Evolution of a doctoral thesis research topic and methodology: A personal experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an insight into the practical process of identifying the research philosophy, methods and research topic by doctoral students. The paper draws from my personal experiences on the dilemma and challenges of the doctoral research process in tourism management. I argue that finding the gap in the literature is a journey negotiated with the literature until the final days of the doctoral thesis. However, not all my experiences are captured in this paper. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that all the experiences that doctoral students go through were evaluated, especially that the paper is based on the account of one person – myself. Other students may have had different experiences. The significance of this paper is that it identifies the ways in which doctoral studies evolve and identifies further research opportunities in multi-disciplinary research in tourism.

1. Introduction

When I saw the invitation from the Editor of Tourism Management for the submission of articles on the research, policy and practice of tourism, what came to my mind was the extent to which tourism scholars ever share their experiences, and the extent to which such experiences can be considered valuable to others in the field of tourism. More significantly, there is a growing number of research students studying tourism whose experiences may not necessarily be represented by established researchers in the field. We are struggling to pass; we are struggling to establish ourselves and to make a significant contribution in a field whose boundaries are less clear. This is signified by our increasing number in international conferences and the increasing number of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students enrolling or graduating each year. We are a people whose experiences need to be shared at a time when there is a growing discontentment about the relevance of 'the classic PhD degree' in the social science. This discontentment has been strongly voiced both in Australia and in the United Kingdom (Anon, 2006; Boddy, 2007; Hoddell, Street, & Wildblood, 2002; Thomas, 2007).

Citing Karl Weick's seminal book entitled Sensemaking in Organizations Bowerman (2000, p. 130) emphasises the need to "use one's own life as data, and a search for those outcroppings and ideas that fascinate" I therefore use some events in my life that have influenced the writing of this paper. On 14th February 2007, I received an email from a colleague, which read as follows: ''Hello Professor Jaloni, since you're the master of all things relating to methodology, epistemology, ontology, etc. here is a question for you. How do I identify my view of the world?'' The author of the email was a doctoral student at the time. I had just submitted my thesis for examination on 26th October the previous year. This was not surprising because I had been nicknamed the 'methodology professor' by my peers. This email helped me to reflect more on my PhD journey. There are many books on how to get a PhD (Brause, 2000; Calabrese, 2006; Finn, 2005; Phillips & Pugh, 2005). Most of these books emphasise the institutional and organisational forms necessary for the accomplishment of a PhD. Some of these books also discuss how to choose a research topic (Brause, 2000; Calabrese, 2006) and research methodology (Calabrese, 2006; Finn, 2005), presumably after the problem statement, the purpose and significance of the study have been discussed. Based on the above, some business schools in Australian universities reject or accept doctoral students. It may be argued that it is not enough for universities to base their decisions of admitting students on a research proposal rather than based on their educational qualifications. These universities just like most of the writers on how to get PhDs are oblivious to the metamorphosis which the researcher goes through as the PhD progresses. While the area of interest or research topic may remain the same, the problem statement, the purpose and significance of the study, research questions and methodology evolve with the student's academic maturity. This maturity is closely linked to the students' interaction with their supervisors, peers

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and attendance of international conferences on tourism and other related disciplines.

My experience, and that of many other doctoral students I have discussed my area of interest with, both in the University of Ballarat where I was a student, and international conferences I have attended, attest to the fact that the problem statement, purpose, significance, research questions and methodology of the study are not static. Doctoral students keep on changing their research topics and methodologies as they go through "a brutal, mind blowing experience" (Brause, 2000, p. 12) resulting in them viewing the world in new lenses, ready to face new problems. As doctoral students obtain more or new information, they redirect their journeys. One important forum for information gathering, apart from keeping abreast with new books and journal publications, is international conferences. Some universities have recognized the importance of conferences to doctoral students to the extent that they fund their students to present their work at such conferences. The attendance of these conferences is important because these are the forums at which students' ideas are tested, and they find others who have similar academic interests and meet writers whose work they have depended upon. As Ryan (2005, pp. 12–13) observes, a conference is theoretically "an opportunity for the testing of ideas in front of an audience who may help the researcher refine the research."

In this paper, I shed some light on how my PhD evolved. In doing so, I also reflect on the work of those writers whose ideas were influential on mine at both methodological and disciplinary levels, and the level at which my own values have shaped my PhD thesis. I am aware that I am also opening up myself to criticism by those whose journeys, or those of their students have been radically different from mine. Our pathways are as 'eclectic' as the 'tourism discipline' we all seek to understand, and to avoid criticism in a way may stifle the richness associated with researching tourism.

2. Grappling with the research philosophy and methods

A major decision has to be made when one has to choose a methodological approach to tourism management or any subject because such a choice deeply reflects not only the nature and exigencies of the work to be provided but also the researcher's view of the social world. Every approach has its own interests and realm of application in the organisation, in research and in everyday life. There is a plethora of texts, which present a wide range of research methodologies from which to select the most appropriate for a particular research project. For instance, there are various dimensions for theoretical and methodological choices which are well captured by Burrell and Morgan (1979) whose abstract classification schema for understanding broad streams of social science approaches to empirical research has inspired many scholars (Chua, 1986; Laughlin, 1987, 1995).

Two major social science paradigms have dominated claims regarding their superiority in research – 'positivist/functional' and 'interpretive' approaches to research in management and tourism studies. Paradigms have been defined as "world-views that signal distinctive ontological (view of reality), epistemological (view of knowing and relationship between knower and to-be known), methodological (view of mode of inquiry), and axiological (view of what is valuable) positions" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 247). A paradigm represents a worldview that defines, for its holders "…the nature of the 'world,' the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as for examples, cosmologies and theologies do" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 200).

Many authors have identified a number of different paradigms which largely depend on this positivist/interpretive dichotomy (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Laughlin, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). It is argued that "…to be located in a particular paradigm is to view the world in a particular way" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 24). Paradigms, thus, define different views of the social world based upon different meta-theoretical assumptions with regard to the nature of science and society.

These methodological approaches are mostly relevant to strategy and tourism research. Jennings (2001) and Davies (2003) underscore the importance of these paradigms to tourism research. While evidence suggests that past tourism research has been largely dominated by quantitative methods (Dann, Nash, & Pearce, 1988), there is an increasing diversity of methodologies adopted by tourism researchers (Morgan & Bischoff, 2003) and that discussion of research philosophies as they apply to tourism research can no longer be neglected.

Therefore my doctoral programme was significant because it enhanced my understanding through weekly seminars conducted by the Office of Graduate Studies, discussions with colleagues and independent reading of different philosophical perspectives which for over many years have influenced learning and scholarly research. Understanding different research philosophies opens one's mind and the main focus was to choose a methodological paradigm that in the process would the research process.

2.1. Finalising the research philosophy and methods' issues

In order to make the appropriate choice one must have a broad understanding of different paradigms and their application to research. My choice of a methodological approach was further shaped by a process of reflection not only on various philosophical readings, but also on my own life, beliefs, past learning and experiences. It is on the basis of this reflection that my thesis (Pansiri, 2006b) *"Harambe: Strategic alliance formation and performance evaluation in the tourism sector of travel"* is premised on the ideas of pragmatism. The choice of pragmatism as a philosophy for researching social life was a journey that began at the University of Essex in 1995/1996 under the guidance of Professors Richard Laughlin and Jane Broadbent, who are committed Habermas scholars prepared to explore various research philosophies. They generated my interest in debates about the social world and reality.

My interest in the social world as socially constructed fitted well with Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism which has been a highly influential theory in sociology ever since it was coined by Blumer (1937) when he wrote an article identifying Mead as a "Symbolic Interactionist." Symbolic interactionism represents a "relatively distinct approach to the study of human group life and human conduct" (Blumer, 1969, p. 1), which "is concerned with the emergence of meaning in human interaction. Meanings are the definitions that individuals attach to the full range of objects (i.e. physical, social, cultural, political) that comprise their lifeworld. Meanings emerge through social interaction with others and the self, and ultimately become the basis of human and collective action" (Burnier, 2005, pp. 501–502). Blumer (1969, p. 35) argues that the social world is the actual group life of experience which consists of the actions of human beings, and that it is the world of everyday experiences of people as they meet the situations that arise from their respective worlds. According to this approach, the empirical world has a 'real' character, which appears in the 'here and now', and is continuously recast with new discoveries being made, which are achieved through careful and honest study. Hence, for my Master of Management Studies (MA) dissertation, I set forth on a short journey of a symbolic interactionist study of teams in a bureaucracy called *Teams in a Bureaucracy: A Case Study of A Local Borough Council in the South-East of London.*

No sooner had I graduated from the University of Essex in 1996 did I realised that my completed dissertation lacked basic statistical information that could have further enriched the qualitative data. To this end, I became more disgruntled with symbolic

interactionism – both the Chicago School with its emphasis on methodological purity that viewed qualitative data collection as the only means through which the social world can be accessed and understood, and the Iowa School's (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) emphasis on Manford, H. Kuhn's twenty statements on self attitudes test which cannot be used effectively to study complex areas like alliance formation, management and tourism.

When I enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of Ballarat, I set out to find a methodological philosophy that I could identify with. This included but was not limited to critical theory and critical realism. Going back to Laughlin's (1995) methodological themes, in one of his diagrams a link was made between symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. Laughlin (1995) made a claim that pragmatism's ideas are essentially premised on the reflections of the Kantean/Fichte/Dilthy philosophical thought of the 'projection of our minds'. Laughlin (1995, p. 69) says this about pragmatism:

> …that "typically American" (Kolakowski, 1972, p. 182) school of thought, following the thinking of Mead, James and Pierce, with its "getting-on-with-life" approach and its heavy borrowing from all and every way of thinking if it is deemed to be "relatively attractive" (Rorty, 1982) to the inquirer, can be seen to be located in this branching with its apparent belief in both subjective and objective dimensions to knowledge.

The link between pragmatism and symbolic interactionism is rooted in the social theory of the pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1853–1931), a philosopher who has remained a marginal figure in the circles of pragmatists. Blumer's (1954, 1966, 1969) symbolic interactionist approach was formed out of parts of Mead's work (Joas, 1990) as an attempt to provide symbolic interactionism with a legitimate symbolic figure (da Silva, 2006). Blumer was one of Mead's ex-students and perhaps the most prominent interpreter and devotee of Mead's philosophy. My MA dissertation was premised on Blumer's (1969) reconstruction of Mead's ideas from the point of view of a social scientist concerned with empirical research. Some of these ideas have had a strong influence on my doctoral thesis and are reflected in its methodology chapter, particularly Blumer's ideas on meanings and how they are handled through an interpretive process. The issue of a methodological philosophy was therefore concluded with a firm understanding of the historical roots of pragmatism and how my previous work fitted in.

While in search for a methodological identity, I also came across researchers who promote the use of mixed-methods research in the social sciences, psychology and education (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003; Creswell, Trout, & Barbuto, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Most of these researchers emphasises the fact that mixed-methods are best employed under pragmatism. My first impression on pragmatism was that it was a confused philosophy without any direction. At first, I agreed with Downward and Mearman's (2004) view of pragmatism as a 'vague' philosophy that should not be relied upon, a view I later challenged. Rorty's (1991, p. 27) definition of pragmatism as "the claim that the function of inquiry is, in Bacon's words, to 'relieve and benefit the condition of man' – to make us happier by enabling us to cope more successfully with the physical environment and with each other" was an indication that there is something about this philosophy that is good for mankind. Recent debates between Powell (2001, 2002, 2003) and positivist scholars, such as Durand (2002) and Arend (2003) on the logical and philosophical foundations of competitive advantage helped me to set the scene for a pragmatist agenda in both tourism and management research.

The idea of pragmatism emphasising on making social life better elated me because I grew up in rural Botswana where the principle of *botho/ubuntu* was a mind-set that glued communities together, even in times of unimaginable hardships. I was always reminded at home, to the point of indoctrination, that, 'a person is a person through other persons'. This ideal has shaped a great deal of my life. In the words of the former Archbishop of Cape Town, Tutu (1999, p. 31), *botho/ubuntu*

> …speaks of the very essence of being human…It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons'. It is not 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share'. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Pragmatism emphasises social harmony as the main focus for inquiry (Rorty, 1999), but I was shocked by the absence of research on both tourism and management based on this paradigm. I am yet to come across a paper in tourism, which claims to have used mixed-methods research with a pragmatist's lens. In 2005, I set the scene by publishing the paper "Pragmatism: A methodological approach to researching strategic alliances in tourism", which appeared in Pansiri (2005b). Its objectives were not only to serve as a critique of Downward and Mearman's (2004) views concerning pragmatism but also to set an agenda for mixed-methods research in tourism and management.

3. Identifying the gap in the literature

My research topic started as "Strategic alliances in the tourism industry: enhancing competitiveness in the tourism industry in Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe." The idea came out of a family trip in December 2002 to the Chobe Game Reserve, a major tourist destination in Botswana. The tour operator drove along the great Chobe River to a spot where wildlife was visible from a distance. There, he stopped to explain one of Southern Africa's colonial legacies, the creation of artificial boundaries that today the region's inhabitants have accepted as permanent and almost natural. His talk became the source of inspiration for me to find reason to study this topic. He said, "that herd of buffalos over there is in Namibia, those animals there, they look like elephants from where I stand, are in Zambia. If you were to move just a little by boat, you see those trees over there, that is Zimbabwe, you guys must go to the Victoria Falls to see one of the world's wonders. It is only 78 kilometres from here. Of course, we are all watching this spectacle of nurture from the country of my birth – Botswana. This is the place where our four countries constantly nurture each other through wildlife tourism, of course this glorious river provides life for all of us."

The more I pondered on "the place where our four countries constantly nurture each other through wildlife tourism", the more I reflected on my fourth year strategic management course, particularly a topic I just taught at the end of the first semester – strategic alliances. The rest became a journey to further my understanding of strategic alliances and their significance. The second chapter of my doctoral thesis reflects this review. However, my ideas of the research site changed when I arrived in Australia, as I reflected more on 'the tyranny of distance'. Researching on a place more than 13 000 km away could be difficult to one's attempt to collect data. Hence, my choice to make the study Australian based. However, the idea of "the place where our four countries constantly nurture each other through wildlife tourism" still vibrates in my mind. Now that I have completed my studies, I am going back to the place where my dream began: "the place where our four countries constantly

nurture each other through wildlife tourism". There I will follow up this research agenda with and among the people who live there.

I had hoped that my reading of tourism literature would be coherent and straightforward. I must confess, 2003 was the first time I have ever read a tourism book. My thoughts were that just like the 'mining industry' (coming from one of the world's largest diamond mining countries myself), the 'tourism industry' was a conceptually agreed upon industry. I was shocked by the level of disagreement on the concept. At first the terminologies of 'tourism industry' and 'tourism industries' were confusing. In my PhD proposal, the term 'tourism industry' was constantly used.

The 16th Annual CAUTHE Conference, held in Melbourne in 2006 completely changed my understanding. It was at this conference where Leiper (2006), one of Australia's outstanding tourism management scholars, presented his paper "Why 'the tourism industry' is misleading as a generic term, and why the plural variant – 'tourism industries' – is preferable". This paper has been published (Leiper, 2008) in the Tourism Management journal. His explosive attack on those who hold the view of 'the tourism industry' particularly Stephen L.J. Smith and big tourism bodies such as the World Tourism Organization was deeper than religious conviction. At the Cutting Edge Research in Tourism Conference held at the University Of Surrey, UK, on 6–9th June 2006, I shared a table with Neil Leiper's prolific academic antagonist, Stephen L.J. Smith during a dinner session. Much of our discussion revolved around Leiper's critique and I was shocked by the fact that throughout the 30 years of debate on the concept, they had never met but remained 'good friends'. His keynote address "Duelling Definitions: Challenges & Implications of Conflicting International Concepts of Tourism" addressed more or less the same issues that Leiper focused on at the CAUTHE conference. Only this time, the emphasis was on tourism as an 'industry' though not in the 'conventional sense'.

I understood why the two most influential scholars on tourism have never met and why they have never been invited to an international tourism conference as keynote speakers at the same time. Tourism researchers and conference organisers have a high respect for these two scholars and their ideas are held in high esteem. However, if this debate is to move towards a consensus, there is need for these scholars to share one forum where this issue can be aired. I recently learnt that Leiper retired in 2006 as Professor of Tourism Management at the Southern Cross University (The Australian Regional Tourism Research Centre, 2007). His retirement may signal the prospect of the two never sharing a platform. However, his ideas are far greater than him, as a person.

Leiper and Smith's debate has centred on whether tourism is an 'industry' (Smith, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1998) or a collection of 'industries' (Leiper, 1979, 1990, 1993, 2006). Smith (1998) sums up their debate as follows:

> The positions are, in a nutshell: Smith asserts that, while tourism is not a conventional industry, it can be defined and measured in a way that is consistent with other industries; Leiper counters that tourism is best viewed as a mix of industries that have varying involvement in the provision of services to visitors, and should not be characterized as a single industry, conventional or otherwise.

Hall and Kearsley (2001, p. 107) argue that to define 'the tourism industry' and its scope is not just a dry academic exercise but has significant implications for its economic impact, its influence on government and its organisation. An understanding of the tourism 'industry' or 'industries' is valuable for a multi-disciplinary research because it provides a better understanding of how a particular theory or set of theories can be applied to tourism. It is a significant step towards the daunting task of identifying the 'gap' in the literature.

There is a lot of emphasis on finding the 'gap' in the literature. It is often said that for one to be able to undertake a doctoral study, he/she must identify a 'gap' that exists in the literature. I must emphasise that this was perhaps the single most difficult task in my journey as a doctoral student. There is nothing new in researching strategic alliances in tourism. Many scholars have been doing that in the past 30 years. How does one identify a gap in the literature, given the enormous volumes of publications? I did an extensive review of both the tourism and strategic alliance literature, but it was difficult to say, "in all the books, journal and conference publications I have read, this is the common missing link". For one to be able to do so in the field of tourism, one has to read other disciplines or sub-disciplines in order to find the gap in the literature. Fortunately for tourism doctoral students, the academic analysis of tourism and hospitality has eclectic origins (Dann et al., 1988; Downward & Mearman, 2004; Pansiri, 2005b; Tribe, 1997) which embrace disciplines such as geography, political science, law, economics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, strategy, human resource management, operations management, marketing, etc. While this fragmentation of theory arising from the various disciplines from which tourism researchers were educated has been seen as an impediment to achieve philosophical consistency in tourism (Downward & Mearman, 2004), I see a lot of opportunities for future tourism research in general, and doctoral researches in particular. This opportunity lies in tourism's multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and multi-paradigmatic nature as a field of inquiry (Pansiri, 2005b; Ryan, 2005). For instance, a new industry and discipline in tourism is emerging, 'medical tourism' (Economist, 2007; Hewitt, Huston, Amrit, & Haederle, 2006) which draws the attention of tourism researchers. In addition, few studies have explored the significance and relevance of diverse paradigms to tourism research (Pansiri, 2005b).

I had done an extensive reading of tourism and strategic alliance literature but failed to identify a gap in the literature. By co-incidence, I came across the Upper Echelon Theory on decision-making (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004; Haley & Stumpf, 1989; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This theory argues that organisational strategy is a reflection of top management characteristics. Further scrutiny of this theory led to my paper (Pansiri, 2005a) through which I identified the gap in strategic alliance research, a gap I extended to the field of tourism management in my thesis. This gap played a significant role in my doctoral thesis. The second gap in the literature also emerged from management research. There is growing research that links company characteristics and firm strategy (Fulop, 1992; Pansiri, 2006a, 2007; Temtime & Pansiri, 2004, 2005; Wincent, 2005). Therefore, my journey began to investigate strategic alliances of tourism and their relationship with the upper echelon theory and company characteristics.

3.1. Finalising the gap in the literature

I need to point out that the manner in which the PhD research process emphasises identifying the gap in the literature might be a limitation to inquiry and discovery. Researchers try hard to find a gap in the literature even before they have a good grasp of their field of study. Giving advice on the development of theory, the leading upper echelon theorist, Hambrick (2005, p. 124) notes:

> I am pretty sure about where theories don't come from. They don't come from scholars struggling to find holes in the literature. Young academics, especially doctoral students, become so immersed in the extant theory and research in a field that they become overtaken by it. They often come to believe that the written word is their entire intellectual armament; and they then become riveted on finding ways to patch, reconcile, or fill holes in the literature. I don't think you can read your way to

developing a theory. It is far better to start with real-life, interesting puzzle; then develop a preliminary set of idea for solving the puzzle; and then turn to the literature for guidance and insight.

Hambrick's ideas are very relevant to the PhD journey. If researchers become too focused on the gap in the literature, they may miss out the exciting stories and puzzles that their data have. To a certain extent, the PhD journey involves 'experimenting with the data', then going back to the literature to find out if what the data show is theoretically explainable. The evolution of my thesis discussed above means that to a certain extent the research questions and objectives evolved too, not to mention the thesis title, which changed many times. This observation is shared by many doctoral students who experienced similar situations.

This is how my topic *"Harambe: Strategic alliance formation and performance evaluation in the tourism sector of travel"* evolved. *Harambe* is a ki-Swahili term meaning "to pull together, or to work together or to pull the same rope together at the same time" in harmony (Murove, 2005, p. 169). The idea, here, is that companies pool their resources together through strategic alliances to be able to achieve their strategic goals and objectives. Even in the face of aggressive competition, *botho/ubuntu* – that idea of being 'intractably bound up' in a network of interdependence (Tutu, 1999) is enhanced through *harambe*. In the corporate world, this togetherness is effectively achieved through strategic alliances. Therefore my doctoral thesis acknowledges the role played by company and executive characteristics in their quest to practice *harambe*.

4. Significance of the doctorate experience

As indicated earlier, this paper is written amidst a debate over the relevance of 'the classic PhD degree' in the social science. Boddy (2007, p. 217) notes that "the debate over whether business and marketing academics need to have a PhD to be qualified to work in business schools is at various stages of completion around the world" while some have questioned if having a PhD is a hindrance to effective management (Anon, 2006; Merrette, 2004). To write in support of the idea of having a degree in philosophy in this paper does not indicate the extent to which the issue has been dealt with. Many critics of the relevance of a PhD fail to take cognisance of its historical roots in Europe in the middle of the 12th Century (Lady, 1967) and the United States in mid-1800 (Clark, 2006; Golde & Walker, 2006). From an historical perspective, two major themes regarding the significance of a PhD are identifiable: 'stewardship of the discipline' and 'relevance to industry practice'. Critics of the PhD limit themselves to the latter (Anon, 2006; Boddy, 2007; Thomas, 2007). I support both ideas.

Golde and Walker's (2006) theme is for the development of doctoral students as stewards of the discipline. They argue in the cover of the book that:

A steward is a scholar in the fullest sense of the term-someone who can imaginatively generate new knowledge, critically conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching, and application. Stewardship also has an ethical and moral dimension; it is a role that transcends a collection of accomplishments and skills. A steward is someone to whom the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field can be entrusted. The most important period of a steward's formation occurs during formal doctoral education.

My undertaking of a PhD was not only influenced by the need to build a professional career as a lecturer at university but also to

contribute significantly to the field of tourism management. Such contribution, in my view, can best be done through teaching and generating new knowledge through research. A PhD is one way through which such objectives can best be fulfilled. Macauley (2004) maintains that doctorates are about the production of an original or significant contribution to knowledge.

Research degrees are undertaken in order to engage with ideas, to enhance knowledge, and to obtain the added confidence that comes from the experience of doing, and knowing how to do, research. The university is understood as a site where critical distance from, and reflection on, workplace practices and issues can occur, as well as providing a valuable source of ideas for application within professional practice (Barnacle & Usher, 2003).

I took study leave from the Faculty of Business, University of Botswana where I had been a lecturer of management since 2000. Before that I had been a lecturer of Management and Public Administration at the Botswana Institute of Administration and Commerce, an equivalence of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia for eight years. The purpose of undertaking a PhD was in part to enhance my academic career. It has been a year now since I completed my PhD and have gone back to the Faculty of Business as a lecturer in both management and tourism.

The PhD experience has helped me in my academic career as a researcher. There is a major difference between the manner in which I approached research before 2003 and now. Since completing my PhD, my supervision of students has shown major improvements. I came back to the University of Botswana at a time when we had just introduced the Bachelor of Business in Tourism and Hospitality Management Degree Programme and I now play a major part in it. Tourism management in Botswana is at its infant stage.

Tourism is described by the Botswana Government as an 'engine of economic growth' and a means for economic diversification (Government of Botswana, 1990) because of its potential to contribute significantly to the creation of employment and the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the Presentation Speech on a Draft National Development Plan 9: 2003/04–2008/09, the Minister for Finance and Development Planning, Mr. Gaolathe (2002, p. 21) emphasised the Botswana government's commitment:

to conserve wildlife populations, while avoiding cases of over-population; to diversify tourist source markets; and to reduce land use conflicts relating to people and wildlife. This strategy is in line with the Vision 2016 statement that "the challenge of preserving the environment and resource base of Botswana is crucial to its survival and prosperity" and calls for the involvement of local, national and international stakeholders in the management of the wildlife resources of the country. The target is to facilitate the development, diversification and promotion of tourism products and position Botswana among the top preferred tourist destinations in the world.

While the emphasis is to increase the contribution of tourism to the GDP through development and implementation of strategies for sustainable tourism and the diversification of the tourism product (Gaolathe, 2002), the Government of Botswana does not seem to be clear on how to involve other tourism stakeholders and how to compete in the industry. One of the major areas for my involvement is therefore to try to understand these issues and to participate in the establishment of Botswana's Tourism Satellite Account (STA). Botswana took a decision to implement the STA in 1999. Work towards this started in 2000 with the Department of Tourism through technical assistance from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). I was then drawn in as

a member of the technical team to spearhead the development of TSA for Botswana.

I think that one of the major questions that African PhD students ask themselves many times is the relevance of their degrees to industry and/or government. African countries such as Botswana have suffered for many years from a lack of skilled resources in many areas. Tourism is an emerging area for research, learning and business. The challenge that I faced was to make my research relevant to the development of tourism.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the journey and evolution, which doctoral students and their work take until successful completion. Using my own experience on identification of the research topic, questions, objectives and methodology, this paper shows that these research issues are not static. They evolve as the research matures over three years. Furthermore, this paper gives a learning opportunity, and comfort to many doctoral students going through similar experiences. It further suggests areas for future research. For researchers in tourism, it highlights the significance of interdisciplinarity, offering opportunities for collaborative work by researchers from different disciplines. For researchers in education, the paper provides an insight into what is really happening to our experiences as research students. There is a need to investigate how doctoral dissertations mature through a particular period of study.

Acknowledgements

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