

Examining Students' Perceptions of Process-Based Learning in the Context of Tourism Higher Education

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Objectives | In recent decades, the landscape of Higher Education has undergone significant changes, profoundly influenced by the rapid expansion of knowledge on learning (Biggs et al., 2022). This shift provides a unique opportunity to shape more effective educational practices (Darling-hammond et al., 2020). Within the realm of education, the Process-based Learning approach integrates theory and practice, aiming to facilitate the learning process (Connell & Seville, 2009). Process-based Learning adopts a holistic perspective, where professors foster students' autonomy in learning and problem-solving through a structured framework, resulting in positive learning outcomes (Ashman & Conway, 1993). The emphasis on/of this approach is on the interactive process propelling/prompting the task forward, with students actively participating in their own learning. The professor, in turn, assumes a facilitator role, valuing students' experiences and knowledge as valuable resources for learning. To generate innovative thinking, students are encouraged to engage in meaningful learning, recognizing that mere memorization of facts and procedures is insufficient for acquiring essential skills (Biggs et al., 2022). Process-Based Learning pedagogy actively promotes the development of critical thinking (Connell & Seville, 2009), a pivotal soft skill crucial in the Tourism industry, where soft skills significantly impact business performance and competitiveness. While acknowledging the recognized benefits of Process-Based Learning for students' learning, this approach also presents challenges, particularly for those accustomed to traditional pedagogical models. Given the above, along with the scarce studies of Process-based Learning in Higher Education in Tourism, this exploratory paper aims to analyse students' perceptions and critical reflections at three stages: before, during, and after their PBL learning experience in a tourism-related undergraduate course.

Methodology | Data is being (was) collected through onsite focus group sessions involving 40 Portuguese students currently enrolled in the final year of a tourism undergraduate program at a Polytechnic Institute in northern Portugal. The focus group sessions were conducted at two

distinct moments in time, capturing participants' insights at the commencement and conclusion of the learning experience. Students were directly approached in the classroom and asked about their willingness to participate in the study. Prior to data collection, all participants were briefed about the research objectives and procedures. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Main results and contributions | This research emphasises the pivotal role of Process-based Learning in the concluding year of the tourism undergraduate program, exploring its potential to develop skills required by future professionals. The study is currently being conducted, and the perceptions of students on how they perceive and engage with the Process-based Learning approach to learning will be identified and analysed. By identifying their perspectives, the study seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness, challenges, and potential improvements associated with the innovative learning methodology and for designing and implementing learning processes in the context of tourism-related undergraduate programs, in particular to the final year of tourism education, and to inform quantitative studies.

Limitations | The limitations result from sample selection and location specificity. Participants were approached directly in the classroom, and their willingness to participate may introduce self-selection bias. The research is limited to a Polytechnic Institute in northern Portugal. The findings may not apply to other educational institutions or regions, limiting the transferability of the study findings.

Conclusions | This paper advocates for integrating process learning in the final year of tourism education, positioning it as a catalyst for fostering innovation and learning of technical and personal-related skills, preparing students to become skillful professionals in the dynamic and challenging tourism industry.

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