Educational tourism as a strategy for sustainable tourism development: Perspectives of Windhoek-based universities, Namibia

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Abstract | This study explored educational tourism as a strategy for sustainable tourism development, with a specific focus on Windhoek-based universities, Namibia. Based on twenty-three interviews conducted with international students and international relations-related staff across the three Windhoek-based universities, this study adopted a qualitative approach in exploring the perceptions of how the universities could leverage their educational tourism (edu-tourism) potential, so as to enhance sustainable tourism development in Namibia. By way of implementing a thematic analysis, the empirical findings suggest that the universities enrolled both long-term degree-seeking and short-term semester-based exchange students. While both categories of students were a potential source of sustainable edu-tourism receipts, no active structures were available for leveraging strategies for attracting such students. Furthermore, the respondents concurred that all three Namibian universities possessed the potential to attract international students to enrol in their programmes, which would contribute to the enhancement of cultural exchange and socio-economic leverages. The study proposes new insights into edu-tourism development in the Namibian context, the need for focused strategies, the development of policies and focused stakeholder engagement for capitalising on this tourism niche. The outcomes present practical leverages prompting Windhoek-based universities to recognise the importance of active participation in edu-tourism promotion, while contributing to the existing literature on the subject, especially in the developing context.

Keywords | Educational tourism, strategy, sustainability, tourism development, Windhoek-based universities

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1. Introduction

Travel and tourism in contemporary times have evolved from economic and social perspectives into a diversity of goods and services demanded by international travellers, thereby encouraging increases in economic activities and consumption (Sofronov, 2018). This evolution, catalysed by changing demands of tourists, has initiated a need for the edu-tourism niche. Choudhary et al, (2022) opine that the nexus between education and tourism lies in the symbiotic nature of their relationship, being complementary of each other. Edu-tourism refers to learning that involves aspects of pleasure and quality education with activities primarily emphasising students' needs, including emotional expression, social change, self-actualisation, intellectual development and the exploration and development of creative potential (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; Salgado et al., 2015; Thomas & Wee, 2022; Vieira et al., 2022). Edu-tourism, in the context of this enquiry, refers to international students as a niche market segment (Vieira et al., 2022). The increase in education-oriented travel in recent decades, and prior to COVID-19, had important outcomes for both host universities, countries, and for students, leading to the consideration of edu-tourism as a strategy for sustainable tourism development (Sharma, 2015; Tomasi et al., 2020). Consequently, there are contentions that enhancement in the edu-tourism potential of any destination improves overall tourism receipts, provides information encouraging biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage protection and engenders sustainable outcomes (Sharma, 2015; Vieira et al., 2022).

Despite the value of edu-tourism highlighted in scholarly and industry circles, the sector's potential as a catalyst for sustainable tourism development has frequently been overlooked by tourism professionals, marketers and national governments (Abrahams et al., 2023; Makuzva & Ntloko, 2021). Such oversight could in part be due to inadequate, or lack of fair participation of tourism industry experts in policy interventions for tourism development, ultimately resulting in policy formulation being dominated by politicians lacking insight into tourism development. Existing literature on this form of tourism highlights the need for it to be sustainable, highlighting the need for the establishment of programmes, awareness campaigns, and marketing initiatives which help attract tourists to the destination (Sharma, 2015). Given such focus, edu-tourism could become a growth strategy towards sustainable development (Vieira et al., 2022).

Contrasting generally held notions regarding the costly nature of the impacts of mass tourism, niche (edu-tourism) tourism has emerged as a relatively sustainable alternative (Progano, 2018), rendering empirical enquiry into the phenomenon in Namibia justified. With the plethora of literature focused on the Global North, the paucity of research on edu-tourism development in the Namibian context more specifically and in the Global South generally warrants this enquiry. Whereas most research conducted, and national policies on tourism development have largely centred around wildlife and natural resources, the need to diversify the Namibian tourism product, given various sustainability challenges to wildlife and natural resource product, validates this study. Furthermore, given the extant scholarship in edu-tourism suggests the need for such tourism to be sustainable, a dearth of such scholarship in this context, particularly from Namibian and African perspectives highlights a necessity for this enquiry. The central question, therefore, is: how could edu-tourism be leveraged as a strategy for sustainable tourism development in Namibia? As such, this study explores the possibility of sustainably enhancing edu-tourism development in Namibia, by focusing on all three Windhoek-based universities as locus, via a qualitative study.

2. Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the stakeholder theory proposed by Freeman (1984), on the perspective of value creation for sustainability. Stakeholder theory is believed to be a strategy for the development of sustainable tourism since the earliest days of related research. The stakeholder idea is construed as a way of organising information that has become increasingly important in terms of strategic planning (Freeman et al. 2018). The origins and early development of the theory were clearly aimed at making business policy and strategy more effective. In the extant literature on tourism studies, scholars draw attention to the significance of stakeholder theory (Bama & Tichaawa, 2021; Waligo et al., 2013). Aligning with Freeman (1984), a plethora of studies highlight that the centrepiece for sustainable tourism, including edu-tourism, involves paying close consideration to the rights and interests of all legitimate stakeholders involved (Waligo et al., 2013). Adopting this approach, it is considered, would assist organisations to make responsible decisions that will promote both their strategic goals and their social welfare (Abrahams et al., 2023; Bama et al., 2022; Jamal & Stronza, 2009). Dameri and Ferrando (2021) highlight the perspective of stakeholder theory that suggests that the joint efforts of the stakeholders towards value creation are systematic, with the lack of support from any stakeholder likely to affect the sustainability of any related business. For this study, the Windhoek-based universities comprised the key stakeholders, with the intention of exploring the benefits of leveraging edu-tourism from the international student segment, a segment that has not yet been considered within Namibia's tourism framework. Here, Namibia could be overlooking an opportunity to attract international students travelling to tourist attractions therein, while studying there, providing a stimulus to the existing latent demand. Therefore, the Namibia Tourism Board should collaborate with the Windhoek-based universities to harness the potential of this niche market, which, in turn, could aid in attracting tourists numbers to the country through good word of mouth. Figure 1 highlights the components of the stakeholder theory according to Freeman (1984), which also informs the basis for the discussions in this study.
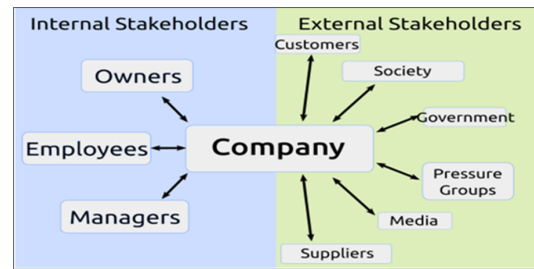

Figure 1 | Stakeholder Theory
Source: Freeman, 1984

2.1. Conceptualising educational tourism

Thomas and Wee (2022) assert that the literature on edu-tourism is wide-ranging, and sometimes confusing and confounding. McGladdery and Lubbe (2017) describe edu-tourism and international education as being similar concepts, given that they are both learning mobilities that are associated with the area visited. Contrastingly however, edu-tourism can be applied to all stages of life, while international education is usually considered a tertiary-level educational concern (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). Similarly, Nagai and Kashiwagi (2018) concur that tourism which includes learning-based travel activities is seen as edu-tourism. 'Education-first' travel refers to travel experience as part of formal learning; whereby the tourist experiences are secondary to the educational activities (Nagai and Kashiwagi, 2018). In addition, Tanhueco-Nepomuceno (2019) defines international education as the combination of international, intercultural or global dimensions: the process of integrating international, intercultural or broadened horizons into the purpose, function

and/or delivery of post-secondary education.

Nagai and Kashiwagi (2018) suggest that engaging in educational activities while travelling can be traced back several centuries, as people throughout history have travelled both domestically and internationally, so as to acquire new knowledge or to learn about a new culture, language, history, landscape or similar subject. For instance, the Grand Tour represents a historical learning mobility of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, undertaken by young British aristocrats, throughout Europe for a period lasting from several months to several years, and considered an important part of young aristocrats' maturation and education (Nagai & Kashiwagi, 2018). Despite their similarities and differences international education and edu-tourism positively contribute to the tourism activities at a destination. Moreover, both tourism forms assist receiving destinations in terms of the offshoots of a ripple effect, as returning students could invite relatives while spreading favourable word of mouth about Namibia in their respective countries.

2.2. Benefits of educational tourism

Effectively implemented edu-tourism follows sustainable development principles. The benefits of edu-tourism are threefold, being on the students, universities and host countries concerned. McGladdery and Lubbe (2017) contend that edu-tourism reinforces classroom learning, brings the curriculum to life, connects students with potential employers, and develops curiosity and new perspectives. Edu-tourism has also been established in the literature and described as a process by which students become more interculturally competent, thereby developing skills and knowledge that enable them to communicate effectively and behave appropriately within cultural settings that differ from theirs (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). Nagai and Kashiwagi (2018) acknowledge the usefulness of edu-tourism, not only in helping students acquire knowledge but also in fostering personal growth.

Additionally, edu-tourism is regarded as one of the most important segments of the tourism industry, particularly in Asian countries. Edu-tourism is noted to have a significant socio-economic impact on the host destinations involved, both during the initial trip and through future referral visits. Tang (2021) averred that the internationalisation of tertiary education has added a new dimension to existing travel patterns, with education emerging as an important subsector in tourism. The subsector has grown significantly in size over the last two decades, as evidenced by data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, illustrating that global student mobility expanded by approximately 6 per cent per annum, growing from 1.7 million students in 1995 to 3 million in 2005 before reaching 4.6 million in 2015 (Tang, 2021).

Hussein et al., (2022) assert that the trend of international student travel has great potential post the COVID-19 pandemic, citing that a record 5.0 million people travelled abroad to pursue higher education in 2018, an increase of 8.70 per cent compared to 2017. Consequently, the increasing levels of international student demand are bound to increase their total expenditure, as the consumers of goods offered by the higher education sector and by the other economic sectors in the host country (Tomasi et al., 2020). The costs incurred by international students during their study period are a source of income that is likely to have a spill-over effect on the host country's economy. Given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry, Abrahams and Bama (2022) consider that, through the industry's resilience to external forces, institutions and tourism organisations should develop plans that will benefit the stakeholders involved for the period post the pandemic. However, in doing so, the issue of virtual learning, as induced by the COVID-19 pandemic,

should not be neglected, as it could have placed the matter of the sustainability of tourism through edu-tourism in question, since limited to no international travel due to circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic could portend negative spill-over effects (Carneiro & Malta, 2007; Makuzva & Ntloko, 2021; Abrahams et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the general impact of the above on the economy is important, since edu-tourists tend to stay in the host country longer than other students. During their stay, the students tend to socialise with, and develop emotional bonds with the destination. Such links lead to the forming of a closer relationship with the sociocultural context, leading to the repetition of similar trips in the future, so as to continue learning, visiting friends who were first made at the destination, or even sharing the background of past tourist experiences with their families and friends (Castillo Arredondo et al., 2018). Ultimately, their experiences might also help reduce stereotypes and spread the reality and cultural richness of the host country involved.

2.3. Factors influencing the development of educational tourism

Harazneh et al. (2018) identified several factors influencing students when choosing educational institutions abroad. The medium of communication is a key factor influencing the development of edu-tourism at any destination. Use of the English language, for instance, places higher education institutions at the beckon of a broader audience, and increases their competitive advantage, to what might otherwise be the case (Carneiro & Malta, 2007; Harazneh et al., 2018). Harazneh et al. (2018), further, state that potential edu-tourists are motivated by the desire to experience new cultures, and by the willingness to travel outside their home country. Consequently, universities and tertiary institutions tend to adopt internationalisation strategies, to enable them to attract and recruit international students and increase their market share. Universities' pull factors for international students include easy admission, international recognition and a safe environment, with, from the institution's perspective, the pull factors including course availability, expertise, cost of living, cheap accommodation and future employment prospects in the labour market of the host country. Conversely, the push factors in educational tourism's generating areas include the economic, political and host country capacity, which is contingent upon friends, family members, private agencies, media and word-of-mouth.

Castillo Arredondo et al. (2018) recognise the need for multilingual citizens as being a key factor in international education, which is increasingly evident in different social contexts, including in the existing labour market, as well as in the social integration, education and research contexts. In the above light, learning a foreign language, or improving one's foreign language skills, is a significant driving force for students to decide to enrol in international education, as well as for them choosing the destination abroad for studies. The wish to learn other languages has prompted the development of a new type of tourism, namely language tourism. Currently, the most studied foreign languages are English, French, Spanish and German, in this order (Castillo Arredondo et al., 2018). Tomasi et al. (2020) note opportunities for future career paths as another key factor influencing edu-tourism development, with their focus being on acquiring the necessary skills during the students' study-abroad period. Companies tend to be willing to hire students who have been exposed to studies at foreign universities, because they consider that such experiences would have afforded them the opportunity to acquire transversal skills, which are considered important for the world of work.

2.4. Challenges inhibiting the development of educational tourism

Despite edu-tourism's global allure, the number of educational travellers (international students), nevertheless, tends to remain small, with them constituting less than 0.5 per cent of the overall number of tourist arrivals (Tang, 2021). This low number of arrivals is attributed to the disregard of edu-tourism as a sector that can lead to economic development in the recipient countries by the policymakers. Maga and Nicolau (2018) suggest that the limited growth in edu-tourism and its impact on economic growth are one of the factors contributing to the slow development of edu-tourism. Quezada (2004), for example, highlights various issues that students have to face while studying abroad, like having to adapt to the curriculum, the need for peer contact and having to overcome language barriers (Choudhary & Srivastava, 2022).

Nagai and Kashiwagi (2018) identified two major challenges of, and hindrances to, edu-tourism development as being financial constraints and safety issues and concerns. Economic considerations clearly provide a potential barrier to overseas school trip planning, with destination marketers possibly being unable to overcome this issue directly, especially because of the high costs of transportation and the unfavourable currency exchange rates within certain jurisdictions involved. Safety issues resulting from political and economic crises and natural disasters also tend to have a direct impact on the international tourism industry, due to its susceptible and vulnerable nature, with the modern world experiencing many such predicaments (Nagai & Kashiwagi, 2018). The recent instance of the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely publicised as impinging very negative impacts on edu-tourism globally.

2.5. Educational tourism as an approach to sustainable tourism development

Bare et al. (2021) advise that the value orientation of edu-tourism-based local competency development should not simply be considered as a form of tourism business practice that is ultimately economic-oriented but should take into account its multidimensional and sustainable impact on community learning. For Bare et al. (2021) local competence consists of real potential owned and developed by the different regions, in terms of both natural potential and social, cultural, economic and institutional potential, including superior commodities and human resource potential that are worthy of being developed as a source of regional competitiveness. Choudhary et al. (2022) concur that edu-tourism should be adopted as the growth strategy for sustainable development, and, as a result, universities and educational institutions should be mandated to conduct education tours annually, to promote the development of tourism for education.

Choudhary et al, (2022) further state that the growing demand for learning new skills and for acquiring knowledge from internationally recognised universities has led to the development of edu-tourism, which comprises an exclusive international travel and tourism niche. The growing demands of, and trends in, travellers visiting new places and sites to undergo learning experiences of one kind, or another have added appeal for tourists.

3. Methods

The current study employed a qualitative research design in obtaining primary data from respondents, and, providing comprehensive descriptive data on edu-tourism (Abubakar et al., 2014). This primary data was obtained by the researchers

through conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-three participants from all three Windhoek-based universities.

The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth investigation of the variety of key stakeholder opinions and perceptions (Flick, 2014) around how edu-tourism could be leveraged as a strategy for sustainable tourism development in Namibia. The purposeful selection of the 23 participants (13 were international students, while 10 were staff members) was based on their knowledge, expertise, participation and involvement in aspects of edu-tourism in Namibia, and these included the faculties' international student coordinators; the student support officers; the international relations officers; the international relations office administrators; the tourism heads of department; and the international students. The three Windhoek-based universities included the International University of Management (IUM), the Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST) and the University of Namibia (UM). The study only included representatives who had been working for at least a year or more at any of the Windhoek-based universities and students who were 18 years or older.

Open-ended interview schedules were implemented, with questions relating to how the universities could leverage edu-tourism for their respective institutions in promoting sustainable tourism development. Semi-structured interviews were implemented to collect data from the international students on the motivations for studying abroad and from employees facilitating and developing programmes to promote international student enrolment on international student mobility (Kalu, 2019). The use of semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool enabled the collection of in-depth and focused data, and provided opportunity to probe secondary issues that arose during the interview (Kothari, 2004). Cossham and Johanson (2019) support that using key informants in qualitative research yields enhanced results when researching unfamiliar problems. Prior consent was

obtained from all participants, and the interview schedule was made available to them in advance to allow them to be familiarised with the content and expectations of the discussions. Questions were reflective of the aim of the study and literature consulted and revealed broad themes of focus (Darby & Fugate, 2019). Data collection continued until saturation was established (Guest et al., 2020) During the process, the transcripts and themes were constantly checked against the recordings and researchers' notes, to ensure reliability and validity (Bama & Tichaawa, 2020). The data was analysed thematically, and findings are discussed next.

4. Presentation of findings

Following the analysis of the interview transcripts, the data were grouped according to the varying conceptual categories and discussed in line with the apparent themes. Relevant codes were allocated to the transcripts and themes that were generated from the data. Figure 2 illustrates the themes that were extracted from the primary data.
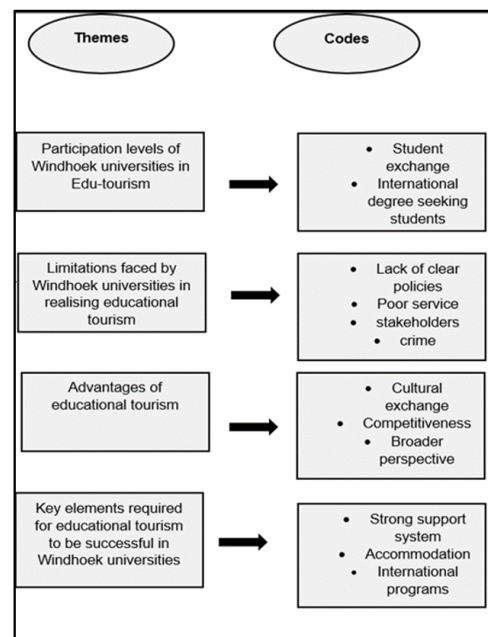

Figure 2 | Alignment of themes to research objectives
Source: own compilation

4.1. Demographic profile of the participants

The three Windhoek-based universities involved were identified as university A (UA), University B (UB), and university C (UC), while the codes P1 to P10 (for the employees) and S1 to S13 (for the students) were used to identify the participants, in order to satisfy the ethical considerations and anonymity requirements of the study. Of the international relations staff participants, six identified themselves as female. whereas the remaining four identified themselves as male. The near-gender parity achieved was purely a question of availability, convenience and willingness to participate in the study. Table 1 summarises the demographic profile of the participants concerned.

Table 1 | Demographic profile of the participants

Participant code	University	Gender	Highest qualification	Position held	Level of experience
P1	UA	Female	Master's degree	Marketing officer	5 years
P2	UA	Female	Honours degree	International student support officer	16 years
P3	UA	Male	Master's degree	Higher education professional	13 years
P4	UA	Female	Master's degree	Director of international relations	15 years
P5	UB	Male	PhD	Deputy director of international relations	15 years
P6	UB	Male	Master's degree	Marketing officer	7 years
P7	UB	Female	Master's degree	International student support officer	10 years
P8	UB	Female	Honours degree	Strategic marketing lecturer	12 years
P9	UC	Female	Master's degree	Marketing officer	6 years
P10	UC	Male	Master's degree	Marketing officer	4 years

Source: author's compilation

The participants, who mostly worked within the international relations departments at the Windhoek-based universities, were responsible for directing, coordinating and facilitating the international students' enrolment at the respective universities, while, in some cases, they were also involved in the marketing activities of the university. One of the participants identified as a university lecturer. The three marketing officers at each of the universities were responsible for the marketing activities of their universities relating to, among other issues, international student attraction. All the participants had over three years of work experience within the higher education environment. Most of the participants, who had postgraduate qualifications in various fields, worked directly with the international students enrolled at the different universities.

On the part of the degree-seeking international students and exchange students enrolled at the Windhoek-based universities, ten degree-seeking international students (eight studying tourism and two culinary art) were interviewed, as were three students who were on exchange programmes, thus making a total of thirteen international student interviewees. In terms of their nationalities, three students were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, another three were from Zimbabwe, one was from Angola, one was from Swaziland, and one was from Kenya, with all three on the exchange

programme being from Austria. Of the thirteen international students interviewed, nine were female while four were male. All the students interviewed were over the age of 18 years. Table 2 summarises the demographic profile of the students concerned.

Table 2 | Demographic profile of the students

Student code	Age	Gender	Area of study	Nationality
S1	21	Female	Tourism	DRC
S2	22	Female	Tourism	DRC
S3	20	Female	Tourism	DRC
S4	27	Female	Tourism	Zimbabwe
S5	40	Female	Culinary art	Zimbabwe
S6	20	Female	Tourism	Zimbabwe
S7	31	Female	Tourism	Zambia
S8	22	Male	Tourism	Eswatini
S9	35	Male	Tourism	Angola
S10	22	Male	Culinary art	Kenya
S11	24	Male	Tourism	Austria
S12	25	Female	Tourism	Austria
S13	24	Female	Tourism	Austria

Source: author's compilation

The international students interviewed were also requested to indicate where they had acquired knowledge of the Windhoek-based universities. Figure 3 presents an overview of the responses received from the participating students.
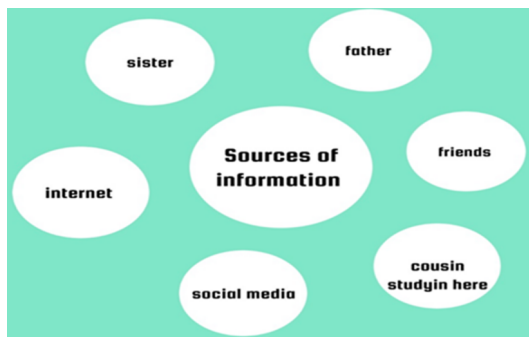
Figure 3 | Students' source of information regarding the universities
Source: Author's compilation

Students revealed that they had learnt about the universities from various sources, like other fa-

mily members and friends, while some had searched the internet, as they had intended to study outside their home country, with their preferred destination being Namibia. In addition, other students noted that they were informed about Windhoek-based universities by their home university when they sought opportunities to engage in exchange programmes. The following discussion was aimed at gaining an understanding of the participation levels of the Windhoek-based universities in edu-tourism.

4.2. Participation levels of the Windhoek-based universities in edu-tourism

The results obtained in the above respect (see Figure 4) show that the universities concerned mainly enrolled two categories of international students, namely full-degree students and semester students. Degree-seeking students were enrolled through their international relations offices, while semester or exchange students were enrolled through the establishment of partnerships and collaborations with international university partners. To this end, one of the study participants (P4), a director of international relations at one of the universities (UA), agreed that their university was involved in educational tourism, stating:

> Yes, we are involved, because we are involved in facilitating the movement of students for both full-degree programmes and those coming for exchange programmes. When those students apply for an exchange at the university, they apply through our department, and, when a student is admitted, we provide them with logistical information, like engaging [i.e. how to engage] with faculty officers. Full-degree students are admitted through the registrar's office, and how we come

in as a department is to assist the students with study permit applications, and [we] facilitate their orientation by inviting the city police and Home Affairs officials to tell them about what is required from them, and we also find out their expectations during the orientation for both full-degree students and exchange students.

Similarly, another of the participants (P5), a deputy director of international relations at one of the universities (UB), concurred with the above and even went further on the issue, so as to explain the primary source markets of the international students concerned. The deputy director confirmed:

> Yes, the university enrols international students who come for different reasons from [Angola, Zimbabwe, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Malawi]. To get exposure outside of their own country, some believe that the university offers a better context and environment for higher education studies. Other international students come from far-away countries, for the purposes of being in a different context, for intercultural benefit and for seeing a different world. By virtue of that, the institution is involved in educational tourism, although we do not pronounce it as [i.e. call it] educational tourism, but ... international education.

The self-same approach was further corroborated by a marketing officer (P10) from one of the universities (UC), who noted:

I believe the university is involved in educational tourism, because we enrol international students on exchange programmes, who stay for a semester, and long-term international students registered in our bachelor's and even master's degrees, from [the] DRC, Zimbabwe, Angola and Zambia.

The international relations offices at all three universities highlighted that their responsibilities included the issuing of admission letters, coordinating registration and linking degree-seeking students with their respective embassies. Regarding the international semester students, the universities, through their international relations offices, established links between the exchange students and the local communities, recommended accommodation, cautioned international exchange/semester students on maintaining their safety and security in Windhoek, and organised orientations/inductions, in terms of which vital information was shared with the students upon their arrival at the Windhoek-based universities. Enhanced pedagogies, cultural diversity, training and academic qualifications attracted international students to Windhoek-based universities. One would surmise from these findings that suggestions by Choudhary et al., (2022) that edu-tourism be adopted as the growth strategy for sustainable development by universities was being heeded as the results point to the Windhoek-based universities' adoption and participation in activities that promote the development of edu-tourism.

Figure 4 below illustrates the participation levels of the Windhoek-based universities in educational tourism, together with the categories of tasks performed by the international relations offices for each category of students.
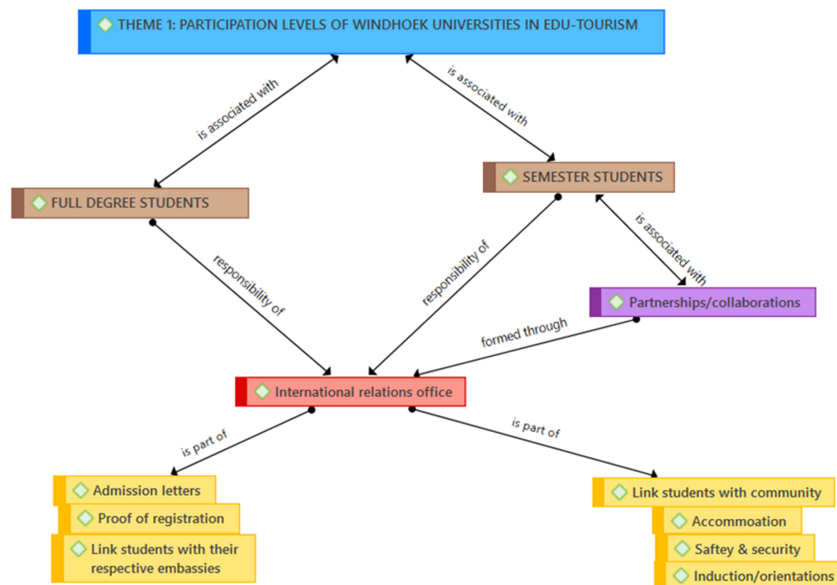
Figure 4 | Participation levels of Windhoek-based universities in edu-tourism Source: own compilation

4.3. Limitations facing Windhoek-based universities in terms of leveraging edu-tourism potential

Participants noted the negative image of the sub-Saharan region, the lack of a dedicated policy for international student recruitment and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) higher education protocol, which states that international students ought not to be charged tuition fees that differ from Namibian students. Furthermore, the results revealed that safety and security, a lack of accommodation, challenges with immigration and visa issues, a lack of relevant educational packages, the inadequate capacity of Windhoek-based universities, a lack of stakeholder involvement, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of management support are some of the obstacles preventing the realisation of sustainable edu-tourism at Windhoek-based universities. In this regard, one of the participants (P1) from UA stated:

Not much is done to attract international students to the university, but, at the beginning of every academic year,

we send emails to our partner universities to remind them of the dates [on] which they can send students, [the] flying times, [the] acceptance for visas and the dates which the semester starts, and that they have to be present at the beginning of the semester.

Furthermore, some of the limitations facing Windhoek-based universities were highlighted by the deputy director of international relations (P5) at one of the universities (UB) as indicated in the following excerpt:

In as much as Windhoek universities would want to have many international students, spaces in the universities are very limited. Some Namibian students struggle to enrol, as the courses are easily filled up. Even if Windhoek universities create a quota for international students, [there is] a lack of programmes which could draw international students to the country. There is no uniqueness in the current programmes offered to attract internatio-

nal students. Of concern is a lack of accommodation for international students.

Additionally, a key resource person (P3) intimated the challenge of not having specific strategies aimed at attracting more international students, by asserting:

I should say we are not actively involved in educational tourism, because the university is not engaged in marketing aimed at attracting international students. We only receive [i.e. attract] international students by chance.

In concurrence, and in terms of decrying the lack of stakeholder collaboration and involvement, the deputy director of international relations (P5) at one of the universities (UB) alluded to the lack of leverage, noting that, even though some embassies promote Namibian universities, there is no active engagement on the part of the universities and government to gain strategic leverage from this. Accordingly, the participant (P5) noted:

We do not have active stakeholders, even though there are embassies that do promote the universities of Namibia, where we are represented. Information can be obtained there as well.

Other challenges raised by the participants involved concerns related to issues of safety and security, the supply of adequate accommodation, the lack of stakeholder engagement, and budgeting. Commenting on the element of safety and security, a participant (P6) from one of the universities (UC) stated:

International students become victims of fraud. Some crimes are perpetrated by taxi drivers from the university to

their [i.e. the students'] accommodations, which sometimes are far away from the school. ... Poor service from tourism suppliers in Namibia affects the flow of international students to the country. Students go out to experience Namibian tourism, then there is a spinoff, and certain tourism sectors are not up to standard.

This view was shared by other participants, with one of them (P7) noting the following:

International students, especially exchange students from overseas, become victims of robbery when coming to school and back to their accommodation, which sometimes is far away from the universities. The taxi drivers sometimes overcharge them the taxi fare, because of their skin colour and lack of knowledge. The school accommodation does not have enough space.

Participants also noted that the procedure through which they had to go to acquire study permits in Namibia was long and frustrating, particularly for the degree-seeking category of international students. Study permits are sometimes approved very late, or sometimes they are not approved at all, which frustrates the students, because they end up lacking the requisite documentation permitting them to be in the country for study purposes. One participant (P10) indicated:

Sometimes, in the middle of their academic year, [their] student permits application is rejected, when they have already completed the first semester, and now they are unable to continue with the second semester, because they are [in effect, then,] illegal immigrants. All three Windhoek universities have similar challenges, and there

was an organised meeting with the Ministry to address these issues, whereby the Ministry promised to improve and respond [to applications] on time, but there has not been any improvement.

The findings further align with extant studies indicating that many factors contribute to the slow and sometimes non-pursuance of international scholarship by students (Abrahams & Bama, 2022; Maga & Nicolau, 2018; Tang, 2021). A concerted and collaborative effort by all stakeholders is therefore required to surmount the highlighted challenges (Dameri & Ferrando, 2021; McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017; Tomasi et al., 2020). Figure 5 below summarises the constraints that the Windhoek-based universities encounter in attempting to ensure sustainable educational tourism, based on the findings gleaned from the interviews that were conducted with the participants.
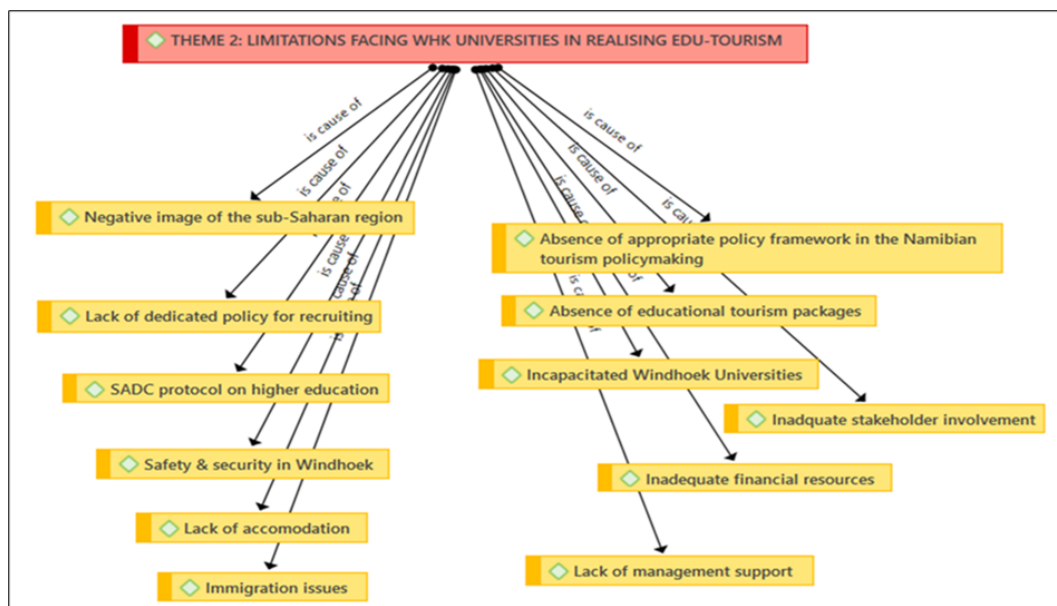

Figure 5 | Limitations facing Windhoek-based universities in realising edu-tourism

On their part, the international students also noted a plethora of challenges that impeded further enrolment and engagement in edu-tourism at the Windhoek-based universities. The challenges included the following constraints; the lack of a dedicated department for processing international students' applications; a lack of financial resources, in the form of scholarships or student loans; and the difficulties encountered with attempting to find suitable accommodation and with obtaining study permits or visas timeously, and for the entire duration of their studies. In terms of application-related concerns, one participant (S6) highlighted the following issue:

> I would say that the Windhoek universities should really work hard to improve their services, as [the] international students [have to] apply to study. The university delays responding to the students, and [, consequently,] I ended up making [i.e. having to make] calls to inquire on the status of my applications. It was really frustrating to [try to] get a place at this university.

Another participant agreed with the above view, noting that the universities needed to improve their service towards international students, as, otherwise, their poor service would be likely to contribute to negative outcomes. The participant concerned (S10) indicated:

> For me, it's time management; it's quite poor. So, I end up panicking when doing last-minute things. I guess [that they should] improve [on] their communication. Students should be well informed before coming [to the university]. I think, for now, that's the major issue.

Linked to the foregoing were the concerns regarding student accommodation, which some participants considered was either inconvenient or unaffordable, in some cases. A key informant (S13) contended the following, in this regard:

> Windhoek universities do not have enough space in their school hostels. They should make arrangements with private accommodation operators, so that they can charge them students' fees, on condition that they bring them more international students. When universities lease private accommodation, … make the rooms suitable for students, like having study tables, lamps and [they] should be [situated] away from shebeens, as they [i.e. the shebeens] cause a lot of noise.

A particular concern that seemed to echo among a cross-section of the participants regarded immigration and visa-related concerns. Regarding such constraints, the participants cited various factors, with a participant (S7) stating:

> Making it easier for students to obtain their study permits, perhaps ensuring

their permits are valid for the duration of their various courses and ensuring there is [i.e. are] one or two members of staff who deal with the study permit process on behalf of the students, to avoid the long queues at the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration.

Concurring with the above, another participant (S3) highlighted the challenges experienced with immigration issues, by means of indicating the following:

> [The] immigration office [needs] to improve on their service … because, when you apply for a study permit, [doing so] is not good, because you must apply every year. Before it was three years, [and] we could be allowed to choose the years you are studying. Now it [has] changed. But, now they are only limiting [the students to] one year, and it's really taking long [for the applications] to be processed.

Given the challenges and limitations highlighted by the participants, the next request was for the participants to highlight those areas of improvement that should assist the universities to leverage, and benefit from, more sustainable edu-tourism opportunities.

4.4. Requirements for sustainable edu-tourism at Windhoek-based universities

A key requirement revealed by the interviews was the need for greater stakeholder collaboration than before (Dameri & Ferrando, 2021). Thus, the universities need to collaborate with both the public (in the form of the government) and private sectors to make the edu-tourism development

taking place at Windhoek-based universities successful. In addition, the results revealed that the Windhoek-based universities need to establish a balance (in terms of a quota system) between international students and Namibian students. In addition, the responsibilities of the Department of International Relations need to be revised, as well as there is a need for modalities to be put in place to safeguard the university accommodation provided for international students, for the internationalisation of programmes, for enhanced pedagogy, and for promoting a culturally diverse university environment, as well as academic training and qualifications. In the above light, a participant (P2) highlighted the need for greater engagement in relation to the resolving of immigration and visa-related issues, stating:

> Windhoek universities and the Ministry of Home Affairs should work hand-in-hand to improve the processes of obtaining study permits.

Furthermore, another participant (P6) concurred, intimating the following:

> International students should be accommodated in university accommodations so that they do not become victims of crimes in the city. ... Development of international student associations/clubs within the university allows them to thrive within their immediate space and [to] take care of their [own] needs.

Additionally, a participant (P5) noted:

> The university [should] offer psychsocial support to the students, connect the student[s] with their embassies, and make associations for [the] international students, so that they can have a support system [in place].

Other findings that were attributed to the government's efforts to develop an infrastructure aimed at enhancing edu-tourism in Windhoek, at building additional higher education facilities, at specific policy development on educational tourism, at promoting Namibian culture and at improving the immigration processes.

Lastly, the private sector needs to promote tourism products and tour operator packages for educational tourism, as well as improved service, stakeholder collaboration and organised cultural activities. Figure 6 illustrates the results related to the necessary requirements for sustaining sustainable edu-tourism at Windhoek-based universities.

For the students interviewed, such reasons as the availability of essential resources, a conducive learning environment, and the opportunity to experience a new culture, gain exposure and expand their knowledge in the field of tourism were motivating factors for choosing to attend the Windhoek-based universities. Key among the considerations was that educational tourism, via international education, broadened the potential of the students concerned, in terms of the career opportunities and exposure for participating students enabled. Participant P6, in the above light, stated:

> When students are at university, they are at a very interesting stage of life. Exposure beyond education or campus makes them a rounded person, a rounded global citizen. In that way, they can gain knowledge and awareness of other areas. Students benefit in terms of education, cultural diversity [and] social dynamics. Students benefit from educational tourism, because it enhances their maturity and independence, since they will be away from their parents and families.

As such, the results highlight that edu-tourism enhances networking between students of different

backgrounds, opens up horizons, promotes professional growth, affords students foreign qualifications, promotes intercultural competencies and enhances their employability advantages. Some participants noted that they were motivated by the desire to learn about other cultures and to gain exposure, as well as by the desire to become internationally and culturally experienced, and to expand their knowledge in the field of tourism.
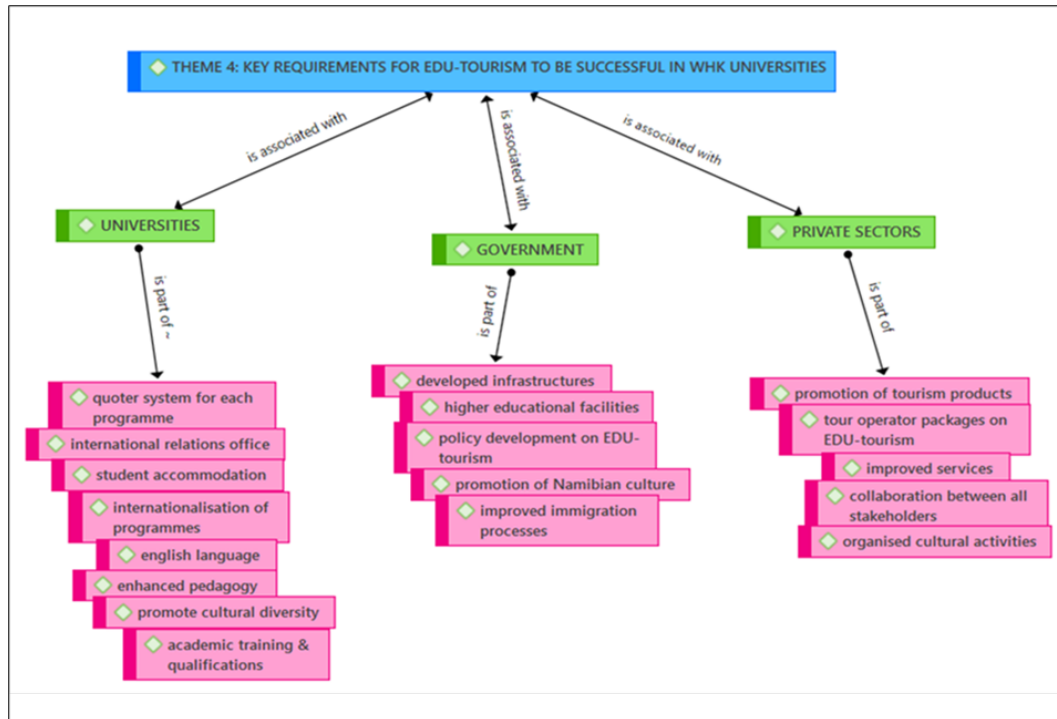

Figure 6 | Requirements for a sustainable edu-tourism at Windhoek-based universities

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study presented an initiation point for considering the potential for edu-tourism development at Windhoek-based universities in Namibia. Firstly, there is evidence from the outcomes of the study that all three Windhoek-based universities participated in educational tourism, albeit informally, as they all enrolled long-term degree-seeking students and short-term semester-based exchange students. However, due to the limited formal approach adopted towards the planning for the student niche concerned, both in terms of the available infrastructure and in terms of the marketing efforts involved, the potential leverages were not harnessed. The need, therefore, exists for concerted efforts to be made in terms of establishing policies, providing the necessary infrastructure, and engaging in adequate and focused marketing campaigns, so as to attract international students to the respective universities. The call for stakeholder collaboration in this regard has been highlighted.

Secondly, the study participants intimated the existence of a plethora of hurdles that discouraged students from selecting Windhoek-based universities for their educational purposes. The challenges concerned ranged from immigration and visa-related issues to the lack of accommodation and the maintenance of their safety and security, which were among the issues raised by the students interviewed. To surmount the challenges involved, suggestions were made that dedicated offices should

be established at the institutions, which should be ready and available when they are called upon to support international students in overcoming challenges when they arise. Furthermore, the communication between all the stakeholders had to be enhanced, so as to help ensure that the students were kept abreast with the changing higher education landscape in Namibia, especially in the area of visa requirements for international students. The existing literature in this area encouraged stakeholder collaboration for value creation (Abrahams et al., 2023; Sharma, 2015; Voleva-Petrova, 2020). Such issues are especially important, given that Namibia is relatively attractive in terms of the beauty of its destination, the country's political stability, the flexible governmental regulations, the use of the English language as the medium of education, the financial affordability of education and the superior quality of education.

Thirdly, due to the need to establish a sustainable edu-tourism niche, as guided by the three Windhoek-based universities, a key suggestion relates to the making of a further enquiry regarding how the challenges that have been identified could be dealt with from a stakeholder involvement perspective, as well as from a policy consideration perspective. Such a study could provide valuable feedback that would serve to enhance the collaboration among the three universities concerned while establishing areas of confluence that could benefit the associated edu-tourism niche in Namibia.

Fourthly, and though not conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current study cannot ignore the scope and extent of the impacts of the pandemic on the edu-tourism sector more broadly. Consequent on these widely felt shocks, the study suggests a continent-wide resilience strategy when faced with shocks such as those caused by the pandemic and more generally since the edu-tourism sector, as a microcosm of the tourism sector is prone and exposed to vulnerabilities and shocks of various severities (Bama & Nyikana,

2021; Nyikana & Bama, 2023). Additionally, the present study established that there was a paucity of consultation among the key stakeholder groups involved. It is, therefore, imperative to set up a framework to guide how the communication between the different stakeholder groups concerned with and impacted by, such challenges should be managed more broadly than at present.

Finally, outcomes of this study also shed light on the existence of only limited extant enquiry into the phenomenon of edu-tourism in Namibia specifically, Africa and the Global South more broadly. In the absence of rigorous scholarship and enquiry from an African perspective, this study makes a modest contribution to the development of emerging literature on the Global South and Africa in particular and thereby lays a pathway for further enquiry from an African focus point on the development and promotion of edu-tourism as a strategy from sustainable tourism development. Calls for further enquiry aimed at contributing to the development of theoretical and conceptual tenets for edu-tourism development in this regard abound.

Acknowledgements

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