

## Research Knowledge and Its Application among Tourism Graduate Students: An Assessment of Critical Issues

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The present paper examines research knowledge and its application among undergraduate and postgraduate tourism students. Key issues shaping the discussion include; importance of research knowledge for the tourism profession, students' attitudes towards learning and applying research skill, factors influencing student's ability to learn and apply research skills and the areas of research process considered as problematic by the students. The research design was exploratory in nature. A mixed research approach was adopted where questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were administered on undergraduate and postgraduate students, lecturers and other tourism education stakeholders in Kenya and Mexico. It is a common agreement among tourism scholars that research knowledge forms a critical part of tourism training and education. Findings further indicate that tourism students have negative attitudes towards research and generally consider it a difficult task; this explains why some are reluctant to further their education either after the first or second degrees; they dread the entire process of undertaking research and successfully defending a thesis. Additionally, students demonstrated limited knowledge of research skills and techniques. Educational institutions offering tourism programs are urged to put greater emphasis on research methods and academic writing in the design and execution of their academic programs.

*Key Words:* research knowledge; tourism; graduate students; educational institutions

### Introduction


The importance of teaching research methods and processes to undergraduate and postgraduate students has been a major area of interest to many scholars (see for example Jafari and Ritchie, 1981; Tribe, 2002; Panelli et al., 2005 and Xiao, 2006; Thomas, 2012). It is crucial to understand learning as an independent concept before relating it to research; Sheldon et al. (2008) consider learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills of a particular subject or field brought about by instruction and practice. According to them, the process of learning is influenced by a number of factors, for example the method of delivery, the knowledge of the subject by the teacher, and the kind of materials used to aid in the learning process, the learning atmosphere and the perception and attitude of the learner towards the subject.

In considering the relevance of research knowledge among tourism students, the following questions have often emerged: Is it important for tourism/events undergraduate students to learn about research methodolog(ies), philosoph(ies), ontolog(ies), epistemolog(ies), axiolog(ies)...? if yes why and to what extent? Is it appropriate for non-research active academics to teach research methods? What about if they were active at some point in their

career? Other authors (Fredman, 1997; Xiao, 2006; Majid and Wey, 2011) have equally raised the following issues: First, many tourism and events programs are now part of business degrees; in these, students are already taking compulsory research statistics subjects; are these adequate? Is there a potential problem of duplication if similar subjects are run with a tourism focus? Secondly, a business degree with tourism/events major might typically have eight subjects; this raises the question of which are the eight priority subjects and is research methods one of them? Thirdly, it is continually surprising how research is equated with quantitative methods. Often, many scholars in industry have held that "research = statistics". Sometimes students would wish to carry out purely qualitative research but often they cannot convince their supervisors that this is adequate research. It is not surprising that in many business schools,

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methods subjects focus almost entirely on statistics and taught by people who do not see the value qualitative methods. Accordingly, Healey et al. (2010) question whether undergraduate subjects give equal weight to quantitative and qualitative methods?

The undertaking of a research a project and successful thesis defense is a compulsory requirement in many graduate and postgraduate programs; prior to the aforementioned, students have to take course units in research process after which they are expected to practically engage in the research process and report their research findings. However, authors like Hren et al. (2004); Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009) have found that students generally have negative attitudes towards the acquisition and application of research knowledge; this prompted us to find out why this is the case. The mushrooming of many research bureaus aimed at “weak research students” and their thriving business is an indication in our view that this is a serious academic issue that requires immediate attention. In the said research bureaus, a myriad of services are offered; writing of proposals, literature review, data collection services, data analysis, preparation of questionnaires and report writing. From our observation, these “consultancy organizations” do not just offer support in these areas but they do the actual research work for the students at an agreed fee. This practice is worrying and wrong, since students are expected to do their own work or seek assistance from their supervisors rather than having someone do their work. From experience, some students go for oral defenses without a thorough understanding of what their research document contains; this may partly suggest that they do not own the work, although other factors like fear may be at play.

Part of training at higher levels of education, involves training and equipping students with knowledge on the research process and report writing; as mentioned earlier, this is a core course in many programs. However, if these courses are adequately taught, why would students still want to engage bureaus to carry out research on their behalf? The problem with this malpractice in our view is that it lowers the status and credibility of the diplomas and degree’s awarded in our institutions and the students end up not being able to contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge; additionally, any policies based on these reports could be misleading. This problem is not, however unique to a particular country- it is a worldwide challenge. In a conference on Industry and Higher education, held in Nairobi, Kenya on 27th October 2010, the key note speaker, vice chancellor of Makerere University alluded to the same problem in Uganda when he observed that some students are engaging the services of their colleagues, to carry out research and write

their academic reports. In a paper presented during the Moi University annual international conference, one presenter mentioned the problems of plagiarism by students; he noted the cases where students are not able to write on their own and copy other scholars work without acknowledgement.

In recognition of the above issues, the present paper examines research knowledge and its application among undergraduate and postgraduate tourism students. Key issues shaping the discussion include; importance of research knowledge for the tourism profession, students’ attitudes towards learning and applying research skill, factors influencing student’s ability to learn and apply research skills and the areas of research process considered as problematic by the students. The paper is organized into five sections, the introduction which sets up the background of the study and its research aims; the review of related literature and studies on research knowledge and teaching of research methods among graduate students; the methodology of the current study which includes the research design and data gathering methods and analysis; and the results and discussion of the findings as well as the conclusions and recommendations derived from the present study.

## **Literature Review**

Learning about and conducting research is an area considered as problematic by many students (Majid and Wey, 2011); the authors note that students especially at the undergraduate university level typically tend to view research-related courses with negative attitudes and feelings. The negative attitudes have been documented in numerous studies (see Hren et al., 2004; Zehrer and Mossenlechner, 2009). One of the main problems of these negative attitudes is that they have been found to serve as obstacles to learning (Healey et al., 2010); consequently, the authors think that research should be taught in a way that is non-threatening, interesting and exciting. On the other hand, there are students who love learning about and doing research; the latter are often perceived as more intelligent than most students (Sheldon et al., 2008); generally, there is a premium placed on the competence and mastery of research skills.

The present discussion revolves around research knowledge as an important component of tourism education. Research is not always a respected concept among tourism practitioners, managers and policy makers (Greenhow et al., 2009). Too often it is seen as an academic activity conducted by others – to the profession, not with the profession. Xiao (2006) believes that research knowledge requires a greater emphasis in tourism training and education especially

at graduate and postgraduate levels because tourism professionals are always learning, finding out things, analyzing information, adapting their behavior according to information received, looking to improve and adapting to modern demands; all of this constitutes research - whether professionals want to call it that or not (Majid and Wey, 2011). The authors go ahead to assert that if tourism education does not emphasize research, then it runs the risk of being based upon one or more of the following: Dogma, theory, ideology, convenience or prejudice.

Thoma (2012) asserts that the study of research methods is a crucial aspect of tourism education; "research methods such as qualitative, quantitative, single-case designs, action research, and outcome-based research," and "the use of research to inform evidence-based practice are a *condito sin qua non* in tourism education. According to Healey et al. (2010), tourism programs should incorporate the teachings of various research methodologies to enhance knowledge advancement. Doctoral tourism students need to undergo a vigorous dissertation process to learn a complete research experience, from research design and data analysis, to publishing research results. Unlike doctoral tourism students, master's students receive academic training that places more emphasis on practical skills and knowledge than on research training (Thomas, 2012). A thesis or research project is usually optional or not included in a degree plan. Without a graduation requirement of research, master's tourism students may not perceive research methods classes as pivotal as other core courses. Sheldon et al. (2008) add that their attitude and interests in taking research methods classes and involving future research activities could be minimized. Recognizing the pertinence of the aforementioned issues, the present study investigated the relevance of research knowledge for tourism graduate students; the study equally looked the general perception of students towards research courses as well as the research areas considered problematic by the students.

Authors like Ramsden and Moses (1992); Fredman (1997); Hren et al. (2004); Healey et al. (2010); Majid and Wey (2011) believe that learning difficulties in research methods classes hinder students' interest and attitude toward research and future research productivity. According to them, many factors contribute to the learning difficulties in research methods classes. For example, the study of research design and statistics often elicits graduate students' anxiety and resistance (Greenhow et al., 2009). On the other hand, students exhibit low self-efficacy (Zehrer and Mossenlechner, 2009) with insufficient training in graduate programs (Sheldon et al., 2008) and are inclined to dismiss the research relevance in professional practice (Panelli et al, 2005).

Thomas (2012) urges graduate lecturers stop lecturing on what you know and get students to investigate the subject for themselves, he thinks it is an all-too-common mistake for lecturers "to think that linking teaching and research for your students is teaching what your research is." He says that students must be taught about the research process in their first year, rather than leaving it to their third-year dissertation. Other authors like Scott et al. (2008) think that the teaching of research should go beyond research specific courses, it should form part of the entire learning process; they says that whatever subject you teach, involving students in conducting some kind of inquiry is the most important aim. "Conceive of your teaching as something in which students have to inquire rather than just open their eyes and ears and listen."

### **Methodology**

The present study adopted a mixed research method which allowed the authors to utilize both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through questionnaires in form of a scale, semistructured, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with tourism academicians and postgraduate students. Part of the data utilized in the present study were retrieved from a similar discussion on an online forum, TRINET- a platform that brings together over 2400 tourism scholars from across the globe. Secondary information such as books, magazines and newsletters, the combination of these data sources complemented the weaknesses of each other. The sample size (n) for the qualitative interviews was 15 respondents (tourism academicians) who satisfied the carefully designed sampling criteria, purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents to be interviewed. Approximately 160 questionnaires in form of a scale were distributed by the researchers between February, 2014 and May, 2014. The said questionnaire was designed in a form of scale and used to test the perception of students towards research as a course, to examine the areas considered problematic by the students as well as the possible challenges facing the learning of research methods in their respective institutions<sup>1</sup>. The graduate students who responded to the questionnaire were drawn from four different institutions (two in Kenya and two in Mexico). It is important to note that naturalistic research studies like the present one are not based on the premise that is observed in the quantitative studies that a larger sample size is better; the sample size in qualitative research is determined by the adequacy of the data (Bordens and Abbott, 2011). According to Stangor (2011), adequacy is achieved when the re-

researcher collects enough data so that saturation is reached; this implies that the researcher performs sampling until repeat responses are obtained. In this study, the researchers determined the saturation after the interviews and focus group discussions with 15 respondents and there was no new information that emerged from the data.

Completed questionnaires were returned between July and mid-August 2014. In total, 137 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate 85%. Each returned questionnaire was checked for legibility and usability. Five questionnaires were incomplete on important statements and were eliminated from the analysis. A total of 132 useful questionnaires remained and were transferred to computer using SPSS (version 17.0) windows for analysis. The computer data was double checked with the originals to ensure the accuracy of data entry, however, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed on the data. In the qualitative analysis, responses were organized following the emerging themes from the data generated as a result of the interviews. As part of the qualitative analysis, an attempt was made to identify common patterns of responses and to develop themes that reflected them. Similarities as well as differences were noted while taking care of the minority views. Various sample verbatim quotation were given and this provided an opportunity to better appreciate the variety of views that existed on that issue. The quotations were coded based on the initials of respondents' names, category, section of the interview schedule and the question number responded to e.g. RBM-C-2-(i). This form of analysis categorized related topics hence identifying major themes. This was achieved by developing a coding system based on samples of collected data, classifying major topics covered, re-reading the text and highlighting key quotations and finally placing the coded materials under the major themes identified. In the quantitative analysis, a series of descriptive statistical techniques were employed. The choice of an appropriate technique was determined by its ability to answer a research questions and its suitability for the level of measurement of the relevant study variables. Given that all the variables (excluding socio-demographics) in the present study were measured on a five-point Likert scale, special considerations were given to this type of variables in terms of the level of measurement.

## Discussion

This section provides the analysis of the data collected and the interpretation of the findings. Thematic qualitative analysis was generally carried out to complement the quantitative findings. The presentation of

the findings is generally aimed at responding to each of the research questions presented at the beginning of the paper, these are:- to examine the importance of research knowledge for the tourism profession, students' attitudes towards learning and applying research skill, factors influencing student's ability to learn and apply research skills and the areas of research process considered as problematic by the students.

### *The importance of research knowledge for tourism graduates*

One respondent (JBH, (2014) puts his opinion right out there: that if someone (in reference to students) wishes to have any claim to knowledge, critique or publish knowledge, they need to be aware of its limitations. According to him, this is not just an ethical demand but also important should they wish to apply that knowledge (other than on themselves) and especially if one is aspiring to a degree from a university, he or she needs to have grounding in basic epistemology (certainly in induction, deduction and hypothetico-deductive methodologies) as they are the most common, every-day applied ways of obtaining and applying knowledge and decisions<sup>2</sup>. Findings show that there is an asymmetric relationship between students in commerce and their appreciation of such knowledge, the reasons for which require their own discussion. It is a common agreement that tourism students and folks who aspire managerial positions and power need to be grounded in basic epistemology and the ontologies of knowledge. As respondent (JBH, 2014) puts it;

*"There are grades of difficulties that have to be considered and 'markets to be targeted', that is, the more difficult the market the more didactic does the teacher have to be.....especially in undergraduate classes teaching research methods and basic statistics is a never ending chore (tell me about it!) but every lecturer worth his/her mettle should have a go at it as that cuts right to the core of knowledge acquisition and application", JBH-B-2-(ii).*

Another respondent (KTP, 2014) agrees with the earlier sentiments and states that the best ways of teaching this material, is by using applied research, problem-based learning techniques, and projects in which students get a hands-on experience out in the field (a souvenir-shop, at the money exchanger, at an attraction). He adds that lecturers should not be afraid of using soft-ware for analysis and should rather enhance quantitative studies with qualitative data; thus use the latter to reflect on the values of the former. He states:

*"For undergraduate level, if you need compelling and riveting material (that shocks you into reali-*

sation), I use Noam Chomsky's *Manufactured Consent* (free; a bit date, just needs you to intro it appropriately) or *The Corporation* (free) but they need you to guide students and take time for discussion – this is a little off the tourism topic but great to discuss theories of learning, especially S->R theories. Boundaries of knowledge and the thinking thereof can also be highlighted with a particular type of tourism: refugees and diasporas. Just check out the various ethical schools (esp. 'life-boat ethics').... The essence of knowledge (and yes, you do not need to use fancy words all the time) can easily be grasped by discussing the sentence in Plato's *Apology*, "This man, on one hand, believes that he knows something, while not knowing (anything). On the other hand, I – equally ignorant – do not believe (that I know anything)" which is often shortened into a favorite sentence: "One thing I do know, that I know nothing" (everything is belief)" KTP-C-4-(iii).

Contributing to the ideas of equipping graduate students with research and especially statistical knowledge, as well as cautioning students against many false conclusions from people who don't understand research methodologies, respondent (RBM, 2014) puts forward the basic understanding that any graduate should possess about quantitative methodology:

1. That what we are doing in a statistical test is comparing the data we collect with the sort of data we might expect from a random sample if there were no differences between the samples or no correlations between factors - somehow this simple concept doesn't always get through, and he says that has even heard a senior stats tutor say 'no, that's only for chi-squared'
2. What is meant by a random sample, and the relevance of sample size, so when they hear media reports saying '7 out of 10 ...', or even when reading the theses of fellow-students or published research, they should question how many subjects were asked, whether they were randomly selected, and how the numbers who did not respond were treated in the analysis
3. That (as Popper instructs) we seldom 'prove anything, but the more we fail to disprove it the more confident we can be of our conclusions,
4. What is meant by a level of probability - that 0.05 (95%) probability after a properly conducted survey with large sample size does not mean "no one really knows yet" even if does imply a 5% uncertainty, but that nor does one sample that just scrapes into the 0.05 probability level amongst a dozen or so similar tests constitute definite proof

5. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence - I've far too often seen students (and others) conclude 'no effect' or 'no difference' has been 'proved' from small samples with the trend in the right direction, when all they could logically conclude was no effect or difference could be concluded from this study, but that further research with a larger sample size would be needed to test it further (they should know about both Type 1 and Type 2 errors)
6. That correlation does not imply causation - a very common misconception, even amongst those who should know better
7. That researchers must be aware of the assumptions associated with the test they're conducting, and to what extent the test may be robust enough to ignore them

He concludes by stating that he would much prefer a graduate has to go back to the textbook to decide whether to use a Mann-Whitney or a Kolmogorov-Smirnoff test, or to check the meaning of covariance or eigenvalues, than not to have a grasp of those basics. According to him, it should be okay for someone not actively working in research to teach it if they have conducted good research in the past and familiar with methodologies, philosophies, probability theory etc. - they may just have to check the recent literature on new methods or recent reviews of the limitations of the more familiar ones.

Respondent (STV, 2014) on the other hand thinks that the idea put forward by Ronda during the focus group discussion is something related to statistical analytic skills and testing assumptions (for some analyses) rather than methodological and philosophical issues and aspects of research targeting at teaching undergraduate students. He observes that based on his seven years experience of teaching research methods topic to both undergraduate and postgraduate students, the great majority of undergraduate students do not clearly get the concept of methodology, and even perceive the topic itself as one of the least relevant and important topics for their tourism degree and future career. In his words:

*"Unless some do consider academic career path (being recommended to undertake Honours and PhD degrees), to a greater extent it might be true the students' perception of uselessness of the topic"* STV-D-2-(i).

For that reason; the research method topic at least in his institute is the least favorable topic (full of complains about the topic itself and its content) and thus no-one wants to teach it. Similar to his experience, he assumes that many of tourism lecturers from all of the world do experience same and/or similar dilemma in which undergraduate students (who may

never need any research skills and research philosophy) should learn it or not. He poses the following questions:

*“What is educational rationale and justification behind teaching and learning methodological issues and aspects (related to paradigm, ontology, epistemology, etc.)? If students feel and perceive it as wasting time and money (e.g., tuition fee), what would be our better rationale to keep it as part of undergraduate tourism degree? If this is the reality, my question is “do we as tourism academics still need to or have to teach it to undergraduate tourism students?” ”* STV-D-2-(i).

To emphasize the importance of research knowledge among tourism graduates, respondent (CHG, 2014) poses another important question: “On the assumption your students wish to achieve managerial posts which at some stage may require them to commission research, how are they to assess what they are offered by consultants if they have no knowledge of research processes?” (CHG, 2014). Respondent (SDF, 2014) fully agrees with the previous responses that not to expose undergraduate students to the research process would be a tremendous loss in process learning, the connection between theory and applied understanding, and the capacity to be reflective practitioners particularly with in respect to understanding ethics.

He notes that he has taught research methods across undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs in the arts, sport, events and tourism (together with honours and higher degree research) where an understanding of the research process, ontology, epistemology and methodology provides a sound foundation for individuals to explore issues of their choosing. He observes that students struggle with not being "given a question" but come to appreciate the journey when provided with a process, requisite skills, learning support and the freedom to explore areas of their interest within the industry contexts; The learning outcomes are even better when these experiences can be industry linked. He concludes that the teaching of research methods is one of the subjects that is about lifelong academic learning skills and akin to "teaching students how to fish".

Respondent (JMN, 2014) concurs with earlier responses and believes that research methods topic itself needs to be a core tourism topic regardless its popularity. She observes that many universities nowadays are facing to student-driven teaching and learning practices, and thus popular degrees and courses survive and will survive, whereas less popular ones will gradually die. To a greater extent that is how the university sector functions based on a business model, which is unfortunate. From the pedagogical perspective, she however, strongly believes that the topic

not only enhances students' critical and logical thinking but also provides a solid platform on which students can develop their independent skills. According to her, there is no doubt that flexibility and freedom is always an asset for this topic so that students would benefit from it as they explore areas of their interests – especially for tourism degree having great dynamics in terms of research areas and contexts. Also, she believes this topic will be one of the most valuable topics when students graduate as it is practical and applied and thus provides “the connection between theory and applied understanding”. She concludes wondering how many tourism undergraduate degrees offer research methods topic and how their students deal and cope with this topic.

Respondent (SRO, 2014) gives an example from the Royal Roads University that is launching a BA in Global Tourism Management degree and notes that one of the key courses will be a Research Methods course where students learn the theory and practicality of conducting and 'consuming' research. He observes that when the degree was developed, it was determined that the students need to know how to intelligently make use of existing research (academic or otherwise) and also conduct the research themselves. The course has been designed so that students get an equal dose of qualitative and quantitative experience; they'll be learning about new technologies and techniques as well as more traditional ones. The designers of the program recognized the importance that research can and will make on their futures. In the said course, the students will be working on research projects that they're interested in; equally, the lecturers of the said course are required to introduce 'research-related' stories to the students from the daily headlines so that they can see the value and importance for their professional and personal lives. At the Master's level, the University has been offering a similar course for the past several years, which the students have helped shape into a very well-received offer and the same result is expected at the Bachelor's level.

Respondent (WDC, 2014) thinks that not enough web/Internet literacy is taught in many institutions of higher learning, and in a sense, the present discussion parallels that observation. In her opinion, research skills must absolutely be taught and need to be taught in combination with information (including Web) literacy. She observes that we are on the verge of losing valuable skills, even and especially in the legal profession:

*“although I would get entirely frustrated at times, my own legal education was based on the Socratic method, based on the hundreds of cases we read through law school and the skills we learned from doing so. Too many law schools today use text-*

*books and case extracts to teach their students, and as a result, these students are losing the ability to think critically and to compare and contrast judicial opinions.....the same applies in any social science discipline, including tourism. If you can have the necessary research skills, you can solve just about any problem. So yes, I definitely come down on the side of at least one research course/paper, and also - research skills being part of every substantive course/paper” WDC-C-3-(iv).*

Respondent (WDC, 2014) goes ahead to criticize the overdependence by graduate students on statistical packages like SPSS and NVivo. She argues that these packages are undoubtedly responsible for the rising generation of student researchers whose educational experience has been more technologically dependent and whose research literacy according to her may not be sufficiently sophisticated to sift through large amounts of sources/information/knowledge. She adds:

*“I have decided not to use NVivo for a variety of reasons, but there is one reason in particular which is relevant to this discussion, --and please bear with me on this -- it is all by way of explanation. My own academic background is a classical (small 'c') liberal arts degree, followed by a Masters in librarianship and publishing, and then a law degree. I also have an IT background, designing complex information systems for lawyers. Common to each of these is the requirement of locating, filtering, analysing, organising, managing and documenting vast amounts of information in all media formats” WDC-C-3-(ii).*

In her view, there is too much in these computer assisted research software that adds an extra layer of complexity, and in one respect, becomes the focus of the user's research rather than the content it is meant to code. She also thinks that it generates too much reliance on its output, and does not allow for interpretation and analysis of the content itself, with all the nuances and carefully crafted language which might accompany that content. In her case, She'd rather use methods that she has developed on her own over the years to deal with the specific genres of information she needs to analyze (and even code).

Respondent (SLF, 2014) strongly thinks it is important to teach all post secondary school (undergraduate, certificate or diploma) students research methodology because research mining and analysis have become part of everyday job. He poses:

*“Imagine the embarrassment to hear your former best student in class, who is now a manager in a local hotel or restaurant cannot conduct a research on customer's satisfaction to his/her establishment” SLF-B-3-(i).*

According to him, it is best limiting the topic of research method to the basics for an undergraduate,

thus at this level, a student should be able to differentiate between a qualitative and quantitative research, how to conduct research, different types of research, analysis and interpreting the findings etc. He thinks that it is not important to expose undergraduate students deeper into research philosophies as these topics might bore students out or even confuse them. And for the lecturers who have students with negative perception towards research methods, respondent (SLF, 2014) has the following advice:

*“It's better if you spice-up the class by introducing what I call 'edutainment'. In Canada, Justin Bieber is a popular musician here; you can bring into the class the video of JB, and ask your students to feel free to watch, sign and even dance to his music for 5 mins. After time up, ask the class how many times JB mentioned 'love' in the video, how many times he mentioned 'f.king'. how many times he mentioned 'Serena Gooomez', Then ask the class to calculate the average number, the mode etc. As you can see, you're conducting a live research and also analyzing it with your students. With edutainment students don't get bore, they get engage..... Complains? No forget it! Students are happy to stay and want to come back again” SLF-B-3-(ii).*

On the question of using non research academics to teach research methods, he thinks that this depends on the academic in question, says that it is better taking it on a person to person basis.

*“One of the many reason(s) while north eastern Asia is producing third class PhDs today (I'm one of them) is because PhD students are not grounded in research methods because their supervisors are non research academics. Welcome to the world where a PhD student has never heard of the word 'Interpretive', 'Radical humanist', ontology', 'epistemology' etc. In Japan, as many is aware, the 'amakudaris' make up a large number of faculties in universities there, the same is true in Korea, in China? (I don't know), so if you accept to study in these countries, you have limited choice. But choosing a research academic or non research academic willing/ or open to learn automatically differentiate a student from the class” SLF-B-3-(iii).*

Respondent (PKH, 2014) gives another example from the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), where statements related to research and research methodologies only enter the discussion at level eight (honours, graduate certificates, graduate diplomas) and the references get strong as one reads the specifications for level 9 (masters programs) and level 10 (doctoral programs). There is no mention of research in the specifications for level 7 bachelor degrees; this is evident in all qualifications, not just tourism degrees

*“The discussion is timely because we are in the process of developing the threshold learning outcomes (aka standards) for tourism, hospitality and events degrees. It is clear from our previous work that research method was commonly taught in undergraduate programs in Australia. Our work on the current project suggests that there is some need for students to understand the techniques use to measure tourism performance. My interpretation is that this extends beyond financial and economic measures and includes market research and at least a basic knowledge of methods and statistics. This is one of the skills that distinguishes someone with a diploma from someone with a degree” PKH-B-2-(ii).*

As to who is best placed to teach research methods, respondent (PKH, 2014) does not think there are any hard and fast rules, but observes that the most successful research methods courses he has seen have been taught by people who were able to help students understand the practical applications of what they were learning (and these courses do not always score poorly on student evaluations).

Respondent (ATS, 2014) gives another example from the European Qualifications Framework (part of the Bologna process – The European Higher Education Area) which provides the standard learning outcomes at a European level. The Framework adopted the Dublin descriptors as the tool to define the three levels in Higher education (1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle). The Dublin descriptors were part of the Joint Quality Initiative (2004)<sup>3</sup>. In the description for the first level (i.e. Bachelor) there appears both the need for graduates to have acquired:

1. Problem solving abilities within their field of study
2. Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgments that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues

Respondent (ATS, 2014) sees the learning of methodology (and methods) as essential for attaining both of these abilities; she equally considers qualitative methods as being as important as quantitative methods and techniques. She also believes that methodology (an introduction to the philosophy of knowledge/sociology of knowledge) and not only methods should be a key element in these courses, so that students get an understanding of the challenges, possibilities and limitations of knowledge production and its relationship to the tool-box of methods. According to her, the issue of which methods should be

prioritized in the curriculum should depend on the overall profile of the tourism degree for instance a stronger focus on market research makes sense if the programme is oriented toward business management/economics, but not as an a priori demand. She observes that there is a tendency to equate market research with statistics, however it is her view that some of the most interesting market research is at the moment being conducted by applying anthropological/qualitative methods.

Regarding the threshold learning outcomes specific for tourism; she recommends the reading of Spanish article “White book of Tourism” developed by the Spanish Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation. This document specifies that tourism graduates (at the Bachelor level) should have attained the ability of problem solving through scientific methods both quantitative and qualitative and has knowledge on the relevance of tourism research<sup>4</sup>. She gives a further example of the Tourism and Hospitality line of BSc. in Business Administration and Service Management at Copenhagen Business School (Denmark) where there are two full courses on methodology, one on qualitative and one on quantitative methods (15 ECTS in total) and one third of the curriculum in the course “Foundations” (7,5 ECTS) is also dedicated to methods (one academic year is 60 ECTS). There is also a very strong emphasis on the mastering/application of methodology in the first year project, second year project and the final bachelor project.

#### ***Students’ attitudes and perception towards research as a course***

A total of 17 statements (8 theoretically positive and 9 theoretically negative) were used to capture the students’ attitudes and perception towards the teaching of research in their academic programs. The respondents rating on all the attitudinal statements are summarized in table 1 below. All the positive statements generated means lower than the theoretical mean (3.00). Indeed, the overall mean for the positive statements was 2.43 whereas the negative statements had a mean greater than the expected mean of 3.00 and an overall negative statement mean being of 3.413, thus suggesting that the students have rather a negative attitude towards research as a course. Infact, the more the statements were skewed towards 1 (minimum expected count –Strongly disagree) the more the positive statement were being negated.



Table 1: Students attitudes towards research as a course

Attitudinal Statements	Item No.	Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Positive Statements (n= 132)	1.	Research Knowledge is a crucial aspect of tourism education	2.76	1.443
	2.	I am happy about taking research classes.	2.30	1.365
	3.	I will take research related classes even if it is not a requirement of my program.	3.11	1.537
	4.	I think every graduate student should take research related classes.	2.25	1.402
	5.	I can be a more effective individual if I am able to have educated critique about the quality of research.	2.54	1.304
	6.	I can be more effective individual if I posses research knowledge	2.27	1.293
	7.	I can become an effective professional if I am able to have an educated critique about the quality of a research project.	2.08	1.555
	8.	I would join a research group if I had a chance	2.15	1.314
		Overall mean of positive statement	2.432	
Negative Statements (n= 132)	1.	Research classes are scaring.	3.52	1.496
	2.	Research is too complicated and is not for everyone.	4.12	1.259
	3.	Research is not important for my profession.	4.25	1.02
	4.	Research is only suitable for active academicians.	2.09	1.05
	5.	Research knowledge is not relevant to the tourism profession.	2.47	1.289
	6.	Research classes are the most challenging in my program.	3.52	1.297
	7.	I am afraid of taking a research class.	3.87	1.324
	8.	I wish I could substitute a research class with another class related to my profession.	3.35	1.313
	9.	I don't want to stress myself with research class, they are least interesting.	3.54	1.144
		Overall mean of negative statement	3.413	

Despite the low general rating of the theoretically positive statements, the students still held the view that they will take research related classes even if it is not a requirement of their program (mean=3.11), a scenario which could be attributed to the fact that they still see research as important to their profession. Meanwhile differences among respondents were also observed. All the seventeen attitudinal items ranged from the minimum (1 point) to maximum (5 points), indicating a wide variation of individual students' attitudes of research. The size of the standard deviations of the seventeen statements ranged from 1.02 to 1.555 indicating a moderate spread around the theoretical mean. The notable difference of mean scores between positive statements and negative statements indicated two possible directions of the attitudes: positive and negative. Score 1 represents strongly disagree and score 5 represent strongly agree and therefore the closer one moves towards 1 in the positive statement as shown by the overall mean of the positive statement (2.43), the more the students are disagreeing to the positive statement. The more one

moves towards 5 in the negative statement as shown by the overall mean for the negative statements, (3.413) the more the students are agreeing to the negative statements.

#### ***Factors limiting the learning and application of research skills***

When asked about the factors limiting the acquisition of research knowledge, the students identified the inappropriate teaching methodology and lack of research specific courses in the institutions as a key factor (86.7% in agreement). The students were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five point likert scale. Score 1 represents strongly disagree and score 5 represent strongly agree and therefore the closer one moves towards 5, the more the students are agreeing to the negative statements thus factors limiting the acquisition and application of research knowledge (see table 2 below with the summary of the findings).

Table 2: Factors limiting the learning and application of research skills

Factors affecting attitudes	Level of agreement					Mean
	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Neither (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	
Inappropriate teaching methodology and lack of research specific courses in the institutions.	3.2	2.8	7.3	28.1	58.7	5
Student's inability to comprehend statistical techniques and analysis.	8.5	16.4	18.6	40.9	15.7	4
Pressure from peers to use research experts	10.4	9.7	21.4	36.2	22.3	4
Time constraints to complete the study	4.7	7.9	10.7	35.5	41.2	4
Laziness and availability of research bureaus	4.4	12.9	21.4	43.7	17.6	4
Lack of a thorough understanding of the research methods	6.9	15.7	22.3	32.1	23	4
Students negative attitude towards the research process	12.9	13.5	22	30.2	21.4	4
Lack of commitment by some lecturers to teach effectively the research process.	7.5	10.4	20.1	36.5	25.5	4
Students' assumption that the research process is easy.	13.5	13.2	15.4	30.8	27	4
Students lack of commitment and dedication to their study	2.8	3.8	12.6	42.8	38.1	4

**Research areas considered as problematic by graduate students**

The students identified the literature review, data collection and analysis as being the most problematic areas of the research process. In relation to the literature review, the main problem was the ability to state the research gap and give a critical review of previous studies without merely presenting their findings; some blamed their lectures for not being categorical

in their examples. In reference to data analysis, the respondents argued that statistical analysis was a major problem with a majority lacking basic knowledge of analysis techniques. The selection of and application of statistical techniques for their study was a big issue. The table 3 below summarizes results obtained from the five point Likert scale assessing the extent to which various stages of the research process present a problem to the students.

Table 3: Research areas considered as problematic by graduate students

Stage of research process	Level of Agreement			Median
	Problematic (%)	Neutral (%)	Not Problematic (%)	
Choosing a topic	25.2	14.8	50.0	3.5
Formulating goals and assumptions	65.0	11.9	23.0	2
Formulating research objectives and questions	54.7	16.7	28.6	2
Formulating hypothesis	74.8	7.2	17.9	2
Establishing the theoretical framework and conceptual framework.	60.4	12.3	27.4	2
Theory identification and application	57.9	16.7	25.5	2
Statement of the Problem	65.1	12.3	22.7	2
Literature review	82.7	7.2	10.0	2
Data collection/application of research instruments	30.2	22.3	57.5	4
Data analysis and Presentation	91.5	3.8	4.7	1
Discussions	53.1	16.4	30.5	2
Report writing	79.0	9.1	11.9	2

## Conclusions

It was found that research knowledge as an important component of tourism education; too often it is seen as an academic activity conducted by others – to the profession, not with the profession. At the same time, students were found to harbor negative attitudes towards the learning and application of research knowledge. The students identified inappropriate teaching methodologies and lack of research specific courses in the institutions of higher learning as a key factor limiting the acquisition and application of research knowledge. Additionally, the students identified the literature review, data collection and analysis as being the most problematic areas of the research process. It is a common agreement among the academicians interviewed that the lecturers involved in the teaching of research skills and methods should come up with ways of stimulating research interest among the students, this may be achieved by applying appropriate teaching mechanisms; emphasis should be given to both quantitative and qualitative research methods contrary to the current scenario where quantitative methods are considered most important. The institutions of higher learning were equally challenged to strengthen the research element in their academic programs by increasing the number of research specific courses.

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## Notes

1. The survey questionnaire was composed by the researchers through a comprehensive literature review.
2. Can be discussed under: what is gut-feeling? ... and you quickly end up in discussing rationalism vs empiricism.
3. They can be accessed on this link <http://www.jointquality.nl/>
4. The article may be accessed at (p.128) [http://www.ane-ca.es/var/media/359791/libroblanco\\_turismo\\_03.pdf](http://www.ane-ca.es/var/media/359791/libroblanco_turismo_03.pdf)

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