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RESEARCH NOTE

“People May Finally Realise Just How Important We Are”: New Zealand Student Perceptions of Future Career Opportunities in the Tourism Industry Following the Events of September 11, 2001

David Timothy Duval (dduval@business.otago.ac.nz) and
C. Michael Hall (cmhall@business.otago.ac.nz)

University of Otago
PO Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand.

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Abstract

This research note outlines the results of a short survey administered in October 2001 to a convenience sample of undergraduate students undertaking courses in tourism at the University of Otago. The note examines the impact of the events of September 11 upon future career aspirations of undergraduate students studying tourism at the University of Otago. The research was partially conducted with the intent of providing strategic information that could be used to help gauge future enrolment patterns.

Keywords: future plans; employment; tourism; hospitality; enrolment patterns

Introduction

This research note presents the results of a short survey administered to a convenience sample of undergraduate students taking courses in tourism at the University of Otago in October 2001. One purpose of the survey was to measure students' perceptions of the events of September 11 in the

David Timothy Duval is a Lecturer in the Department of Tourism at the University of Otago. His research and teaching interests include aviation and transport policies and alliances, seasonality in rural environments, the transition from agriculture to tourism in rural environments, tourism marketing (especially image and visitor satisfaction), and both quantitative and qualitative (especially ethnographic) research methods. He is also interested in transnational identities and diasporic communities in the context of post-colonial environments and tourism.

Michael Hall is Professor and Head of Department at the University of Otago, New Zealand and Honorary Professor, Department of Marketing, Stirling University, Scotland. Michael is also Co-Editor of Current Issues in Tourism. He has wide ranging research interests in tourism, regional development, environmental history and food and wine.

United States upon their future plans for employment in the tourism and hospitality industry. A secondary purpose of the survey, the results of which are outside the scope of this research note, was to measure student perceptions of the impact of September 11 upon the New Zealand tourism and hospitality industry, thus following existing studies that recognise the importance of student markets in travel and tourism (e.g., Bywater, 1993; Chadee and Cutler, 1996; Ford, 1991).

Method

A one-page questionnaire was administered over a two-day period to students enrolled in various tourism papers at the University of Otago. First-year, second-year and third-year students received the questionnaire in the final weeks of lectures. A total of 271 questionnaires were completed. Unfortunately, it is impossible to accurately determine the rate of response, as the true size of the population could not be readily determined. However, given the size of the sample, and other assessments of student profiles for tourism courses at the university, it is reasonable to assume that it is broadly representative of the undergraduate student population enrolled in tourism papers at the university.

In addition to general questions relating to students' major and their industry experience, respondents were presented with a series of statements to which they were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represented 'strongly disagree' and 5 represented 'strongly agree'. By way of a brief demographic profile of the sample, almost half of all respondents (131) indicated their major to be tourism, and almost half had previously worked in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Analysis

One of the more interesting results is the relative impact of the events in the United States on the future career plans of students majoring in tourism. As the authors are resident in a Department of Tourism at a large university in New Zealand, this information was considered rather strategic to gauge future enrolment patterns in light of negative stories in the media regarding tourism and the consequent impact on enrolments. Two methodological problems need to be addressed. First, it should be noted that direct questions relating to undergraduates' future career plans are almost always problematic. Future (or intended) behaviour cannot easily be determined using a research instrument such as a questionnaire. Second, the method utilised is a pre-post measurement that was, in effect, measured post-hoc. Despite these methodological limitations, the results provide at least a cursory insight into any negative impacts the events of September 11 may have in tourism undergraduates' future career plans.

Examined broadly, the news is not all that bad. There is room for consideration that the publicity surrounding the events of September 11 may even have had a slightly positive impact on future career plans of tourism majors. Almost three-quarters of tourism majors indicated that they were considering a career in the tourism and hospitality industry prior to the events in the United States. After the attacks, however, eight in ten indicated that they were considering a career in tourism and/or hospitality. In fact, non-parametric tests on the statements "I am currently considering a career in the tourism/hospitality industry" and "Prior to the events in the United States, I was considering a career in the tourism/hospitality industry", suggest that tourism majors are more likely to be considering a career in the tourism industry now than before the September 11 tragedy ($p = .002$). What this speaks to is the possibility that September 11 has raised awareness of the tourism industry because of the increased media profile given to the industry overall. For the most part, both majors and non-majors share a similar outlook on the impact and fallout from the September 11 attacks (Table 1).

The only significant difference was found in the statements that focus on future career aspirations in the tourism and hospitality industry. This is not particularly revealing, as one would expect tourism majors to be more inclined to consider such career options.

Respondents were also asked about previous work experience in the tourism and hospitality industry. No statistically significant differences were observed in the experience/non-experience sets' responses (Table 2).

	MAJORS <i>n</i> = 127		NON-MAJORS <i>n</i> = 144		p*
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
The events of September 11 in the United States will have a significantly negative impact on New Zealand's tourism/hospitality industry over the next two years	3.58	0.886	3.52	1.023	.771
The events in the United States will have a negative impact on international tourist arrivals to New Zealand over the next two years	3.62	0.942	3.52	0.943	.444
Over the next two years, New Zealanders will be less inclined to travel within New Zealand as a result of the events in the United States	1.96	1.101	1.80	1.009	.217
I am re-considering my future travel plans to international destinations as a result of events in the United States	2.54	1.222	2.77	1.282	.150
I am re-considering my future travel plans to destinations within New Zealand as a result of events in the United States	1.41	0.719	1.30	0.628	.224
Overall, I have not changed my career plans in light of the events in the United States	3.74	1.303	3.88	1.350	.166
I am currently considering a career in the tourism/hospitality industry	4.14	0.800	2.90	1.088	.000
Prior to the events in the United States, I was considering a career in the tourism/hospitality industry	3.98	0.941	2.71	1.146	.000
The events in the United States will have a negative impact on New Zealand's economy overall over the next two years	3.58	0.794	3.62	0.905	.388

* Mann Whitney non-parametric

Table 1: Tourism major and non-major comparisons

The pattern among majors and non-majors in terms of career aspirations is repeated among those who have past industry experience and those who do not. The data suggests that those who have experience in the industry are more likely, since September 11, to be considering a career in tourism ($p = .017$). Interestingly, for those who do not have experience in the industry, they are also more inclined to consider a career in the tourism and hospitality industry ($p = .001$). This further illustrates the extent

to which media stories about the tourism industry, even though it is often cast in a negative light, may well have given the tourism industry a much higher media profile than that which it normally enjoys (Padgett and Hall, 2001; Hall, 2002).

	EXPERIENCE <i>n</i> = 122		NO EXPERIENCE <i>n</i> = 144		p*
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
The events of September 11 in the United States will have a significantly negative impact on New Zealand's tourism/hospitality industry over the next two years	3.54	1.041	3.59	0.87	.896
The events in the United States will have a negative impact on international tourist arrivals to New Zealand over the next two years	3.55	0.997	3.59	0.91	.822
Over the next two years, New Zealanders will be less inclined to travel within New Zealand as a result of the events in the United States	1.86	1.031	1.90	1.07	.870
I am re-considering my future travel plans to international destinations as a result of events in the United States	2.66	1.251	2.67	1.27	.989
I am re-considering my future travel plans to destinations within New Zealand as a result of events in the United States	1.37	0.685	1.32	0.63	.406
Overall, I have not changed my career plans in light of the events in the United States	3.86	1.306	3.77	1.37	.673
I am currently considering a career in the tourism/hospitality industry	3.37	1.232	3.24	1.24	.617
Prior to the events in the United States, I was considering a career in the tourism/hospitality industry	3.66	0.921	3.59	0.77	.405
The events in the United States will have a negative impact on New Zealand's economy overall over the next two years	3.58	0.794	3.62	0.905	.141

* Mann Whitney non-parametric

Table 2: Impact of prior tourism industry work experience

Conclusions

Like many tourism destinations around the world, New Zealand was substantially impacted by the events of September 11. Total arrivals for the month of October were down by three per cent compared to October the previous year. The biggest decline was in inbound travel from the USA and Japan where visitor numbers declined by 20 per cent compared to the previous October, although

other markets continued to perform strongly with China up by 62 per cent, and Korea by 34 per cent respectively. International visitor arrivals fell by 9.7 per cent in the month of November, the second month of declining arrivals after a long period of strong growth performance. The major markets most sharply in decline were Japan and the United States, which declined by 48.2 per cent and 13.3 per cent respectively in the month of November compared to the same month in the previous year. Outbound travel from New Zealand declined by 9.8 per cent in November 2001, following a decline of 8.2 per cent in October. Long-haul travel was most severely affected, with travel to the United States down 38.5 per cent and Europe down 27.6 per cent (Tourism Research Council, 2001).

Despite the general gloom of the New Zealand media and tourism industry about the impact of the events of September 11 on tourism in New Zealand, the pattern of student responses suggests that students had more realistic responses than those found in the media (e.g. see Coventry, 2001). By 2002 the inbound visitor numbers had begun to rebound with growth of 3.5 per cent in January, 6.9 per cent in February and 14.5 per cent in March. Overseas travel by New Zealand residents increased by 10,500 trips or 11.6 per cent in March 2002 to 101,167 trips compared with the same month in the previous year. This was a reversal of the declining trend in the previous five months and was due largely to Easter falling in late March and school holidays. Significantly, long haul outbound travel to the United States and Europe was still down compared with the same month in the previous year (Tourism Research Council, 2002). Throughout the November to March period domestic tourism activity stayed strong with some resorts reporting their best ever summer seasons.

But perhaps more significantly, and perhaps somewhat to the relief of the Department in which the students were taking courses, the events of September 11 did not lead to students changing their career plans, despite many negative stories regarding the tourism industry and significant job losses. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that student interest and awareness of the tourism industry was actually strengthened in both tourism majors and non-majors. This is perhaps a reflection of the old adage that 'all publicity is good publicity', but may also reflect a comment made by a student to a staff member following a lecture on the impact of the September 11 events on tourism: "At last, people may finally realise just how important we are".

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