

Regenerative Capability Pedagogy in Small Island Tourism and Hospitality Education

 Robertico Croes

UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, USA, and School of Tourism and Hospitality, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

(Email: robertico.croes@ucf.edu)

ABSTRACT

In Small Island Destinations (SIDs), tourism sustains livelihoods while reproducing dependency, ecological fragility, and social precarity. Hospitality curricula often reinforce this paradox by emphasizing employability over resilience and sovereignty. This study employs narrative inquiry with Caribbean educators, analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, to explore curricular practices, systemic constraints, and reformist aspirations. Findings reveal strong endorsement of the Regenerative Capability Pedagogy (ReCaP), a framework grounded in Sen's Capability Approach and Nussbaum's notion of human flourishing, across its four dimensions: empathy, capability expansion, sovereignty-building, and resilience. Respondents also identified institutional and structural "capability traps" that constrain transformative reform, underscoring the recursive tension between aspirations for educational sovereignty and systemic fragility. ReCaP operationalizes a spiral curriculum that integrates service foundations, digital fluency, indigenous knowledge, and empathy-driven metrics. It repositions higher education from a mechanism of labor-market compliance to developmental infrastructure capable of cultivating sovereignty and sustainable futures in SIDs. This paper contributes to the literature by extending the Capability Approach into tourism education, theorizing pedagogy as a regenerative capability system, and empirically demonstrating how ReCaP can align curricular practice with resilience and sovereignty in fragile, tourism-dependent societies.

Keywords: *Capability approach, Curriculum reform, Regenerative pedagogy, Resilience, Small island destinations, Tourism education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Small island destinations (SIDs) embody a structural paradox at the heart of contemporary tourism development. Tourism serves as both the primary engine of economic growth, generating GDP, employment, and foreign exchange, and a vehicle for identity formation and cultural affirmation. Yet this same dependence entrenches systemic vulnerability. (Baum, 2019; Croes, 2012; Stylianou & Pericleous, 2025; World Bank, 2025). Narrow production bases, ecological fragility, exposure to climate shocks, external market dependence, inequality, and constrained institutional capacity coalesce into a development model that is simultaneously enabling and limiting. In this context, tourism is not merely an industry but a structuring condition of both possibility and constraint for island futures.

Within this paradox, hospitality and tourism management education (HTME) assumes an existential rather than instrumental role. Education cannot remain confined to the reproduction of labor for tourism systems; it must instead expand the capabilities through which island societies navigate volatility, exercise agency, and pursue sustainable well-being (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Lewis-Cameron, 2022; Sigala, 2020). This repositioning is not optional; in SIDs, education is inseparable from development itself.

However, prevailing HTME models are dominated by productivity-oriented paradigms. Tribe (2002) critique of instrumentalist education is particularly acute in small island contexts, where curricula are overwhelmingly designed to service resorts, cruise operations, and tourism supply chains. This vocational narrowing reduces

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education to a mechanism of labor allocation, reinforcing dependency by aligning success with absorption into externally driven industries rather than with the cultivation of adaptive, critical, and innovative capacities (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Lewis-Cameron, 2022). As a result, education becomes reactive, responding to industry demands and crises, rather than generative of alternative development pathways grounded in resilience, justice, and human flourishing (Di Biase & Maniku, 2021; Spencer, 2016).

This limitation is consequential. Tourism is not only an economic sector but also a socio-cultural system that reflects and reproduces broader societal values. When education privileges efficiency, technical competence, and market responsiveness above all else, it risks legitimizing unsustainable growth models and deepening structural inequities. Conversely, a reimagined HTME, grounded in the capabilities approach (Cockerill, 2014) and aligned with UNESCO's call for a renewed social contract for education (Carney, 2022), can equip learners to interrogate the ethical, ecological, and cultural dimensions of tourism. In doing so, it repositions graduates not as passive participants in tourism systems but as agents capable of reshaping them toward regenerative and inclusive futures (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

The core challenge, therefore, is conceptual. It requires moving beyond a view of education as an instrument of economic productivity toward an understanding of education as a foundation of economic purpose. This shift demands a theoretical framework capable of transcending growth-centric logic that have long constrained small island development. The Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) offers such a reframing by redirecting attention from resource accumulation to the expansion of substantive freedoms and human flourishing. Applied to HTME, it enables education to be conceptualized as developmental infrastructure, one that cultivates empathy, resilience, and agency as prerequisites for sustainable futures.

From this perspective, education becomes central to the reconfiguration of island development trajectories. By embedding capability expansion within curricular design and institutional architecture, HTME can contribute to reducing structural vulnerability, disrupting cycles of dependency, and enabling communities to define development on their own terms (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Croes, 2012). This entails moving beyond technical skills to cultivate dispositions, ethical orientations, and critical literacies that enable learners to engage with climate change, technological disruption, and socio-economic inequality in transformative ways.

Building on this foundation, this study advances Regenerative Capability Pedagogy (ReCaP) as a framework for repositioning HTME as a lever of autonomy and transformation. Informed by critiques of developmental inertia (Croes, Renduchintala, & Badu-Baiden, 2025) and insights into human capital and competitiveness (Croes, Ridderstaat, & van Niekerk, 2018; Golubovskaya, Solnet, & Robinson, 2019), ReCaP shifts the orientation of education from industry-serving to society-serving. It embeds employability within a broader architecture of capability expansion, justice, and regenerative well-being.

In doing so, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature. Existing scholarship on HTME in small island contexts has largely treated education as a function of labor supply and sectoral productivity. Far less attention has been given to its role as a developmental system capable of expanding human capabilities, enhancing resilience, and fostering autonomy. By advancing ReCaP, this study contributes a theoretically grounded and empirically informed framework that reconceptualizes education as regenerative infrastructure. It offers both conceptual innovation and practical pathways for aligning tourism education with the pursuit of sustainable well-being in fragile, tourism-dependent societies.

This reframing positions education not as a peripheral concern but as a central developmental frontier for SIDs. While prior research has documented the structural constraints of insularity, the persistence of instrumentalist educational paradigms, and the endurance of dependency logics (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Baum, 2019; Croes, 2012; Lewis-Cameron, 2022), there remains limited theorization of how education can actively disrupt these dynamics. This study responds to that gap by conceptualizing HTME as a regenerative capability system capable of mediating the paradox of tourism itself.

The structure of this study is as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 outlines the methodology, Sections 4 and 5 present the findings and their implications, and Section 6 concludes with the study's key insights.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Tourism in Small Island Destinations: From Dependency to Paradox*

Paradox framing provides a particularly compelling lens for understanding tourism in small island developing states (SIDS). Tourism simultaneously expands and constrains well-being: it generates employment and investment while reinforcing cultural pride, yet it also intensifies ecological vulnerability and external dependence (World Bank, 2025). The very flows that sustain livelihoods can erode ecological integrity; the revenues that stabilize public finances may foster fiscal reliance; and the global visibility that affirms identity can, over time, commodify culture. In this sense, tourism in small island contexts operates as both lifeline and liability, an enduring source of opportunity intertwined with profound risk.

This paradox shifts the discourse from linear notions of vulnerability to a dynamic understanding of tension and interdependence. Rather than implying passivity, this framing foregrounds agency, adaptability, and complexity, recognizing that island societies simultaneously experience gains and losses as they navigate development. It therefore calls for analytical and institutional tools that move beyond dependency critiques to capture co-evolution, resilience, and distributive justice. In this context, systems are needed not only to reduce structural constraints but also to expand emerging opportunities.

Hospitality and tourism management education (HTME) is central to this task. Rather than functioning solely as a skills-delivery mechanism, HTME should be reimagined as regenerative infrastructure that builds the capabilities individuals and communities need to navigate paradox, enhance resilience, and support more inclusive and adaptive island futures. (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Golubovskaya et al., 2019; Lewis-Cameron, 2022; Sigala, 2020).

2.2. *Reimagining HTME: From Productivity to Purpose*

The literature on tourism and hospitality education has long critiqued its instrumental orientation. Tribe (2002) coined the notion of the “vocational cage” to describe education’s narrowing toward immediate industry needs, privileging technical proficiency over the critical, ethical, and emancipatory dimensions of learning. This dynamic is particularly acute on small islands in the Pacific. HTME curricula are often tailored to seamlessly integrate graduates into resorts, cruise operations, and other related sectors of the hospitality industry. While such programs facilitate employability, they reinforce narrow conceptions of success tied to labor market absorption rather than broader developmental outcomes (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Lewis-Cameron, 2022).

This productivity-oriented paradigm is increasingly inadequate in the face of island vulnerabilities. Scholars such as Spencer (2016) and Di Biase and Maniku (2021) argue that education in fragile contexts must transcend narrow vocational training to address structural risks, such as climate adaptation, social equity, and sustainability. Mariaye and Samuel (2018) emphasize that higher education in small states cannot remain reactive, adapting to external crises, but must be proactive in shaping developmental trajectories attuned to resilience and justice. Scandurra, Romano, Ronghi, and Carfora (2018); Eppinga, de Scisciolo, and Mijts (2019); Pereira and Steenge (2022) and Loftsdóttir, Gomes Santana, and Franco Montesdeoca (2025) extend this argument, underscoring that higher education in small islands cannot be divorced from questions of survival, identity, and autonomy.

Reframing HTME as purpose-oriented education shifts its normative anchor from economic productivity to a broader economic purpose. Productivity measures success in terms of output, workers trained, revenue generated, and sectors serviced. Purpose measures success in terms of outcomes, capabilities, expanded freedoms, and sustained communities. This reframing does not abandon employability or competitiveness but repositions them as instrumental means rather than as the ultimate ends. Therefore, the task for HTME is to cultivate graduates who are not only employable but also empowered, innovative, and capable of regenerating fragile socioecological futures.

2.3. *Regenerative Capability Pedagogy in Context*

Regenerative education has increasingly been conceptualized as a systemic, justice-oriented process aimed at restoring equilibrium among social, ecological, and economic systems (McIntyre-Mills and Yvonne Corcoran Nantes (2022)). While this framing offers important normative direction, its application within specific disciplinary contexts, particularly in professional education, remains insufficiently developed. This study addresses that gap by situating regeneration within hospitality and tourism management education (HTME), with a particular focus on small island

destinations (SIDs), where structural vulnerability and economic dependency heighten the consequences of educational design.

Within this context, regeneration is not merely an abstract ethical aspiration but an operational necessity. Small island systems are characterized by persistent structural constraints, including climate vulnerability, economic concentration, and limited diversification pathways, all of which restrict long-term development options (Croes, 2012). As a result, education emerges as a critical institutional mechanism through which adaptive capacity can be expanded, cultural identity safeguarded, and resilience strengthened over time.

Rather than treating regeneration as a diffuse normative ideal, this study reconceptualizes it as a capability-driven, place-based pedagogical approach. Grounded in Sen (1999) emphasis on substantive freedoms and Nussbaum (2011) articulation of human flourishing, this perspective enables regeneration to be translated into actionable principles within curriculum design, institutional governance, and community engagement. In doing so, it shifts regeneration from rhetoric to practice, positioning education as an active agent in shaping resilient and equitable socio-ecological systems.

2.4. From Transformation to Regeneration

Transformative education has traditionally focused on altering how individuals think by fostering critical reflection and facilitating shifts in worldview (Mezirow (2000) ; Sterling (2011)). Its primary locus of change is the learner, emphasizing cognitive and perceptual transformation as the basis for broader social change.

Regenerative education, however, extends beyond the individual to encompass the renewal of the systems within which individuals operate. It is concerned not only with fostering critical awareness but also with restoring and sustaining the socio-ecological conditions that enable collective well-being. In this sense, regeneration emphasizes interdependence, long-term resilience, and the co-evolution of human and environmental systems (McIntyre-Mills & Yvonne Corcoran Nantes, 2022).

This distinction is particularly salient in the context of HTME in SIDs. While transformative learning may produce critically conscious graduates, its impact remains limited in the absence of systemic alignment. Regeneration, by contrast, requires that education actively contributes to reshaping institutional, economic, and ecological systems, rather than merely interpreting them. It calls for a reorientation of educational purpose, from individual enlightenment to systemic renewal.

To operationalize this shift, the study advances Regenerative Capability Pedagogy (ReCaP) as an integrative framework that links educational design to capability expansion, equity, and resilience. ReCaP positions education not only as a site of knowledge transmission but as a dynamic system of transformation embedded within broader development processes.

2.5. Anchors and Dimensions in ReCaP

To enhance conceptual clarity and avoid analytical ambiguity, it is necessary to distinguish between the theoretical anchors and operational dimensions that constitute the Regenerative Capability Pedagogy framework.

The theoretical anchors define the normative foundation of ReCaP and articulate why education matters within this paradigm. The first anchor, capability expansion, defines the normative purpose of education as the enlargement of substantive freedoms and life opportunities, drawing on Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) capability frameworks. The second anchor, positional objectivity, emphasizes that educational outcomes are mediated by context-specific conversion conditions, including social positioning, institutional structures, and cultural norms (Carney, 2022; Robeyns, 2017). The third anchor, recursive empowerment, highlights the dynamic feedback loops through which expanded capabilities reinforce broader system-level transformations, thereby linking individual development to collective resilience (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Croes, Ridderstaat, & Shapoval, 2020).

These anchors collectively establish the evaluative logic of ReCaP by defining the intended ends of education within a regenerative paradigm. In contrast, the operational dimensions specify how these normative commitments are enacted in practice. ReCaP is expressed through four interrelated dimensions: holistic competence, which integrates cognitive, technical, and ethical capabilities; empathy as infrastructure, which embeds relational and ethical awareness into institutional design; capability-oriented learning, which prioritizes

the expansion of freedoms over the accumulation of discrete skills; and regenerative pedagogy, which aligns teaching and learning processes with long-term socio-ecological sustainability.

Together, these dimensions translate abstract theoretical principles into concrete pedagogical and institutional practices. The distinction between anchors and dimensions is therefore critical, as it clarifies that ReCaP is not a collection of loosely related themes but a structured framework that systematically links normative purpose to educational practice.

2.6. Operationalizing ReCaP

The operationalization of ReCaP occurs through four interconnected institutional domains: curriculum, governance, stakeholder engagement, and policy alignment. Within the curriculum, sustainability, digital literacy, and systems thinking are embedded as capabilities rather than treated as isolated competencies, thereby fostering integrative and adaptive learning (Murray, 2024; Sigala, 2020). Governance structures are reoriented toward inclusion by incorporating diverse perspectives and positionalities into decision-making processes, ensuring that institutional priorities reflect a plurality of lived experiences (Croes & Kubickova, 2013).

Stakeholder engagement evolves from a model of consultation to one of co-creation, enabling the integration of community-based and Indigenous knowledge systems into educational processes (Croes et al., 2025; Gruenewald, 2003).

Incorporating tools such as blockchain for transparency, algorithmic decision-making, and cybersecurity literacy enhances students' conversion factors, equipping them to innovate and act with a justice-oriented agency (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022). At the level of policy alignment, education is strategically connected to broader resilience agendas, including climate adaptation, social equity, and digital transformation (Lopes, Farias, Lopes, Silva, & Catapan, 2024; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Across these domains, technology functions as a conditional conversion factor that can either expand or constrain capabilities depending on the institutional and governance contexts in which it is embedded (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022; Prados-Castillo, Guaita Martinez, Zielińska, & Gorgues Comas, 2023). Through this integrated structure, HTME is repositioned from a narrow labor-market pipeline to a regenerative capability system that supports autonomy, resilience, and sustained well-being.

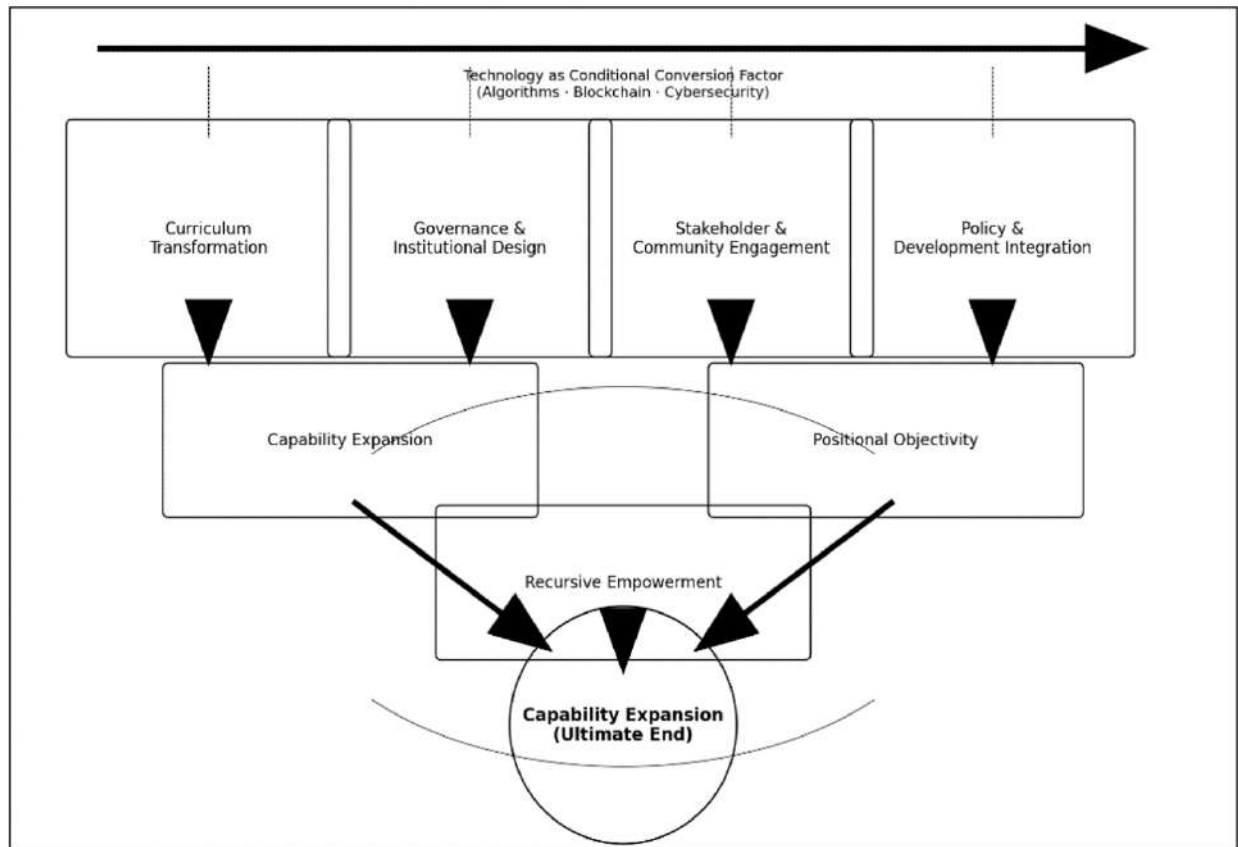


Figure 1. Regenerative Capability Pedagogy (ReCaP) for tourism and hospitality education in small islands.

Note: Framework linking curriculum, governance, engagement, and policy to capability expansion, mediated by technology, positional objectivity, and recursive empowerment.

Figure 1 centers capability expansion as the normative core (ultimate end), scaffolded by three theoretical anchors, capability expansion, positional objectivity, and recursive empowerment, which orient design and evaluation. Four interdependent operational pillars—curriculum transformation, governance and institutional design, stakeholder and community engagement, and policy and development integration—translate theory into practice. A cross-cutting technology dimension (algorithms, blockchain, cybersecurity) functions as a conditional conversion factor, capable of widening or constraining freedom depending on governance and pedagogy. Bidirectional flows depict recursive feedback between education, resilience, and development, positioning HTME as a regenerative infrastructure that advances autonomy, well-being, and competitiveness within the tourism paradox of simultaneous opportunity and constraint.

The following sections situate ReCaP within the lived constraints and possibilities of SIDs, showing how a shift from productivity to purpose reorients HTME toward autonomy, well-being, and regeneration amid tourism’s simultaneous opportunities and constraints (Baum, 2019; Croes et al., 2025; Croes et al., 2020). In doing so, it clarifies how recursive feedback between education, governance, and community capacity can be designed, not hoped for, so that small islands do not merely survive global volatility but actively reshape it to expand freedoms and sustain flourishing.

3. METHODOLOGY

Having established the conceptual architecture of ReCaP, this section translates the framework into an empirical strategy designed to assess its relevance and applicability within small island contexts. Guided by the theoretical anchors of capability expansion, positional objectivity, and recursive empowerment, the methodology outlines the research design, site selection, and sampling strategy, as well as the indicators used to examine capability

expansion, resilience, governance, and technological conversion factors (Croes et al., 2020; Golubovskaya et al., 2019; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

The analytical approach employs qualitative triangulation to explore how educational practices either expand or constrain substantive freedoms, how outcomes vary across institutional and cultural contexts, and how recursive feedback loops emerge between education, resilience, and development processes (Croes et al., 2020; Murray, 2024).

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited for examining an emergent and under-theorized framework such as ReCaP. Narrative inquiry is employed as the primary methodological approach due to its strong alignment with the framework's theoretical anchors.

First, narrative inquiry captures capability expansion by foregrounding individuals' lived experiences of opportunity and constraint, thereby providing insight into how educational processes shape substantive freedoms (Folke et al., 2010; Sen, 1999). Second, it reflects positional objectivity by situating these experiences within specific institutional, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how outcomes vary across different settings (Croes et al., 2025). Third, it reveals recursive dynamics by tracing how educational practices both influence and are influenced by broader systems, highlighting the co-evolutionary relationship between education and development (Clandinin, Connelly, & Phelan, 2000; Freire, 1970).

Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, this design explores how educators interpret and enact regenerative principles in practice. This approach generates contextually grounded insights into how HTME functions as a capability-expanding system in SIDs.

3.2. Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were gathered via six open-ended, semi-structured written interview prompts that were administered electronically. This method is consistent with exploratory educational research that privileges interpretive depth over statistical generalization (Bourn, 2021). Asynchronous written responses reduce interviewer effects, enhance reflexivity, and enable unpressured expression, an especially valuable approach in cross-cultural Caribbean settings, where researcher presence can reproduce asymmetrical dynamics (Arja, White, Kottathveetil, & Thompson, 2024).

The six prompts were purposefully designed in direct alignment with ReCaP's anchors, ensuring that every dimension of inquiry was both theoretically grounded and practically resonant. Questions on curriculum and systems thinking probed sustainability, ethics, interdisciplinarity, and resilience, operationalizing capability expansion by examining whether higher education enlarges substantive freedoms and prepares graduates for regenerative choices (Sen, 1999; Stylianou & Pericleous, 2025). Governance and empathy were explored through attention to institutional collaboration and care, treating empathy as infrastructure, and foregrounding positionality by highlighting differentiated responses to vulnerability and power (Krzanich, 2015; Zembylas, 2012).

A third line of inquiry focused explicitly on capability expansion, pressing beyond narrow labor preparation to assess whether curricula genuinely broadened freedoms and affirmed education's normative end as empowerment (Cockerill, 2014; Murray, 2024; Sen, 1999). Regenerative pedagogy was examined through projects that generated mutual benefits for communities and institutions, embodying recursion by tracing feedback loops between educational practice, resilience building, and social transformation (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Croes et al., 2025; Eppinga et al., 2019; Lewis-Cameron, 2022; Nussbaum, 2011). Simultaneously, prompts on conversion factors and context illuminated how ecological, institutional, and cultural conditions shaped the translation of opportunities into outcomes, operationalizing positionality by revealing how differential access and conversion produced uneven capabilities (Croes et al., 2025; Robeyns, 2017).

Finally, participants were invited to envision systemic levers for change, articulating reforms that embed ReCaP across higher-education systems and advance recursion by linking present practices to long-term regenerative trajectories (Sen, 1999; World Bank, 2025). Taken together, this instrumentation ensured that each data point was theoretically anchored, enabling a robust assessment of whether and how higher tourism and management education (HTME) in Caribbean SIDs expands freedoms, reflects positional differences, and produces recursive empowerment amid ecological vulnerability and socio-economic precarity (Folke et al., 2010; Gruenewald, 2003).

3.3. Methodological Rigor

Trustworthiness in this study was evaluated using [Lincoln, Egon, and Guba \(1985\)](#) criteria, reframed within the Recursive–Capability (ReCaP) framework to foreground capability expansion, positionality, and recursion as anchors of rigor. Credibility was established through iterative coding, thick description, and systematic grounding in participants’ voices, ensuring that findings reflected genuine expansions—or constraints—of freedom within educational practice, judged by how fully the analysis illuminated opportunities for enlarged choices and well-being ([Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017](#); [Sen, 1999](#)). Transferability was achieved by situating the analysis within the dense contextual realities of Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where differentiated vulnerabilities and conversion conditions shape the meanings of education. Rather than assuming universality, this study treated educational processes as standpoint-dependent and analytically resonant with other fragile or peripheral contexts ([Biagi, Ladu, & Royuela, 2017](#); [Croes, 2012](#); [Roman Krznaric, 2015](#)).

Dependability was strengthened through transparent analytic procedures, reflexive memoing, and an audit trail of coding decisions, allowing insights to emerge recursively from feedback loops between data, theory, and researcher reflection, consistent with ReCaP’s co-evolutionary emphasis ([Cockerill, 2014](#); [Golubovskaya et al., 2019](#); [Murray, 2024](#)). Confirmability was secured by explicitly acknowledging the researcher’s standpoint as both a lens and a resource for recursive insight, tracing how interpretations were shaped and reshaped through iterative engagement, in alignment with ReCaP’s dual commitment to standpoint recognition and feedback-driven empowerment ([Madison, 2011](#); [Tracy, 2010](#)). Although the sample comprised only eight educators, adequacy was established through information power; the diversity of institutional perspectives and richness of responses supported analytic saturation ([Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016](#)). Therefore, the findings are not statistically generalizable but analytically transferable, advancing a theoretically anchored, justice-oriented understanding of higher education in SIDS.

3.4. Sampling and Participants

Purposive and snowball strategies were used to reach educators with substantive experience in Caribbean hospitality and tourism. In small islands where academic systems are resource-constrained and highly networked, these approaches are both pragmatic and theoretically consistent with ReCaP’s emphasis on context and agency ([Bray, 1993](#); [Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007](#)).

Two inclusion criteria guided recruitment: (i) substantial experience within hospitality and tourism programs in Caribbean SIDS and (ii) demonstrated reflexivity regarding pedagogy and policy architectures shaping educational transformation. These criteria ensured that participants could (a) contribute capability-centered insights into how curricula enlarge or constrain freedoms; (b) provide positional perspectives across institutional and cultural standpoints; and (c) generate recursive reflections on how educational practices feed back into systemic development ([Croes et al., 2025](#); [Sen, 1999](#); [UNESCO, 2021](#)).

The final cohort comprised eight educators from Aruba, The Bahamas, Curaçao, and Jamaica, ranging from early career lecturers to senior faculty in hospitality management, sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, and business administration fields. Several participants had industry experience, which strengthened the practical grounding. This diversity aligns with ReCaP’s anchors: it enables the exploration of capability expansion across varied practices, captures positionality via multiple institutional contexts, and illustrates recursion by documenting feedback between industry experience, academic teaching, and policy reform ([Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018](#)).

The sample size was appropriate for narrative inquiry, which prioritizes depth and voice over breadth. Guided by information power, the diversity of standpoints and depth of responses enabled saturation ([Malterud et al., 2016](#)). The aim was analytical transferability, not statistical inference: to illuminate the universal tensions of autonomy, resilience, and justice in small-island higher education ([Madison, 2011](#); [Murray, 2024](#)).

3.5. Context: Caribbean Higher Education and SID Vulnerabilities

The Caribbean, the world’s most tourism-dependent region, is a crucible for testing the power and limits of ReCaP. Tourism fuels GDP, jobs, and foreign exchange, yet this very reliance deepens fragilities such as ecological degradation, economic leakage, and cultural commodification ([Croes et al., 2020](#); [Pereira & Steenge, 2022](#)). Higher-education institutions are caught in this paradox. They must generate human capital for the sector while

navigating fragile political economies, scarce resources, and post-colonial legacies that constrain vision and reform (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Lewis-Cameron, 2022).

Within ReCaP, these tensions are sharpened. Capability expansion exposes the gulf between narrow, skills-based curricula and the broader freedoms, innovation, justice, and ecological stewardship that education should unlock (Jamal & Camargo, 2014). Positionality highlights unequal conversion conditions across institutions, where access to international networks, resources, and digital infrastructure creates winners and losers (Cockerill, 2014; Robeyns, 2017). Recursion underscores the cyclical interplay between external shocks and educational practice: crises like COVID-19 expose vulnerability yet ignite reform, pushing governance and pedagogy toward regenerative futures (Loftsdóttir et al., 2025).

These dynamics echo elsewhere, such as in the Canary Islands, but in small island destinations, the stakes are existential. Emerging transitions, digital, green, and community-based, offer pathways to regenerate capabilities (Eppinga et al., 2019; Meddeb, 2022) but only if governance and pedagogy embrace inclusion. The application of ReCaP is critical. It tests whether Caribbean HTME can expand freedoms, accommodate positional variation, and generate recursive empowerment or merely reinforce dependency in subtler forms.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Guided by narrative inquiry, this study traces how Caribbean educators narrate their practice under conditions of volatility and constraint, mapping those stories onto ReCaP's anchors of capability expansion, positionality, and recursion (Clandinin et al., 2000). The aim is not only to describe programs but to interpret how resources are converted into outcomes (positionality), where freedoms are enlarged or denied (capability expansion), and how practice and systems interact in feedback loops (recursion) (Robeyns, 2017). Through the paradox of tourism in SIDs, these narratives expose higher education's promise and fragility as developmental infrastructure (World Bank, 2025).

The section is organized around ReCaP's four dimensions: holistic competence, empathy as infrastructure, capability expansion, and regenerative pedagogy. Each theme is interpreted through the anchors of capability, positionality, and recursion, showing how educators articulate transformative aspirations but confront policy misalignment, institutional inertia, and resource scarcity, which perpetuate developmental traps (Malterud et al., 2016).

4.1. Holistic Competence: Beyond Technical Training

(Capability Expansion)

Educators consistently judged the prevailing curricula as insufficient for island realities. They argued that operational proficiency is necessary but not remotely sufficient for contexts defined by climate shocks, market volatility, and uneven development. As one educator put it:

"We train them to run a front desk or manage a banquet, but not to manage disruption. A hurricane, a pandemic, a political crisis, these realities define our region, yet our students are rarely prepared to navigate them." (Respondent 4)

Another stressed the ethical and justice-oriented horizon that technicalism ignores:

"Hospitality should not just mean pleasing the guest but restoring communities and environments. That requires more than technical know-how." (Respondent 2)

These narratives position capability expansion as the evaluative lens of education, emphasizing what learners can actually do and be: innovative, ethical, and adaptive under conditions of stress (Folke et al., 2010). The missing elements cluster into four capability sets: cognitive (systems and futures literacy), affective (empathy and care), ethical (justice and stewardship), and innovative (entrepreneurship and digital fluency). The gap described is not skills alone, but substantive freedoms, the capacity to interpret, anticipate, and reshape complex socio-ecological futures (Urban Walker, 2006). Holistic competence, viewed through the SID paradox, mediates tourism's dualities, shifting outcomes from productivity to purpose (Croes et al., 2020; Golubovskaya et al., 2019; Gössling & Michael Hall, 2019; Tribe, 2002).

4.2. Empathy as Infrastructure: Recognizing Standpoints (Positionality)

Empathy surfaced as both an aspiration and an absence. Institutions signal empathy through service learning, student governance, and internships, but these practices often function as compliance rituals rather than transformative infrastructures that alter power, voice, and design. One Educator Catalogued Existing Mechanisms.

“Community engagement: All first-year students must pursue a one credit Community Service Course... Participatory governance: There is Student Union / Guild... Collaboration with stakeholders: Each student pursue an internship... 800 hours... Industry experts are also invited...” (Respondent 8)

However, as multiple respondents noted, these touchpoints rarely become systemic. They depend on champions and tend to reproduce the dominant standpoint, industry demand, rather than centering on community perspectives.

“Our students come alive when they work with community tourism groups... But these opportunities depend on personal initiative; we don’t have systemic support.” (Respondent 6)

“Industry tells us what they need, but communities are never consulted. If empathy was truly embedded, we’d treat community perspectives as curriculum inputs, not as afterthoughts.” (Respondent 3)

This is the positionality problem in practice: educational processes reflect one standpoint (industry) and marginalize others (community, environment), thereby narrowing the conversion conditions for capability gains (Biagi et al., 2017). Empathy as infrastructure would invert that order: co-design with communities, integrate Indigenous and local knowledge, embed care in governance and evaluation, and treat lived experience as epistemic capital (Krzanich, 2015; Zembylas, 2012). In SIDs, where imbalances of power and voice are structurally reproduced through tourism, empathic governance is not a soft skill but a system design, a necessary condition for just capability expansion (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

4.3. Capability Expansion: Between Constraint and Promise (Capability Expansion + Recursion)

Even when curricula begin to broaden freedoms, system-level constraints can stifle the conversion into outcomes. Educators described structural ceilings in labor markets, myopic metrics in policy, and digital gaps that collectively depress agency.

“We prepare them well, but they walk into an industry where the ceiling is low and the ladder is owned by someone else.” (Respondent 7)

“The ministry asks us how many graduates are employed in six months, he said. They never ask how many are creating new ventures, or leading community change.” (Respondent 1)

“We talk about resilience, but our students do not learn data literacy, green finance, or digital platforms. We’re behind on the very skills that could break our dependency.” (Respondent 5)

These accounts reveal capability deprivation: freedoms are articulated but structurally denied through misaligned incentives and missing conversion factors. (Robeyns, 2017). They also reveal recursion: when programs nurture entrepreneurship, digital literacy, or community ventures, graduates reinvest in local systems, diversifying their livelihoods and enhancing institutional strength (Croes et al., 2025). In SIDs, the paradox of tourism, jobs versus shocks, heightens the stakes. Capability-rich education enables graduates to launch cooperatives, apply blockchain technology for transparent supply chains, and leverage data for climate adaptation and buffering vulnerability (Prados-Castillo et al., 2023). Without this, education risks recycling dependencies (Croes, 2012).

4.4. Regenerative Pedagogy: Feedback and Differentiation (Recursion + Positionality)

Educators overwhelmingly endorsed co-creative, place-based learning, resonating with Gruenewald (2003) findings. They reported that community-engaged studies, circular economy pilots, and heritage co-management projects generated mutual benefits, deep learning for students, and tangible value for communities. However, assessment and accreditation regimes still privilege seat time and test scores.

“We know co-creation works, but the system rewards seat time and test scores, not collaboration or transformation.” (Respondent 4)

Here, recursion is visible: regenerative projects change relationships among students, communities, and institutions; those changed relationships reshape curricula and governance; and those new designs, in turn, scale capability gains (Cockerill, 2014). However, positional inequities limit participation: under-resourced programs and communities cannot always co-create at the same level, risking a two-tier system of innovation (Meddeb, 2022). Regenerative pedagogy only becomes systemic when governance, funding, and policy guarantee participation, not merely inviting it (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

4.5. *The Aspiration–Reality Gap*

(Capability Trap)

Across narratives, the educators described a recurring disjuncture between ambition and structure.

“We are asked to innovate without resources. It’s like being told to build a boat without wood.” (Respondent 2)

This is the capability trap (Sen, 1999): freedoms are expanded in principle but blocked in practice by resource constraints, policy fragmentation, and institutional inertia (Malterud et al., 2016). The trap persists when evaluation remains fixated on throughput (graduates placed) rather than outcomes (freedoms enlarged), and when island institutions must adapt to global metrics that sidestep local justice and resilience (Murray, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017).

The SID paradox reframes the trap: because tourism can rapidly destroy or create value, time is important. Slow-moving reforms are overtaken by fast-moving shocks. Educators’ narratives therefore press for temporal recursion, short-cycle pilots that seed capability gains quickly, and feed into medium-/long-run system redesign (Cockerill, 2014; Folke et al., 2010). In the absence of such loops, the inertia hardens into the structure.

4.6. *Cross-Cutting Barriers: Policy, Resources, and Governance*

(Positionality + Recursion)

Many educators find themselves in a double bind.

“We’re caught in the middle; education wants compliance, industry wants workers, but no one asks how education can transform the system itself.” (Respondent 3)

This bind reveals positional misalignment: ministries optimize for short-term absorption, industries for immediate skills, and accreditation for standardized inputs, while communities and ecosystems remain weakly represented (Biagi et al., 2017). Such misalignments become recursive inhibitors, blocking feedback loops that may connect community outcomes to curriculum reform and policy shifts (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024). In the SID paradox, policies fixated on job counts risk reproducing vulnerability. The second barrier is resource asymmetry: small programs lack laboratories, digital infrastructure, and relational partnerships (Pereira & Steenge, 2022). Governance redesign, community boards, transparent credentialing, and joint metrics offer pragmatic redistribution (Prados-Castillo et al., 2023).

4.7. *Technology and Futures: Absent Capabilities, Uneven Conversion*

(Capability Expansion + Positionality)

Educators voiced the urgency of algorithmic literacy, blockchain fluency, and cybersecurity:

“AI is not coming; it is here. If we don’t teach students how to adapt ethically and strategically, they’ll be displaced before they graduate.” (Respondent 1)

Where digital spines are absent, students become consumers rather than shapers of technological futures, a clear case of capability deprivation (Sen, 1999). However, technology is a conditional conversion factor: depending on governance, it can democratize opportunity (e.g., transparent supply chains for MSMEs, data for climate resilience) or amplify exclusion (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022). In SIDs, the paradox of tourism is intertwined with the paradox of technology: digitization promises resilience and reach, but without inclusive design, it can accelerate leakage and precarity (Meddeb, 2022; World Bank, 2025).

Educators who piloted community-facing digital projects (e.g., heritage tokenization, MSME data dashboards) reported strong student engagement and visible community benefits, with recursive potential as graduates transferred skills into local enterprises and governance (Eppinga et al., 2019; Golubovskaya et al., 2019). This pattern reinforces ReCaP’s thesis: technology widens freedom when tethered to empathy, equity, and local purpose.

4.8. Validating and Extending ReCaP

Collectively, these narratives validate ReCaP's scaffolding and extend it in SID-specific manners. Validation lies in how capability expansion coherently operates as an evaluative lens for curricula, directing attention to what learners can be and do. Positionality explains why some students and institutions successfully convert opportunities into outcomes while others remain constrained by structural inequities. Recursion captures how regenerative projects, whether entrepreneurial initiatives, digital literacy programs, or community ventures, seed institutional and community change through feedback loops (Robeyns, 2017).

However, the extension is equally significant. Educators point to capability traps at the interface of policy, metrics, and resources, where short-term employability targets undermine long-term freedom (Sen, 1999). They highlight digital capability gaps, algorithmic literacy, green finance, and platform fluency, which are central to SID resilience but are underrepresented in curricula (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022). Framed by the SID paradox, the evidence underscores why HTME must shift from industry-serving compliance to society-serving purpose: only capability-centered systems can mediate tourism's dualities, translating jobs into autonomy, resilience, and well-being (Henderson, Webber, Weyrich, Miller, & Melnikow, 2024). However, without targeted investment in enabling infrastructure and inclusive metrics, reforms risk stalling and perpetuating precarity (Loftsdóttir et al., 2025; Nowell et al., 2017).

Two implications arise from this evidence. First, Measure What Matters: Employability within six months is instrumental, but freedom-enlarging outcomes, entrepreneurial agency, ecological stewardship, and digital sovereignty must become the ultimate indicators (Sen, 1999). Second, Design for Conversion: access alone is insufficient; conversion requires time, networks, and governed technologies. Embedding empathy into infrastructure and technology as a conversion factor ensures that opportunity becomes capability, especially for historically constrained groups (Zembylas, 2012).

In short, educators are working at the frontier of transformation, but system-level support remains fragile. Where ReCaP's anchors are institutionalized, HTME ceases to be a reactive pipeline and becomes a regenerative engine of autonomy and resilience in SIDs (Croes et al., 2025).

5. FROM FINDINGS TO IMPLICATIONS

The findings reveal a persistent paradox: educators articulate a transformative vision, yet systemic inertia, policy fragmentation, and resource constraints limit its realization (Alexander & Helen Henderson, 2024; Lewis-Cameron, 2022). As one respondent noted, "Industry wants workers, education wants compliance, but no one asks how education can transform the system itself" (Respondent 6). This reflects what Croes et al. (2025) calls developmental inertia, with higher education sustaining dependency rather than enabling sovereignty.

Figure 2 illustrates this aspiration–reality gap: curricula are imagined as innovative, empathic, and resilient, yet the reforms remain incremental. This pattern resonates with Sen (1999) notion of a capability trap, where freedoms are promised but structurally denied. Traditional hospitality competencies (Baum, 2019) remain indispensable but insufficient for addressing climate precarity, economic dependence and unsustainable tourism flows (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). The urgent implication is clear: curricula must embed systems thinking (Tribe, 2002) digital fluency (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022) and regenerative values (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) repositioning education as a developmental infrastructure. UNESCO (2021) reinforces this call, urging higher education to align learning with sustainability, equity and well-being.

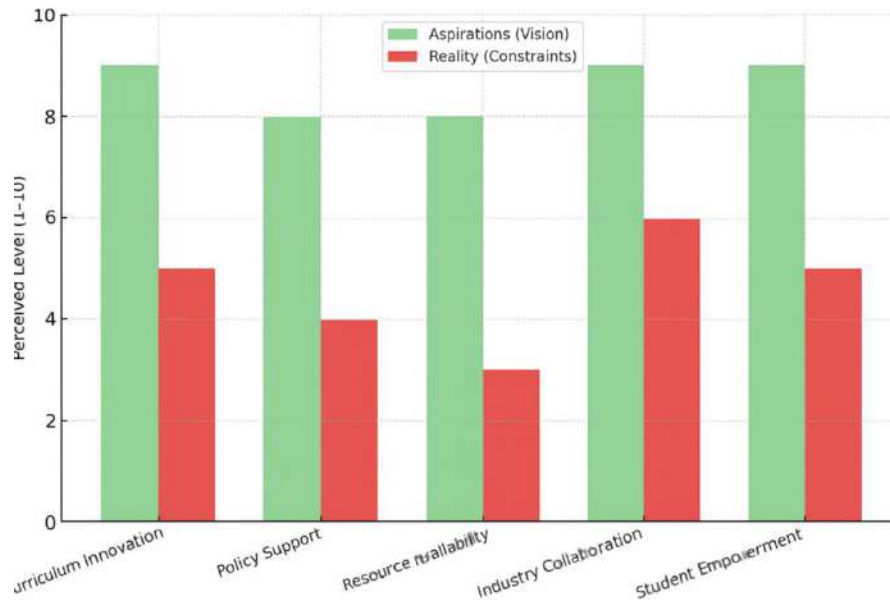


Figure 2. The Aspirations–Reality Gap in Caribbean Tourism and Hospitality Education.

Note: Educators envision curricula grounded in innovation, empowerment, and collaboration, yet systemic realities limit realization, reinforcing the capability trap.

Source: Sen (1999).

5.1. ReCaP: A Regenerative Capability Pedagogy for SIDs

Educators lamented the dominance of compliance over transformation: “We train them to run a front desk or manage a banquet, but not to manage disruption” (Respondent 4). Others pointed to deficits in data literacy and platform fluency: “We’re behind on the very skills that could break our dependency” (Respondent 5).

ReCaP (Regenerative Capability Pedagogy) responds by embedding Sen (1999) principle that education must expand freedoms, paired with Nussbaum (2011) emphasis on imagination, affiliation and justice. In tourism contexts, education is instrumental for competitiveness but foundational for human flourishing (Croes, 2012; Croes et al., 2025; Golubovskaya et al., 2019).

ReCaP is structured around three elements: First, the Spiral of Knowledge–Application–Impact: service foundations progress into applied digital and community partnerships, culminating in regenerative and locally embedded capstones (Tribe, 2002). Second, a Digital Spine (Algorithms, Blockchain, Cybersecurity) equips graduates to shape emerging systems, securing sovereignty in global markets (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022; World Bank, 2025). Third, four cross-cutting dimensions, holistic competence, empathy as infrastructure, capability expansion, and regenerative pedagogy, embed ecological stewardship and indigenous epistemologies into curricula (Carney, 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

The spiral progression (Figure 3) underscores that hospitality and tourism education in small island destinations cannot remain trapped in technical proficiency alone. As Respondent 5 noted, “We talk about resilience, but our students don’t learn data literacy, green finance, or digital platforms.” ReCaP addresses this gap by repositioning vocational skills as entry points for broader capability expansion. Algorithmic literacy, blockchain, and cybersecurity have become pathways to systemic innovation, reframing employability as sovereignty and resilience. In doing so, the spiral operationalizes Sen (1999) vision of education as freedom, Nussbaum (2011) call for human flourishing, and Croes et al. (2025) critique of developmental inertia.

Spiral Progression of Curriculum: Hospitality & Tourism Education in Small Islands (RCF + ABC + Service Foundations)

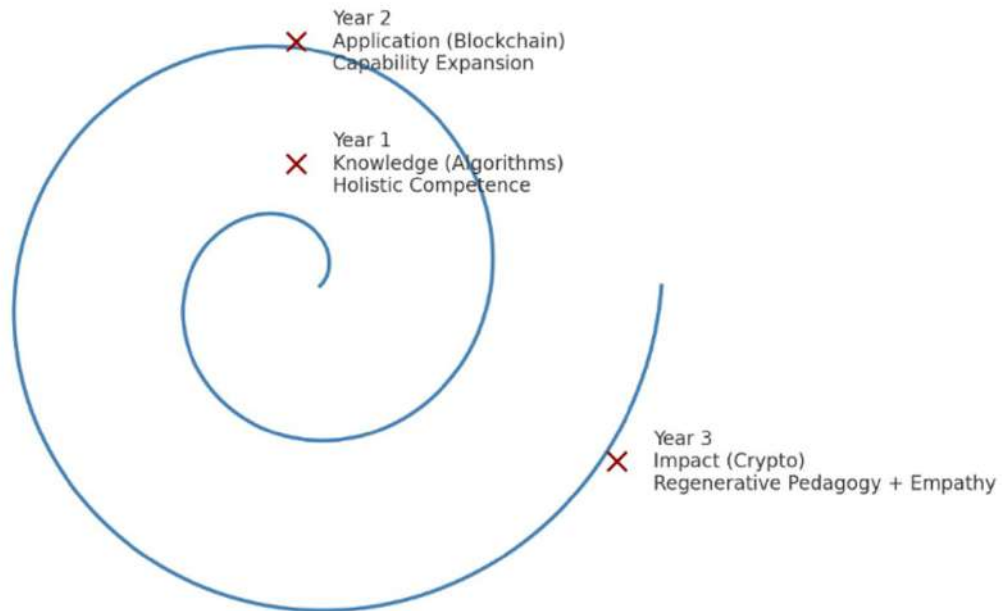


Figure 3. Spiral Progression of the Regenerative Curriculum in Small Islands.

Note: Figure 3 depicts the upward learning journey in ReCaP, where students advance from knowledge to application to impact, integrating service, digital fluency, and regenerative values throughout.

5.2. Beyond Employability: ReCaP as Systemic Transformation

Employability remains necessary but cannot define the educational purpose. As [Sen \(1999\)](#) observes, employment is a means of freedom, not an end. Respondents criticized the narrow evaluation metrics: “The ministry asks us how many graduates are employed in six months. They never ask how many are creating ventures or leading community change” (Respondent 1).

ReCaP reframes employability as a pathway to sovereignty: technical readiness ensures entry, but empowerment flows from empathy, entrepreneurial agency, digital sovereignty, and Indigenous knowledge reclamation. [Nussbaum \(2011\)](#) underscores that such capabilities require institutional scaffolding, policy, governance, and resources that enable the translation of agency into resilience. Without systemic support, competence risks being blunted by inertia ([Croes et al., 2025](#)).

5.3. Empathy-Driven Metrics

Respondents stressed the absence of metrics that capture community value: “Our students come alive when they work with community tourism groups, but we don’t have systemic support” (Respondent 6). ReCaP introduces an Empathy-Driven Metrics Framework ([Table 1](#)) to operationalize empowerment, capability expansion, technological sovereignty, and regenerative practices. Unlike KPIs focused on absorption or compliance, these metrics evaluate whether education enlarges freedom, embeds regeneration, and strengthens sovereignty ([Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018](#); [Sen, 1999](#)). Thus, measurement becomes a lever of change, preventing capability traps and aligning accountability with communities, ecosystems, and future generations.

Table 1. Empathy-Driven metrics framework for tourism and hospitality education in SIDs.

Category	Indicators	Measurement Tools
Community Empowerment	Number of community members trained in digital tools; % of local suppliers integrated into supply chains	Surveys; Blockchain transaction records; Supplier databases
Capability Expansion	Participation of community members in training workshops; Access to educational opportunities beyond students	Attendance logs; Certification records; Capability assessment surveys
Technological Empowerment	Adoption of blockchain for transparent supply chains; Use of eco-tokens or crypto-finance initiatives	Blockchain data; Project reports; Community feedback sessions
Regenerative Business Practices	Number of regenerative business models co-created with communities; Impact of student-community capstone projects	Case studies; Project evaluations; Sustainability audits
Policy & Governance Alignment	Inclusion of community voices in curriculum advisory boards; Policy changes supporting regenerative practices	Advisory board records; Policy documents; Stakeholder interviews
Long-term Commitment	Duration of partnership agreements; Level of community trust and sustained engagement	Agreements; Longitudinal surveys; Trust indices

Note: Framework positioning empathy as a driver of transformation, linking empowerment, capability expansion, technology, regenerative practice, and policy to measurable indicators, with trust and long-term commitment central to sustainable tourism education in SIDs.

6. CONCLUSION: TOWARD REGENERATIVE EDUCATION AND THE TOURISM PARADOX

Hospitality and tourism education in small island destinations (SIDs) is at a decisive crossroads. Curricula have long been constrained by narrow vocationalism, treating education as a pipeline for industrial labor rather than a foundation for sovereignty, resilience, and justice. This approach limits the transformative potential of education and reinforces dependency. Regenerative Capability Pedagogy (ReCaP) offers an alternative: A framework that reimagines education as regenerative infrastructure, grounded in [Sen \(1999\)](#) vision of education as freedom, [Nussbaum \(2011\)](#) call for dignity and justice, and [Croes et al. \(2025\)](#) critique of developmental inertia in the Caribbean.

ReCaP responds to the UNESCO’s call for transformative education ([Carney, 2022](#)). By embedding community-based learning, participatory assessment, and indigenous epistemologies, it dismantles extractive, industry-driven models that reduce education to workforce training in fragile economies. Instead, ReCaP positions education as an enabler of agency and sovereignty, expanding substantive freedoms, cultivating critical consciousness, and building pathways toward a resilient future. Caribbean educators have long articulated this vision, but institutional scaffolding, governance, and resource allocation have lagged.

ReCaP fills this gap with normative reorientation and a practical blueprint.

At its core are three innovations: Spiral curricula built around knowledge–application–impact, a digital spine linking technical proficiency with digital sovereignty, and an Empathy-Driven Metrics Framework that replaces narrow employment absorption with indicators of empowerment, ecological regeneration, and participatory governance. This vision is operationalized through the ReCaP Curriculum Map ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2. The ReCaP curriculum map for hospitality and tourism education in small Islands (RCF + ABC + Service Foundations).

Year / Stage	Knowledge (Cognition / Algorithms) / Holistic Competence	Application (Behavior / Blockchain & Cybersecurity) / Capability Expansion	Impact (Affect / Cyber) / Regenerative Pedagogy & Empathy
Year 1 – Foundations	Principles of Hospitality Delivery (Front Office, F&B, Housekeeping); Tourism Systems & Island Studies; Algorithmic Literacy (demand forecasting, energy/water management, disaster preparedness); Data ethics and critical interpretation of hospitality analytics	Cybersecurity Foundations (privacy, digital hygiene, risk awareness) to safeguard service platforms	
Year 2 – Integration	Hospitality Operations Analytics & Revenue Management; Customer Experience Design supported by algorithms	Blockchain for transparent supply chains (food, crafts); Smart contracts for fair bookings, wages, and loyalty systems; Hospitality Innovation Labs with community partners	Cybersecurity Applications (secure data handling, fraud prevention, cyber resilience in tourism platforms)
Year 3 – Transformation / Capstone	Strategic Hospitality Management for Small Islands; Crisis & Disaster Response in Hospitality	Applied Blockchain Projects: destination governance and hospitality co-creation with residents; Cybersecurity Audits for small island enterprises	Crypto-finance for regenerative hospitality (eco-tokens, diaspora-backed coins); Tokenized guest incentives for sustainability; Capstone: design and evaluate a regenerative hospitality model for a small island
Cross-Cutting Dimensions	Holistic Competence: Integration of hospitality expertise, digital literacy, and ethical reasoning	Capability Expansion: Ensuring local participation, equity, transparency, and digital safety	Empathy as Infrastructure & Regenerative Pedagogy: Embedding compassion, justice, and regeneration across all levels of hospitality design and delivery

Note: This table integrates traditional service foundations with digital innovation (Algorithms, Blockchain, Cybersecurity, Crypto) and regenerative values. It demonstrates the spiral progression of knowledge, application, and impact across three years of higher education in small island contexts.

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The study involved minimal risk and followed ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of the Institute for Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

TRANSPARENCY

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

There are no competing interests.

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