The Role of Temporary Immigrant Community in Visiting Friends and Relatives Tourism: An Exploratory Study in Queensland Australia.

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Abstract

Immigrants play a significant role in creating the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism market (Williams and Hall 2002). Unfortunately, the significance contribution and value of immigrants towards VFR tourism and other tourism topics, is poorly understood and under researched particularly on international students group. International students have been identified as temporary immigrants in the literature and actively participated in VFR activities. They normally act both as a host and domestic tourists and travel more compared to the general population. In this study, the main focus will be on international students’ role and their ability to attract tourists to one place during their study period. To provide further clarity about the contribution of international students group to the VFR tourism at a destination, this research attempts to investigate Malaysian international students’ community in Queensland, Australia. Malaysian students have been identified as the third largest group of international students in Australia in 2010. This is an exploratory study which provides a platform for future research and discussion at academic and industry levels.

A mixed method survey approach will be applied in this study. A personal interview with selected Malaysian students who used to study in Queensland will be undertaken to get some insight background about their VFR activities during their stay over there. Next, questionnaires will be distributed to Malaysian community in Queensland through their associations by using the Internet. Data will be analysed using SPSS package.

Key words: immigrant community, VFR, international students and Queensland.
1.0 Introduction

Many research shows that the higher the number of immigrant group at one place the higher
the number of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) visitors visited that particular place. Countries such as Ireland and Vietnam for example have significant number of immigrants
staying outside of their countries and the numbers of tourists’ arrival in these countries are
related to VFR activities (see Duval 2002; Seaton & Tagg 1995). In countries such as
Australia, New Zealand, the US and UK where international education sector contribute
significantly to their economy the number of international tourists closely related to the
number of their immigrant communities, and the international students have been identified
as temporary immigrants and future permanent immigrants at one place (Hall & Williams
2002). The traditional world education leaders such as Australia, Germany, New Zealand, the
United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) attracted many international students from
developing nations like China, India and Malaysia (OECD 2007). At the same time,
international tourists’ arrival statistic reports in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and US show
substantial number of tourists from these developing countries too. In Australia the
international students’ expenditure is stated to be AUD$13.7 billion and their VFR
expenditure is AUD$365.8 million (Access Economics 2009). It shows that there is a strong
relationship between the tourism industry and international students.

With a total number of more than two million students enrolled outside their home country in
2005 (OECD 2007), they contribute significantly to the economy of their host countries. The
international students are considered as part of immigrant community and local residents as
they are no longer considered as tourists according to the WTO definition of a tourist. They
are considered as temporary immigrants or residents which may lead to become permanent
immigrants in the future (Hall & Williams 2002; Access Economics 2009). During their
study period in their host countries, these students contribute significantly towards the local
economy particularly VFR tourism activities.

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) reported that one of the top three reasons for
tourists to visit a place according is for visiting friends and relatives (VFR) activities. Many
studies acknowledge the important of VFR market to the tourism industry. While VFR
research gained popularity nowadays, there are still many areas of VFR still lacked of data
and need more attention in the literature for example the role of VFR host (see Young,
Corsun & Baloglu 2003), and type of VFR tourists (Seaton & Tagg 1995). While VFR hosts topic is the most under research area in tourism studies (Seaton & Tagg 1995; Young et al 2003) particularly looking at international students’ role (Min-En 2006). Research on this topic needs immediate attention especially on developing countries where data is significantly poorly documented. Therefore, this study decided to examine further on VFR hosts focusing on Malaysian international students in Queensland, Australia to close the significant gap in the literature. This is an exploratory study which seeks to identify the contribution of international students towards the tourism industry at a place particularly in VFR market. This will provide a platform for future research and discussion at academic and industry levels since international students have the potential in becoming an important tourism resource. Their attitudes, perceptions and support towards tourism activities must be evaluated continuously because they are part of local community for a place throughout their study period.

1.2 Malaysian International Students

International students are identified to participate actively in becoming VFR hosts throughout their study period (Shanka et al 2001). The longer one student stayed at one place for their study the greater chances for them to attract international visitors to visit them. A study done by Liu and Ryan (2011) indicated that from 504 self-completed surveys by Chinese students from four universities in North Island, New Zealand, evidence was found of students fulfilling a number of roles as guides, sources of information and acting as hosts apart from being local tourists themselves. The world market leaders in education sector have long benefited from this sector and other related sectors specifically the tourism industry. For example, Australia gained AUD$ 17 billion from international education sector in 2009 compared to AUD$ 14 billion the previous year (Malkovic 2010).

Australia has always been an important economic partner to Malaysia due to its close geographical proximity. Malaysia is ranks as 10th largest Australia's trading partner and the ninth largest import source worth of AUD$ 8 billion dollars of two way trade between the two countries (Ariff 2004). The relationship is also underpinned by strong education links with Malaysia as Australia's third largest international students market. According to Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWAR) latest data in 2010, there are approximately 23,300 Malaysian students studying in Australia. The report
stated that Victoria received the highest number of Malaysian students followed by Western Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. As a result, the number of Malaysian tourists to these states is significant and two prominent airline companies from Malaysia have direct flight to these states daily.

Nonetheless, research on Malaysian students in Australia particularly in Queensland hardly being mentioned in the literature despite their economic contribution to the local economy. Their roles in the tourism industry particularly in VFR market have been ignored substantially though they have the capability to attract tourists to one place. The role of the international students should be closely examined because they can become one of tourism resources at a destination. In doing so will assist tourism marketers and stakeholders to develop a better marketing strategies and policies to fully utilise this group in attracting tourists. VFR hosts in immigrant communities including international students have been identified to act as tour consultants (giving advice to the travellers) (Jackson 2003; Young et al. 2007), giving free promotion about a place through word of mouth and became tour guide (Duval 2002; Williams & Hall 2002). From these activities show how they contributed towards the tourism industry and helping to promote tourism destinations to their VFR.

1.3 Research Problem

The VFR market needs to be understood from a wider perspective rather than focusing on the VFR visitors or the demand side (Young et al 2003). Malaysian international students have been the traditional market contributor to Australian education sector since the 1950s under the Colombo Plan. Currently Malaysian international students are the third largest group of international students in Australia and in Queensland (Council of Australian Governments 2010). However, even though the number of Malaysian international students in Australia is reported to reach 23,300 in 2010, their contribution towards VFR tourism in Australia is largely ignored in the literature. Thus it is timely to undertake this study to better understand about their contribution towards Australian tourism particularly in hosting VFR and to close the gap in the literature. Malaysian students in Queensland are chose by this study due to their significant existence in the state through their active participations in the community events. These students can be an important tourism resource for Queensland government in attracting international tourists to one place. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate international students’ role in hosting VFR tourism and the activities undertaken by them.
This is an exploratory study which seeks to identify the critical issues that impact on tourism stakeholders in identifying international students as a significant potential as tourism resources for a place. Also, to provide a platform for future research and discussion at academic and industry levels. Hence, three research questions will be examined by this study:

**RQ1:** *What is the main role of Malaysian international students when they hosted their VFR visitors in Queensland?*

**RQ2:** *What are the activities Malaysian international students advise their VFR visitors to do?*

**RQ3:** *How many times they hosted repeat VFR thorough out their study period?*

### 2.0 Literature Review

This section will discuss on the literature relating to topics on immigrant community role in VFR tourism. Special focus will be on the international students group from Malaysia in Queensland roles in hosting their visitors. With approximately three percent of the world’s population are immigrants by the year 2050 demographers estimate that there will be approximately 230 million migrants worldwide ([International Organization for Migration [IOM] IOM 2003]. There is growing recognition of the contribution of immigrant communities to the tourism industry, and as having a close relationship to the growth of tourism particularly in visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism (refer Duval 2002; Hall & Williams 2002; Inbakaran & Jackson 2005).

Immigrants normally can be categorised into three broad groups: temporary immigrants, permanent immigrants and refugees (humanitarian) (Hall & Williams 2002). This study focuses on temporary group of immigrants which is the international students’ and their contribution towards VFR tourism, a topic that is still in its infancy in tourism literature. Tourism studies have indicated that the growth of an immigrant group at a destination will result with the growth of VFR at that destination (William & Hall 2002). It shows the importance of immigrant communities in becoming a significant resource in the tourism industry. They contribute significantly in terms of the economy, culture, and tourism of their new ‘home’ (Hugo 2004) particularly in hosting VFR (Liu & Ryan 2011; Isa 2004).
Immigrants have been recognised as having considerable potential in attracting VFR tourists to a destination. Also, they tend to act as a domestic tourist and often host visitors during their migration period at a destination. Many tourism academicians such as, Jackson (1990); Duval (2002) and Hall and William (2002) confirm this positive relation between migration and VFR tourism. Jackson (1990) concluded for Australia the volume of total VFR tourism, both inward and outward, is reasonably closely and significantly associated with the size of different migrant groups in Australia and their period of residence in the country. This positive relation implies that when migration flows keep on growing, VFR tourism flows will be growing as well. According to Poel, Masurel and Nijkamp (2004) VFR tourism is a well-known phenomenon in former colonised countries as well as from the rapid growth of international migration of labour in more recent years. Migration generates these VFR tourism flows either because migrants may become poles of tourist flows, in the sense that friends and relatives come to visit them, or because migrants themselves become tourists when returning to visit friends and relatives in their areas of origin (Williams and Hall, 2000).

Both immigration and tourism have increased significantly in recent decades. International migration in the world has increased from 154 million per year in 1990 to 175 million in 2000 (United Nation 2002). A common perception is that most migrants are moving from poor countries to rich countries, but in reality half of the migrations take place within the developing countries. One cause of this growth is the globalization process that enhanced mobility and improved accessibility to different places (Gheasi, Nijkamp & Rietveld 2011). In comparison, the growth in tourism was even stronger with 700 million worldwide tourist trips in 2000 as compared to 25 million in 1950 (Fischer 2007). The globalization process and the related tourism together spread further the information regarding economic prospects and tend to encourage people to move to places where they can find better economic opportunities. For example: prosperous places like London and Paris attract vast numbers of tourists, while some of these tourists become subsequently temporary or permanent migrants in the host country. So, tourism encourages migration. Conversely, migrants travel back to their home countries for short visits and their friends and relatives visit them in the host country. Therefore, migration boosts tourism at one destination.

2.1 Immigrant community and VFR Tourism
Today, the growth of high quality immigrants who have strong economic power and skills, especially in developed countries, make them significantly attractive to marketers (Hugo 2004). With the steady growth in the number of immigrants, there is no doubt about their potential to become a tourism resource at a destination. The US, the UK and Australia are identified as traditional immigrant receiving countries (Friedberg & Hunt 1995). These countries have a long history of immigration and as a result they have multi ethnic groups living in the country today. However, when discussing local residents immigrant communities are often being ignored as part of the group including in tourism study. Also studies on VFR mainly focused on developed countries such as the UK (see Seaton & Palmer 1997); the US (see Young et al. 2007) and Australia (see McKercher 1996) even though developing and some of the under developed countries also have significant number of immigrant communities. Consequently, VFR data from these countries is not readily available in the literature although VFR is acknowledged as one of the top three reasons for people to travel, by the WTO (2007). Due to the significant gap of study on this topic, this research will examine an immigrant community from a developing country by focusing on the international students’ group from Malaysia who reside in Queensland, Australia. This will assist a better understanding about immigrants and VFR market from developing country, and contribute to the gap in the literature on this ignored topic.

Asian countries have been noted as a major contributor to this segment of the tourism market. This can be attributed to emphasis the significant value that Asian cultures place on societal values (Truong & King 2006). In light of this characterising Asian immigrant probably have additional capabilities to attract their VFR and host them more frequently. Hugo (2005) stated Asian immigrants tend to maintain strong linkages with home such as through hosting and visiting friends and relatives. Unfortunately, study on Asian VFR and immigrants only are restricted to a few economically prominent countries in Asia such as China (Cai, O’Leary & Boger 2000) and Korea (Kang & Page 2000). Although it could be argued that the capability to attract VFR markets will depend on the immigrant’s economic background (Cai et al. 2000), study on the linkages between immigrants and VFR market should focus on a broader picture.

In this study, the main focus will be on one group of immigrant communities which is the international students’ role in hosting their VFR visitors during their study period. Apart from that, the activities they advise and undertaken together with their visitors will also be
examined. This is because during the hosting activity, they sometimes act as domestic tourists (Shanka et al 2001; Isa 2004; Liu & Ryan 2011). This study is timely since the international students group hardly been the focus in the literature on VFR hosts until today. A study by Isa (2004) on Malaysian international students’ in hosting VFR in the South Island, New Zealand found that more than 90 percent of students hosted VFR at least once throughout their study period. Additionally more than half of the respondents became VFR hosts more than once during their stay in the country. Their popular means of communication has been identified as through word-of-mouth (WOM) (Hall & Williams 2002; Isa 2004).

Thus, immigrants including the international students can be considered as doing free advertising and promotion for their host countries. The international students can be considered to have the pulling factor to attract visitors to a destination. However, they also can give bad comments about one place if they dislike or encountered with bad experience at that place. It is important for tourism stakeholders and market players to include this group in their marketing and promotion strategies so that they can play their role in attracting their VFR visitors throughout their study period particularly during graduation ceremony. Shanka et al (2004) found that graduation ceremonies tend to attract the highest number of VFR visitors from the international students’ group. Also, the higher number of international students at one place the probability to have international tourists is substantially higher, and will contribute to other side activities from this group. Sometimes, this group can attract other tourists to visit their community through their unique lifestyle in the host countries. Paci (1994) highlighted that, temporary residents like the international students usually find themselves acting like tour guides, making suggestions regarding the activities that visiting friends and family members should participate in, and warning them about the places to avoid. In addition, the residents may also participate in activities they do not normally engage in simply to accompany the visitors, and as a result, spend larger amounts of money than normal.

2.2 The International Students Role in VFR Tourism

Study on international students’ role in VFR activities is still in its infancy in tourism literature (Hall & Williams 2002) though many world governments realised the significant economic contribution of international education sector. A report by Council of Australian Government (2010) highlighted that, all Australian governments acknowledge and value the
contribution to Australian life of international students who come here from all over the world to study, live and work. The council acknowledged that international students enrich Australian communities, bringing energy, diversity and new ways of seeing things. They also expand Australia's global networks and link them to the world. With their high quality life experiences in Australia contribute to regional and global standing. As the third largest international students’ group in Australia presently Malaysian students play such a significant role in VFR tourism.

According to Liu and Ryan (2011), tourism researchers have found considerable indirect evidence to suggest that the participation rate in VFR tourism as both a host and traveler is significantly higher among international students compared to local population (Michael, Armstrong, & King, 2003; Shanka, Taylor, & Ali-Knight, 2001; Taylor, Shanka, & Pope, 2004). In Access Economics (2009) report stated that each international student (including their friend and family visitors) contributes an average of $28,921 in value added to the Australian economy. The report shows international students, and the associated visitation from friends and family contribute $12.6 billion in value-added. This is based on student expenditure of $13.7 billion and visiting friends and family expenditure of $365.8 million. A recent study by Tourism Research Australia suggests that for every two formal students, one friend or relative visited Australia during the students’ stay in Australia. This class of traveller is estimated to contribute $314.7 million to the Australia economy in value-added, comprising labour income of $179.7 million and gross operating surplus (GOS) of $135.0 million. For a relatively small country, Australia hosts a high proportion of the world’s international students. Of the almost 2.8 million tertiary students studying abroad in 2006, just over 207,000 studied in Australia – 7.5 per cent of all international tertiary students studying worldwide (Access Economics 2009).

Due to the international students’ substantial contribution towards the local economy of their host countries, the competition in this sector is getting fierce. Today, many small and developing countries like China, India and Malaysia are joining the other market players (Clerks & Segwick 2005) based on their realisation about the importance international education sector to their economy.

International students have been identified as one of the significant group of immigrant communities that play an active role in VFR activities (Shanka et al 2001). Tourism studies
have indicated the students participate actively in VFR activities as both a host and traveller higher than in the general population. As such, more studies need to look at this group of communities to better understand their potential and contribution particularly in attracting VFR tourists and acting as domestic tourists to a tourism destination. In other words, they act like tourists in their own backyards (Hall & Williams 2002; Paci 1994). However, relative to its size, research has been lacking, commencing only around 20 years ago, and gaining momentum only this century. Data on international students’ contribution towards VFR activities is poorly documented, particularly on developing countries.

3.0 Methodology

Malaysia international students’ group in Queensland is chose by this study due to the important contribution of this group towards VFR tourism in Queensland. Exploratory research will be used to gain in depth understanding of this under research topic. Both qualitative and quantitative methodology will be used to gain the data needed and to overcome the weakness of using a single method. Value can be added to a study by the use of a mixed method approach as it can give greater depth and breadth in a local context of an otherwise generic framework (Mactavish & Schelein 2000). While convenience sampling is proposed due to time and financial constraint.

3.1 Data Collection

There will be two data collection stage for this study. The first stage will be focus group interview. Two focus group interviews will be organised during the first stage of data collection to gain robust data from the international students. The first group of the international students will be from Faculty of Forestry and the second group will be from Faculty of Economics and Management. This is necessary in order to get different perspectives of international students from different faculties and courses. Each focus group will have five to seven respondents in order to manage the interview effectively. The interview questions will be taken from a few VFR hosts and international students research studies such as; Jason et al (2011); Seaton and Tagg (1995) and Young et al (2006). After that, data will be transcribed and questionnaire will be designed based on the focus group interview result.
The questionnaire will be distributed for three months during the first semester of 2012/2013 which is in September. The data will be processed using SPSS software package. Several SPSS tests will be utilised to get the best result from the data gathered by this study for example; T-Test to compare two means, one way ANOVA analysis, Mann-Whitney test to compare the answers between two different groups of students, gender, and education level, standard deviation (SD) and Chi-Square test.

3.2 Research Sample

The targeted sample in this study will be the international students in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). UPM is a public university in Malaysia and hosted more than three thousand international students currently (UPM 2012). With its convenient location close to Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, this university managed to attract a significant number of international students to UPM since the early 21st century. Most of these international students are from South East Asia countries, Middle East and Africa. In addition, being one of the top five Malaysian research universities has managed to attract many networking and collaborations from local and international organisations with UPM particularly with Faculty of Forestry and Faculty of Economics and Management (FEM). The FEM in particular has one of the highest numbers of international students studying in UPM. Hence, these two faculties will be approached and their international students are chose to be the respondents in this study.

4.0 Expected Findings

This study expected to find that the international students’ group in Malaysia are actively involved in VFR tourism. At least half of them may have hosted their VFR visitors during their study period in Malaysia particularly during special occasions such as graduation ceremony and festive seasons. This study is expected to find that the international students group from neighbouring countries such as; Indonesia, Thailand and Brunei might host repeat visit from their VFR tourists.

5.0 Conclusion
VFR activities is not novel for Malaysians because it is part of their culture for a long time and still been practising until now, but to get the data on VFR activities particularly on VFR hosts can be challenging. Not many studies looked at the topic of VFR tourism and the role of VFR of the hosts due to their argument that VFR tourism contribution towards the tourism industry is insignificant (Poel, Masurel & Nijkamp 2005; Seaton & Tagg 1995). Although the topic starting to gain attention from the tourism academicians and people from the industry for the past 10 year, but there are many areas of VFR still need further exploration especially in developing countries like Malaysia.

The tourism industry has become a major source of income for many countries. Countries with many tourism resources are at their advantage to attract more tourists. However, countries with fewer tourism resources can also attract a significant number of tourists if these countries know how to fully utilize their minimum resources. Singapore is an example of a country with limited resources but successful at attracting a substantial number of tourists to the country (Ritchie & Crouch 2000). Tourism destinations must identify their available resources that have potential to attract tourists or be known as comparative advantage. Immigrant communities have been acknowledged as a potential tourism resource for a destination. With approximately three percent of the world’s population are immigrants, demographers estimate that there will be approximately 230 million migrants worldwide in 2050. Many countries particularly those who have substantial number of immigrant communities such as; Australia, France, the UK and US have high number of VFR tourists partly because they have large community of immigrants there.

Tourism marketers should consider all stakeholders including immigrants who might influence the customer’s perceptions when they formulate their marketing strategies (Bendixen et al. 2004). The category immigrant community is considered as part of stakeholders at a destination since they are the component of local community of a place. This finding of this study are expected to contribute significantly about the importance of international students towards the tourism industry, with more understanding of their role in hosting VFR visitors during their study period in Malaysia. Nevertheless, there are a number of issues affecting international students that have become apparent and need to be addressed by the Malaysian government immediately. Students have identified issues such as education quality, health and wellbeing, safety, and the quality and accessibility of information as particularly important. For example, assaults on some international students have led to a
perception that Malaysia is not a safe place for students (Mahabub 2009) and visitors. Education market leaders such as Australia and the UK are giving serious attention and measurement on international students’ safety issue because they realised the negative impact they will face if the international students do not feel safe (Larsen, Payne & Tomison 2005). Their support is crucial because they can influence their government at home and visitors. It is expected that this current research will initiate other researchers to investigate more about international students’ contribution to local economy apart from education sector and VFR tourism.

References


