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International Student's Mobility and Tourism: Relations, Opportunities, and Insights for Canadian University Cities

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Introduction

Canada has been one of the world's leading destinations for international students. With support from various levels of government (DFATD 2014; Anderson 2015; Vickzo et al., 2016; CMEC 2019), Canadian universities have increasingly engaged with international markets to fill their student places (Universities Canada, 2014). These students, to varying degrees, consume services connected to the travel and hospitality sectors (Abdullateef & Biodun, 2014; Mgeogr & Rancane, 2019). The pandemic brought substantial impacts to the international student market (Brennan et al., 2021), as well as for tourism and hospitality (Liu, 2020), as Canadian destinations and Universities alike have seen dramatic decrease in demand from international markets. As travel and mobility restrictions relating to the pandemic start to lift, these sectors must now consider strategies to recover and rebuild in an uncertain period. This paper, therefore, aims to consider the connections between the international student market, and the travel and hospitality sectors, to identify potential synergies, and consider opportunities for destination marketing and management organizations (DMMOs) to partner with higher education institutions to encourage international students as a way to rebuild from the aftermath of the pandemic.

Literature Review

The quality of Canada's education system and its reputation as a tolerant, non-discriminatory, and safe society are listed as the top reasons why international students choose this country (CIBE 2018). According to Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada data (IRCC 2020) in the period 2015-2019, the number of new study permits almost doubled (+46%), to 402,427. In 2019, a total of 827,586 international students held study permits, and 11,566 were granted permanent residency. The vast majority of international students come from India (35%) and China (21%), followed South Korea and France (4%), Vietnam and Brazil (3%), Iran, Nigeria, the U.S., and Japan (2%). Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec respectively welcomed 46%, 22%, and 15% of all Canada's international students. The Canadian Government's "International Education Strategy (IES), 2019-2024" is evidence of the interest in and recognition of international students as an "important source of revenue and human capital". One of the IES' key objectives is to "diversify the countries from which international students come to Canada, as well as their fields, levels of study, and location of study within Canada".

Between 2015 and 2018, international students' economic contributions to Canada increased by 77%, with \$23.3 billion spent on tuition, accommodation, and discretionary spending including tourism-related activities (GAC 2020). This heterogeneous group generates new and varied demand for types of accommodation and hospitality services that are not adequately investigated. Further, international students travel to regional destinations generating a new form of domestic tourism during holidays, and attract visiting friends and relatives (VFR) from overseas. As restrictions relating to the pandemic start to ease, Canadian universities and surrounding businesses are keen to see international students return (Study International, 2021).

The pandemic has substantially impacted many activities, and the effects on the travel and hospitality sectors have been particularly severe. According to Destination Canada (2021), Canadian tourism in 2020 saw a 91% decline in air transport revenues, accommodation revenues dropped by 71%, and the unemployment rate in tourism has far surpassed the national unemployment rate. Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver recorded the lowest hotel occupancies of any region in Canada (-79%) and a total loss of \$2.3 billion. Forecasts have estimated that recovery to 2019 revenues will take at least 5 years. Destinations, supported by their governments, are keen to see tourism demand and the economic benefits it brings return.

The role of students in tourism, the related economic impact, and the variable nature of city tourism and local development, is rarely explored in tourism literature (Arionesei et al., 2015; Bock, 2015). International students do spend time and money in local hospitality businesses, tourism attractions, and even regional destinations on vacation (Pawlak, 2013; Tomasi et al., 2020). Further, international students attract visitors, which depending on the destination can make up substantial proportions of overseas visitor activity, and inspires or obliges the student to visit regional destinations with their guests (Min-En, 2006; Taylor et al., 2004). These experiences can ultimately increase the attachment to the host country, resulting in repeat visits, strong word-of-mouth promotion, and sometimes increased desire for permanent residency (Tran et al., 2018).

Looking past the pandemic, a survey exploring the opinion of international students across the globe highlighted that, despite the uncertainty related to the post-pandemic period, the majority (61%) hope to return to in-person teaching (QS Survey, 2021). The overseas studies, the international experience, and the country's culture and lifestyle, still play a primary role in their decisional process and wishes.

Methodology

The paper is based on a review of the literature and of statistical data, institutional reports, and international surveys of the last 5-10 years, including recent studies and research related to the pandemic. The scope of this approach is to identify, as much as possible, a wide perspective of the topic in terms of: 1) the institutional initiatives and strategies; 2) the unexplored potential and opportunity offered by the mobility of international students in the tourism sector; 3) to better address the impact of international students in the tourism industry in the post pandemic period.

Results

Following a brief review of literature and secondary data, this paper proposes destinations could consider positioning international students as an important component of tourism recovery with intriguing implications. First, international students may be more open to travelling long distances and dealing with the challenges of cross-border travel due to the benefits and commitment to their education. Second, international students can help stimulate and support local hospitality services, sustaining services that will keep the destination more able to serve other visitors. International students attract visiting friends and relatives (VFR), who are more likely to choose to travel internationally to a specific destination because of their personal connection with the student. As a host, international students are also then more likely to explore their immediate and regional communities. International students (and their visitors) produce valuable word-of-mouth marketing, and can populate review sites and social media with sources for others to shape the destination image of their community.

DMMOs could engage with higher education institutions to better learn about hospitality and travel services and information that would aid attract and welcome international students and their guests, including, but not limited to the provision of temporary accommodation, suggested itineraries, and even incentives for certain behaviour. The higher education and travel and tourism sectors could partner in strategic ways to leverage each other's resources and strengths: travel and hospitality need visitors, and universities need appealing imagery and external services to raise the appeal of their community in a competitive market.

Conclusion

Building resilience and flexibility in travel and tourism will be one of the most important challenges for the recovery of the post pandemic period. The tourism industry is in need of strategic approaches to rebuild activity, awareness, and relationships with travellers. Leveraging other forms of mobility, including international students, is worthy of consideration. The role and impact of student mobility and of university cities in the tourism sector can promote future trends, stimulate new generational habits, and create potential economic opportunities. Planning and designing specific and innovative services for this segment of tourism will offer a key contribution to tourism recovery.

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