

Emerging from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Prospects for Edutourism Demand in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper discusses the outcomes of an exploratory study into the obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and a post-COVID recovery in the South African educational tourism sector. By reviewing the challenges and the key technological innovations developed and implemented during the pandemic, this study established that, while the COVID-19 restrictions significantly impacted the viability of every business in the edutourism sector, the use of important technological platforms (like social media, virtual reality, mobile apps, computer-based technology and virtual reality/augmented reality [VR/AR]) helped the sector remain resilient. However, the current paucity of empirical data in this regard suggests an investigation, the motivation for the current study, which assumes an inductive approach. This paper highlights the challenges, trends and prospects of COVID-19-related revival strategies for South Africa's edutourism sector, with the ensuing debates contributing to increasing academic debates on the subject, while highlighting both practical policy-related input and theoretical contributions.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; edutourism; resilience; South Africa; pandemic response

Introduction

Set within the trajectory of the impacts and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism industry and with a dearth of enquiry on the effects of the pandemic on the educational tourism (edutourism) sector, this study explores the challenges impinged upon the edutourism sector by the COVID-19 pandemic and potential post-COVID recovery pathways in South Africa. Edutourism as a niche sector remains a catalyst for socio-economic growth and development at the local level in any region, state or country (Sharma, 2015; Tjitunga et al., 2023). Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2020) assert that edutourism can lead to international exposure and the discovery of unexplored regions within the host location. An important part of preparing for future cultural exchanges and global competency to address the challenges of the 21st century is achievable through enabling edutourists access to overseas experiences (Abdullah et al., 2020; Attaalla, 2020).

Tourists (edutourists) are drawn to South Africa primarily for its natural beauty, wildlife parks, historical landmarks and affordability (Asmal & Rooney, 2021). Tourists participating in edutourism in South Africa mostly emanate from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, the United States of America, Namibia, Swaziland, Germany, the United Kingdom, Botswana, Malawi and India, overall highlighting the dominance of countries in the continent of Africa (Abrahams et al., 2023; Wesgro, 2020). The fact that South African universities such as the University of Cape



Town, University of the Witwatersrand and Stellenbosch University are ranked among some of the best in the world is a testament to the popularity of the country as a destination for tourists travelling for educational purposes (Abrahams et al, 2023). South Africa largely relies on tourism as a driver of growth, employment creation, entrepreneurship opportunities and earnings in foreign currency (Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Chipumuro & Chikobvu, 2022), with the government providing funding for conserving the country's natural heritage in several protected areas across the country (Wesgro, 2020). Scholarly contentions point to the fact that enhancement in the edutourism potential of destinations improves overall tourism receipts and encourages biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage protection while engendering sustainable outcomes for the host destinations (Tjitunga et al., 2023).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, its broader scope and extent, the global nature of its spread, the enormous impact that it has had on many facets of life, and the vulnerability of tourism to such shocks, in particular, the edutourism sector signal the inherent risks that the country faces (Bama et al., 2022; Dube, 2022). Although the impacts of COVID-19 have been extensively debated there are limited studies and enquiries on the implications of the pandemic on educational tourism in South Africa, specifically relating to its impact on future demand (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; Abrahams et al., 2023). Recent academic and societal discourse about COVID-19's impact and implications on tourism and, ultimately on how tourism and hospitality recover as socio-economic activities in society have been carried out (Akhtar et al., 2021; Alhammad et al., 2023; Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Bama et al., 2022; Bilsland et al., 2020; El-Said & Aziz, 2022; Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022; Ioannides & Gyimothy, 2020; Ndou et al., 2022; Nyikana & Bama, 2023; Siji & Varma, 2021). In general, the studies have examined the impacts, lessons learnt, resilience, and how the tourism industry might emerge in terms of recovery. Additionally, other studies have highlighted that emerging from the effects of such shocks would be linked to innovation and technological development (Chadee et al., 2021; El-Said & Aziz, 2022). For the edutourism sector, digital transformation and technology have been touted as crucial in responding to the effects and impacts of the crisis (Abrahams et al., 2023; Bama et al., 2022; Dube et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2021; Gretzel et al., 2020). Thus, as the industry continues to evolve, edutourism stakeholders should anticipate the curve, by finding innovative ways of building resilience and reviving the industry through the application of technology. Against this backdrop, the current enquiry considers the pandemic's impact on edutourism demand, looking at the challenges and prospects for a post-COVID-19 recovery, using South Africa as a case study. The following section presents the theoretical considerations around issues of educational tourism demand, as well as the challenges and prospects posed by the pandemic from both global and South African perspectives. Finally, the conclusion and pathways for future research are proffered.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

Edutourism is often posited around considerations that it possesses potential which if developed adequately will engender added value. For the edutourism sector, which together with the broader tourism industry had been touted as a catalyst for sustainable tourism development (Alipour et al., 2020; Al-Shwayat, 2017; Attaalla, 2020; Ojo & Yusof, 2019), COVID-19's rapid spread could not have happened at a more inopportune time considering the impact on academic mobility and resultant effects within the international education community (Noorashid & Chin, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021; Rumbley, 2020; Ye & law, 2021). As such, scholars and industry experts have been involved in extensive debates and discourse on potential strategies to aid response plans and recovery efforts within the edutourism sector (Abrahams et al., 2023; Bama et al., 2022; Dube, 2022; Noorashid & Chin, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021; Rumbley, 2020; Ye & law, 2021). Primarily positioned on the premise of response,

resilience and recovery, this study relied on the resilience-based framework developed by Sharma et al. (2021) and further adapted by Noorashid and Chin (2021) into a resilience and transformation-based framework, substantiating the management of the edutourism sector during the pandemic and providing a flexible approach for evaluating resilience and transformation through multi-faceted perspectives. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the COVID-19 resilience and transformation-based framework for edutourism. The framework suggests that adopting a sustainability-focused trajectory will aid the edutourism sector in developing resilience and transformative capabilities which ultimately influence the recovery of the sector (Hemmonsbey et al., 2021; Noorashid & Chin, 2021).

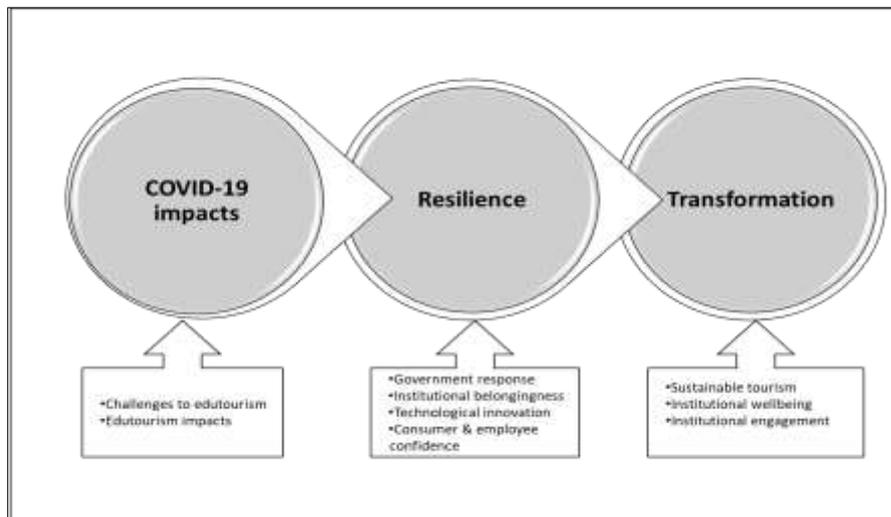


Figure 1: COVID-19 resilience and transformation-based framework for edutourism
Source: Adapted from Noorashid and Chin (2021)

In essence, government and sector-relevant stakeholders need to engage in collaborative enterprise to establish resilience and transformation-based strategies by implementing robust and multi-faceted communications efforts, systematic mapping, guidance in navigating the pandemic scenarios, and technological innovation. Technological innovation emerges as one of the focal points for recovery efforts, in addition to institutional well-being and engagement (Bama et al., 2022; Noorashid & Chin, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021).

Nature of educational tourism

The tourism industry is known to have grown in sustainability as a result of the combination of tourism and education (Rahman et al., 2021). Tomasi et al. (2020), claim that the definition of edutourism and the relationship between education and tourism has sparked several ongoing debates and discussions among various scholars and experts. Several definitions of edutourism emphasise travel with the primary or secondary objective of learning in, and, about a unique location (Gibson, 1998; Ritchie, 2003; Pitman et al., 2010; Sie et al., 2016). The most recent definition of edutourism notes that edutourism refers to organised trips led by skilled guides where leisure-travel activities and learning processes occur simultaneously through interaction between related stakeholders (participants, tour operators/leaders, and local community) as part of the total experience. The educational tourism experience occurs within a certain period of time (a minimum of 24 hours away from home) and generally ensues in an informal setting (Sie et al., 2016).

According to Ritchie et al. (2003), edutourism consists of two major components. One refers to the general travel for people, where there is some type of education and training, which

is a significant component of the tourist experience. The other element is associated with university and school tourism, such as language schools, school excursions, and student exchange and study abroad programmes, in which tourist experiences are secondary to the educational aspect and aims of the participants. In this instance, education and training come first and are the core product of consumption, whereas tourist experiences are complimentary. Most scholars analysing educational tourism focus on the second form, in which education comes first and tourist experiences are the aftereffects of people travelling and staying somewhere other than their regular home (Voleva-Petrova, 2020).

The edutourism industry has expanded significantly over the past few decades, with student and adult travel becoming popular ways of learning about new places, cultures and subjects (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; George, 2014). Edutourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in the travel and tourism industry, with it having the potential to lead to increased value in both social and economic contexts (Al-Shwayat, 2017). Choudhary et al. (2022) contend that edutourism provides a platform for participants to engage in ‘glocal’ lifetime learning experiences that greatly enhance their knowledge outside of the classroom and are embedded with fun-mixed elements with high-quality learning in both educational and travel experiences. Consequently, Alipour et al. (2020) assert that the evolving and growing demand for learning new skills and acquisition of knowledge from destinations considered valuable in content and context has led to the establishment of edutourism as a unique and alternative form of tourism niche. Figure 2 illustrates the confluence between tourism and education resulting in establishing the edutourism niche.

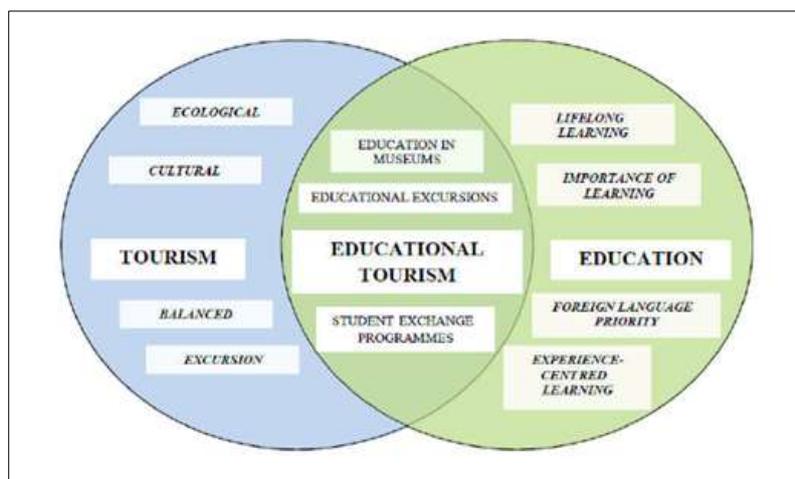


Figure 2: Structure of ‘educational tourism’
Source: Poletaeva et al. (2021)

Edutourism represents a broad range of products and services related to academic studies, skill enhancement holidays, school trips, sports training, career development courses and language courses, among others (UNWTO, 2019). As such, Wang and Li (2008) postulate that edutourism attractions are often located in reputable institutions and institutes, universities, or even in some historical places and the homes of illustrious and emeritus professors.

Furthermore, the potential of edutourism, including ecotourism, cultural tourism and agricultural tourism, can be transformative and experience-based, involving learning and personal growth (Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Richards, 2011). Thus, the demographic spectrum of educational tourists, ranging from preschool children to senior adults, presents a limitless amount of product creation potential (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017a). More specifically, the edutourism industry worldwide, which is dominated by the youth student market (Centre for



the Promotion of Imports [CBI], 2020), is valued at \$333 billion, representing 23% of the global travel market for 2018 (WYSE Travel Confederation, 2022). Alipour et al. (2020) note that the subcategories of edutourism include trips undertaken during spring/winter breaks, study abroad trips, educational cruises, seminar vacations, school trips, student and staff exchanges and skill enhancement retreats.

Edutourism has been noted to have both positive and negative effects from social, cultural, economic and environmental perspectives. The positive effects of edutourism could include increased income levels, increase in job opportunities, increased investment and development opportunities, promoting host community social and cultural aspects, demand for cultural and historical activities and cultural exchange (Amador-Fierro, 2022; Choudhary et al., 2022; Gonzalez, 2022). Conversely, edutourism could also generate some negative outcomes including increased cost of living, increase in prices of goods and services, increasing prices of houses and other immovable properties, expanding competitive consumption and increasing migration levels of foreign labour to the region, disruption of social bonds, expansion of materialist culture (Amador-Fierro, 2022; Choudhary et al., 2022; Gogoi & Balaji, 2015; Gonzalez, 2022). Thus, Hussein et al. (2020) confirm that factors affecting edutourism demand in both the short and the long term include the amount of income per capita, the educational tourism costs, the prices in competing countries, and the quality of universities, based on their approved programme and global university rankings.

In the South African context, despite studies having been undertaken into the nature of edutourism (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; Boekstein, 2017; Donaldson & Gatsinzi, 2005; Henama, 2013; McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017a; 2017b), they have, until now, focused largely on defining edutourism from a South African perspective, as well as on highlighting the benefits of the industry, in terms of fostering global learning and addressing issues of poverty and inequality. Other studies have focused on the motives behind the choices of edutourists for visiting certain destinations, while yet, others have considered edutourism as a catalyst for the socio-economic growth and development of host communities (Abrahams et al., 2023; Tjitunga et al., 2023). For instance, Donaldson and Gatsinzi (2005) discuss foreign students as tourists while Boekstein (2017) analyses whether English language learners are students or tourists. Additionally, Henama (2013) explores the strategies of tourism, edutourism and global mobility, in addressing issues of poverty and inequality, while McGladdery and Lubbe (2017b) propose a new process model for educational tourism at school level. More recently, Abrahams and Bama (2022), and Abrahams et al. (2023) examined the effects of COVID-19 on tourism, focusing on the study abroad segment of edutourism stakeholders. The paucity of broader studies in the South African context highlights the need for empirical inquiries into the impact and implications of COVID-19 on the edutourism industry in South Africa more generally.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on edutourism

According to Abrahams and Bama (2022), the notion of edutourism is currently expanding, as increasingly, more people realise the significance of the concept of education. People, due to their inquisitive nature, traverse the world to learn new ideas and technology that they still must explore (Choudhary et al., 2022). The advantages of experiencing ‘education with travel’ and the perception that informal learning is sometimes superior to formal learning (i.e., visiting a location, to obtain first-hand information about the place, in preference to reading books) are further reasons for the growth of the edutourism industry (Choudhary et al., 2022). Nevertheless, given the industry's inherent state of instability and uncertainty, anticipating the future is often a major challenge. The health contingency crisis caused by COVID-19 impinged unquestionable and diverse impacts on the edutourism sector globally. Testament to the fragility of the forces of globalisation and the vulnerability of the tourism industry, between



the latter part of 2019 and the early stages of 2022 the world was paralysed by COVID-19. Although crises (i.e., financial crises, terrorist attacks, war-related conflicts and crises, and epidemics) are not new to the tourism industry the nature and effects of COVID-19 far exceeded those experienced by the sector in any of the earlier crises in recent memory (Afellat et al., 2021; Bama et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2020; Petrevska, 2012; Sönmez et al., 1999; UNWTO, 2021).

More than any other industry, the tourism industry was forced to stop all travel- and leisure-related activities because of the pandemic, which led to the closing of international borders, the suspension of international flights and the shutdown of restaurants and accommodation (Ndou et al., 2022). Consequently, international tourist arrivals plummeted by 73% in 2020, with there being 1 billion fewer travellers than in the preceding year, placing between 100 and 120 million direct tourism jobs in peril (UNWTO, 2021). The World Bank noted that around 649 462 981 schools were completely shut down at the start of the pandemic, while 93 602 500 students were in countries which experienced partial shutdowns, accounting for about 85% of the global student population (Gonzalez, 2022). For economies that had, previously, been reliant on tourism as the mainstay of their existence, such a decline led to considerable losses in terms of the export of travel services (i.e., in the amounts spent by non-resident tourists in a nation) and transport services, including the airline profits made from tickets sold to non-residents (Milesi-Ferretti, 2022).

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of ongoing debates were aimed at critically examining the future of the internationalisation of education, specifically relating to the benefits offered by gaining an international education, with such issues having been brought to the fore by the pandemic (Mok et al., 2021). While remote learning and teaching provided opportunities for continuity, the effects of the pandemic were therefore wide-ranging and varied from the lack of staff training, at all levels, on information technologies for learning and teaching purposes, unequal access to technological infrastructure, and poor connectivity among different sectors of the population have also been exposed (Gonzalez, 2022). Furthermore, the boost engendered by the pandemic on educational institutions around digitisation, information technologies, and services development highlights the importance for edutourism stakeholders, including research communities, to consider the problematic nature of the concerns resulting from the exponential evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; Gonzalez, 2022; Romeo et al., 2021; Sulaiman et al., 2020). The way edutourism has traditionally been conceived as a strategy centred around student and academic mobility is noted as detrimental to crisis management, and the need for an upgrade in these processes can therefore not be overemphasised.

South Africa and the COVID-19 pandemic

On 5 March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in South Africa, likely resulting from transmission by a South African traveller returning from abroad (NICD, 2020). The International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) (2020) asserts that the regulations and restrictions imposed in terms of the risk-adjusted strategy of the South African government had a significant negative impact on the mobility of edutourists, with the plight of international students attending South African universities for purposes of face-to-face education and research, in particular, being highlighted. Consequent to the outbreak and the need to curb the spread of the virus, the South African government implemented five-level alert lockdown regulations across the nation, with the most severe regulations being in terms of level 5 requiring the implementation of drastic measures to stop the virus's high rate of spread, to save lives, and the lowest severity being in terms of level 1, with the enabling of the resumption of normal activities, along with the continuous monitoring of evolving conditions subject to

the imposition of the appropriate safety and health precautions (Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Nyikana & Bama, 2023; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Consequently, in line with the safeguarding of South African citizens from the coronavirus, the travel restrictions imposed under the risk-adjusted strategy led to a sharp decline in the number of international tourists visiting South Africa, including international students (Abrahams et al., 2023). Compared to pre-pandemic levels, statistics of these international travellers (including edutourists) to South Africa during this time painted a grim outlook. Figure 2 illustrates the statistics for international tourist arrivals in South Africa between 2018 and 2022.

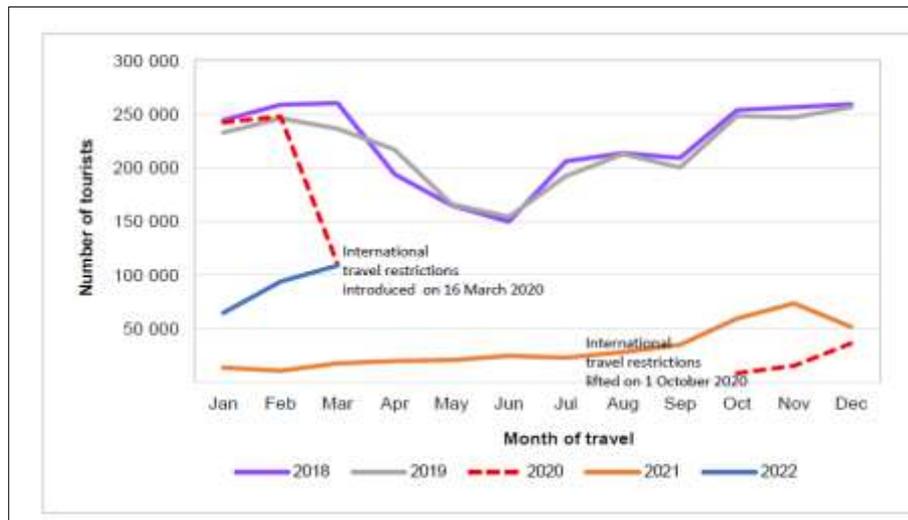


Figure 3: International tourist arrivals, 2018–2022
Source: Statista (2022).

As Figure 2 highlights, the first and fourth quarters of every year (2018 to 2022), from January to March and from October to December, respectively, in keeping with the traditional ebb and flow of the tourist industry, saw the most visitors to South Africa. However, the second quarter (April to June) of the same period can be seen to have been characterised by a sharp decline in the number of visitors from abroad, which reached its lowest point in June, before gradually increasing into the third quarter. Despite a significant increase occurring in the first quarter of 2022, the numbers experienced were still quite low, when compared to the first quarter of the years prior to the pandemic. Nevertheless, South Africa continues to be one of the most popular tourist destinations, particularly in Africa. For instance, after Egypt and Morocco, South Africa, as a nation, experienced the third-highest number of international tourist arrivals in Africa in 2019 (Statista, 2022). The post-pandemic panorama is, however, anticipated to reflect slow progress in edutourism re-adoption.

COVID-19 challenges on South Africa's edutourism industry

The COVID-19 pandemic did not meet the edutourism sector in South Africa in a position of strength and stability. With very strict regulations in place at the onset of the pandemic, the pandemic presented major challenges to the edutourism sector, necessitating significant shifts in implementing innovative and creative strategies to cope with the ever-changing and uncertain circumstances prevailing at the time. With direct and complex impacts on the international higher education sector, there was a need for the edutourism industry in South Africa to modify its offerings and services. For example, the functioning of higher education institutions was significantly disrupted by the pandemic, forcing institutions to transform overnight and move from in-person to online teaching, learning and engagement (Heleta,



2020). University administration, information technology (IT) corporations, the edu-tech sector, international consultancy firms, and nearly every other player in the higher education sector were forced into urgent action by the desire to prevent a huge educational disintegration (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; Choudhary et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). Furthermore, a sense developed that largely thanks to technology, we would wake from the COVID-19 nightmare in a better, kinder, more equal world where education can reach everyone in new and better ways and that we would never return to the pre-COVID, old ways of doing things.

Additionally, other areas of the edutourism value chain such as educational and cultural institutions, like the Apartheid Museum and Mandela's home, which are commonly regarded as the first place of interest requested to be visited by tourists were also affected (Toyana, 2021). Consequently, edutourist attractions such as museums, heritage sites and art galleries were severely impacted by the pandemic, with them being compelled to close their doors owing to the presence of the COVID-19 virus (Iziko Museums of South Africa, 2020; Toyana, 2021). According to Iziko Museums of South Africa (2020) all public programmes, planetarium presentations, planned commemorative day events, mobile museum outreach programmes, venue hire initiatives, museum tours, field trips and research-related undertakings, conferences, travel, and meetings were suspended for the duration of the various COVID restriction periods, while public access to the Iziko libraries and collections was limited. When South Africa implemented its first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, such institutions were forced to close along with other cultural institutions. The protracted and oftentimes lengthy closures (Iziko Museum reopened in January 2021, but because of the regulations and the lack of ticket sales for ten months), rendered most of these institutions and organisations unable to sustain operations with debilitating effects (Toyana, 2021). For instance, the Robben Island Museum was also significantly hit by the pandemic, to the extent of the suspending of the annual bursary fund for the 2021 academic year, after it experienced an over 90% drop in visitor numbers during the 2020 to 2021 tourist peak season (Dayimani, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on edutourism business operations and activities, putting organisations in danger of bankruptcy, due to the sharp decline in operating income and the consequent shortage of cash flow. Ndou et al. (2022) contended that overcoming crises, developing survival strategies, and using the crisis as an opportunity for creativity are crucial strategies for preventing destruction, and promoting growth and rejuvenation. Thus, although little could be done to limit the pandemic's effects on the edutourism industry, the educational and cultural institutions concerned were able to turn to key technological platforms for enhancement and improvement, as well as for developing innovative and creative strategies to lure tourists post the lifting of the COVID-19-related restrictions. For example, while educational institutions implemented hybrid and blended approaches to learning and teaching, other related institutions in the value chain relied on virtual tourism techniques, particularly virtual tours, with tours of museums, townships, game reserves and deep-sea diving being some of the popular virtual tours engaged in, to keep the tourists interested in, and motivated to, travel (Lekgau et al., 2021; Schrandt, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Furthermore, the South African government assisted non-governmental organisations, particularly mobile network providers, as well as higher education institutions, to develop strategies for maintaining the delivery of education (Landa et al., 2021). Landa et al. (2021) highlight that the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Lockdown Digital School, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp groups were examples of efforts that have since evolved, and aimed at sustaining edutourism.

Post-COVID-19 prospects and revival strategies for the South African edutourism industry



As the edutourism sector recovers gradually, with regulations having been lifted, the potential for a rebound of the edutourism sector in South Africa exists (Abrahams et al, 2023). The country's rich cultural heritage, diverse ecosystems and provision of wide-ranging educational opportunities are available to attract potential edutourists. It is therefore critical for sector-relevant stakeholders such as government, educational institutions and tourism operators to collaborate in developing innovative strategies to capitalise on such opportunities. Such strategic leverage could focus on digital transformation efforts, because, unquestionably, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of business and society given the restrictions that were intended to minimise the amount of travel and the number of gatherings engaged in during the height of the pandemic (Everingham & Chassagne, 2020; Sigala, 2020). During the past few years, the number of tourists engaging with travel and tourism businesses and destinations on social media has increased. For instance, photo- and video-generated content on Instagram or Twitter that focuses on travel can be very useful for rekindling a desire to travel, and for allowing viewers to immerse themselves fully in the scene (Ndou et al., 2022). The author notes further that tourists tend increasingly to value such 'try before buying' and 'explore digitally first' encounters.

Moreover, experiential travel and the growth of 'digital nomads', a term that is used to describe persons who make a living working remotely while travelling provides prospects for edutourism (Noorashid & Chin, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2021; Wesgro, 2020). About half of millennial and Gen-Z tourists, according to the World Youth Student and Educational Travel Confederation (WYSETC), are engaging in different forms of experiential travel, like working, studying languages, pursuing their higher education, au pairing and volunteering while they are abroad, with them increasingly coming to look for locations that provide opportunities for personal development (WYSETC, 2022). These young tourists, who constitute many South African visitors, often stay longer and spend more money than other categories of tourists (Wesgro, 2020). Interestingly, as most businesses allowed their employees to work remotely, due to the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, greater opportunities for edutourism travel than had previously been available also arose, while enabling job retention, owing to the enhanced possibilities provided by the opportunities made available for remote work and digital nomadism.

Growing discussions about the viability of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) for the edutourism industry were already taking place before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, with the pandemic having brought such issues to the fore. Consequently, the pandemic has led to a rise in the use of immersive technologies (Tiwari et al., 2021), with university campus tours at many universities across the world using such technologies extensively (Liang et al., 2021:354), as well as on educational sites, like those of museums (Bafadhal & Hendrawan, 2019:76). Furthermore, a survey conducted by Maximize Market Research (2022) established that the global market for VR in education is expected to reach \$18.71 billion by 2027. As a result, while the COVID-19 pandemic significantly damaged the edutourism sector, numerous opportunities arose for implementation or improvements to support the industry going forward and to restore it to its former lead position.

Conclusions and future research pathways

Research in the edutourism domain has struggled to keep pace with industry development. The current study recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic impinged immensely devastating impacts on the edutourism industry in South Africa. The pandemic led to a sharp decline in international travel and disruptions to educational activities resulting in substantial decreases in edutourism demand. Acknowledging the paucity of available empirical inquiries into the impact of COVID-19 on the edutourism industry in South Africa, the results from the present



study can assist in bringing about an understanding of the challenges involved in, and the prospects for, the post-COVID recovery of the sector. Consequently, the further enquiry that is recommended should consider a long-term impact assessment of the pandemic on the edutourism sector, investigate the specific market segments within the edutourism industry, explore the diverse educational content and experiences that attract edutourists, investigate the integration of sustainability and responsible tourism practices within the edutourism sector, examine the role of technology and virtual learning in the context of edutourism and consider the policy frameworks and collaboration mechanisms between the government, educational institutions, and tourism operators in promoting edutourism in South Africa.

This study adds a modest, yet important contribution to the theoretical understanding of pandemics, in terms of their control and the effects that they can have on the educational and travel sectors, particularly from the perspective of South Africa. This area of focus has largely been neglected in the past, making the findings in this study capable of adding to the current body of literature in this respect. For example, the present study established that, although the COVID-19 related restrictions had a major impact on the viability of all businesses within the edutourism industry, the use of key technological platforms (like social media, virtual tours, phone apps, computer-based technology and VR/AR), could be leveraged in aiding the industry in its recovery processes.

Unquestionably, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered, or at least prompted, a re-evaluation of the growth of edutourism. Indeed, the pandemic has highlighted how crucial innovation, adaptation and resilience are to the survival and sustainability of the tourism sector (Bama et al., 2022). Consequently, it is prudent for all the involved parties concerned to re-examine and re-evaluate the current edutourism industry, particularly considering the development of recovery strategies and policies that should prioritise edutourists requirements for travel and safety. Such strategies and policies should be approached in a spirit of innovativeness and open-mindedness. This study, therefore, could serve as a springboard for further investigation into the effects and consequences of COVID-19 on the edutourism market in South Africa and other developing countries. Furthermore, stemming from the debates, key avenues for further research are suggested. As the focus area of edutourism has largely been neglected in the extant literature, additional studies could be undertaken, particularly in the South African context. Additionally, different ways of improving the effectiveness of marketing platforms, particularly for edutourism post-COVID, could be explored. Finally, a comparative study of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on edutourism across the various regions of the African continent particularly, and other continents more broadly could be pursued.

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