SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH ENTHRAL AT THE INAUGURAL G20 TOURISM HACKATHON CHALLENGE

12 SEPTEMBER 2025

#G20TourismHackathon - The picturesque hills of the Sabie River valley in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province provided a tranquil haven for a group of aspiring young innovators who took on a challenge to reimagine the future of tourism through a digital lens.

Arriving at Sabi River Sun Resort, the youth's excitement filled the air, affirming friendships and camaraderie that had traversed space and time. Travelling from the nine Provinces in South Africa, this diverse group of students connected and maintained friendships built on trust in preparation for the G20 Tourism Hackathon challenge.

The innovator's journey began in June 2025 when Minister of Tourism, Patricia de Lille, launched the G20 Tourism Hackathon at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Forty-six (48) youth, who represented 21 institutions of higher learning, were afforded a platform and an opportunity to generate Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions that will drive job creation and the inclusive and sustainable growth of the tourism sector through digital innovation.

Launched in partnership with the Future Leaders Challenge (FLC) event, and in collaboration with the Centre for Public Service Innovation in conjunction with Geekulcha, the Tourism Hackathon initiative seeks to nurture a pool of future leaders who will drive innovations within the tourism and hospitality sector.

"This initiative prioritises a vision of a people-centred Artificial Intelligence and sustainable tourism innovation. The G20 Tourism Hackathon is more than a competition; it is a legacy project that brings government, business, and academia together to build a tech-savvy tourism sector," Minister Patricia de Lille said.

The G20 Tourism Hackathon Challenge unfolded over a period of two days in the Mpumalanga province from 10 to 11 September 2025. Working in teams, the students were mentored to develop AI solutions that enhance the tourism experience, promote sustainability, and benefit society. Their prototypes, applications, and solutions had to be effective within the travel and tourism industry and support the following themes:

- Smart Tourism and AI Solutions – AI Solutions that empower Small and Macro Enterprises (SME) and promote a seamless travel experience;

- Community-Based Tourism and Rural Inclusion - AI Solutions should connect tourists with small tourism operations who can offer experiences in the hidden gems that are located in small dorpies, towns and villages; and

- Heritage and Cultural Tourism Innovation – AI solutions that showcase South African and African cultures, historical landmarks and indigenous knowledge, and bring historical sites to life sustainably.

Solidarity **Equality** **Sustainability**

As the sunset marked the end of the second day of the G20 Tourism Hackathon Challenge, the students emerged with heightened anticipation to present their team's vision of a futuristic tourism sector to a panel of judges that comprised academics, tourism experts, and government representatives. The presented solutions were measured against a strict set of criteria that assessed innovation, feasibility, user experience, impact, and the alignment of the solutions with people-centred principles.

The G20 Tourism Hackathon Challenge winners are:

- **First-Prize Winner** - **The Catalysts** conceptualised a Hologram Hub that offers a digital platform that enables rural communities to tell their story, to profile and preserve their cultural and heritage, whilst attracting tourists to their communities.

- **Second-Prize Winner** - **Map My Biz** created a solution that combines offline accredited learning, AI-driven support, and a global smart map that makes rural entrepreneurs visible, trusted, and supported by tourists worldwide.

- **Third-Prize Winner** - **Ubuntu Unlimited** created a digital tourism platform that blends VR, AI, and Web3 to showcase South Africa's rural cultures to the world. It allows international tourists to explore villages virtually, join live workshops, and buy authentic crafts, while also preparing them for in-person visits.

The prize money for the top three winning groups is as follows:

- First place – R175 000.00

- Second place – R140 000.00

- Third place – R105 000.00

- All the other groups from fourth to seventh place were awarded R35 000 per group.

Minister De Lille lauded the enthusiasm and dedication displayed by the youth throughout the various stages of the G20 Tourism Hackathon, and assured them that their innovations will be accelerated into tangible products that are recognised on a global stage.

"This year we challenged the youth to think big, and showcase their skills to the world. We were not just looking for good ideas; we are investing in solutions that are ethical, inclusive, and sustainable. The winning solutions will be accelerated for commercialisation, with funding from the Department of Tourism and our partners."

"I am proud of you, and excited that the top three winners of the Hackathon Challenge had the opportunity to present their solutions at the G20 Ministers' Meeting in Skukuza, Kruger National Park today," Minister De Lille concluded.

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Editor's Note:

- List of the team members of the top three G20 Tourism Hackathon Challenge winners

The Catalysts Team – 1	Institution of higher learning
1. Teagon Spykerman	University of Johannesburg (UJ)
2. Zinhle Methula	Durban University of Technology
3. Innocentia Bongiwe Nkosi	University of Mpumalanga
4. Matshidiso Ralekholela	The Independent Institute of Education
5. Morongwa Manamela	University of Pretoria
6. Tebogo Selepe	Vaal University of Technology
7. Khanyisa Mokgolobotho	Sefako Makgatho Health Services University

The Map My Biz Team – 2	Institution of higher learning
1. Tshepiso Lebyane	University of Venda
2. Inga Zamela	University of Johannesburg
3. Janet De Graaf	International Hotel School
4. Lindelani Buhlenkosi Khunou	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
5. Moses Mosuenyane	North West University
6. Kabelo Selopyane	Tshwane University of Technology

The Ubuntu Unlimited Team - 3	Institution of higher learning
1. Hishaam Langson	Nelson Mandela University
2. Thelma Makoma Rasekele	University of South Africa
3. Skhanyiso Dlamini	University of Zululand
4. Roos Moors	Eduvos
5. Mathapelo Ngubeni	Central University of Technology
6. Keotshepile Modise	Sol Plaatjie University
7. Vusi Matlou	Eduvos