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Re-Strategizing Tourism and Hospitality Assessments in a Post-COVID-19 Higher Education Landscape

Abstract

COVID-19 has significantly disrupted global landscapes and forced a quick adaptation towards new ways of conducting higher education, with almost all tertiary institutions compelled to embrace online teaching and learning quickly. In addition, this crisis presents an opportune moment to reflect on the why and how higher education assessments should be framed through a blue ocean strategy for disciplines such as tourism and hospitality. While the blue ocean strategy has emerged within tourism and hospitality practice, little is known as to how this is manifested in the context of educational settings, and especially academic voices as part of such radical transformations following COVID-19. To address this gap in knowledge, this research traces the journeys of 16 Chinese academics transitioning as educators before, during, and after the outbreak of COVID-19 through the theory's four actions framework of eliminate, reduce, create, and raise. The findings revealed how the pandemic challenged their philosophical stances of who we are as assessors, the dilemmas of technology-mediated learning and assessment, indicators of professional development, and assessing outside one's comfort zone. Derived from these outcomes is a conceptual framework around a blue ocean strategy to repurpose the role of assessments from a narrative of what and how, to what now and how else of tourism and hospitality education.

Keywords: quality assurance, tourism assessment standards, higher education, tourism and hospitality education

1. Introduction

This research concerns the notion of higher education tourism and hospitality teaching and assessment quality assurance in a post-COVID-19 landscape. The pandemic has arguably transformed how institutions have engaged with curriculum and assessments, triggered in part by the numerous efforts to salvage ongoing teaching and learning journeys whilst adhering to government legislation around tertiary environments (Tesar, 2020). Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators engaged in curriculum and course assessment iterative cycles to ensure that graduates possess the necessary competencies for industry needs (Mei, 2019). While these could be undertaken in a face-to-face manner, the pandemic raised issues associated with quality assurance as almost all institutions turned towards digital tools without necessarily possessing the resources and staff to deliver online learning and, more importantly, in guiding students as to what to expect during these uncertain times (Zhu & Liu, 2020). In this vein, quality assurance in higher education was primarily

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reactive rather than proactive, as hardly anyone anticipated such a global pandemic to have destructive and long-lasting impacts on everyday lives (Hou et al., 2022).

Amidst this backdrop, teaching evolution has emphasized authentic student-centric learning and course assessments (Anderson & Sanga, 2019). Correspondingly, curriculum and course assessment design principles ensure students are job-ready for the new economy (Dev, 2020). Accordingly, new ways to assess student learning have increased educators' experiences and development of robust, authentic course assessments, including role plays, simulations, internships, and digital artefacts such as blogs and wikis (Xiao et al., 2019).

However, the impact of COVID-19 has witnessed higher education disruptions across many countries, with almost every tertiary institution compelled to embrace online teaching and learning within a short period (Bao, 2020; Chandra et al., 2022). In addition, the widespread curtailment of tourism mobility has resulted in the travel industry announcing numerous job cuts and with businesses precariously holding onto government bailouts to survive (Brozovic & Saito, 2022; Loncaric et al., 2022; Ugur & Akbiyik, 2020). Indeed, this global pandemic has become a pivotal moment to reflect on what Edelman (2020) has argued regarding the vocabulary of educational value propositions that should be embedded within the higher education fraternity.

It is, therefore, timely that course assessments should not merely prepare students for the technical requirements for their future careers but also reflect the growing socio-ecological and well-being aspects of applied knowledge moving forward (Gonzalez-Herrera & Giral-Escobar, 2021; Kock et al., 2020). Yet, few studies have sought to investigate how these potential developments are aligned with quality assurance and assurance of learning at an institutional, national, and global stage (for instance, Perrin & Wang, 2021). Therefore, this research explores how course assessments should be conceptualized in a post-COVID-19 higher education landscape and the challenges encountered by 16 Chinese academics in their forays to such a transition. These outcomes then help elucidate a more nuanced understanding of assessment redesign and modes to help other institutions navigate their journeys in a personalized manner. The research questions were as follows:

1. How has the transition to employing different course assessment methods impacted educators?
2. Are there new and equitable ways of conducting course assessments in higher education?
3. What course assessment topics should now be included and assessed in a post-COVID-19 world?

2. Literature review

2.1. Assessments in higher education

There is a range of terms used interchangeably with assessments, including evaluation, testing, and measurements (Moskal et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in a higher education context, assessments are a snapshot of student progression regarding their knowledge, skills, and abilities whilst adhering to the academic standards prescribed within each country (Crook et al., 2006; Leathwood, 2005). Furthermore, in some applied disciplines, assessments are a lever to evaluate competencies and calibrate curriculum requirements for employability outcomes (Ali et al., 2017; Sokhanvar et al., 2021). As such, an institution has at its disposal formative (non-graded) and summative (graded) tasks to interpret student performance (Craddock & Mathias, 2009; Leathwood, 2005). This process is then revised in an iterative manner taking on board staff and student feedback to ensure that assessment items are fit for purpose (Fletcher et al., 2012; Struyven et al., 2005).

Extant literature also reveals various factors influencing students' learning and assessment performance, as they are impacted by other concurrent commitments such as work, family, and other studies over time (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Struyven et al., 2005). Unfortunately, assessment results may not be able to reveal such externalities but instead are evidence-based outcomes of what a student has oriented in terms of their effort to a given task (Flores et al., 2015; Pereira et al., 2016). Students who do not perform well on assessment tasks

can become demoralized and drop out of their courses or university entirely (James & Casidy, 2018; Struyven et al., 2005). Other issues related to assessments have also resulted in violations of academic integrity, where deviant student behavior in the form of plagiarism, collusion or contract cheating has required universities to track immediate and punitive measures to mitigate such incidents (Goh, 2013; Leathwood, 2005).

For this reason, universities have gravitated to more 'authentic' forms of assessment (Sokhanvar et al., 2021; Villarroel et al., 2018). In this space, authentic assessments use real-world, industry-based, and novel tools to holistically evaluate students' learning and application (Vu & Dall'Alba, 2014). The assessment item is developed to support and measure cognitive processing customized to a given setting or context (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Pereira et al., 2016). These go beyond traditional modes of assessment, such as examinations or reports that enhance students' abilities to demonstrate the application of learning in personalized ways. Examples of authentic reviews include responses to peer comments on a discussion board, crafting a media press release for a new product/service, or writing informed recommendations following a mystery shopping experience. Authentic assessments demonstrate higher levels of student engagement and positive feedback, and such methods have also been identified as valuable ways to uphold academic integrity (Sokhanvar et al., 2021; Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Moreover, authentic assessments could also be designed to meet future employers' needs in the fields (Leathwood, 2005; Small et al., 2018).

However, authentic assessments are not without their critics. Accurate estimates have been argued to take longer to design and grade, which can be challenging as universities clamp down on the time or resources allotted to assessments (Barradell et al., 2018; Vu & Dall'Alba, 2014). This becomes a scalability challenge as higher education class sizes in emerging economies have increased due to rising middle-class households that perceive tertiary qualifications as a tool for upward social mobility (Marginson, 2018; Mok, 2016). This could then present unrealistic expectations for staff members to provide timely and constructive student feedback. Assessments operate in an iterative space in higher education as institutions evolve to deliver industry-relevant and work-ready graduates.

2.2. COVID-19 and implications on higher education teaching and assessment

COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). The pandemic has impacted every social, economic, cultural, and educational facet. Governments and higher education authorities innovated and implemented measures to deal with campus closures by shifting classes online, where possible. Correspondingly, these disruptions will likely spark conversations and debates about how higher education teaching and assessments will look in the post-pandemic landscape (Pan, 2021; Tesar, 2020). On the one hand, COVID-19 is a trigger to level the playing field for developing broader participation and inclusivity to access higher education (Ross, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). On the other hand, the pandemic can exacerbate further digital divides between those with more sophisticated and advanced technological tools and resources and those less endowed (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2022).

COVID-19 created severe ramifications for teaching and assessment methods by higher education instructors. The sudden jolt and urgency of moving face-to-face courses onto existing and new digital learning platforms within a short timeframe generated heightened stress and well-being issues for instructors seeking to salvage their teaching semesters and ensure student progress following their learning plan (Pan, 2021; Rapanta et al., 2020). Yet, several scholars have contended that many academics were unprepared for such transitions to move teaching and assessment requirements onto online platforms without pre-tests before implementation (Mishra et al., 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020).

Given the impacts of the pandemic on higher education, several institutions have resorted to either the use of predicted grades or the option for students to choose whether their 2020 performance would count towards their Grade Point Average (GPA) (Johnson et al., 2020; Upoalkpajor & Upoalkpajor, 2020). All

the same, little is known about how academics have felt and responded in pivoting to the online teaching and learning environment and whether there may be other domains that assessments should incorporate to prepare students for post-pandemic careers (Baum et al., 2020; Hite & McDonald, 2020). Synthesizing the information gaps in literature has led to the importance of focusing on curriculum (re)design and assessment principles considering the shifting forces confronting higher education, namely hybrid modes of delivery, graduate employability, and quality assurance. This indicates that existing higher education business models are insufficient to deal with these uncertain and fast-evolving landscapes, hastening the need to consider new and radical strategic transformations. Derived from these unknown propositions has led to the need to locate the purpose of assessments within higher education by discussing a blue ocean strategy.

2.3. Blue ocean strategy

Kim and Mauborgne (2005) coined the Blue Ocean Strategy to define new value propositions, disrupting competitive forces within existing industries. As such, the Blue Ocean Strategy predominantly occurs in brand or product-proliferated environments. Leavy (2019) further distinguished blue oceans from red oceans, where the latter is characterized by hyper-competition, with consumers having significant substitution options for choice alternatives. In this space, most studies to date have primarily applied the Blue Ocean Strategy in the context of business models and deriving competitive advantages for different industries. For instance, several studies have examined a Blue Ocean Strategy's role in differentiating a brand or product from another within the technological landscape (Al Qudah & Hashem, 2018; Chang, 2010; Hersh & Abusaleem, 2016). Yet, the blue ocean's competitive advantages can be quickly eroded if an organization fails to defend its turf and continue innovation, such as in the case of Nintendo Wii (Hollensen, 2013). The application of a Blue Ocean Strategy must be accompanied by continuous innovation to keep ahead of competitive forces in any industry.

It should be noted that other theoretical frameworks discuss innovation and disruption, even in the context of higher education. For example, some models, such as the S Curve (Brown, 1992) or the Diffusion of Innovation model (Rogers, 1995), are helpful insofar as conceptualizing and guiding technology or product-centric industries. In contrast, the Blue Ocean Strategy has a broader and more targeted approach to rethink business models by pursuing markets yet to be served (Carton, 2020).

Related to this research, the Blue Ocean Strategy has been appropriated within higher education (see, for instance, Jones, 2010; Savage & Brommels, 2008). These papers have been discussed in terms of aligning curricula to meet the applied needs of respective professions. At the same time, other studies have instead postulated the need for higher education to adopt the concept of Blue Oceans to expand its funding pathways and diversify markets and business models to remain competitive (Dennis, 2019; Lyne, 2007). Similarly, the higher education sector operates in a red ocean environment. Before the pandemic, most universities and other tertiary institutions were developed and founded on almost identical structures due to the high levels of centralized governance in different countries on how they should be run and operationalized. As such, the replication of degrees, majors and courses/subjects was mainly prescribed, so universities are planted in various geographical settings but rarely differentiated (Bowl, 2018; Story, 2021).

However, little is known about how a COVID-19-inspired blue ocean strategy is manifested in educational settings, especially as part of their digital transformations following COVID-19. The pandemic has hastened the need for a Blue Ocean Strategy in higher education, as universities continue to be stymied by red tape and reactive to governmental and health instructions and resourcing (Ehiorobo, 2020). Moreover, although online education has existed for several decades, few institutions have a robust blended learning environment on the proviso that students behave homogeneously in on-campus face-to-face interactions (Kintu & Zhu, 2016; Moussa-Inaty, 2017). Though such perceptions before 2020 were widely held across the globe, the disruption caused by COVID-19 propels all higher education stakeholders to engage in greater virtual environments,

whether by choice or compulsion (Guardia et al., 2021; Pham & Ho, 2020; Zawacki-Richter, 2021). Correspondingly, as a critical component of evaluating student performance and competencies, the Blue Ocean Strategy is a justified approach to explore how assessment design principles are shaped in a post-pandemic landscape.

3. Context

This research is in the context of tourism and hospitality education in one of the most populated provinces in Eastern China. As tourism and hospitality have existed for several decades in China, higher education providers have also gradually included relevant courses and programs to deliver the skilled labor needed for this economy (Gu & Hobson, 2008; Zhao, 1991). Across the country, different institutions position themselves as knowledge brokers underpinned by governmental policies and funding mechanisms to attract top students and academics locally and internationally (Cullen, 1984; Penfold et al., 2012). This is increasingly evidenced by the neoliberal landscape characterized by university rankings and global accreditation bodies, such as the AACSB (Shen et al., 2015).

As such, an emerging body of literature has revealed the developments of tourism and hospitality education in China. For instance, Wang et al. (2010) identified that Chinese tourism and hospitality education were housed within a business degree. However, some studies also alluded to the issue of academic staff lacking the necessary work experience in tourism and hospitality to demonstrate credibility towards industry-competent outcomes (Wu et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2001). In the context of tourism and hospitality assessments in higher education, there is a predominant focus on exams, and theory-based tasks, with less emphasis on experiential learning or creative thinking skills (Li & Liu, 2016; Yang et al., 2016). Alternative assessment topics, which have been absent from tourism education in China for years, should be integrated into courses, such as digital competencies, crisis, and risk management, which have been implemented in Anglo-Saxon tourism education for years. As such, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in forcing teaching and learning online, as well as re-centering the attention and awareness of other 'soft' skills such as empathy and resilience, lends a solid justification for employ a blue ocean strategy to explore tourism and hospitality assessments in Eastern China, and elsewhere.

4. Method

The most appropriate method of choice was to employ in-depth interviews to explore the research questions of interest. Such an approach allows for the probing of factors that facilitate or inhibit changes to higher education and quality assurance regarding curriculum or assessment redesign, as supported by other scholars (Habib et al., 2012; Oliveira et al., 2021). Academic staff from one Chinese university's undergraduate tourism management program were invited via email to participate in in-depth interviews to elucidate how COVID-19 offers a timely and needed intervention to cast a Blue Ocean Strategy on tourism and hospitality assessments within higher education. The selection criterion was that each academic had to oversee curriculum and assessment design in their respective courses and have taught in the institution for at least six months to be familiar with the institutional and student culture. Following the call of expression of interest, 16 academics participated in this research, upon which theoretical saturation was reached once respondent answers did not provide new elements or knowledge (Low, 2019). There were nine female and seven male academics in the sample, with 10 out of the 16 participants already having a Doctorate. These academics had 2-8 years of experience teaching their respective courses, so they did possess a nuanced understanding of the subject material, students, and institutional culture. The interviews were conducted twice - during the early weeks of the commencing semester in October 2019 and after the mandatory lockdowns in China in June 2020. This timeframe allowed the participants to reflect on how their teaching and assessment methods and practices had changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and articulate new ways forward for assessments in tourism and hospitality education.

The interview instrument was informed by the work of previous studies (see, for instance, Lee et al., 2017; MacLellan, 2001; Shih, 2011) and was designed in Chinese to enable the academics to speak freely about their own experiences in their native languages. Examples of the interview questions include:

- 1) What is the nature of the course you teach (e.g., tourism marketing, destination planning)?
- 2) How did you decide on the curriculum contents and assessments for the course?
- 3) As COVID-19 hit, what were some of the urgent changes made to the course?
- 4) To what extent did the content or assessment design meet the desired outcomes over the pandemic?
- 5) What potential changes would you make to enhance the quality of the contents or assessments? Why do you consider these critical?

The instrument was pre-tested with other academics to ascertain questions for their clarity and intended purpose. Interviews lasted, on average, between 45-60 minutes. They were conducted face-to-face in the first stage and online during the second stage when COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing policies were implemented. Each interview was audio-recorded for transcription and subsequently translated into English by at least two researchers, who are bilingual in Chinese and English. This process enhances the methodological rigor of conducting cross-cultural research, as supported elsewhere (Poland, 1995; Witcher, 2010).

The data analysis religiously followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) typology. This qualitative way of analyzing data follows five main steps: initial familiarizing with the data, creating codes, searching for themes based on literature, reviewing the articles, and defining the themes. Then, the authors carried out a cross-check rotationally to ensure accuracy and consistency. The findings are subsequently presented and discussed.

5. Results and discussion

Incidentally, only 25% of the participants held prior working experience in tourism or hospitality, consistent with what was discussed earlier. Data collected from the 16 instructors generated 19 codes based on the assessment methods employed in the pre-COVID-19 and during the COVID-19 pandemic (See Table 1). Besides these codes, instructors offered new assessment methods for the post-COVID-19 World, addressing research question three. Overall, the researchers generated 129 codes and their frequencies are presented accordingly in Table 1.

Table 1
Frequency of each course assessment and implications of COVID-19

Category	Indicators	Frequency
Formative assessment before COVID-19	Unit testing	4
	Class performance	7
	Group discussion	2
	Group oral presentation	3
	Group reporting and assignment	2
	Individual assignment	1
Summative assessment before COVID-19	Closed book examination	9
	Group assignment	1
	Individual assessment	1
	Course paper	1
	Exams quantitative assessment	1
Formative assessment during COVID-19	Unit testing	9
	Class performance	7
	Group discussion	5
	Group oral presentation	0
	Group reporting and assignment	5
	Individual assignment	3
Summative assessment during COVID-19	Individual online exams	8
	Individual offline exams	2

Table 1 (continued)

Course assessment Before COVID-19	Traditional classroom setting	16
	Online and application tools	2
Course assessment During COVID-19	Online and application tools	16
Post-COVID-19 course assessment	Theory and practice course assessment	5
	Digital competencies	7
	Health and Hygiene	5
	Crisis management and problem-solving	7
Total		129

For research question one, “How has the transition to employing different course assessment methods impacted educators? Results showed that, before the outbreak of COVID-19, most of the educators (14 out of 16) favored a traditional classroom environment characterized by didactic methods, as expressed:

“I spent 10-15 minutes summarizing and repeating the main points of the lesson to help students consolidate their knowledge effectively.” (Participant 6)

“Because the knowledge of the course is complicated, only by testing over and over again can I enhance the knowledge that students learn at the course to accomplish the teaching goal.” (Participant 8)

This is consistent with the incumbent teaching pedagogy associated with many Asian tertiary environments, where the educator is most likely to be the ‘sage on the stage’, and information is disseminated via rote learning of contents (Heffernan et al., 2010; Holmes, 2004). This translated into a skewed preference for end-of-semester exams as an assessment of choice, with almost all participants utilizing this in their courses.

Then, COVID-19 likewise witnessed the ‘lecture’ as the dominant modus operandi for teaching, though this was leveraged on technological platforms that became ubiquitous during the pandemic. Such sentiments are not uncommon elsewhere, as didactic learning approaches allow the instructor to present information in a manner, they have complete control over, especially in large cohorts (Saunders & Gale, 2012). In addition, the institution employed a range of platforms, such as Tencent meetings. However, these modes of engagement did not appear to alter teaching and assessment practices before and during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Regarding research question 2, “Are there new and equitable ways of conducting course assessments in higher education?” the study revealed that most instructors had access to existing tools and applications that served the Chinese education fraternity. Online applications enabled the instructor to continue their impartation of knowledge online, thus repudiating the traditional classroom setting mode of teaching. Interestingly, since these applications are ubiquitous and accessible to most institutions, they did not create any undue advantage that could have triggered inequality and a possible digital divide. This contrasts with other scholars who opined that COVID-19 worsens the digital divide effect in higher education, even more so in developing countries (Azubuike et al., 2021; Mathrani et al., 2022). However, there didn’t appear to be any indication of the digital divide in this context because the university was in a highly urban landscape with well-developed technological capability. In contrast, other institutions in rural or remote locations may reveal more issues associated with the digital divide. Such insights prompt the need to take a nuanced perspective of developing nations, where technological affordances differ across the country. This status quo, therefore, necessitated the need for formative assessment to ensure possible interaction between instructors and students as one participant revealed,

“Our school provides all the required applications and tools needed to facilitate the delivery of my course.” (Participant 2)

There was an increasing focus on using formative assessments throughout the COVID-19 technology-mediated class experience, as evidenced by all the participants. This was an attempt to elevate the level of interactivity in the online environment. In such a sense, participant 1 revealed, *'Formative assessments were used to increase students' sense of participation'*. Likewise, four other participants reiterated that formative assessments helped students keep track of their learning journeys and critical concepts throughout the semester.

"Unlike offline teaching, which includes more interaction and communication, online classes are mostly taught by the teacher and listened to by the students. More evaluation in class can increase students' sense of participation". (Participant 2)

The uptake in terms of formative assessments during the COVID-19 teaching period perhaps reflects the intention of the educators to obtain timely insights into students' progress and learning because online classrooms differ significantly from face-to-face delivery in terms of receiving instantaneous feedback when their screens are switched off and muted. Hence, formative assessments provide a proxy to check student learning and take remedial action should some individuals fall behind in their tasks.

"Formative assessment can comprehensively reflect students' overall learning status" (Participant 5)

In this space, a range of formative assessment tasks was employed by different educators, including short response answers to videos, quizzes, and online debates. Some interesting insights emerged in comparing formative assessments before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. First, group oral presentations were non-existent as a productive assessment task during COVID-19 because it did not appear to be a practical mode to evaluate student performance when other externalities, such as poor internet connectivity or audiovisual quality, may result in a less than optimal level of engagement or interaction, and so these were replaced by other tools, as supported by Lapitan Jr et al. (2021).

Data from the respondents concerning summative assessments remained fixated on evaluating student competencies, with the individual online examination as the method of choice. However, two respondents did employ individual offline examinations, as students were required to demonstrate competencies in a physically supervised setting, such as accounting. Incidentally, two participants (6 and 14) relied entirely on formative assessments instead of summative ones. This could be explained by the perception that formative assessments were perhaps more suited to the modular system that formed the online course structure. To some extent, the shift away from widely adopted forms of summative assessments prevalent in the pre-COVID-19 era made educators realize the limitations and challenges of the pandemic on their pedagogical approach, triggering suitable assessment tasks for online classrooms. In this vein, six out of the 16 respondents opined that they have between 50%-90% discretion in changing assessment items or schedules.

In comparison, five other respondents stated they had absolute discretion to determine the vocabulary of these tasks. Only one respondent indicated it limited to no choice in revising the tasks, which can be explained again by the professionally accredited nature of the course. The findings, therefore, allude to the precipitated change triggered by COVID-19 that assessment *of* learning (summarized outcomes) is instead replaced by assessment *for* learning (formative outcomes), as supported elsewhere (Zhang et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2021).

Incidentally, all respondents recognized that the pandemic triggered a timely introspection of how students' professional careers will likely have changed to require more adaptability and resilience. As such, incorporating scalable, industry-relevant, and digital forms of authentic assessment would be advantageous to position graduates for better employment outcomes (Fuller et al., 2020; Kundu & Bej, 2021; Park & Jones, 2021). Then, by extension, it can be argued then that these assessments may not necessarily have to rest within the confines of the classroom (physical or virtual) but could instead be nested with practitioners

who possess the necessary skillsets. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, some institutions have appointed adjunct lecturers or guest professors to complement their teaching staff in specialty areas such as culinary or wine studies (Hui, 2016; Xiao et al., 2018). These opportunities widen students' learning and applied skills by exposing them to different ways of acquiring valuable skillsets for graduate employability. These industry engagements offer timely and pedagogical inputs to support their goal-oriented career aspirations and reiterate the importance of higher education competencies for professional development (Dyki et al., 2021; Gill, 2020).

For research question 3, 'What course assessment topics should now be included within higher education in a post-COVID-19 world?', the study ascertained that the current Chinese educational landscape is predominantly skewed towards theory and exam-centric, as a metric to progress onto the next level of the academic ladder (Davey et al., 2007). It is interesting to note that Participants 5 and 8 had this to say:

"I think the post-COVID-19 world should combine both theory and practice course assessment methods to prepare students for the new norm." (Participant 5)

"Our field should focus on digital competencies, health and hygiene, crisis management and problem-solving to prepare students for the unpredictable world and should be reliant on formative assessment methods." (Participant 8)

Akin to this, it was observed that tourism and hospitality assessments in a higher education setting are primarily leveraged on existing tools and applications that have served the Chinese education fraternity well (Hao et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2019). It was also clear that respondents mainly employed online assessment modes via formative assessment. COVID-19 triggered flexibility and greater use of discretion by instructors in course assessment. Most respondents had some control over determining the vocabulary of the tasks given to students. In other words, most instructors could alter their course assessment to enhance the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. This accentuates the work of Ashford-Rowe et al. (2014), who maintained the need for authentic forms of assessment where the assessment item is tailored and customized to a given setting or context. This consequently goes beyond religiously following traditional modes of evaluation such as examination. Significantly, respondents underscored that to maintain quality standards and uniformity, academic registry measures were laid to monitor such tendencies. This aligns with Gamage et al. (2020), who argued that maintaining academic integrity is critical at the forefront of educators' minds, even when confronted with the challenges triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notwithstanding such constraints, all respondents reiterated that the COVID-19 pandemic is an inflexion point to consider the role of higher education and how it is best positioned to assess student capabilities across hybrid learning environments, such as in tourism (Tiwari et al., 2021). In addition, the repeated variants of the COVID-19 virus mutations are likely to mean an ongoing battle by health authorities to stem the threats posed to public health and safety. This suggests that hybrid learning environments will continue for the short to medium term and therefore necessitate higher education institutions to cater to students across the globe and in different modes (e.g., face-to-face, online, and hybrid). This, therefore, calls for closer collaborations between academia, industry, and learning management systems to develop suites of resources that reflect the heterogeneity of learning environments confronting higher education. Some of these initiatives that should be prioritized include simulations that can be personalized, internships that can be undertaken online, and big data that can be more affordably accessed. The findings point towards a Blue Ocean Strategy for assessments in higher education post-pandemic futures.

The findings from this study will be juxtaposed against the research questions of interest to systematically address each domain of interest within a Blue Ocean Strategy that assists with the post-COVID-19 future of assessments in higher education. Arguably, the transition to employing different assessments has impacted

educators significantly. The COVID-19 pandemic presented some clear imperatives to modifying assessment methods chosen by the respondents. There was a gradual shift towards utilizing formative assessments by all respondents as the outbreak occurred. This could be due to the value of formative evaluation for timely student feedback when teaching online. However, aside from facilitating these online, summative assessments in the form of end-of-term exams remained the same. It may be the case that many educators are fixated on the need to evaluate student performance based on their application of theory and concepts as derived from the teaching contents. After all, educators have their respective curricula with pre-determined course objectives to fulfil, and they need to be confident of students' evidence-based abilities to demonstrate mastery of these before moving on to the next year of their studies or towards graduation.

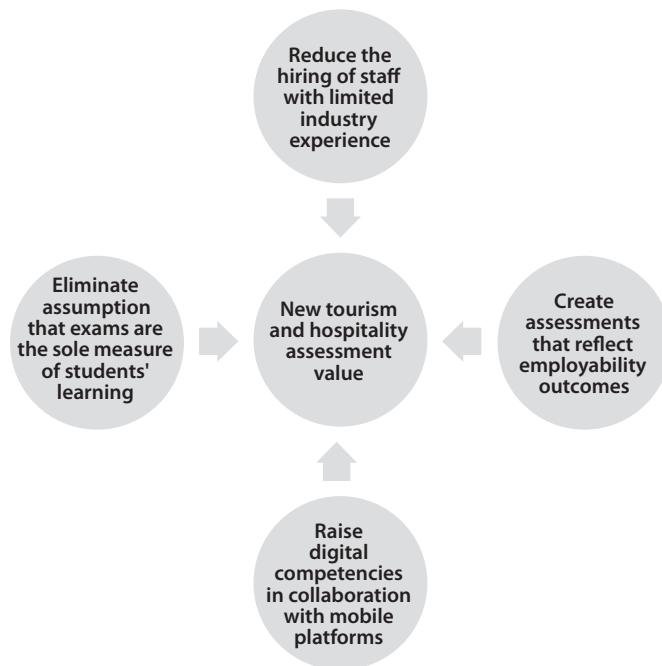
The shift to online assessments, both in terms of formative and summative levels, targeted three overarching objectives: i) obtaining timely feedback on student learning, ii) optimizing engagement levels and iii) safeguarding academic integrity and quality. The impact for educators was a sudden upswing in academic workloads to get face-to-face learning materials and assessment tasks to the online domain and then experimenting with students in a virtual classroom without possible prior experience or precedence. Nevertheless, all respondents agreed that the COVID-19 landscape offered them a disruptive moment to reflect on their pedagogical practices moving into the future of tourism and hospitality education.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has not triggered the enormous digital divide as ubiquitous technologies and other applications in higher educational institutions mitigated it. This study illuminated that tourism and hospitality assessments in a higher education setting are primarily leveraged on existing tools and applications that have served the Chinese education fraternity well, such as Tencent meetings and QQ. As such software are the dominant platform across China's mobile computing market, conducting tourism and hospitality assessments through such technologies has been argued to provide new and equitable ways for staff and students to access and engage (Hao et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that there may be other external factors creating possible digital divides, such as poor internet connectivity or incongruent mobile devices, which could lead to less-than-optimal outcomes for students who may, because of the pandemic, return to regional or remote home environments where access to technology may not be as stable as other metropolitan cities. However, this issue did not arise during the interviews with the respondents, suggesting that students found ways to engage with the learning and assessments.

Significantly, it is evident that the post-COVID-19 World requires new assessment methods to prepare students for the challenging and unpredictable World. The findings revealed that in China, many tourism and hospitality education courses are entrenched in grasping theory even before and during the outbreak of COVID-19. The theoretical focus of such contents could be in some way attributed to the structure of higher education in China as a centerpiece of the knowledge economy, and this has translated to assessment items that manifest to traditional forms of evaluating students' understanding of concepts. The use of exams has been ubiquitously employed throughout the Chinese education system, from elementary to high schools, and cumulates with the 'Gaokao', which is the equivalent of the high school examination to determine one's academic grades as a pathway for entry to university courses (Davey et al., 2007). It, therefore, comes as no surprise when such ingrained practices are extrapolated to the higher education landscape. This does not mean that the core theory and concepts be diluted or diminished. Still, instead, it calls for rethinking assessments to position students for post-pandemic careers and required skill sets.

As such, assessment topics in tourism and hospitality should instead consider broader domains such as digital competencies, crisis, and risk management as part of the learning and assessment landscape. These domains are not likely to be optimally evaluated using quizzes or end-of-semester exams. They should draw on more authentic assessment modes such as videos, debates, role plays, simulations, and other digital artefacts (e.g., website or app design). The outcomes of the findings, and the gaps that exist, therefore, pave the way to conceptualize the Blue Ocean Strategy to be applied to future assessments in higher education, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Blue ocean strategy for tourism and hospitality assessments in higher education



Note: Adapted from Kim & Mauborgne (2005).

6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

In conclusion, higher education learning and assessments are indispensable to equipping emerging leaders with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities for future careers. This study has explored the pre- and during COVID-19 teaching and assessment methods employed in the hospitality and tourism higher education field within China and illustrated how the pandemic had impacted their pedagogies. Via an exploratory investigation of 16 academics involved in the teaching of tourism-related courses, this research has amplified the importance of how quality assurance of instruction and assessments in higher education needs to be radically redefined as more and more institutions come to terms with the COVID-19 pandemic and the ‘new normal’ landscapes of technologically mediated pedagogies. In addition, the study has identified that critical gaps remain, with areas such as future employability outcomes and domains not yet addressed within the current scope of assessments. Synthesizing the findings and knowledge gaps has led to conceptualizing the Blue Ocean Strategy for higher education learning and assessments to equip educators for post-COVID-19 futures. The outcomes help address the research gaps and provide action-oriented steps for higher institutions to consider the merits of a Blue Ocean Strategy to shift value propositions to potential and existing student cohorts around assessments that equip competencies and graduate outcomes (Erekson & Williams, 2022).

The study is not without its limitations. As an exploratory study, the results may not necessarily be generalizable to other disciplines or higher education contexts, as the respondents were based solely on one institution in China. Also, insights were drawn from just 16 educators, which may differ should the study be conducted using student voices and experiences. Likewise, the mobile learning and assessment platforms unique to China are arguably distinctive. In contrast, other mobile platforms in the rest of the World may derive (dis)similar outcomes concerning the operationalization of the blue ocean strategy as conceptualized in this study. These limitations notwithstanding, the study has provided a valuable platform to steer avenues for future research.

Future research could test the propositions within the Blue Ocean Strategy conceptual model for tourism and hospitality education learning and assessments and ascertain if these can be validated in other higher education contexts. Another body of work may seek to conduct longitudinal studies to track educator and student performance post-COVID-19 and whether the assessment strategies serve their desired purposes. Finally, cross-cultural inquiry about educators' evolution of assessment modes and contents in the post-pandemic landscape will provide rich insights to prepare students for the COVID-19-induced changes to future careers across the globe.

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Submitted: June 14, 2022

Revised: January 20, 2023

Accepted: March 10, 2023