

Hospitality and Tourism Education in Malta: Students' Reflections on the Dissertations Process.

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Abstract: This study explores what hospitality and tourism students in Malta perceive as the biggest challenges in writing their dissertations. Balancing academic research with industry-focused skills presents difficulties. Students struggle to manage workload, meet academic writing standards, and secure effective supervision. Restricted access to academic resources, rigid institutional policies, and time constraints can present additional challenges. This study adopts a qualitative approach, gathering insights through focus groups with students from various backgrounds, academic levels, and levels of dissertation progress. The discussions focus upon concerns about inconsistent supervision, the lack of structured academic writing support, and difficulties in obtaining research participants. Many students also express anxiety over dissertation expectations, leading to procrastination and uncertainty about their research direction. The findings offer recommendations for improving dissertation support systems, helping to enhance student confidence, engagement, and motivation in hospitality and tourism education in Malta.

Keywords: Hospitality; tourism education; students' reflections; dissertation process

Introduction

Students in further and higher education who undertake dissertation research frequently face a range of challenges. These include time constraints and difficulties with academic writing. They may also face

limited access to essential academic resources. Many of them struggle with structuring their research, formulating clear and focused research questions, and synthesizing existing literature into a coherent theoretical framework. Cuschieri, Aquilina, and Liwak (2023) identify several structural and academic barriers that impede student success. They stress the importance of targeted support mechanisms to enhance student engagement, facilitate research progress, and improve overall academic outcomes. They also note that the challenges that students face frequently lead to delays in progress and increased academic anxiety.

These challenges are particularly pronounced for students who lack prior experience in academic research or writing, making it difficult to adhere to academic conventions and effectively communicate their findings (Ali, Ishaq, & Hassan, 2022). Additional obstacles such as inconsistent supervision and a lack of timely academic support may also arise. These challenges are often compounded by feelings of anxiety and self-doubt, which can cause students to experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty when managing independent research projects (Atorkey et al., 2021). Furthermore, financial pressures, work-related commitments, and family responsibilities may also exacerbate these challenges, creating inequities in students' ability to complete their dissertations successfully. Institutional policies, such as strict extension regulations and limited access to plagiarism detection tools, may further hinder students' ability to undertake the dissertation process efficiently. This adds another layer of complexity to their academic journey. Such obstacles can diminish students' ability to engage effectively with what Meyer and Land (2003, 2005) describe as threshold concepts - fundamental ideas that, once mastered, lead to deep and transformative learning. However, the complexity of these concepts can cause uncertainty, frustration, and self-doubt, particularly for students unfamiliar with academic conventions or struggling to balance their studies with work commitments.

Considering this complexity this study aims to answer the research question: What do hospitality and tourism students in Malta perceive as disruptive challenges in writing their dissertations? It also explores how students believe these challenges impact their academic progress and career trajectories. By focusing on students' perspectives, this research aims to highlight the specific difficulties they encounter and identify potential improvements in institutional support systems. Consequently, insights from this study can inform curriculum design, supervisory practices, and the development of institutional resources, ensuring that

students are adequately prepared for both academic and professional demands. Improving dissertation support mechanisms is essential not only for academic success but also for developing students' research identities and fostering independent learning (Ali et al., 2016).

Shen, Zhang, and Carter (2024) provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by students in thesis discussion writing, albeit at a doctoral level, emphasizing the importance of sociocultural theory in addressing these needs. Their work highlights the critical role of social interaction and support mechanisms, particularly through Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). When considering training in the tourism and hospitality sector, strong analytical and communication skills are essential, along with the ability to interact effectively with people from all walks of life. The ZPD represents the space where students, with the support of advisors, peers, and institutional resources, transition from their current level of understanding to desired levels of achievement in their dissertation writing. Vygotsky (1978) proposes that learners can construct a certain level of understanding independently, but can achieve greater development through interactions with peers and teachers. In alignment with Vygotsky's perspective, Conley and French (2014) discuss the importance of students taking ownership of their learning. This sense of ownership includes engaging deeply with academic content and developing critical thinking and analytical skills. While Conley and French's focus is on college readiness, the principles outlined are equally applicable to dissertation writing, where student ownership and engagement are crucial for success. This is especially important as dissertation writing fosters deeper engagement with broader academic and disciplinary discourses within specific academic and vocational fields. Shen, Zhang, and Carter (2024) further identify key challenges in this process, and advocate for appropriate and timely guidance, collaborative environments, constructive feedback, and meaningful academic discourse as essential for both enhancing writing capabilities and boosting self-confidence. Additionally, their work incorporates Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) concept of the learning situation to provide a broader contextual framework for examining the specific difficulties students face and identifying effective support mechanisms. Engaging in tasks like synthesizing research findings, maintaining coherence in writing, and meeting procedural requirements, all of which are liable to be compounded by emotional barriers like stress, self-doubt, and anxiety, can be a daunting process for

students, particularly if they have never undertaken dissertation work previously.

This study integrates the theoretical perspectives of the learning situation and sociocultural theory to address the specific learning needs of hospitality and tourism students in Malta, while acknowledging the ongoing ambiguity in balancing theory and practice within undergraduate and master's programs. Students often struggle with unclear expectations about the level of originality and depth required in their research, leading to uncertainty about academic standards. Some students may be inclined to see bachelor's and master's degrees as credentials for career advancement rather than as opportunities to develop strong research skills within vocational education and training. Students may prioritize practical knowledge and industry relevance over rigorous academic inquiry. This may help explain why many vocationally inclined programs prioritize industry-relevant skills, often at the expense of academic reflection and curiosity-driven research. While this practical focus is beneficial at lower levels of education, it can be limiting to people at higher levels of study, where deeper intellectual engagement and critical inquiry are essential (Tinto, 2017).

In hospitality and tourism education, achieving a balance between practical expertise and academic rigor presents a unique challenge. Students are required to engage with theoretical frameworks and critical thinking as an integral part of their dissertation writing and broader academic training. At the same time, the hospitality and tourism industry's dynamic, customer-focused nature necessitates a strong emphasis on practical, job-ready skills. This dual focus can create conflicting expectations for students and educators, further complicating the already demanding process of thesis writing and research. Furthermore, hospitality and tourism students may struggle with the theoretical components of their dissertations, particularly if they are more accustomed to hands-on, experiential learning environments. This shift from practical to abstract thinking can feel unfamiliar and overwhelming. Moreover, students with limited exposure to academic writing face additional challenges, including difficulties with language and the conventions of academic discourse. This issue is not confined to international students. Maltese students who are less confident in their use of English may also encounter obstacles. These barriers can impede their ability to articulate complex ideas, synthesize literature, and effectively communicate their findings. This may ultimately affect the quality of their dissertations. Addressing

these challenges requires targeted support and inclusive strategies to help students to be in a better position to balance theory and practice in their academic and professional development.

Literature review

It is highly likely that students face notable challenges when transitioning from structured coursework to completing a dissertation. This is because this shift involves moving from shorter, guided assignments to producing extensive, independent research documents often exceeding 200 pages. The process can be particularly daunting in an industry-focused field like hospitality, where practical skills are normally prioritized over academic writing due to the nature of the jobs that students are preparing to take on after completing their studies. Saying this, writing a dissertation is more than merely documenting the results of several years of research; it is a comprehensive process that requires advanced writing skills, critical thinking, and an inquiring disposition. The quality of a dissertation is not solely determined by the research outcomes but also by the writer's ability to communicate ideas and findings effectively.

Zopiatis and Constanti's (2007) five-gap model provides a valuable framework that can be adapted for understanding how hospitality and tourism students in Malta may perceive and try to overcome the challenges of dissertation writing. The model identifies five key areas where discrepancies often arise between academic training and industry expectations: (1) the gap between students' academic expectations and the actual demands of their education, (2) the gap between students' dissertation topics and real-world industry applications, (3) the gap between students' workplace experiences and their research focus, (4) the gap between the industry's needs and the academic training provided, and (5) the gap between planned educational experiences and their practical relevance in professional settings. These gaps reflect five critical relationships: the relationship between the individual student and the educational institution, the relationship between students' academic and industrial experience, the relationship between students working in the industry and their hospitality host organization, the relationship between the hospitality industry and education, and the educational institution's control over students' industrial placements.

It is possible that students may anticipate initially that dissertation writing will be a straightforward, practice-oriented process. Yet, it is sometimes the case that, on starting their work on their dissertation, they

would find academic complexities such as research design, literature synthesis, and methodological rigour challenging. The misalignment between expectations and reality that surfaces in some cases often leads to frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty. Furthermore, students may struggle with integrating theoretical insights with real-world industry applications, particularly if their research topics do not align directly with the day-to-day challenges of the hospitality and tourism sector. Drawing from Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this study recognises that within a college set-up it is unlikely that students would operate on their own. Mentorship, peer collaboration, and institutional support may all serve as scaffolding mechanisms that could enable students to progress beyond their current academic skill level. The perceived challenges in dissertation writing - ranging from academic writing difficulties and supervisory support, to access to resources, work-life balance and institutional constraint, highlight the importance of structured guidance and tailored academic interventions (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

While most students are likely to report that dissertation writing presents difficulty, certain categories face additional barriers that make the process even more challenging. Multilingual students and those from underrepresented backgrounds, are likely to experience language challenges. Also they may not understand how to access the required level of student-centered support. As a result disparities in learning experiences and outcomes can be widened (Spiteri and Seguna, 2020). It is highly likely that during the shift to online learning, particularly during the pandemic, these challenges had been exacerbated. Likewise, the pandemic impacted students with disabilities, socio-economic vulnerabilities, health concerns, or emotional challenges negatively (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Given these circumstances, understanding how vocational education and training (VET) students perceive their future careers in hospitality and tourism is important. This is particularly so, if institutions are to be better equipped to align their programs with student needs and labor market demands. Strengthening this connection can help enhance student motivation and support a smoother transition from education to employment in Malta's tourism-driven economy.

A key disruptive challenge in dissertation writing for hospitality and tourism students lies in mastering academic conventions, which are often deemphasised in practically oriented programs. Many students

struggle with structuring well-reasoned arguments, adhering to citation standards, synthesizing literature, and integrating theoretical frameworks with practical industry applications..

Consequently, students may feel "stuck" when shifting from familiar knowledge to new, complex ways of thinking. The resulting disappointment, stress, and anxiety can become significant barriers in dissertation writing (Ferguson, 2009). In hospitality and tourism education, threshold concepts such as understanding customer behaviour or applying financial analysis to operations are essential for professional success, yet difficult to grasp without sufficient academic preparation. Addressing these challenges requires institutions to implement targeted teaching strategies, provide structured academic support, and foster a learning environment that encourages engagement with complex concepts.

Within this context, the role of supervision cannot be overstated (Ali et al., 2016). Effective supervisory practices that emphasise mentorship, constructive feedback, and tailored academic guidance play a critical role in helping students manage the complexities of independent research (Ferguson, 2009). A supportive supervisory relationship fosters a stronger academic identity, which is crucial for maintaining motivation and resilience throughout the dissertation process. When students receive timely and constructive feedback, they are better able to refine their research focus, overcome methodological challenges, and approach the academic writing process with greater confidence.

Furthermore, direct engagement with industry can significantly enhance students' understanding of their field, reinforcing the practical relevance of their academic research. Marques et al. (2024), from a university context, examine how support from universities fosters academic collaboration with industry, based on academics' perceptions of the benefits and costs of such partnerships. This research aligns with the themes of enhancing students' understanding of their field and strengthening the connection between research and professional practice through effective university-industry collaborations.

However, in Malta, structural challenges within the hospitality and tourism sector—such as seasonal employment, demanding work conditions, and internship experiences that may not align with academic research goals—can negatively impact student engagement. Workplace realities may reinforce disillusionment rather than cultivating

enthusiasm for career pathways in hospitality, particularly if students feel that their industry experiences are disconnected from the research skills they are developing. To counteract this, institutions must take a strategic approach in promoting diverse career opportunities, including pathways to management, entrepreneurship, and specialized hospitality and tourism roles.

By identifying what students perceive as the most significant challenges in dissertation writing, this study highlights the need for stronger institutional support mechanisms, better alignment between academia and industry, and enhanced research training within VET programs. Addressing these factors is crucial not only for improving students' academic experiences and dissertation success rates, but also for ensuring that they graduate fully equipped to integrate research-based thinking into their professional careers in Malta's evolving hospitality and tourism sector.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach with an ethnographic focus to explore hospitality and tourism students' perceptions of the disruptive challenges they encounter during the dissertation process. A qualitative research design was selected to provide in-depth insight into students' lived experiences, capturing their perceptions, academic struggles, and coping mechanisms in undertaking dissertation writing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In terms of research design, the study utilises semi-structured focus groups as the primary data collection method, ensuring rich, participant-driven discussions that explore key themes related to dissertation challenges. Three focus groups were conducted at different intervals with different participants, allowing for comparative insights across different student experiences. Each focus group followed a structured interview schedule with pre-determined questions; however, the approach remained discussion-centered and flexible, encouraging open dialogue. The interview schedules were designed to prompt open-ended responses, while also allowing for spontaneous discussions on emerging themes. All discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The focus groups explored several key areas related to challenges students face in dissertation writing. Participants were asked about their choice of dissertation topic and supervisor selection, as well as their expectations regarding the frequency and quality of supervision. This

was to understand how these factors influenced their research progress. Additionally, the discussions examined academic challenges encountered and the strategies students used to overcome them, along with issues related to dissertation extensions and the effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms. Beyond these areas, the study also investigated time management and work-life balance, particularly how students juggle dissertation deadlines alongside employment, family responsibilities, and personal commitments.

Access to academic resources and research materials was another critical topic, as students reflected on the availability of hospitality-specific journals, databases, and writing support. Furthermore, the focus groups addressed institutional barriers and administrative challenges, assessing whether policies such as rigid deadlines and bureaucratic requirements exacerbated dissertation difficulties. The study also explored the emotional and psychological challenges students encountered. These included stress, self-doubt, and dissertation-related anxiety. The extent to which students felt adequately prepared for academic research based on prior coursework and research training was also explored. Participants also shared their perspectives on the relevance of dissertation writing to their future careers, reflecting on whether they viewed the dissertation process as a valuable learning experience or as an academic obligation with limited industry applicability. By addressing these interconnected themes, the focus groups provided a comprehensive understanding of the most disruptive challenges perceived by students in completing their dissertations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on students identified as potentially struggling with the dissertation process. A total of 32 participants were included in the study, drawn from an initial pool of 66 students who had been flagged as at risk of dissertation failure. Selection was based on academic records and faculty recommendations to ensure that participants had direct experiences with dissertation-related challenges. The sample was demographically and academically diverse, including both male and female students, a mix of local and international students, and individuals with varying levels of familial and work responsibilities. Additionally, participants came from different academic programs and had varying degrees of difficulty with dissertation writing. This heterogeneous sample provided a broad perspective on the challenges students faced in different contexts. It offered varied insights into their dissertation experiences and contributed to a more comprehensive

understanding of what they perceived as the leading factors impacting their progress in their dissertations.

To ensure objectivity and reliability, the study employed a structured division of roles among four researchers, each with distinct responsibilities. Although each researcher had specific tasks during the data collection process, they collaboratively authored the study, combining their observations and analyses to produce a comprehensive and balanced report. A primary external researcher conducted focus groups, acting as both interviewer and moderator to facilitate discussions while maintaining neutrality and consistency in data collection. Two internal researchers served as observers and note-takers, capturing non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and additional contextual insights without influencing participants' responses. They were also responsible for data triangulation and quality assurance, cross-referencing group transcripts with observational notes to identify patterns, verify consistency, and ensure interpretations remained grounded in the collected data. The fourth researcher provided critical feedback during the analysis and writing stages, refining the study's structure, addressing potential gaps, and enhancing overall coherence. This additional layer of review further strengthened the study's objectivity, ensuring that the final report accurately reflected the data and adhered to high scholarly standards. The clear division of roles that was adopted minimised researcher bias and reduced the risk of leading questions or subjective interpretations influencing the discussions.

By having one of the researchers take on the additional role of an external moderator of the focus groups, the study aimed to create a more open and comfortable environment where students felt encouraged to speak candidly about their dissertation challenges without concerns about institutional influence or academic repercussions. The internal researchers' role as passive observers further reinforced the credibility and authenticity of the data by allowing participants' lived experiences to shape the findings organically, rather than being filtered through researcher assumptions. This structured approach ensured that data collection remained focused, participant-driven, and aligned with the study's research objectives, ultimately enhancing the validity and depth of the findings.

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges students face in dissertation writing, the recorded focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic

analysis framework, alongside discourse analysis insights from Naeem and Ozuem (2023). This qualitative, inductive approach ensured that students' voices and lived experiences remained at the core of the study, aligning with the research question: What do hospitality and tourism students in Malta perceive as disruptive challenges in writing their dissertations? The analysis followed a six-step process, beginning with familiarization, where researchers repeatedly reviewed transcripts to identify key patterns and emerging themes. Initial coding was then applied, systematically labeling recurring ideas, challenges, and coping strategies shared by participants. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories, allowing for structured theme development. The themes were then reviewed and refined, ensuring they accurately represented the range of student experiences and aligned with the study's research objectives. In the next stage, themes were clearly defined and named, differentiating between convergent themes—where students shared similar perspectives—and divergent themes, where individual experiences varied. Finally, the themes were mapped to the research question, leading to the interpretation and conceptualization of students' perceptions of dissertation challenges.

This rigorous thematic analysis provided valuable insights into the barriers students face, from academic struggles and institutional obstacles to personal and emotional challenges. By prioritizing student perspectives, the analysis ensures that the findings accurately reflect the complexities of the dissertation experience, offering meaningful recommendations for institutional improvements that support both academic success and professional readiness in Malta's hospitality and tourism education sector.

Ethical integrity was a central priority in this study, ensuring that participants' rights, privacy, and well-being were fully protected throughout the research process. Before participating, all students provided informed consent, acknowledging their voluntary involvement and their right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. The researchers took particular care to consider the vulnerabilities of students facing dissertation challenges, recognizing that discussing academic struggles and personal setbacks could be sensitive. By creating a supportive and nonjudgemental research environment, they aimed to co-create an environment where participants would feel encouraged to share their experiences openly, consequently contributing to a more authentic and meaningful exploration of their perceived dissertation challenges. To safeguard

confidentiality and anonymity, all names and identifying details were removed from transcripts and data records, ensuring that responses could not be traced back to individual students. Given that participants were drawn from a single higher education institution in Malta, additional measures were taken to prevent the risk of indirect identification through contextual details. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring that the research adhered to established ethical guidelines. This compliance reinforced the study's commitment to fair, responsible, and transparent research practices, ultimately strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Observations, findings and discussion

The researchers observed that a common characteristic across the three focus groups was the immediacy and intensity of participants' responses, particularly when discussing the challenges and obstacles encountered during their dissertation journey at the institution. While two of the three focus groups maintained a generally cordial and constructive atmosphere throughout the discussions, one group displayed notable tension and heightened engagement. In this group, participants spontaneously expressed their experiences and perspectives, leading to heated debates when concerns were raised regarding perceived academic privileges granted to certain students.

As the discussion unfolded, it became evident that these perceived claims of preferential academic treatment directly implicated some of the members present, prompting a defensive response from those who felt personally affected. However, participants who voiced these concerns later clarified that their intention was not to question individual cases, nor was it to question whether such privileges were justified. The students argued that similar accommodation should be systematically made available to everyone facing comparable circumstances. This reflects consideration of a broader issue relating to the transparency and equity of institutional policies, which is consistent with Biesta's (2015) accentuation on the need for education systems to adhere to the upholding of ethical and democratic values by ascertaining that all students are treated equitably.

As previous research suggests, students' perceptions of institutional equity and support play an essential role in shaping their academic motivation and engagement (Tinto, 2017). The dissertation writing

process can place considerable pressure on students, often leading to feelings of being overwhelmed, and, in some cases, self-isolation. The lack of robust support systems within academic institutions further exacerbates these mental health challenges, negatively impacting students' self-esteem and increasing the likelihood of delays in research progress (Ali, Ishaq, & Hassan, 2022). When these challenges are combined with perceptions of inconsistently applied academic policies, students may experience heightened dissatisfaction, diminished trust in institutional processes, and increased academic stress (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Furthermore, research on student retention indicates that fairness and transparency in academic regulations are critical factors in promoting student persistence and successful dissertation completion (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

To further examine the students' concerns, the two main findings from the focus groups are summarized in The Table, which categorizes the key themes and common challenges identified by participants. This table presents a systematic summary of the key themes identified across the focus groups, highlighting both areas of agreement (convergent viewpoints) and areas of differing perspectives (divergent viewpoints).

Convergent viewpoints refer to challenges and experiences that were consistently reported across multiple focus groups, indicating shared struggles and common patterns among students. These insights provide a cohesive understanding of the most widespread issues affecting dissertation progress, such as time constraints, access to academic resources, and supervision quality. On the other hand, divergent viewpoints capture variations in student experiences. These differences may be influenced by personal circumstances, academic background, supervisor engagement, or institutional policies.

By distinguishing between shared and unique challenges, the table offers a comprehensive representation of students' perceived dissertation difficulties. The subsequent discussion elaborates on these findings, linking them to institutional policies, academic support mechanisms, and broader implications for student success.

The findings from the three focus groups are summarized in the Table below. The key insights from each group are further elaborated in the subsequent discussion.

The findings summarised in the Table highlight that most participants perceive the dissertation supervision process as student-centered, with students generally having the opportunity to select their research topic and supervisor. This aligns with research suggesting that increased student agency in topic selection fosters higher levels of motivation and engagement (Lee and Darby, 2012, Lee, 2018). Participants in all focus groups acknowledged receiving help and support from their supervisors, particularly when actively seeking it. Some students described their supervisors as highly proactive and supportive, while others noted delayed responses and limited interaction. A few participants perceived some supervisors as less committed than others to their academic development. These differences reflect broader concerns in academic supervision, where disparities in mentoring approaches significantly impact student success (Ali et al., 2016; Inouye, 2023).

Summary of Focus Group Findings:

Theme	Focus Group A	Focus Group B	Focus Group C
Dissertation Supervision	Satisfaction with supervision; process seen as student-centered; meetings mainly online/email.	Mixed experiences: some had proactive tutors, others minimal interaction. One student felt constrained by an imposed topic.	Satisfaction overall, but concerns relating to supervisor response times; students adapted by using in between lecture hours.
Challenges in Dissertation Writing	Time constraints (work, family, studies); limited access to University of Malta research; academic writing struggles; rigid institutional policies; delayed responses from research participants.	Similar issues as Group A, plus difficulties in literature review; anxiety and procrastination; limited access to plagiarism detection tools (Turnitin).	Time constraints; strong criticism over restricted access to University of Malta resources; concerns over AI detection policies and institutional inconsistencies.

The Table illustrates that students in Focus Group B had the most divergent supervision experiences, with responses ranging from highly engaged supervisors who followed up on progress, to students who had

minimal communication with their supervisors. The differences in the amount of time supervisors dedicate to students highlights the significance of 'scaffolding' within each students' individual Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Some students need timely and personalised support on a regular basis to achieve a better understanding and produce better results. This enables them to build on information already acquired and thereby consolidate further their learning.

Additionally, one participant reported feeling constrained by an imposed dissertation topic, which influenced their research approach. In Focus Group C, participants raised concerns about supervisor response times, although they attributed delays to faculty workload rather than disinterest. As a coping strategy, some students utilized lecture hours or informal discussions to address dissertation-related concerns. These findings highlight the importance of flexible academic support structures, ensuring that students can confront supervision inconsistencies effectively (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

The Table also indicates that dissertation supervision is increasingly conducted through digital communication methods, such as email, Microsoft Teams, and SMS, rather than traditional face-to-face meetings. While participants generally found these approaches adequate, questions remain regarding the academic effectiveness of short, improvised exchanges as a substitute for structured supervision. Research suggests that while online communication enhances accessibility, it should complement rather than replace in-depth one-on-one supervisory meetings (Rowley & Slack, 2004). This implies that whilst it is possible for students to acquire information online, this would ideally also be supplemented by direct conversations with supervisors who can engage them in better understanding thereby developing threshold concepts. In doing so, they would be able to deepen their understanding and consequently be in a better position to develop new insights (Vygotsky, 1978).

Challenges in dissertation writing: time constraints, academic writing, and institutional and sectorial barriers

The Table indicates that procrastination and dissertation-related anxiety were particularly pronounced in Focus Group B, with students expressing a strong fear of engaging with their research - especially during the formulation of research questions and the literature review

process. This aligns with Meyer and Land's (2003, 2005) threshold concepts theory, which suggests that students often encounter periods of uncertainty and discomfort before mastering complex academic concepts. It is likely that these pressures could be further exacerbated by gaps in educators' ability to manage occupational stress, often stemming from excessive workloads, which is a common complaint in the Maltese educational sector. Ashar et al. (2021) point out that excessively increased responsibilities among educators tend to heighten stress levels and negatively impact overall performance. Their study suggests that structured support mechanisms could alleviate some of these pressures, benefiting not only educators but also students, who face similar challenges in balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities, but who ultimately depend upon their lecturer's instruction and feedback to perform optimally. In a similar vein, Ali, Ishaq, and Hassan (2022) observe that overburdened faculty members, coupled with inadequate supervisory frameworks, result in delayed guidance, which can negatively impact students' research progress and overall academic confidence.

Across all focus groups, time constraints emerged as one of the challenges, as reflected in the Table. Balancing dissertation writing with coursework, employment, and personal responsibilities is a well-documented struggle, often leading to delays in research progress and increased procrastination. This is especially acute in vocational education, where students must juggle practical training alongside academic commitments. The cumulative workload stress frequently results in extended timelines for completing research projects and heightened anxiety levels. The participants also identified language barriers as an obstacle which needed to be overcome, particularly for students required to write their dissertations in English, despite it not being their first language. The Table shows that students consistently expressed the need for greater academic writing support, advocating for structured training in writing techniques, including coherence, formatting, and overall structure. These findings echo research advocating for the integration of academic literacy programs within vocational education to enhance students' research competencies (Itua et al., 2014).

Institutional policies emerged as another critical barrier, particularly concerning dissertation extension requests. The Table indicates that some students criticized the rigidity of these policies, noting that extensions were granted only to those with pre-approved extenuating

circumstances, such as medical conditions. As a result, students dealing with personal or financial challenges felt disadvantaged, believing that greater sensitivity and flexibility in the application of these policies could have helped in alleviating their difficulties. In Focus Group A, one student admitted to manipulating the system by citing a false medical condition to qualify for an extension, highlighting the pressures created by inflexible academic regulations. These findings including students feeling disadvantaged by rigid policies (Okahana, 2020), align with research emphasizing the importance of student-centered approaches, particularly in vocational education settings (Tinto, 2012).

Another widely discussed institutional barrier was the limited access to plagiarism detection software. As shown in the Table, participants in Focus Group B noted that Turnitin was only available at the draft and final submission stages. This prevented them from proactively addressing potential plagiarism issues throughout the writing process. Research suggests that restricted access to plagiarism detection tools can hinder self-regulated learning and academic improvement, as students are unable to make necessary revisions based on similarity reports (O'Leary, 2023).

AI detection policies and institutional fairness

A significant concern among participants in Focus Group C was the recent introduction of AI detection systems. As shown in the Table, students perceived the thresholds for identifying AI-generated content as being unfairly applied, leading to fears of false accusations. Some even reported that basic tools, such as spell-checkers, were mistakenly flagged as AI-generated content, causing unnecessary stress. These findings reflect broader concerns about the reliability of AI detection tools, where unverified policies may unjustly penalize students (Baines et al., 2014). Focus Group C participants also noted that their institution's stricter approach to AI detection contrasted sharply with other institutions offering the same qualifications. While AI detection tools were widely used, they believed that the level of enforcement and severity of penalties varied greatly. This perceived inconsistency highlights the need for standardised AI assessment criteria to ensure fair and transparent regulations across institutions (O'Leary, 2023), addressing disparities in how AI policies are applied throughout Malta.

Alongside concerns about AI detection, students also highlighted issues with the functionality and accessibility of plagiarism detection tools,

particularly Turnitin. While Turnitin is accessible at certain submission stages, many students felt constrained by its limited availability over time, preventing them from proactively checking their work for potential similarity issues before final submission. This restricted access increased anxiety over the risk of unintentional plagiarism and limited opportunities for self-correction, contributing to heightened stress among students.

Access to academic resources and research participant engagement

The Table reveals that a recurring challenge across all focus groups was the limited access to local academic research materials, particularly those from a leading higher education institution in Malta. Participants strongly criticized the inaccessibility of publicly funded research materials from other local educational institutions, arguing that state-funded resources should be shared across all higher education institutions. This issue was especially pronounced in the Maltese vocational education and training (VET) sector, where institutions often serve a dual role as both higher and further education providers. This aligns with research on resource equity in education, which emphasizes that publicly funded knowledge should be accessible to all students, regardless of institutional affiliation (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

Another key challenge, particularly in Focus Group B, was difficulty in securing research participants. The Table shows that students encountered bureaucratic barriers when seeking approval to conduct research within public institutions, with one participant reporting the need to escalate the request to ministerial level to receive a response. This finding reflects broader research challenges in vocational education, where institutional gatekeeping can delay data collection (Spacey et al., 2020), and ultimately hinder student progress.

Limitations to the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by hospitality and tourism students in Malta during the dissertation process, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relies on data collected from focus groups, which, although rich in qualitative detail, may be influenced by group dynamics. Participants might have conformed to dominant opinions within the group or hesitated to express dissenting views, particularly on sensitive topics such as supervision quality or institutional policies. Despite moderators'

efforts to encourage equal participation, some students were more outspoken than others, potentially leading to the underreporting of certain issues or an overemphasis on others. This dynamic may have affected the breadth and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, while structured role division and data triangulation were employed to minimize researcher bias, complete objectivity cannot be guaranteed. The interpretation of qualitative data is inherently subjective, and despite the involvement of multiple researchers, their individual perspectives and experiences may have influenced the analysis and conclusions.

Secondly, the study's sample was drawn from a single higher education institution in Malta, which limits the broader applicability of the findings to other contexts. While participants represented a diverse range of academic backgrounds, genders, and stages in the dissertation process, the specific institutional environment and policies may not reflect those of other higher education or vocational institutions within Malta or internationally. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diverse range of dissertation-related challenges experienced by students in different educational or cultural settings. The research captures only students' perspectives, which, although valuable, represent just one side of the dissertation experience. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, future studies should incorporate the perspectives of dissertation supervisors and institutional representatives, offering a more holistic view of the dissertation process.

Thirdly, the qualitative nature of this study, while offering in-depth insights into students' perceptions, does not allow for quantitative analysis or statistical validation of the results. Future research could benefit from adopting a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data with surveys or other quantitative methods to validate and expand upon these findings. This would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students in vocational education and training, particularly within the hospitality and tourism sector in Malta.

Conclusion

The focus group findings, outlined in The Table, highlight systemic challenges related to dissertation supervision, academic support, institutional policies, and access to both research participants and essential academic resources such as academic journals, publicly funded

research materials, and databases from local higher education institutions. These barriers collectively hinder students' ability to conduct thorough and timely research, contributing to delays in dissertation completion and increased academic stress. These challenges are consonant with those identified by Shen, Zhang, and Carter (2024), who note that students encounter significant obstacles throughout the dissertation process. Such barriers not only hinder research progress but also contribute to academic anxiety, procrastination, perceptions of institutional unfairness and students development.

This aligns with research by Liu, He, and Wu (2022), whose meta-analysis examines the various factors influencing hospitality and tourism management students' career intentions. Their study highlights the challenges students face in balancing professional commitments with academic responsibilities, emphasizing the need for targeted support mechanisms to enhance student engagement and success in both academic and professional settings. This reinforces existing research on dissertation barriers in vocational education, further supporting the idea that hospitality and tourism students—many of whom juggle work and academic obligations—require structured academic and institutional support to be in a better position to commit themselves to working on their dissertations effectively.

Shen, Zhang, and Carter (2024) further identify key challenges in this process and advocate for appropriate and timely guidance, collaborative environments, constructive feedback, and meaningful academic discourse as essential for both enhancing writing capabilities and boosting self-confidence. Their work also incorporates Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) concept of the learning situation, providing a broader contextual framework for examining the specific difficulties students face and identifying effective support mechanisms. Addressing these concerns necessitates a multi-faceted approach that strengthens academic writing preparation, enhances dissertation supervision structures, and improves institutional transparency in decision-making. The variability in supervision quality and responsiveness suggests a need for standardized supervisory guidelines, ensuring that all students receive equitable access to mentoring and timely feedback (Ali et al., 2016; Inouye, 2023). Additionally, the rigid dissertation extension policies that fail to account for personal and financial struggles indicate that institutions should explore a more flexible, student-centered approach to academic regulations (Okahana, 2020).

One of the most pressing concerns raised by students is the limited access to academic resources, particularly to research platforms within publicly funded higher education institutions. This study highlights students' frustrations with restricted access to University of Malta research materials, reinforcing the broader debate on knowledge equity and inter-institutional resource sharing (Deem & Brehony, 2000). Implementing cross-institutional academic partnerships could improve information accessibility and ensure that all students, regardless of their enrollment institution, have adequate research support. Moreover, the study reveals emerging concerns related to AI detection policies, as students perceive institutional inconsistencies in the application of AI-generated content thresholds. The lack of transparency and direct access to AI similarity scores has contributed to uncertainty and academic stress, necessitating clearer institutional policies and student training on AI regulations (O'Leary, 2023).

Ultimately, fostering a supportive academic environment that integrates sociocultural learning principles, standardized supervision practices, and equitable resource access will not only benefit students but also contribute to the broader educational landscape. By embracing flexibility, transparency, and innovation in dissertation supervision and academic policies, institutions can create a more inclusive and effective framework that empowers students to overcome challenges and achieve academic excellence. Future research should further investigate the complex relationships between institutional policies, academic support systems, and student outcomes, with a specific focus on vocational education settings. Longitudinal studies assessing the long-term effects of improved supervision practices and enhanced resource accessibility on student achievement and career development would offer valuable guidance for educators and policymakers.

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