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Export Education and Tourism A Survey of Tertiary English Language Students in New Zealand

The New Zealand Government, recognizing the value of Export Education, changed the law in 1989 to allow State institutions to recruit international fee paying students. Data for foreign fee paying student's tourism expenditure and travel habits did not feature in New Zealand's Domestic Travel Survey or Provisional Tourism Satellite Account. A sample survey was administered to tertiary English language students, studying at CPIT, Christchurch, New Zealand's ESOL Department to investigate the value of the education market to domestic tourism.

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Purpose

This article explores the extent to which tertiary English language students engage in domestic tourism activities during their temporary stay. It discusses results of a sample survey of travel habits and characteristics of such students, studying at CPIT in Christchurch, New Zealand. The survey captures preferences of student travellers, their demographics, tourism expenditure and influences on their travel related decisions in an effort to expand the limited data for this market in New Zealand. In essence, the study intends to assess the value of the education sector to domestic tourism more closely.

Method

One hundred 6-page questionnaires were administered in ESOL classroom settings in 2003. The survey was designed to capture: 1. *Demographic / general data*: Giving information about the country of origin, gender, age, length of study and study destination selection. Visits from friends or family received during their stay were also asked. 2. *Destination preferences*: Students were given pre selected destinations to choose from or state 'other' destinations not listed, to determine the frequency of visits, activities and transport choices to destinations, split into day and overnight trips. Day trips were defined as 'coming back the same day and not staying overnight'; Overnight trips were defined as 'staying away for at least one night or longer' (travel of at least 40km one way from home). 3. *Expenditure*: Respondents were asked to give figures of spending during their most recent day or overnight trip away.

From one hundred surveys administered, eighty six respondents completed the questionnaire staying in New Zealand on a student visa; eight respondents were permanent residents (results

not counted) and six students were non response participants. Data collected was collated and analyzed using the SPSS software package.

Findings

Demographics

Eight in 10 ESOL students in the sample survey were aged between 18 - 24 years. In terms of gender, 44 per cent of respondents were male and 56 per cent were female. Fifty eight per cent of survey respondents were studying for one year at CPIT. This makes a significant time span to enable students to engage in domestic tourism on weekends and term holidays. Chinese students lead the country of origin with 62 per cent, followed by 12 per cent from Korea and 7 per cent from Japan.

Twenty seven per cent opted for 'natural beauty of the environment' as their study choice. Tourism New Zealand's marketing campaign '100 % Pure New Zealand' successfully cashes in on the country's asset of having a 'natural beauty of the environment' (Tourism New Zealand, 2003). The assumption can be made that New Zealand's attributes of natural attractions, coupled with our lack of population, clean air and plenty of space hits a nerve with many young students from highly populated Asian countries, struggling with issues like traffic and pollution at home. "Eighty five per cent of all foreign students to New Zealand arrived from Asia in 2001" (Collett, 2002, p.D4).

Thirty per cent of students received at least one visit from friends and relatives overseas while studying at CPIT. This VFR segment is likely to travel in New Zealand during their temporary stay. Fifty two per cent of survey respondents' information gathering prior to engaging in domestic tourism activities came from friends and relatives. This indicates lively information sharing of students with their peers on campus.

Trip Characteristics

Day Trips

Most popular was a visit to the thermal pools in Hanmer Springs, a ninety minute drive from Christchurch, followed by whale watching in Kaikoura (2 ½ hrs drive) and dolphin encounters in Akaroa (1 ¼ hrs drive), whereby respondents perceived that there was nothing else to do apart from the key attractions on site. Skiing on Mount Hutt, (distance 150 kilometers) rated poorly with this market. This destination would do well to address this result in terms of marketing organized ski trips. Tramping in Arthurs Pass, 150 kilometers from Christchurch rated also poorly. It appears that Asian English language students, coming from densely populated cities, are not accustomed to utilize nature as a resource in the same way than New Zealand domestic tourists without getting educated about it.

Common to all day trip destinations is the fact that the bulk of transport used was by private car, to get to their destination. Most students went in-groups of an average of four, indicating car-pooling, that not everyone necessarily owns a car. Even if only one out of four purchases a car during their temporary study in New Zealand, this still has an impact in domestic spending.

Overnight Trips

Overnight trip results have been clustered into South and North Island locations.

South Island based trips:

Dunedin (a distance of 362 kilometers from Christchurch) received a VFR visitation rate of thirty per cent due to its university town status, accompanied by a lively student scene, coupled with bars, clubs, live bands and sporting events.

Scenic locations like the West Coast and Mount Cook / Lake Tekapo scored high single visitations, but poor repeat visit results. Sightseeing was predominantly stated as the main activity. Again, it appears that these students struggle to come to terms with handling natural attractions like

native forests, mountains and coastlines, compared to man made attractions elsewhere in terms of frequency of visits. Queenstown, a seven hours journey (486 kilometers) from Christchurch, received forty seven per cent of student visits, the highest score for overnight trips. This result is in line with the destinations equal popularity stakes for domestic and international tourists alike. It is an all year round place to go to, skiing in winter and outdoor / adventure pursuits in summer. It also caters for a diverse range of visitors and budgets. Queenstown received the highest 'liked best' score in the survey, particularly because there is 'lots to do' in terms of tourist attractions (natural and man made) and nightlife. It also received high praise for its beautiful scenery.

The average student trip length amounted to two nights for South Island destinations.

North Island based trips:

Wellington showed a score of seventeen per cent of students visiting friends and relatives in the capital city, which are studying in one of several tertiary institutions in town. Auckland, the biggest city in the country, one thousand kilometers from Christchurch in the South Island, was predominantly visited via domestic flights. Of the nineteen per cent of students visiting, a quarter of those spent seven days in Auckland. This meant a six nights stay, double the national average length of stay of three nights! Students rated Auckland in the 'liked best' destination question in the survey as 'lots to do there'. Student response to the 'did not like' destination question received some comments like 'too busy; felt unsafe; too many Asians; too crowded, and unfriendly locals'.

Considering the fact, that international student's share information about destinations mainly by word of mouth, such perceptions might stifle a growth in the length of stay sector for Auckland.

Expenditure

This is broken down into day and overnight trips.

Day Trip Expenditure

Respondents were asked to record their expenses for the most recent day trip taken, firstly stating the total and then giving a breakdown of costs. Fifty three per cent of students spent up to NZD 100, twenty nine per cent spent between NZD 101 to NZD 200 in total for day trips. This is significantly up from the mainstream domestic 'average day trip spend of NZD 66 in 2001' in New Zealand (Gravitas Research, 2002, p.2). Petrol was the main expense for students day trip transport, considering private car usage to reach respective destinations. Seventy five per cent of students spent up to NZD 20 for gifts & souvenirs, together with 44 per cent of students spending up to NZD 20 for food and drink during day trips.

Overnight Trip Expenditure

Respondents were also asked to record their expenses for the most recent overnight trip taken, firstly stating the total and then giving a breakdown of costs. Twenty five per cent of students spent between NZD 401-600 and twenty seven per cent spent NZD 600+ on overnight trips.

Domestic tourists in New Zealand spend an average of three nights away, which comes to a spending of NZD 258. The average South Island student overnight trip in the sample survey was two nights, where one in 7 students spent NZD 500 while being away. This indicates international students' spending being much higher than the national domestic average.

The overnight trip expenditure breakdown showed again a high spending in petrol sales for car usage as the main means of transport. It also continued the pattern of day trips with regards to gifts and food sales where fifty five per cent of students spent up to NZD 50 on gifts / souvenirs and a high of seventy nine per cent spent up to NZD 100 for food / drink while being away.

Conclusion

The results of the survey suggest several implications for tourism operators and marketers of tourism. The expenditure of foreign fee paying students for day and overnight trips in the sample survey represents value to domestic tourism in being about twice the national domestic average. This is a significant contribution, which could warrant specially designed tourism product for the 18-24 year old predominantly Asian student market. Students are mainly attracted by New Zealand's natural beauty, but struggle to utilize this resource. Outdoor activity based packages are means to bridge the gap. Another area warranting further study is the VFR segment of the survey. The assumption was made, that overnight trips most often run parallel with term breaks. Marketing efforts should consider promotional activities, which coincide with these breaks.

The limitations presented by the relative small survey size in the tertiary area only, its restriction to only one school of study and its isolation to one Polytechnic campus suggest further studies, to get a more accurate reflection of international student travel habits to give tourism service providers a more focused framework upon which to dedicate marketing efforts.

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