

International Students' Perception towards Educational Tourism in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

Educational Tourism is any type of educational program in which travelers move to another location mainly for the purpose of gaining a learning experience in that location. This research aims to become a contribution to other previous researches conducted in the field of educational tourism to analyze the educational tourism industry in the Kingdom of Bahrain as a basis for its development to attract more international students to study in universities and higher education institutions. The research followed a quantitative methodology by distributing a survey questionnaire to one hundred international students from private universities in the Kingdom. The research adopted the random sampling technique and analyzed the data collected from those surveys statistically using mean, r-value and p-value figures. On the basis of research findings it is recommended that universities should improve their services provided to international students in terms of quality, speed and efficiency and to provide better facilities and more academic qualifications and degrees. Bahrain, in general, should create an educational environment that is strong enough and well-reputed to attract more international students and other universities to establish their campuses in Bahrain.

Keywords— Educational Tourism, Educational Facilities, Infrastructure, People Traits, Cost

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main types of tourism is the educational tourism where human beings in ancient times had the drive to gain new knowledge that was essential for their survival. Since then, the pursuit of education both locally and internationally is key drive of a person's success and his intellectual and knowledge level. As a result, educational tourism has grown significantly during

last decades where students seek for international education in colleges, schools, and universities abroad rather than in their hometowns.

Educational tourism is seen as short term tourism in which education seekers (mainly students) and education providers are the key participants with the main purpose of transferring knowledge, learning, and education through various educational instruments. Educational tourism is also known by other names according to its purpose, means, types and processes such as self-actualization experience, career development, educational trips, seminar vacations, skills enhancement, educational cruises, international internships, etc.

It started in technical and vocational education institutions and schools where the primary purpose of education tourism at that time was to produce quality personnel and workforce for the industry with the required skills and knowledge. Since then, educational tourism or edu-tourism for short has not been a new term and has gained significant popularity in recent decades and included more undergraduate and postgraduate programs for students from colleges and universities. It is expected that educational tourism will expand in coming years as people look for better educational terms in other countries.

Educational tourism has many advantages for all participants in different levels; It enhances the social and economic capital of a country, empowers learners and knowledge seekers, and improves the level of education and knowledge base for them as well as for local and international communities. Moreover, educational tourism gives educational institutions and societies the drive to develop their education systems which will in return develop the learning quality and raise the demand for international tourism.

Educational tourism as a major source of income for countries also where education seekers spend

significantly in other sectors than education fees and expenses such as accommodation, telecommunication, health services, food and entertainment, etc. As a result, government should support the educational tourism and develop educational institutions in terms of finance, legal issues, research and development efforts to ensure their active role in accelerating the economic wheel in the country and attracting more educational seekers from abroad.

Educational tourism is seen as an approach of learning and gaining knowledge. It is referred to any type of educational program in which travelers move to another location mainly for the purpose of gaining a learning experience in that location (Rodger, 1998 cited Sharma, 2015). It started in technical and vocational education institutions and schools where the primary purpose of education tourism at that time was to produce quality personnel and workforce for the industry with the required skills and knowledge (Airey, 2004 cited Sharma, 2015).

Universities and educational institutions are the major source of development for any society and the status of education depends heavily on their role to promote and improve education in any country. Personnel in universities and educators form the basis for academic connections in educational tourism based on their academic qualifications, practical or academic experiences and educational standard level. Their involvement in educational tourism and the experience of international students is very crucial as they have better perceptions and knowledge. They are also the professional facilitator of education which is highly dependable on quality.

The Kingdom of Bahrain has had its decent share of educational tourism during the last years. It has many factors that lead to the raise and development of educational tourism such as: its strategic geographical location, cultural openness, liberal regulation, and the existence of well-reputed universities and schools.

The educational tourism in Bahrain combines different groups of educational seekers (students) non-residents who temporarily come to Bahrain for a specific period of time, or non-residents who come on a daily or weekly basis (especially from other GCC countries) for educational purpose.

In order to measure the status and impact of educational tourism, most previous researches were based on customer (students) satisfaction, financial impacts, and social and ecological impacts on a person or a society. The study in hand had a main objective to examine the status of educational tourism in Bahrain based on the actual experience of international students in private and public universities and higher education universities. The study also analyzed how educational tourism has been developed by those universities in order to raise the satisfaction level of current international students and attract more in the future from different countries.

The study is intended to be of significant

importance for many stakeholders related to the issue of educational tourism in Bahrain specifically and in other countries around the world more generally. Those may include, among other: universities; international students; their parents; future researchers; education industry; and tourism industry. The study filled the gap in the research area for education industry and tourism industry as there is a lack of previous researches conducted to discuss and analyze the issue of educational tourism in Bahrain or other GCC countries which can act upon the same results as they have virtually similar conditions to those of Bahrain.

The increased number of international students at AMA university specifically and other universities generally is the first motivation for conducting this study. Those international students have different and more needs than local students and they face more issues while studying abroad. It is sometimes more difficult and complicated to satisfy their needs as they come from different backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances.

This study examined the issue of educational tourism in Bahrain which has shown a significant growth in recent years. This was done by focusing on higher education and the status of educational tourism and its related effectiveness in universities and educational institutions which offer undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in Bahrain in terms of: Facilities, Infrastructure, People Traits, and Cost.

The study also examined the steps and efforts taken by those universities and educational institutions and schools in order to develop the status of educational tourism and improve the quality of education they offer to attract more foreign students from international markets.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

Educational tourism is seen as an approach of learning and gaining knowledge. It is referred to any type of educational program in which travelers move to another location mainly for the purpose of gaining a learning experience in that location (Rodger, 1998 cited Sharma, 2015). It started in technical and vocational education institutions and schools where the primary purpose of education tourism at that time was to produce quality personnel and workforce for the industry with the required skills and knowledge (Airey, 2004 cited Sharma, 2015).

Since then, educational tourism or edu-tourism for short has not been a new term and has gained significant popularity in recent decades and included more undergraduate and postgraduate programs for students from colleges and universities (Sharma, 2015). It is expected that educational tourism will expand in coming years as people look for better educational terms in other countries.

Educational tourism has many types according to its purpose or form. Ritchie (2003, cited Haukeland, et al

2013) divided educational tourism into two types; general learning while travelling and purposeful learning while travelling. The former type is where travelers participate in guided tours and programs which they can organize individually or within formal groups. The later type is where travellers participate in educational or training courses. Furthermore, Educational tourism can also be classified into other major categories which are: cultural (historical); eco-tourism (nature-based or rural); and study-abroad programs (Ankomah and Larson, 2004 cited Sharma, 2015).

According to these classifications, educational tourism can be sub divided according to “tourism first” or “education first”. The latter is the key issue of this study which concentrates on those travelers (mainly students) who have a primary interest to initially participate in university or college educational courses but at the same time they have other effects on tourism in the hosted country (Ritchie, 2003 cited Haukeland, et al 2013).

Based on these classifications, Richie (2003, cited Haukeland, et al 2013) listed the most significant suppliers of educational tourism that are related to the purpose or type of educational tourism. These include: events, attractions, venues, ventures which provide the educational experience for visitors or participators such as: museums, historic sites, wildlife parks, religious sites, etc.

Furthermore, resource specialists are also suppliers of educational tourism who are the personnel responsible to provide the educational experience for visitors or participants such as: lecturers, interpreters, academics, translators, storytellers, tour guide employees, etc.

Also, travel planners or offices which are formal and organized establishments that plan for educational tours for tourists such as universities and colleges, tourism agencies, interest groups, companies, etc.

Bahrain is a small country with a strategic location in the Middle East with a strong reputation of the education sector especially higher education which has grown massively in recent years since 2000. It has many factors that lead to the raise and development of educational tourism such as: its strategic geographical location, cultural openness, liberal regulation, and the existence of well-reputed universities and schools.

According to a report issued by Ministry of Education 2012, there is a significant number of international students from different countries around the world which comprise of 21% of total students population placing it at the top rank according to OECD (Organization for Economic and Co-operation and Development).

Most of those international students come from GCC countries (Saudi Arabia in the first place), followed by other Arabic countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, etc. International students also come from other foreign countries such as, among others: India, USA, Pakistan, France, UK, Philippine, and Canada.

Furthermore, reports showed a percentage of 1% of visitors coming through King Fahad Causeway and 1% of visitors coming through the airport for the purpose of education or training. Tourism activities that were mainly connected to education counted to BD 18m (5-10%) of the total GDP of the country.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, there are mainly four public and eleven private universities and higher education institutions which collectively and individually play a major role in the development of educational tourism in Bahrain. Public universities include: Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain Polytechnic, College of Health Sciences, and University of Bahrain. On the other hand, private universities and higher education institutions include: Arab Open University, AMA International University, Applied Science University, Ahlia University, Bahrain Institute of Banking and Finance, Gulf University, The Kingdom University, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) - Bahrain, Royal University for Women, Talal Abu Ghazaleh University College of Business, and University College of Bahrain.

GCC Region

GCC countries have had great reforms to alter the higher education sector and modernize their educated societies in order to attract more international students from around the world. One major reform in all GCC countries was to change the higher education sector from a mass production sector where the main aim was to produce as much as possible graduates with the support of the government to a more contemporary sector where Western style of education is adopted. This included: education differentiation among universities and institutions, building a high quality and knowledgeable economy, and great access to international universities and institutions which open their branches and affiliates in the GCC (Al Tamimi, 2017).

GCC countries have many advantages that have attracted many international students in its higher education sector and resulted in its development. This is mainly due to several reasons (Fida, et al 2017). To start with, they have a strategic geographic and cultural location which attracts tourists with different backgrounds and nationalities and they are known for their political stability, friendly people, and strong reputation for their peace and hospitality.

On top of that, they have built a strong infrastructure (road, air and sea networks) in the education sector and other related and supporting sectors and they are diversified economically and have significant growth in both sectors, private and government on different scales. Also, they are known for their strong academic accreditation with well reputed universities and educational institutions, both local and international.

A recent conference conducted in Muscat, Oman by Oman Quality Management and Enhancement in Higher Education represented the pattern of educational

tourism in GCC countries through presenting the number of inbound students (international students studying in GCC) and the number of outbound students (GCC students studying outside their home countries) (Fida, et al 2017).

Bahrain followed by UAE scored the highest number of inbound students with Kuwait and Oman being the lowest. As for the inbound ratio, according to the table below, UAE and Qatar scored the highest ratios (44.8% and 39.9% respectively). This indicates that Bahrain, UAE, and Qatar have internationalized its higher education more than other countries in the region which reflect the development in educational tourism in recent years (2015-2016).

The present study examined the level and status of educational tourism based on four attributes similar to a study conducted by Al Shwayat (2017) which analyzed international students' perception towards educational tourism based on tourism attributes which are specifically: facilities, infrastructure, people traits, and cost. The researcher proposed a structure which depicted the concept of educational tourism in a holistic way as seen in the figure below.

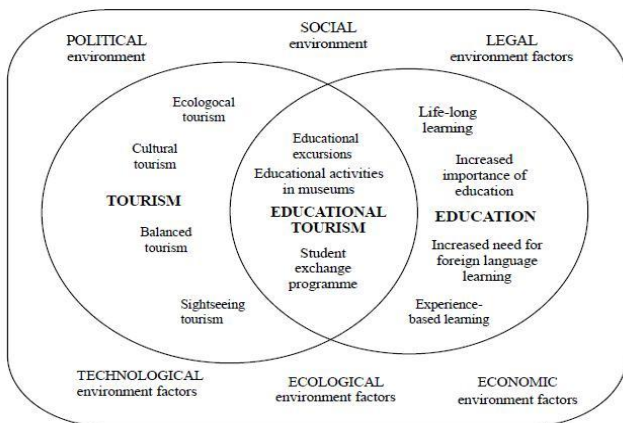


Figure 1: Structure of educational tourism concept.

Figure 2.4 Structure of educational tourism concept

Source: Al Shwayat, M. (2017).

The researcher used a qualitative method by conducting face-to-face interviews with international students enrolled in Yarmouk University for academic years 2012-2015. The study concluded that international students have differing opinions of negative and positive perceptions of the four tourism attributes of the university but the majority were positive. The researcher concluded that the four attributes of educational tourism have a positive impact on students' perceptions and expectations for their experience in Yarmouk University.

Demographic features of respondents are also a key aspect when determining their level of satisfaction with the educational tourism in their universities. Asgari & Borzooei (2013) identified three main demographic

variables which are age, gender and nationality. The psychological differences between men and women of different age groups and also their varying cultural background can affect significantly their attitude, preferences, and perceptions and hence their level of satisfaction and expectation.

Researchers used those three demographic features as a moderator to analyze the impacts of the overall image of destination (host country) and university on international students' satisfaction and in return their learning outcome. International students' satisfaction is yet another moderator which reflects their positive mental feedback or reaction regarding their experience with the university.

Furthermore, the overall image is the independent variable used in the theoretical framework proposed by researchers which included destination (host country) image and university image. The destination image is a combination of ideas about many attributes of the host country such as culture, infrastructure, society, etc. As a tourist, an international student's decision is affected by these attributes when choosing a university to enroll in. Likewise, university image plays also a major role in their decision making where international students look for favorable attributes which can help in building positive experience for them with the maximum outcomes.

As for the dependent variable, researchers used learning outcomes that international students and the market as a whole look forward to gain after their university experience. These include: vocational gains, personal development gains, general educational gains, and intellectual gains. The learning outcomes of students play a major role in enhancing their employability in the market and in developing their skills and professionalism.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study conducted a survey questionnaire which included open and closed ended questions and was distributed to a sample of one hundred international students enrolled in private universities located in Bahrain. The questionnaire classified respondents' answers based on the Likert scale.

A research design was the framework which was implemented in the study to generate evidence and analyze the situation in hand and it was classified based on several standpoints. First of all, this was considered a formal and specific study as the problem discussed and analyzed was clear, established and determined which was to measure the status of educational tourism in Bahrain and the level of international students' perception and satisfaction.

Second of all, the study was also considered as a quantitative research as it implemented a survey questionnaire to gather the opinions and personal experiences from respondents (international students). Hence, the study is considered a statistical one in terms of

the scope of analysis used to examine the situation.

Third of all, in the scope of time frame, the study was considered as a cross-sectional with a limited and specific time frame to collect the data which was one year (2017). This time frame provided the most updated and relevant data from each university which made the results more accurate and representative.

After organizing the data collected from the questionnaire, it was statistically tested using Correlation Analysis which analyzed the independent variables' effect (educational tourism attributes) on the dependent variable (international students' perception). In order to determine whether those independent have significant positive or negative effect on dependent variable in Bahrain, an analysis of variance was also used. Other statistical tests were also used to analyze the results such as: mean, r-value, p-value, degree of significance, etc.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This research studied the status of educational tourism in Bahrain in terms of four independent variables which were: Facilities, Infrastructure, People Traits, and Cost. These variables were tested to analyze their relationship to the level of effectiveness of educational tourism in private universities located in Bahrain.

To do so, a survey was distributed to one hundred international students who study in three private universities. Briefly, the findings were as follow:

1. 55% of respondents were female, 79% at the age 18-24 years old, and 52% with Arabic nationalities.
2. 83% of international students were Non-resident who temporarily come to Bahrain for a specific period of time
3. 54% of respondents knew more than ten international students of different nationalities, which indicated that there was a significant number of international students at each university.
4. In terms of their future plans, 53% of international students intend to be employed in Bahrain after graduating from their universities. This was an indication of international students' satisfaction with their experience in the country and their intention to extend their stay here. A low percentage of respondents (6%) intend to continue studying in Bahrain. This raised the questions to explore the reasons behind their dissatisfaction if any.
5. As for Facilities, the majority of international students were satisfied with the Facilities or efforts of their universities in terms of different services. However, some students suggested improving the services provided by admission and registration departments.
6. As for the Infrastructure, the majority of international students were satisfied with infrastructure services of their universities and of Bahrain in general.

7. In terms of People Traits, the majority of international students were satisfied with the traits and personalities of university faculty and the public in the Bahrain who are respectful, welcoming, and friendly. However, some students recommended adding more facilities especially for sport activities and parking.
8. In terms of the level of effectiveness of educational tourism in Bahrain, International Students of the three universities stated that Facilities, Infrastructure, People Traits, and Cost of significant effectiveness in enhancing the status of educational tourism in Bahrain.

In order to answer the principal question of this research which was: "Is there a significant relationship between the status of educational tourism in Bahrain in terms of Facilities, Infrastructure, and People Traits, and Cost with the level of effectiveness of educational tourism in Bahrain", a correlation test was conducted.

The correlation test resulted in a computed R-value of 0.5995 which indicated a moderate positive relationship between the independent variables of the status of educational tourism Facilities, Infrastructure, People Traits, and Cost with the dependent variable (the level of effectiveness of educational tourism). The result was statistically significant as the P-value, which tests the level of significance, showed a score of 0.05.

In order to improve the various services provided to international students in Bahrain and enhance their overall experience while studying at their universities, respondents were asked to propose some recommendations based on their own opinion and personal experience. Their recommendations included the following:

- Registration services should be easier and faster.
- Add more majors and qualifications.
- Improve the way of teaching and quality of education.
- Improve the facilities of university, specially parking lots and sport facilities.

V. CONCLUSION

According to literature educational tourism has grown significantly in recent decades due to the increased importance of education and the continuous pursuit of knowledge and intellectual property that is essential for one's success and growth personally and professionally. People change their destinations, move their residence, and travel to other countries in order to gain academic or professional qualifications for several reasons such as: better quality, affordability, reputation, services, etc.

In this research, the concept of educational tourism was discussed theoretically and conceptually from previous researches and literature. Moreover, an applied research was conducted to examine the relationship between the status of educational tourism and the level of

its effectiveness in Bahrain. This was done by distributing a survey questionnaire to one hundred international students studying in three private universities located in Bahrain. The outcome of the survey was statistically tested in order to reject or accept the hypothesis of the research which was:

H0: there is no significant relationship between the status of educational tourism in Bahrain in terms of Facilities, Infrastructure, People Traits, and Cost with the level of effectiveness of educational tourism in Bahrain?

The research concluded that the hypothesis shall be rejected and therefore there exists a significant positive relationship between the status of educational tourism with the level of its effectiveness in Bahrain.

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