University of Fort Hare	2	0	2	10
University of the Free State	4	1	5	17
University of Johannesburg	15	1	16	40
University of KwaZulu-Natal	13	1	15	77
University of Limpopo	0	0	0	7
University of South Africa	0	1	1	18
University of Pretoria	11	2	13	56
University of Venda	0	0	0	2
University of Zululand	14	2	16	71
University of the Western Cape	3	0	3	17
University of the Witwatersrand	15	0	15	54
Vaal University of Technology	0	0	0	1

Source: Author’s survey

Note: All amalgamated technicons and universities appear under their current university of technology name. (For example, Cape Town Technicon appears under Cape Peninsula University of Technology)

A perhaps polemical argument could be made that this can be attributed to the idea that tourism was seen as somewhat apolitical in nature and made such studies attractive to many white Afrikaans universities during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it was clear that many other research topics (particularly in the social sciences) might hold political implications, which either the candidates themselves, or their supervisors, felt ill-equipped or unwilling to analyse. Until recently, there was an absence of graduate tourism research at the historically black universities.

A noticeable exception was the University of Zululand, which established a Centre for Recreation and Tourism in the late 1990s. A number of reasons have been suggested in the past; the primary one is that these institutions were created as teaching, and not research intensive institutions. As a consequence, there were far fewer postgraduate students. Historically, too, as Bedingham’s (1999) thesis title, *Tourism is white people’s crap*, suggested. This argument was mainly made because the majority of the population historically could not move about freely in South Africa, nor generally had the financial means to do so.



Nevertheless, the key observation is that since then there has been significant growth in the body of tourism-focused research at South African universities. In terms of the recent past, there have been changes in where student tourism knowledge is produced. Stellenbosch, as have all South African universities, has been significantly overtaken by North West University (NWU) with this form of knowledge production. The bulk of NWU's tourism students are in some or other way connected to TREES (Tourism, Research in Economic Environment and Society) and the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences more broadly. It also underlines the fact that the relative position of research output is often closely related to particular personalities and their strategic research trajectories – in this case Andrea and Melville Saayman, as well as Elmarie Slabbert. Elsewhere, Christian Rogerson's impact was seen at the University of the Witwatersrand (until he left) and is currently reflected at the University of Johannesburg. A further trend is that, with the exception of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (again connected to an individual in the person of Kamilla Swart), the various universities of technology have not made any significant contributions to the tourism discourse. Then again, many of these institutions are more focused on hospitality fields and are generally not research intensive in terms of their tourism programmes.

### **Disciplinary positions of knowledge producers**

Both the databases provide indices that categorise theses and dissertation according to so-called subject areas (Table 3).<sup>4</sup> It has to be highlighted that disciplines are presently spanning Accountancy to Zoology. To ease the analysis, "like disciplines" were grouped together into 26 broader categories, of which only the top ten of the past decade are analysed here (Table 4). The earlier study dealing with student research (Visser, 2004) showed that Economics, Business Administration, as well as Geography and Environmental Management were the key disciplinary vantage points from which students approached researching the South African tourism system. Urban and Regional Planning was in a distant third place. At that stage, Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism departments were seldom independent departments, or research or teaching units at universities, and did not register. However, this has changed notably over the past decade or so.

The earlier investigation suggested that a noteworthy trend was the entry of departments focused on recreation and tourism and their increased inclusion in this subject categorisation. The past decade has seen these entities grow considerably. Currently, the vast bulk of research is produced in departments dedicated to recreation and tourism, often within Schools of Hospitality, or Tourism Management sections within Management/Business Management departments. What is also noticeable, is that output numbers of Geography and Environmental studies have seen considerable decline relative to that of the Management and Business Administration, and Economics cluster.

As a whole, the actual number of theses and dissertations produced in Geography and Environmental Studies contexts has not changed significantly over the past two decades, but recently seems to be trending downwards from its peak in the early 2000s. It is also revealing that, despite the very significant planning challenges and opportunities, the tourism system holds for any settlement type. Urban and Regional planning is therefore almost absent from the South African tourism studies' discourse. Given the developmental potential of tourism, it is perplexing to see the very low rate of knowledge production from that vantage point. However, the trend is once again intimately linked to these departments' recent and current staffing profiles.

It was noted in Visser (2004) that an increasing number of titles, that at first sight appeared to be profoundly "geographical", were categorised under the subject heading "recreation and

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<sup>4</sup> The years prior to 2003 are discussed in Visser (2004).





tourism”. It was suggested at the time that this trend would alter the disciplinary proportional contributions in future, and so it has. It was noted then (and has turned out to be the case) that a range of multi-disciplinary postgraduate courses and programmes moved the institutional location of the production of student tourism knowledge outside of geography departments and into dedicated academic units in which tourism is the central focus and not just a component of a discipline, addressing discursive turns within particular disciplines.

**Table 3: Dissertation and Theses on Tourism by General Disciplinary Category (2003–2015)**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
<b>African Studies</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
<b>Agriculture</b>	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	5
<b>Anthropology</b>	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Architecture</b>	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Botany</b>	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Business Administration/ Management &amp; Economics</b>	8	7	11	7	13	11	9	12	9	10	4	2	0	103
<b>Communication Studies</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	1	2	1	0	8
<b>Development Studies &amp; Public Administration</b>	4	1	4	4	4	4	1	4	1	1	2	1	0	31
<b>Education</b>	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	3	1	1	0	0	9
<b>Engineering</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Food Sciences</b>	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Geography &amp; Environmental Studies/Science</b>	12	15	5	8	8	5	10	6	9	4	5	5	1	93
<b>History</b>	0	1	2	1	1	1	0	2	0	2	1	3	0	14
<b>Hospitality, Recreation &amp; Tourism Management</b>	6	11	12	9	15	15	24	23	20	17	13	8	2	174
<b>Human Movement Science</b>	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
<b>Information Systems</b>	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
<b>Languages</b>	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
<b>Law</b>	0	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	8
<b>Performing Arts</b>	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Philosophy</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Political Studies</b>	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Psychology</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
<b>Sociology &amp; Social Anthropology</b>	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	3	0	0	9
<b>Town &amp; Regional Planning</b>	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
<b>Unknown</b>	0	4	1	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
<b>Total</b>	35	42	48	36	48	40	51	53	47	37	33	23	3	496

Source: Author's survey



**Table 4: Dissertation and Theses on Tourism by General Disciplinary Category (2003–2015)**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
<b>Business Administration/ Management &amp; Economics</b>	8	7	11	7	13	11	9	12	9	10	4	2	0	103
<b>Communication Studies</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	1	2	1	0	8
<b>Development Studies &amp; Public Administration</b>	4	1	4	4	4	4	1	4	1	1	2	1	0	31
<b>Education</b>	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	3	1	1	0	0	9
<b>Geography &amp; Environmental Studies/Science</b>	12	15	5	8	8	5	10	6	9	4	5	5	1	93
<b>History</b>	0	1	2	1	1	1	0	2	0	2	1	3	0	14
<b>Hospitality, Recreation &amp; Tourism Management</b>	6	11	12	9	15	15	24	23	20	17	13	8	2	174
<b>Information Systems</b>	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
<b>Law</b>	0	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	8
<b>Sociology &amp; Social Anthropology</b>	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	3	0	0	9
<b>Total</b>	35	42	48	36	48	40	51	53	47	37	33	23	3	454

Source: Author's survey

### Themes of postgraduate tourism research

In terms of the thesis and dissertation themes chosen by South African graduates, it is useful to momentarily reflect on international research and scholarly treatment of tourism over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, early studies featured mostly the economic prospects of tourism and accentuated its benefits (Gill, 2012). Second, this unilateral economic view then led to a wave of studies that focused on the socio-cultural aspects of tourism and brought the benefits of tourism under scrutiny (Pearce, 2004; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Third, when both the positive and negative outcomes of tourism had been formulated, research attention was drawn to those alternative forms of tourism development that were potentially sustainable, with minimal unwanted consequences. Finally, these research orientations together led to systematic research, and towards the formation of a body of knowledge on tourism (Jafari & Aaser, 1988). In many respects, the shifting foci of South African students' research echoes this chronology.

Tables 5, 6, 7 and Figure 2 provide a summary of the main themes and their spatial focus. In the 2004 study, it was shown that keenly pursued themes of investigation were related to tourism-marketing strategies for development, which often meant economic development. Studies focused on issues such as strategies to attract particular market niches, for example Chinese, Dutch (Uys, 2004) or German tourists (Poprowa, 1998), and over time moved on to how tourist niches see South Africa as a tourist destination and what products they truly want (Yu, 2004), to an eventual focus on the impact of those tourists on the destination region (Liu, 2008). Since the early 2000s, an area of interest that has seen dramatic growth in research interest was tourism facility or resource descriptions with these studies ranging the accommodation sector, spanning small, black-owned bed-and-breakfast establishments (Nxumalo, 2003), second homes (Hoogendoorn, 2010), and time-shares (Pandy, 2013), to the entire South African hotel sector (J.M. Rogerson, 2012). These investigations as a whole were



(and largely still remain) located within the theoretical and discursive concerns of economic geography, business administration and management. This is not surprising, seeing as these disciplines have accounted in the past, and still do so in the present, for more than a third of all graduate tourism research. This is a long-running trend with a steady stream of research completed in these fields since the 1990s. A further theme of investigation that has increased more rapidly than any other is the tracking of the actual development impacts of tourism enterprises through, for example, local economic development (for example, Stoddard, 2008), an outpouring of interest in SMME expansion or challenges they face since the mid-2000s (for example, Vallahb, 2014), enabled through the tourism system and its expansion or decline. As a function of a maturing tourism industry, an increasing number of investigations have focused the management of aspects of the South African tourism system at a number of scales of analysis, ranging intra- to inter-enterprise management issues (e.g. Dube, 2013).

**Table 5: Broad themes of dissertations and theses (all records since 1971)**

Broad themes of dissertations and theses	Total
Challenges / threats to tourism	27
Community participation / perception and tourism development	52
Development impacts of tourism (including LED and SMME development)	105
Information systems	10
Management of the tourism system	90
Nature-based tourism and development	14
Tourism and policy / legislation / law	47
Tourism education	34
Tourism facility / resource description and development	162
Tourism marketing strategies for development	64
Tourism transportation	9
Tourism, culture, history development	16
Tourism, gender, and development	3
Tourists as consumers	49
Total	682

Source: Author's survey

The 2004 study noted that “it is a matter of concern that only ten studies have been completed in which the needs and perceptions of tourists themselves form the main thrust of the research enquiry” (Visser, 2004: 61). Over the past decade or so, this concern has been addressed through a range of investigations, focusing mainly on domestic tourists. In addition, it has been argued for some time that tourism education and skills development is fundamental to the successful expansion and development of the local tourism system. This field of tourism research has still not received that much investigatory interest. Over a span of two decades, just more than 30 studies broadly focused on tourism education have appeared. Prior to 2000, another key observation was that theses and dissertations focused on nature-based tourism as a developmental tool, but this has not seen much interest in the recent past. As the South African tourism system has matured away from nature-based tourism to urban-based tourism products and services (see Rogerson and Visser, 2014), the former interest of the late 1990s has started to decline. It is also interesting to note that “sustainability” has for the most part disappeared from thesis titles (see related Hunt, Gao & Xue, 2014).

One broad theme of analysis that has received relatively little attention are issues that challenge or threaten the establishment and development of tourism enterprises or the tourism system. One of the challenges or threats strongly felt by the tourism sector in South Africa recently was the implementation of new border control legislation. Over the past decade, there has been a relatively small vein of research into tourism-linked legislation and laws. However, in recent years it would appear that this type of research is on the wane, probably owing to the fact that no radically new national or provincial policy frameworks have been introduced. A theme that could have been included in tourism facility and resource descriptions is tourist

transportation. Given that the tourism system is fundamentally premised on the mobility of people, it is perplexing to record that essentially no one within the tourism-focused research fields has considered the various modes of tourist transportations, the opportunities and challenges, and how they relate to different tourism products, services, and locational contexts.

### *Spatial locations of investigations*

Table 7 provides some insight into the spatial locations in which these investigations took place and pose a few surprises. Essentially, those provinces with the largest tourism resource base are the most commented upon by student researchers. The one anomaly is that of Gauteng, which has a vastly larger tourist offering than the Eastern Cape, yet still had fewer investigations dedicated to the analysis of its tourism system. Then again, it is one of the provinces that both holds extraordinary tourism development potential and is in desperate need for its potential development outcomes. In terms of dissertations and theses focused on places outside South Africa, the general reason for their production was that these students are usually resident elsewhere but were completing degrees at South African universities.

**Table 6: Dissertation and Thesis Themes (2003–2014)**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Challenges / threats to tourism	3	3	2	2	3	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	20
Community participation / perception and tourism development	3	1	3	4	3	3	5	8	2	0	2	0	0	34
Development impacts of tourism (including LED and SMME development)	8	7	14	5	3	4	5	10	8	5	2	7	0	78
Information systems	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	7
Management of the tourism system	1	6	8	6	14	8	8	4	9	4	9	3	1	61
Nature-based tourism and development	2	1	0	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Tourism and policy / legislation / law	7	3	5	1	7	4	5	0	1	4	0	2	0	39
Tourism education	2	6	0	0	0	2	4	2	4	0	2	1	0	23
Tourism facility / resource description and development	5	9	10	10	11	7	3	16	15	12	11	3	1	113
Tourism marketing strategies for development	1	3	2	3	1	4	8	0	4	3	2	1	0	32
Tourism transportation	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	4



<b>Tourism, culture, history development</b>	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	1	1	3	0	5	0	<b>14</b>
<b>Tourism, gender and development</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Tourists as consumers</b>	2	0	2	1	6	5	3	7	3	6	4	0	0	<b>39</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>494</b>

Source: Author's survey

**Table 7: Main Spatial Focus of Dissertation or Thesis**

Location	Number
<b>South Africa</b>	
Country as a whole / no specific region	175
Various combinations of provinces	19
Eastern Cape	36
Free State	17
Gauteng	32
KwaZulu-Natal	146
Limpopo	32
Mpumalanga	18
North West	23
Northern Cape	6
Western Cape	109
<b>International</b>	
Antarctica	2
Belgium	1
Botswana	7
China	2
Congo	1
Ecuador	1
Eritrea	3
Finland	1
Germany	1
Kenya	2
Lesotho	12
Madagascar	1
Malawi	2
Mozambique	8
Namibia	6
Philippines	1
Rwanda	3
Seychelles	1
South and East Africa	1
Swaziland	2
Taiwan	1
Tanzania	3
Thailand	1
Uganda	2
West Africa	1
Zambia	3
Zimbabwe	2

Source: Author's survey

Questions posed in the 2004 investigation were which themes are researched within the student tourism research discourse, but also by whom. Tourism research among graduates was a “whites-only” affair until the early 1990s. However, this has changed markedly in the past two decades, with the initial take-off of engagement in tourism studies by historically disadvantaged cohorts from 1996. It was significant that by 2002, roughly half of all theses and dissertation were produced by students who fell within the historically disadvantaged categories. This pattern has remained roughly the same. However, given that black participation in higher education has expanded significantly since 2002, it means



proportionally fewer persons from the designated groups are in fact conducting research on tourism-focused topics.

**Table 8: Changes in Racial Composition of Student Researchers**

Study focus	Black	White	Total
Challenges / threats to tourism	17	10	27
Community participation / perception and tourism development	37	15	52
Development impacts of tourism (including LED and SMME development)	41	64	105
Information systems	3	7	10
Management of the tourism system	35	55	90
Nature-based tourism and development	10	4	14
Tourism and policy / legislation / law	23	24	47
Tourism education	12	22	34
Tourism facility / resource description and development	70	91	161
Tourism marketing strategies for development	17	47	64
Tourism transportation	4	5	9
Tourism, culture, history development	6	10	16
Tourism, gender, and development	3	0	3
Tourists as consumers	11	38	49
Total	289	392	681

Source: Author's survey

### Some critical reflections and new possibilities going forward

As reflected in the previous section, a very broad range of tourism products, tourist types, policy needs and implications set in various locations and community contexts have been addressed in South African students' research on tourism. The investigation did not go into detail concerning the content of each research output and no attempt was made to compare and contrast their content. The various research reporting formats meant that such an endeavour could not sensibly be performed. Some general remarks can, however, be made of the research undertaken. Research themes have already been discussed so it will not be repeated here, and suggested themes going forward are provided later.<sup>5</sup> Four broad critical remarks are made.

A first observation relates to the epistemology of South African student tourism research. What qualifies as tourism knowledge has been relatively similar in orientation. Much of the reported researches, be they mini-theses, full-length dissertations or doctoral theses, are empirical and fall within the positivist traditions. The majority of the work entails some sort of structured and/or semi-structured questionnaire survey, which is then statistically analysed, themed, and fed back to the disciplinary core from which the project was developed in the first place. Very little conceptual work really challenges current formats of knowledge beyond the descriptive or engagements with policy objectives, most often related to some form of economic development.

This is, however, not always the case and there are certainly instances when methodologies associated with postmodernism and the cultural turn in the social sciences (such as participant observation, focus groups, text analysis, etc.) were registered. In many cases, quantification has often become very formulaic. The work on festival tourism stands out in particular. We continue to see repetitions of investigations that contribute relatively little conceptual knowledge. Some research students habitually change the location of the investigation, drawing on the same literature and the same statistical methods and models with the same

<sup>5</sup> It is hoped that the reader will appreciate that some of these remarks need to be kept vague, as, should direct reference be made to particular dissertations or theses, it could embarrass and offend institutions, candidates, supervisors and examiners.



findings over and over again, which deliver diminutive amounts of new knowledge. These very positivist approaches to science also restrict the types of questions that can be asked. The result is that many of these investigations speak past core disciplines' contemporary central concerns.

South African tourism geography as a whole has been very productive in investigating pro-poor tourism ideas and their relevance and impacts on host communities, and much has been seen in the development of a large body of work dealing with local economic development and small, medium, and micro-enterprise development (Visser, 2016). But these tourism studies do not critically speak back to the more traditional sub-disciplines in which the investigators are institutionally located. For example, in what way do South African urban planners understand tourism as potentially fundamental to the changing urban economies of South Africa? And do they understand its meaning to various types of constituencies? Furthermore, how does their understanding impact on the adaptation of planning theory?

The second concern is the poor flow of postgraduate research findings into the mainstream corpus of published academic work. As highlighted in Wolhuter (2015), this is not unique to South African studies. This issue might also be linked to the former point that the methods of some of these investigations are plainly outdated and do not always provide in-depth understanding of the topics they engage. At master's level, there is not always the expectation that the research results should be published. Often the ability to publish findings gathered at this level of research competence requires a talented and experienced supervisor. These types of skills are distributed highly unevenly at South African higher education institutions. It is clear that some universities are quite successful in reworking research results to published formats – nearly always owing to very able supervisors. However, the majority of this level of research does not make it to the academic press – see Wolhuter (2015) on an extensive discussion of this issue.

At doctoral level, expectations are different and parts of the thesis should be published in peer-reviewed journals. Some universities are exceptionally successful in translating doctoral research into published research articles. In some instances, this reflects the fact that these universities have chosen the article-based PhD format, while others have simply published results as they progressed with their research. However, in some cases it would appear that no or very few publications result from these investigations. This poses questions at a number of levels, the most worrying being the quality and impact of the doctoral research – again, see Wolhuter (2015).

Third, related to these concerns, is the limited availability of completed summative collections in the formal academic press of student research. For example, the majority of master's and doctoral work has focused on KwaZulu-Natal. It has to be acknowledged that a very sizeable proportion of the completed student research is in the form of mini-theses as a component of coursework degrees. However, given the sheer bulk of information at hand, one would think at least some of the tourism scholars would synthesise the findings of these studies. Similarly, given that at institutions such as North West, particular themes (such as festival tourism of nearly every conceivable type) has been published, one might also expect full-length book treatment of such a theme. This goes for a number of other themes such as earlier work on community perceptions and impacts of tourism. Why is so little done to synthesise the existing body of knowledge? Only a handful of books appear to have attempted to include thesis and dissertation results as part of larger, edited collections around specific themes (for rare exceptions, see Rogerson & Visser, 2004; 2007; Tomaselli, 2012) in which (in part) the results of research students' contributions were disseminated.

Whereas it was shown that very few doctoral degrees had focused on tourism by 2002, this is certainly not the case anymore. The spatial scope of completed research has widened but the general argument made then still stands: certain provinces, and even places within a province,



have received substantial research attention whilst others have not. The bulk of research is focused on KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, which is hardly surprising given that those provinces are key destination areas in South Africa. However, there remains a dearth of research interest in Gauteng, the base to a range of different tourism and tourist types.

Finally, the need for this particular study highlights the fact that South African students' research on tourism is poorly captured on central databases. Some of the investigations in the current body of student research is very closely related. Should there have been a central repository of at least what investigations have already undertaken, replication could be avoided or greater opportunity created for comparative investigations. It would appear, at least to me, that these types of investigations should in some way be more prominent.

## Conclusion

This investigation provided a brief analysis of existing student research in the South African tourism system. Various lines of enquiry were highlighted and some challenges and shortcomings in this body of scholarship were reviewed. Looking ahead, this investigation gestures towards a larger and more in-depth review of postgraduate scholarship focused on tourism in South Africa and research focused on the country but conducted inland. In this investigation, inspiration was drawn from similar studies reflecting on student tourism scholarship. The analytic lens should now turn to a more thorough understanding of doctoral contributions in particular, as well as to the disciplinary shifts in the South African vantage point on tourism. Both the way(s) in which these contributions speak to understanding the South African tourism system, and how these investigations contribute to the epistemological and ontological foundations of the various disciplines in which these scholarly works are embedded, should be questioned.

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