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**Cost-Benefit Analysis of Educational Tourism in North Cyprus: A Qualitative Study of the Socio-economic Impacts**

Educational tourism continually commands attention in the academic sphere around the world. In contrast to previous studies that have mostly relied on figures and numbers to assess the socio-economic impacts of educational tourism, this study makes a two-fold contribution to the literature. Firstly, empowered by the cost-benefit theoretical framework and a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews, this study identifies the socio-economic pros and cons of this phenomenon as experienced by different entrepreneurs in Famagusta city: an educational tourism destination in North Cyprus. Secondly, the specific attribute of Famagusta, a destination that hosts a considerable number of educational tourists in comparison to the local population, has created an opportunity to see how this industry affects the economy of such a region. A total number of 24 interviewees were selected purposefully as the study sample, and the results showed that educational tourism and the economic lives of the local community are firmly tied together.

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## **Introduction**

The reciprocal relationships between the host community and tourism activities make it vital for decision-makers and planners to consider the perceptions of the locals in following a sustainable development approach (Weaver & Lawton, 2013). Tourism has become an ever-growing source and driver of socio-economic progress in various destinations (UNWTO, 2016), recently tourism has been recognized as a game-changing accelerator of economic growth (Tang & Tan, 2015). As such, scholars examine the links between economic growth and tourism development (Balaguer & Cantavella-Jorda, 2002). Chatziantoniou et al. (2013) found a mutual flow between tourism and economic growth, namely Tourism-Led Economic Growth (TLEG) and an extension of benefits from tourism to the economy (Schubert et al., 2011). Overall it is believed that in this current era, tourism in one way or another, directly or indirectly, affects the economy of the destination (Ardahaey, 2011; Lew & Williams, 2014). One of the primary risks for destinations is over-dependence, which is unhealthy for the economy (Dumont, 2007).

Traditionally tourism entails traveling to destinations for different purposes of which one might be learning and education (Bodger, 1998) forming the focal points of our study. This kind of tourism, which is also called educational tourism, is defined as traveling to other places with the initial intent of learning. Since there are many international students in North Cyprus, analyzing the probable positive and negative outcomes of educational tourism and their contributions to the economy of the island is crucial. Lam et al. (2011) remarked that as educational tourism became more and more popular, it took a prominent economic stance on the economy of the host countries. Previous studies in the context of this small island state have examined the economic impacts of educational tourism through a quantitative research approach (Katircioglu, 2002, 2009, 2010, 2014). The results of these studies revealed the positive influences of educational tourists on the economy of the region.

Mohul (2009) quantitatively researched various impacts of this alternative tourism on community members and reported both negative and positive impacts. Özşen (2012), through in-depth interviews with host residents, observed their perceptions about educational tourism in general. She found that the residents were happy with the development of educational tourism in their community, mostly because of the economic benefits they obtain, though they had experienced some negative impacts. Rezapouraghdam (2013) studied the phenomenon from a social perspective and found that educational tourism has had tangible effects on the residents' lifestyle. Shahgerdi (2014) observed the environmental aspects of educational tourism in Famagusta, a city famous for the excessive numbers of educational tourists it hosts. Finally, in a recent study, Aliyeva (2015) observed the impacts of educational tourism from the viewpoint of the local indigenous students who studied together with the educational tourists, in which she also asserted that the economy, culture, environment and social life of the locals had been affected by educational tourists.

Previous research is yet to provide a thorough qualitative investigation of the economic costs and benefits of educational tourism felt and explicitly experienced by those locals who are directly involved in businesses and entrepreneurs that serve the educational tourists. Starting from an understanding that entrepreneurs can better explain the economic intricacies related to educational tourism than other individuals in the society, this study aims to understand their perspectives and answers to the following research question:

Whether those locals who are directly involved in tourism economic activities and receive income from educational tourism perceive this phenomenon as being entirely positive to the economy of the community or do they have different perspectives about this industry in North Cyprus?

To do so, the researchers in this study found Famagusta, known as a "student city," a fruitful setting that can provide valuable information to meet the research aim. Overall this

study contributes to filling a gap in the literature; that is to say, the examination of locals' attitudes towards tourism impacts in destinations where tourism is new and has not received adequate attention (Sinclair-Maragh, Gursoy, & Vieregge, 2015). Famagusta city receives the majority of educational tourists and is home to Eastern Mediterranean University, the oldest and largest higher education institution in North Cyprus (Gursoy, Kilic, Ozturen & Rezapouraghdam, 2017).

## **Theoretical Framework and Background of the Study**

### **Tourism's Contribution to Development**

Tourism - the globally welcomed and controversially well-known industry - is considered a "key to development, prosperity and well-being" of the destination communities (UNWTO, 2014, p. 2). This industry has favored continuous growth and diversification in recent decades. According to the latest statistics provided by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2014), tourism contributed to 6% of global exports and 9% of global GDP. These figures clearly illustrate the great economic status of tourism throughout the globe.

Due to the important development of tourism as a growing industry in many economies in recent decades, a vast proportion of the world's population is largely dependent on the on-going capability and viability of this industry (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997).

Tourism has made significant contributions to the economies of many communities around the world due to its ability to generate incomes (individual and taxes), hard currency, a variety of business opportunities, an increase in living standards, and economic diversity (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Dwyer & Forsyth, 2008). According to Bramwell & Lane (1993) it can contribute to the viable and sustainable development of countries if natural endowments or resources are utilized adequately for the reinforcement and future productivity of the host nations.

## **Costs and Benefits of Tourism Activities**

The perception of costs and benefits of tourism are usually discussed based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory is applied in several areas such as economics, sociology, and social psychology to interpret different aspects of social relations through the exchanges that occur among them (Andereck et al., 2005). This fundamental theory has been adopted in tourism studies as a theoretical framework for understanding residents' attitudes toward tourism (Ap, 1992; Jurowski, Uysal, & Williams, 1997; Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990; Sirakaya, Teye, & Sonmez, 2002). Most of the costs and benefits discussed in this section are based on this theory.

The benefits and costs of tourism can influence almost everyone in the region in one way or another (Stynes, 1999). These benefits have encouraged stakeholders to enter this competitive arena and invest heavily in the sector. This has caused community leaders and economic specialists increasingly to treat the tourism industry as an important economic sector. Studies have documented its significant positive impact on the economic well-being of nations and communities (Allen et al., 1993). It can enhance local employment opportunities, tax revenues, and economic diversity as well as escalate long-term economic growth through different channels (Kim et al., 2013). An increase in living standards, generating tax income and finally acquiring foreign exchange (Weaver & Lawton, 2001) are numbered as some of the most prominent economic effects of tourism. Additionally, tourism creates jobs and business opportunities (Tosun, 2002); it can stabilize the local economy and provide cultural exchange between hosts and visitors within communities.

Economic benefits are most likely the key reason why so many countries are concerned with and interested in developing the tourism industry. The economic benefits of tourism are frequently declared and highlighted by the governments and tourism providers as

reasons for supporting and establishing tourism in an area. However, the negative impacts and specifically the negative economic impacts of tourism (e.g., event tourism) are not frequently explicitly publicized by governments and providers (Burgan & Mules, 2001). The review of the literature has highlighted several negative outcomes related to the tourism industry among which over-dependence, increase in the cost of living, and inflation were the most highlighted (Dumont, 2007; Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997). Furthermore, tourism development can affect the cost of local government drastically due to the expansion of infrastructure such as an airport, roads, and so on (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2008). Another economic cost that may occur is the growth rate of inflation for property values and inflation in prices of goods and services (Coppin, 1993). Moreover, if the tourism activities are controlled by foreigners, then benefits accrued may leak out of the local economy (Sinclair & Stabler, 1991).

Economic costs regarding employees are linked to seasonality. Workers may be out of the work in winter due to a decrease in tourism demand thereby making employment seasonal (Rudihartmann, 1986). Additionally, the rise of competition and saturation of destinations would decrease the quality of such a destination and their attraction to tourists (Cooper & Jackson, 1989). Moreover, many workers are poorly paid, and there may be knowledge/skills shortages to achieve higher paid management positions. Another substantial element that affects the economy negatively is the total amount of foreign exchange revenues that leave the destination countries to import tourism goods.

### **Educational Tourism**

Educational tourism has gained the attention of very few academic studies. Among scholars, Ritchie (2003), Kalinowski and Weiler (1992), and Wood (2001) did comprehensive research on educational tourism. Based on the Canadian Tourism Commission (2001), the educational or learning form of tourism can be viewed as a continuum ranging from “general interest

learning while traveling” to “purposeful learning and travel.” Each year, millions of people pursue their higher education overseas; hence higher education is considered as a type of student tourism that contributes to national income, employment and the wealth of local citizens (Katircioğlu, 2014). For instance, the revenue the USA obtained from international students in 2013 was about \$22.7 billion (UNWTO, 2014).

It has also been asserted that international students contribute to the social environment and the economy of the host country where they commence education (Pandit, 2007). Ritchie et al. (2003) defined educational tourism as

*tourist activity undertaken by those who are undertaking an overnight vacation and those who are undertaking an excursion for whom education and learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip. It embraces general educational tourism as well as adult study tours, international and domestic university and school students' travels, including language schools, school excursion and exchange programs. Educational Tourism can be independently or formally organized and can be undertaken in a variety of natural or man-made settings.*

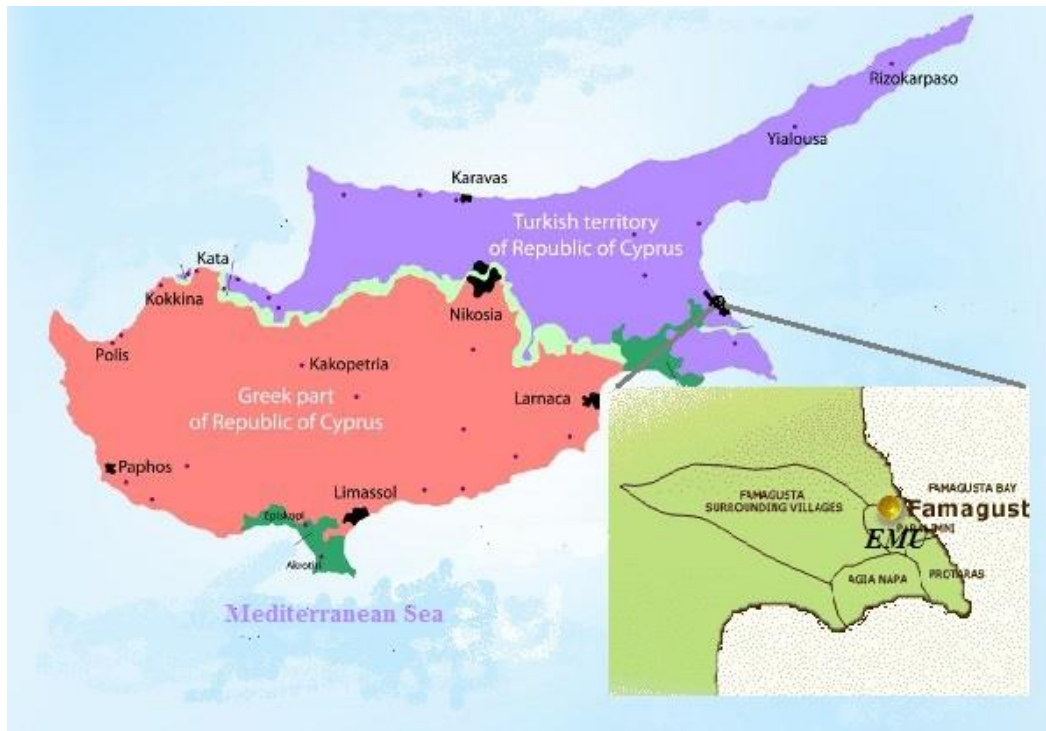
For more than three decades, in order to create economic opportunities, educational tourism has been promoted in the TRNC. However, there is a need for further studies to examine the settlement and economic conditions in the local community in destination countries where the educational tourists find themselves.

## **Methodology**

This study tries to understand the experience of the local people in Famagusta (Figure 1) who are engaged in businesses related to educational tourism in the city and to see how this sector has affected the quality of their business essence. Adopting a descriptive approach, this study employed qualitative data gathering and analysis techniques which are the most appropriate methods for an in-depth understanding of people's experiences. This approach was utilized in



this study to explore the outer layers of this phenomenon that cannot be measured quantitatively or through quantitative figures in previously mentioned studies.



**Figure 1.** The location of Famagusta city and EMU

Twenty-four people from different occupational backgrounds were purposefully selected, which is considered the best technique for non-probability sampling and is widely used in qualitative research (Patton, 2005). Interviews were conducted based on two main criteria: Cypriot origin and job relevance. The interviews were first audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis and observation purposes.

### **Sampling**

According to the latest statistics, over 19,000 students from a wide range of countries have enrolled in EMU Famagusta ([emu.edu.tr](http://emu.edu.tr), 2014). The relatively small size of the local population means the presence of international students in the area is highly visible. In recent times, Famagusta city has become home to thousands of international students, along with their families and relatives who travel and stay with them on a temporary basis (Hassannia et al., 2016). The population of international students within the area is glaringly apparent.

Visitors could easily tell at first glance that the city is dominated by students. This feature motivated the authors of this study to choose Famagusta as a good source for data collection with regards to the purpose of this study.

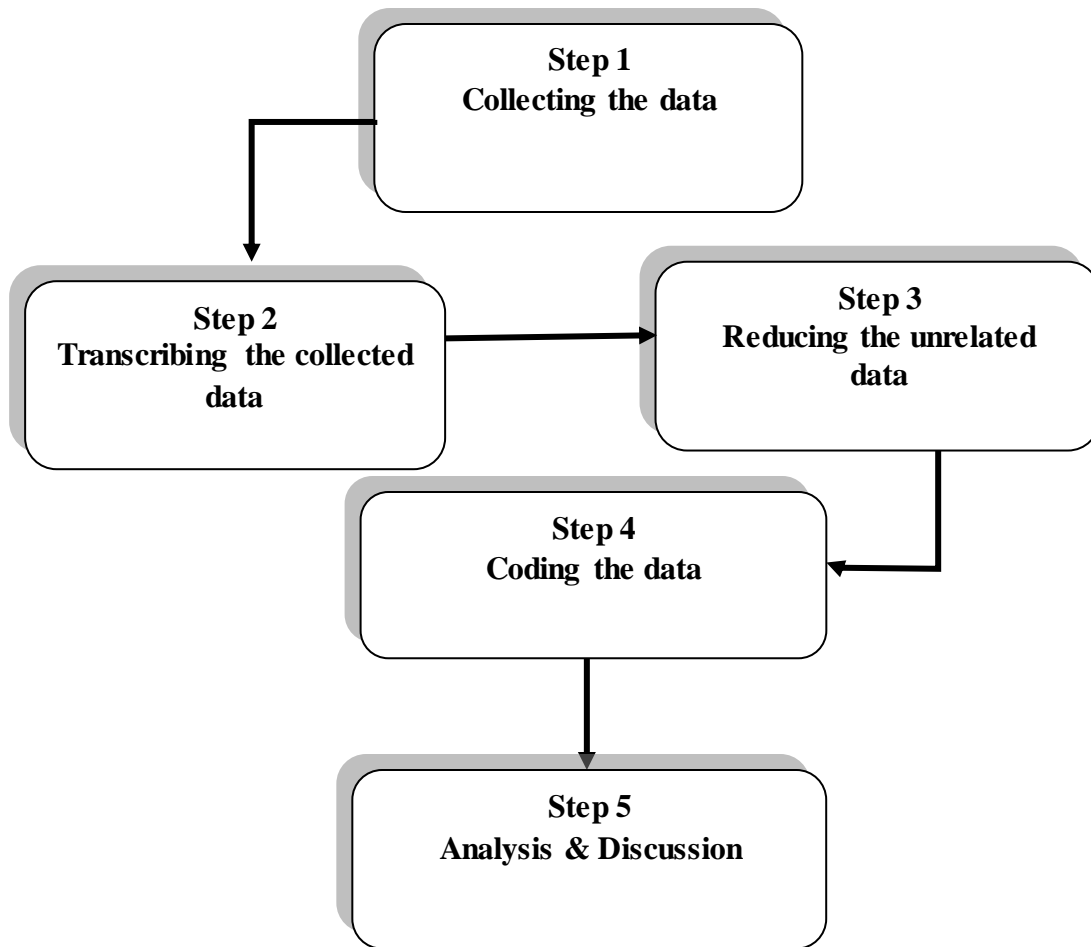
**Table 1.** The respondents' profile

Number		Percentage	Number		Percentage
<i>Age</i>			<i>Employment Sector</i>		
20-30	3	12%	Private	13	54%
30-40	5	21%	Government	11	45%
40-50	7	29%			
+50	9	38%			
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Education</i>		
Male	15	62%	School & Pre	7	29%
Female	9	38%	Graduate & Post	15	62%

The participants (Table 1) were all from the region and had different occupational backgrounds. They were considered the primary service providers to international students, that is, banks, insurance providers, travel agencies, private accommodation owners/agents, private food and beverage providers.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

This section entails the results of this study obtained through adequate analysis (Figure 2) of the gathered data from interviewees in January 2015.



**Figure 2.** The data analysis procedure utilized in this study

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study and the major theme of the questions was about the economic impact of educational tourists on the local community. The main structure of the questions was based around the following theme:

*Providing your opinion about the economic contribution of educational tourism in the region of Famagusta, share your personal experiences about the costs and benefits of this phenomenon in your business and in society, with actual examples if any.*

The respondents included but were not limited to tourism service providers (restaurant and hotel managers, travel agency owners), the banking sector (accountants, managers, and clerks), and university staff. Below is the format of the transcribed interviews which were coded and grouped by Miles & Hoberman (1994):

### **Economic benefit:**

#### **Economic Development**

The findings of the study indicate that most participants considered educational tourism and international students to be among the main pillars of economic development in Famagusta.

The respondents asserted that educational tourism had affected the economy of the area quite significantly:

*“The city center of Famagusta has changed drastically as a result of the development in EMU. After the development of the university in the city, the city center focus changed from the historical city within the walls to the surroundings of the EMU campus. The local people’s perception about the city center has changed in recent years, since the establishment of EMU.”*

#### **New Job Opportunities**

Based on collected data, most respondents believed that the integration of different sectors, such as food, construction, stationery, and travel agency, directly contributed to educational tourism. Additionally, they believe that some new businesses, like second-hand merchandise markets, have emerged due to the demand for educational tourism. In this regard, one of the respondents asserted that:

*“I related the creation of some sectors, such as dry cleaning, computers, and photocopying, directly to educational tourism in Famagusta. It is obvious that the jobs which provide services to international students have increased in recent years. I can cite the growth of the second-hand and home supplementary goods market as an example of the new, evolved pattern of trading.”*

## **Real Estate Turbulence**

The analyzed data indicates that educational tourism and its effects have provided plenty of opportunities for the local community of Famagusta. On the one hand, the intense demand from foreign students for accommodation has resulted in the development and use of previously “dead” areas. Construction and accommodation and their perquisites have greatly favored individuals within the local community, both directly and indirectly. In this regard one of the interviewees said:

*“There is a boom in housing investments in Famagusta. Even in the region around Tuzla, famous for its impermeable soil structure, or in the Ay Lukas area, which is very close to the lake and thus suffers from drainage problems, there are numerous housing construction projects to meet the demand for student accommodation. Twenty-five years ago, purchasing land in these regions for the purpose of construction was not recommended at all. Many construction companies have been established due to the development of educational tourism in the city. Nowadays, lots of people work as construction workers, wall painters, plasterers, plumbers, etc. Of course other sectors also benefit from this development.”*

## **Banking and Insurance**

The results of this study asserted that international students in Famagusta had a considerable impact on the banking and insurance sectors in the area. The respondents mentioned that students indirectly increase the number of loans and credit from banks:

*“In my opinion due to the increase in economic activity as a result of EMU, there are many in the sectors of food, transportation, construction, furniture, and so on, that are expanding their businesses and in this process, they need banks to provide them with L/C and loans. This is highly profitable for the banking sector.”*

On the other hand, the students’ direct impacts on the banking sector as declared by interviewees are as follows: 1) money transfer services; 2) savings account services; and 3) currency exchange services.

**Table 2.** Educational direct impacts on the banking sector

<b>1. Money transferring services</b>	<b>N: 13/24</b>	<b>P : 54%</b>
<b>2. Savings account services</b>	N: 10/24	P: 41%
<b>3. Currency exchange services</b>	N: 8/24	P :33%

**Note:** N stands for number and P stands for percentage

One of the respondents noted:

*“We open deposit accounts for our cash. Nigerian students in particular bring with them in cash the full amount of money they will need to spend during the entire academic year and it generates growth and profitability for banks when they open savings accounts, bearing in mind the fact that these types of account do not pay interest to customers.”*

Insurance companies in Famagusta were also affected a lot as a result of the whole development process in Famagusta due to educational tourism.

*“The insurance activity started at the port of Famagusta through which students brought their cars into the country. This situation encouraged the establishment of new insurance agencies that provide insurance for those students who come with their cars, before they enter the island.”*

### **Municipality Revenues**

Another outgrowth of this phenomenon is the insertion of capital generated by foreign students and different forms of revenue earned by the municipality.

*“The local government earns absolutely huge amount of money from these students. Each student should pay tax for registration in school, temporary residency, driving license and other types of taxes.”*

### **Economic Costs**

#### **Inconsistency of real estate expenses**

The findings reveal that real estate prices both for rental and purchase in the area around EMU have increased a lot compared to the suburbs of the city. One of the interviewees stated that:

*“Demand for rental houses has drastically increased around the main university campus. Foreign students usually rent houses at higher prices than the going rate. For example, one cannot find a flat for less than 4,000 USD per year close to the main campus but the cost of renting the same type of flat in a further away district like Marash is less than 2,000 USD per year.”*

An interesting comparison made by another respondent:

*“Property prices increased because of the growing demand for renting houses due to the existence of EMU. For example, shop rentals on the way to EMU (Salamis avenue) are so high that one can easily rent a similar shop for the same price at Nisantasi in Istanbul (Nisantasi is an exclusive shopping zone in Istanbul).”*

### **Laboring condition**

Several interviewees mentioned that in many working environments, foreign students are hired as part/full-time employees. Although the respondents did not directly imply this as a negative factor related to the students, they were concerned about its consequences on the overall employment of local individuals.

*“... Mainly the Nigerian students offer cheap labor all year round, since even in summer-time they do not go home because of the high cost of flight fares. Moreover, the cheap labor provided by foreign students has reduced job opportunities for local people.”*

### **Over-dependency**

Most of the informants indicated that the economy of Famagusta is severely dependent on international students, to the extent that when they leave the city during the summer, almost all the commerce in the city faces a decline.

*“Trade and shopping sectors are significantly affected by the presence of the foreign students. My wife runs a clothing shop (textiles) and the volume of sales decreases considerably in summer and during exam periods.”*

### **Excessive Competition**

Respondents from some sectors, especially restaurants and travel agencies, complained about the emergence of many new competitors in their market to provide services to international

students. The business owners were satisfied with the international students but dissatisfied with the excessive competition within their market.

*“In the past there was a limited number of 24/7 restaurants in Famagusta which had too many foreign customers, but recently there are many newly established restaurants that have really made the competition in this market too intense.”*

### **Alternation in students’ demands**

The number of students has increased by 43% in the past six years. This growth is because of a growth of foreign students from developing countries. There has also been an increase in students from Turkey, but the increase in students from developing countries is most notable (with the majority being from Africa and the Middle East). This has caused a reduction in the dependency of North Cyprus on the Turkish market. However, students coming from other countries, might contribute less to the economy of North Cyprus with regard to expenditure rate and cash flow, compared to students coming from Turkey.

As one of the participants noted:

*“Turkish students affect the economy of Famagusta more compared to other nationalities because new student arrivals from the Republic of Turkey spend more and create higher levels of demand.”*

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study show tourism to have significant economic impacts in Famagusta. The findings highlight that educational tourism, not only enhances and develops previously existing sectors (e.g., restaurants, travel agencies, accommodation, banking, and insurance) but also creates opportunities for many new businesses (e.g., copy centers, stationers, call shops). The direct and indirect contributions of educational tourism to the revenues accessed by local government through taxes is supported by this study in line with the findings of Dwyer & Forsyth (2008) and Kim, Uysal & Sirgy (2013).



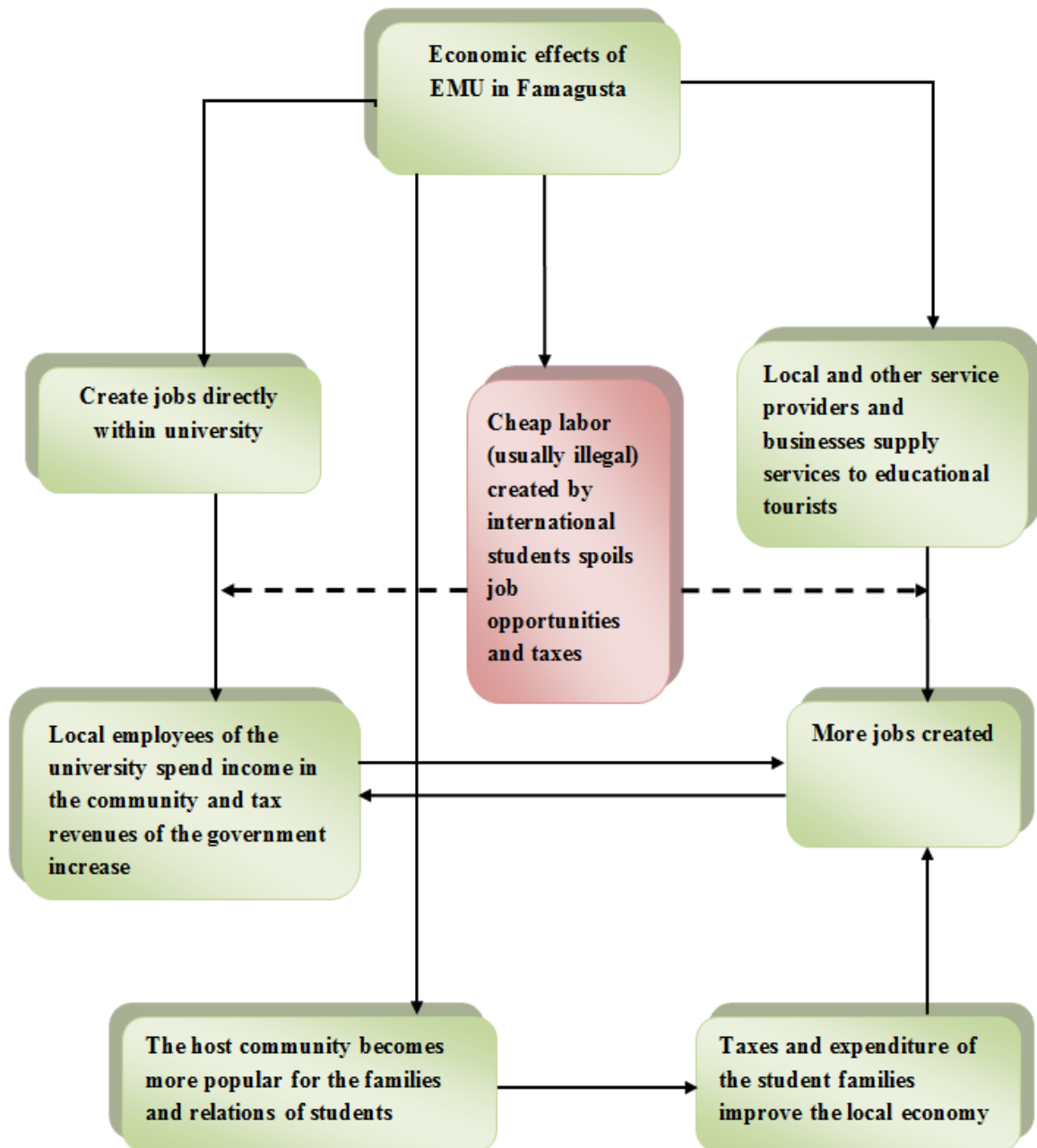
In line with SET theory, most respondents who were in direct economic exchange with educational tourism in the area believed that educational tourists had had a positive influence on the whole society of Famagusta. For instance, the respondents from the banking sector stated that educational tourists bring foreign exchange into the banks by opening checking accounts. On the other hand, their presence in the city encourages entrepreneurs to obtain financial aid from banks and establish new businesses or develop their current professions. These findings are similar to the findings of Allen et al. (1993) who indicated that the benefits and costs of tourism could reach almost everyone in the region in one way or another.

Real estate rental prices in the areas closest to the main campus of the university are much more expensive than in other areas. The respondents mentioned that these prices are somehow higher than the prices in the best parts of Istanbul in Turkey. Tourism in Famagusta might be linked to an increase in real estate prices, which is in line with the findings of previous studies (Dumont, 2007; Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997).

One of the issues that the findings of this study showed was the “cheap labor” phenomenon in the study area. The respondents stated that there are many businesses that employ foreign students, mostly as part-time employees with lower wages than regular employees. This issue may not only negatively influence the opportunities for local workers but also disturb the labor market. Regarding this phenomenon, it is noteworthy to state that these enterprises should not only focus on the short-term economic aspects of their business but also on their responsibility towards society, the environment, and their employees. Another negative economic aspect of educational tourism in the area was the intensely competitive environment, especially in some service sectors like restaurants. The respondents indicated that the number of restaurants has been increasing day by day since the establishment of EMU. This issue has created some doubts among locals about the

profitability of their sector in the future. Moreover, the small local restaurant and canteen owners with limited resources would not be able to compete with the large restaurants with more financial power.

Finally, the findings indicated that Famagusta is heavily dependent on educational tourism. This over-dependency was so evident in conversations with interviewees who stated that “most sectors survive because of the existence of students in the city.” Over-dependency is considered a negative issue in tourism destinations (Dumont, 2007) and should be taken into consideration by the relevant stakeholders. Figure 3 summarizes the findings and the discussion of this study. The presence of EMU as a center for attracting educational tourists has created several benefits (horizontal boxes) but also costs (vertical box).



**Figure 3.** Illustrative model of the economic costs and benefits of educational tourism

### Conclusion and Implication

The aim of this study was to shed light on the latent economic impacts of educational tourism in Famagusta by observing the experience of the locals. Many previous studies have applied quantitative research methods thus there was a lack in-depth knowledge.

Educational tourism was found to be a fundamental key for the economic development of the Famagusta region. As such findings of negative and positive impacts

could be utilized by policymakers, government, and the private sector. A critical area to improve the local economy might be to attract the friends and families of the students temporarily residing in the area. Special holiday packages such as on-island tours, reasonable accommodation, and flight tickets should be provided for the foreign students' families to encourage them to spend their holidays with their children in North Cyprus. In this case, not only will the students be motivated to stay longer in North Cyprus but also their families' expenditures will promote the economic situation of the island. However, it is crucial that stakeholders involved be conscious of the issue of sustainability, avoidance of which has been found to threaten the viability of long-term benefits for tourism.

### **Limitation & Future study**

The focus of this study has been the economic impact of international students on the economy of North Cyprus by examining the business sector activities of the community. Thus, other aspects of educational tourism, such as students' demands, their spending capacity, the way they approach their cost of living, their expectations of different sectors and society were beyond the scope of this paper. Future studies could focus on the attributes mentioned above of educational tourism in Famagusta.

Additionally, the context of the study is the Famagusta region. There are over 40,000 students living on the island, in areas such as Nicosia, Kyrenia, Lefke, and Guzelyurt. In order to create a comprehensive view of the impact of educational tourism, further research in these areas may be necessary. Therefore, to be able to have a proper picture of the impacts of educational tourism on the island, similar investigations in other regions are necessary. As such, future researches are recommended, to carry out investigations in other regions and help to form a country-wide picture of the economic impacts of educational tourism in the TRNC. Regarding the importance of sustainability for the long-run success of organizations

(Rezapouraghdam et al., 2018) future studies can observe the ways in which educational institutions may promote sustainability within their operation.

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