**THE TRAVEL BEHAVIOURS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents on a comprehensive tourism study of international students and their visiting friends and relatives (VFRs). Whilst education is their primary reason for studying in Australia, international students may also be motivated by the various travel activities that they undertake prior to, during and on completion of their studies. The role that tourism and travel plays in the international student experience, and the tourism significance of the associated VFR market, is however little understood. The research included focus groups and a survey of over 5,500 international students studying in Australia at higher education, VET and English language institutions. The findings provide a comprehensive picture of the tourism opportunities associated with the international student market in Australia and their VFRs. It profiles travel behaviours and reports on international student expenditures and the mix of study, work and travel while in Australia.

**KEYWORDS** International students, VFRs, Australia, travel.

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**INTRODUCTION**

International education has become a significant industry globally with approximately one out of every five students leaving his or her home country to study (UNESCO, 2009). The worldwide expansion of demand for tertiary education has fuelled a growing interest for studying abroad, particularly amongst Asian students who are seeking an educational experience within an English-speaking setting (Baron, 2009). Whilst international students cite education as their primary reason for studying abroad, they may also be motivated by the prospect of travelling prior to, during or on completion of their studies (Weaver, 2004). The growth and resilience of the phenomenon over the past decade would suggest that there is potential for the tourism industry to connect actively with the interests and activities of this prospective market. However the role that travel and tourism plays as part of the international student experience is poorly understood.

Collaborating with education providers may allow tourism related businesses to target international students and motivate them to travel more extensively over the course of their enrolment (Michael, Armstrong & King, 2004). There is also an apparent opportunity for destinations and operations to recruit international students as advocates for travel to destinations which they have experienced. They could also become future repeat visitors following their return home (Weaver, 2004). Friends and relatives who visit students when they are studying abroad are another prospective travel market. There has however been little research undertaken into the travel and leisure behaviours of these consumers. On this basis it appears likely that the tourism and leisure industries have not maximized the full market potential.

This paper reports findings from the first large scale tourism-related study that has been conducted on international students and attempts to provide an enhanced understanding of their travel behavior and their visiting friends and relatives (VFRs). It is hoped that the research findings will inform tourism leaders about any gaps associated with product and service provision and any opportunities associated with this market. The paper highlights the key study findings and provides insights into the capacity of the tourism industry to take advantage of this potential source of business.

**METHOD**

The study focused on students currently studying in Australia at institutions offering: Higher Education (HE) (eg. undergraduate and postgraduate degrees), Vocational Education and Training (VET), (eg. certificate and diploma courses); and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) institutions. The programs offered by these types of institution represent the bulk of international student enrolments in Australia. In the first stage of the research eight focus groups were conducted at HE, VET and ELICOS institutions throughout Australia. This phase was followed by the administration of an online national survey. A rigorous scale development process was adopted for the survey items based on the broad criteria proposed by Churchill (1979). Items were derived from the qualitative focus group research and also from the literature. Inputs from relevant experts helped with the testing of the items for their validity. The scales were then pilot tested and the data were subjected to exploratory factor analysis with a view to establishing item purity. Following the amendment or removal of any complex items the survey was finalised. A number of institutions across the three main categories agreed to extend an invitation to their international students to participate in the study via email with a web link to the survey. Students completed the survey online and the survey data were analysed using SPSS software.

**FINDINGS**

*Sample demographic characteristics*. Following the exclusion of missing data there were 5,991 survey responses. Most respondents (89.2 percent) were under 30 years of age. There was a fairly even distribution of males (45.3 percent) and females (54.7 percent). Students from Mainland China were the largest nationality group (at 27.7 percent of the sample), followed by respondents from Malaysia (6.4 percent), Singapore (6.3 percent), Hong Kong (5.3 percent) and India (5.0 percent).

The sample was skewed heavily towards higher education students with 89.2 percent of respondents studying at a university, 6.5 percent at a VET institution (either public or private) and 2.9 percent at an ELICOS institution. The skewing towards HE (university) students arose because more universities were generally willing to participate in the study. In addition, universities tend to have larger international student populations and better developed student email distribution systems. The diversity of the institutions and of their student profiles within the non-university sector compounded the difficulty of using this method of distribution.

*International student travel behavior*. The study found that most (84.9 percent) international students travelled while studying in Australia and over half intended to travel in Australia during the upcoming vacation period (being the summer holidays of 2009/10). Most trips taken by international students are relatively short, either day trips (24.0 percent) or trips of one to three days (38.2 percent). Sightseeing was popular in either the city or town where respondents were studying. Shopping for pleasure was the most popular activity in the city or town where they were studying. When travelling away, the most popular activity was visiting natural attractions. The main forms of transport used when travelling within Australia were car (34.7 percent) and plane (26.4 percent). International students spent, on average, less than $1,000 (84.0 percent) per trip. Most respondents were travelling in groups, accompanied by friends (62.4 percent), family (14.7 percent) or their partner (14.5 percent). Only 8.4 percent travelled by themselves. Hotel/motels (43.3 percent) and apartments (23.3 percent) are the preferred types of accommodation. Backpacker hostels were also popular, with 22 percent preferring this type of accommodation. However this inclination was mainly confined to the non-Asian respondents. Financial constraints and study commitments were the principal barriers to travel.

*VFRs associated with international students*. International students generate a large market of visiting friends and relatives (VFRs). On average, over 70 percent of respondents expected at least two or more friends and two or more family members to visit them in Australia. Over half indicated that they have already hosted friends and/or family visits while studying in Australia. Most of the VFRs received by international students stay in Australia for between one and two weeks (40.3 percent). However, only 36.3 percent are likely to stay in commercial accommodation, with the majority staying with the international student (47.1 percent) or with friends and relatives (13.8 percent). Many respondents overall and most in the case of Asian students, felt that there was a strong possibility that their parents would travel to Australia to attend their graduation. Approximately 80 percent of Chinese, Indian and Korean respondents indicated that their parents would maybe or definitely attend their graduation.

**CONCLUSIONS**

It is apparent that the international student market represents a significant opportunity for the Australian tourism industry. There appear to be two sub-markets associated with international students: (1) international students themselves; and (2) their VFRs. Each of these markets presents potential benefits for the tourism industry. The findings from this study suggest that international students are opportunistic travelers, who tend towards day trips and short breaks undertaken within friendship groups. Based on the estimates provided by the participants in this study, the VFR market associated with international students constitutes a significantly higher proportion of international leisure visitor arrivals to Australia than was previously thought. Attending graduations appears to be an important motivation to travel to Australia for the parents of international students. These findings suggest that there are opportunities for tourism product as well as destination management and marketing organisations to tailor their products and develop packages to better service these markets. It may also be worthwhile developing marketing campaigns to ignite interest in travel among international students. These actions should aim to increase the number of trips taken by students during their time in Australia and motivate their VFRs to visit them during and following their study.

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