

EDUCATION TOURISM SEEN AS TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS IN ROMANIA, TÜRKİYE, AND CUBA

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Abstract

The study's purpose is to investigate the tourism opportunities for international students when studying in Romania, Türkiye, and Cuba in order to offer the best tourism experiences that enrich their life. Furthermore, the paper offers new perspectives for the destinations tourism management organizations to promote tourism in university cities creating tourism strategies to interplay academic life with local communities. Education tourism can enhance the tourism cities' cultural attractions and foster social relations between residents and visitors, contributing to the international tourism economic boost. The paper methodology consists in qualitative research using in-deep interviews with foreign students studying in Romania, Türkiye and Cuba. The research followed the three counties in terms of affordability, tourism cultural attractions, infrastructure and the diversity of students' programs. The results have shown important insights for Romania, like the EU-wide powerful student access and a big appreciation for the traditional culture, for Türkiye, like the preferences for ecotourism and big appreciation for Istanbul being vibrant, and for Cuba, like viewing tourism through art, dance and music, but limited internet services.

Keywords: tourism, education, students, tourists' attractions

JEL Classification: A23, H52, I21, Z32

1. Introduction

According to Glossary of Tourism Terms created by The World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism, 2025), "Education tourism covers those types of tourism which have as a primary motivation the tourist's engagement and experience in learning, self-improvement, intellectual growth and skills development. Education Tourism represents a broad range of products and services related to academic studies, skill enhancement holidays, school trips,

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sports training, career development courses and language courses, among others (Glossary of tourism terms, 2025).”

Education tourism represents a global market valued at USD 466.85 billion in 2024. According to forecasts (IMARC Group, 2025), the education tourism market will reach USD 1,291.50 billion by 2033, with North America dominating, holding a 30% market share in 2024 (IMARC Group, 2025).

The exponential growth of educational tourism is due to government policies, the growth of the education industry, and the increase in disposable income of the population (European Travel Commission (ETC), 2025). Young people’s desire to learn foreign languages and experience different cultures are motivational factors for education tourism. Governments promote student exchanges and educational scholarships, making international education more accessible. Furthermore, the value of international certifications and intercultural skills are key drivers in the knowledge-based economy. Studying in a foreign country is seen as a “passport” to better-paid jobs, which favors the growth of education tourism (Bunghez, 2022).

Firstly, government support is the foundation for the growth of education tourism (OECD, 2025). For example, Erasmus+ (the EU’s education and training program) provided mobility opportunities for over 1.2 million students, educators, and young workers (), supported 26,000 projects, and benefited over 73,000 organizations in 2022 (OECD, 2025).

Secondly, students are eager to study abroad, with the aim of developing their professional skills and personal development. According to UNESCO, education tourism is extremely popular, with international student mobility exceeding 6 million in 2022. The most important players in the educational tourism market from the students’ perspective are the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, which have the best educational infrastructure with world-renowned institutions. Furthermore, figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2025) show that 4.5% of higher education students globally study outside their country of origin. Students aspire to experience new cultures, learn something new, acquire new skills, and learn foreign languages.

The main companies in the global educational tourism market include AAI Edutourz Pvt. Ltd., ACE Cultural Tours, ACIS Educational Tours, Atlantis Erudition & Travel Services Pvt. Ltd., Capital Tours Inc., Educational Tours, Inc., EF Education First, Global Educational Travel, Goireland, Qadri International Education Consultancy, World Expeditions Travel Group Pty Ltd. (IMARC Group, 2025).

Students pursuing higher education abroad, resulting in bachelor’s and master’s degrees, accounted for 38% of the educational tourism market in 2024 (Statista, 2025). Foreign universities offer diverse specializations through research courses and language courses aimed at improving academic

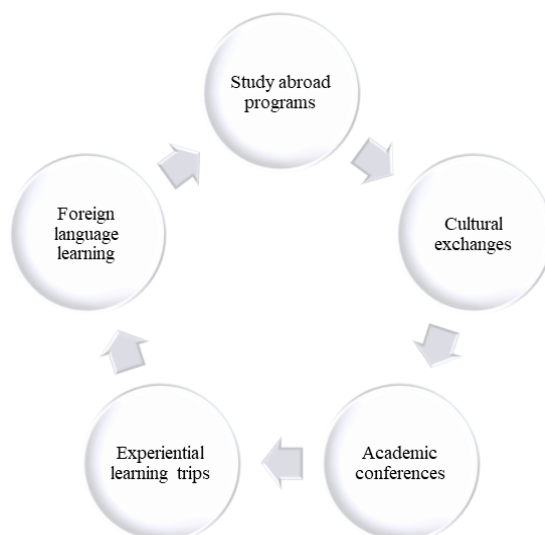
qualifications. In the United States, Europe, and Asia, students opt for exchange programs, internships, and study trips organized by colleges.

The present paper assesses the tourism opportunities for foreign students in Romania, Türkiye, and Cuba. It is based on qualitative research using in-deep interviews discussions with international students who studied in Romania, Türkiye and Cuba. The interview guide was based on education services' affordability in these three countries, the diversity of the tourism cultural attractions, the country's infrastructure and the variety of students' programs. The paper structures involved the analysis of the literature review, and presenting the qualitative research methodology, after continues with the results and discussions. At the end, the conclusions are presented including the research limitations and further research directions and perspectives.

2. Literature review

Education tourism is described as the pursuit of academic studies in a foreign country for a duration of less than one calendar year (Ritchie et al., 2003). The predominant motivation for education tourism is the quest of knowledge and learning (Buhalis, 2022). The development of education tourism has been pushed by three economic phenomena: globalization, the liberalization, and the internationalization of education (Iglesias, 2022).

According to Ritchie et al. (2003), an education tourist is a person who is away from their home town or country overnight, where education and learning are either the main reason for their trip or secondary reasons, but are perceived as an important way to spend their free time. Thus, educational tourism can be defined as: tourist activity undertaken by those taking an overnight vacation for which education and learning are a primary or secondary part of their trip. This can include general education tourism and study tours for adults, international and domestic travel by university students and schoolchildren, including language schools, school trips, and exchange programs (see Fig.no.1). Education tourism can be organized independently or formally and can be undertaken in a variety of natural or man-made environments (Ritchie et al., 2003; Zaroucha, 2022).

Figure no.1: The education tourism components

Source: created by authors after Tomasi et al. (2020)

Education tourists are actually the international students because they are characterized, on the one hand, by academic activities aimed at specializing in various fields of activity and, on the other hand, by leisure activities in the host country during the course of their studies (Unurlu, 2020).

Economic studies have been conducted to determine the economic impact of educational tourism, and investigations have revealed the significant contribution of educational tourism to the development of local communities, thanks to the spending of international students and their families and relatives whenever they come to visit them (McGladdery and Lubbe, 2017). Thus, money is spent on accommodation, meals, transportation, leisure, and language learning (Tigu, 2012).

Studies that have correlated educational tourism with local development have shown that universities play an important role in integrating international students into the local environment and culture (Kusumah et al., 2021). In addition, the sustainable behavior of educational tourists is prepared in the classrooms of host universities, and friendships with colleagues from abroad can last a lifetime.

Experiential tourism is best highlighted in educational tourism, as the encounter of different cultures creates a harmonious blend of practical and spiritual experiences (Suciu et al., 2022).

Last but not least, reference studies analyze the sustainability and well-being of tourist destinations when they come into contact with international students (Teach & Travel, 2025; Hall, 2025). Interculturality is a

key feature of educational tourism, which strengthens the technical and social skills of international students (Teach & Travel, 2025).

When the country of residence offers limited educational opportunities in terms of employment and when there are international programs that award scholarships and grants, students are attracted to educational services abroad, where they find up-to-date specializations that are in demand on the labor market. Hindered by limited educational resources and attracted by academic excellence outside their country of origin (push-pull theory), students seek the best solutions for their professional and personal development (Yang et.al. 2023).

Maturity comes with experiential travel, and educational tourism thus contributes to your ability to fend for yourself, to cope with life's difficulties on your own, to make the best decisions in an instant, to make new friends, to develop logical thinking, and to be a citizen with strong ethical values (transformative learning theory) (Bueddefeld and Duerden, 2022).

Education tourism in Europe is stimulated by the Erasmus+ program. Through this program, students' mobility has increased exponentially. According to the European Commission, in 2022, the program supported 26,000 projects and provided 1.2 million educational mobility opportunities. The Erasmus+ program is based on student and staff exchanges, research collaborations, and cultural experiences, making Europe an attractive destination for international students. Students are encouraged to choose an academic program in a European Union country. Thus, through the Erasmus+ program, Europe offers grants and scholarships, promotes intercultural dialogue and academic excellence, and helps forge international links between students and teachers (IMARC Group, 2025).

Tourism and education are essential for sustainable development. Thus, in 2023, the Global Forum on Education of the World Tourism Organization analyzed the importance of education in the development of tourism (World Economic Forum, 2025). Providing skills for tourism workers, with a focus on sustainability, digitization, and innovation, can be achieved through partnerships with universities (World Economic Forum, 2025).

According, to Tomasi et al. (2020) when learning is the primary goal and tourism is the secondary, it is considered education tourism. Education tourism services include university exchanges for students and teachers, learning foreign languages, learning new cultural customs and traditions, and professional and personal development programs through trips focused on learning new cognitive or practical skills. Tourism contents the wish to learn about the culture and the traditions of a destination (Pitman et al., 2011).

The expenditures of friends and relatives who visit the international students in the host country is significant, for example in the U.K. in 2014–2015, visitors spent about £520 million for transport, hotels, hospitality, and

cultural, recreational and sports attractions, generating an estimated £1 billion in gross output. Their presence supported a further 11,000 jobs and £100 million in tax revenues (HESA, 2025 and Universities UK, 2017).

According to Rehab (2021) VFR (Visiting Friends And Relatives) tourism arises naturally in host destinations, and so specialists in the field have not been involved in marketing it. Thus, VFR is not affected by conventional marketing campaigns, but rather by friends and relatives who help them decide to travel to visit them out of longing or for certain financial reasons.

According to Backer, 2015 and Shani & Uriely, 2012, VFR tourism encouraged by international students is of particular interest in terms of the financial gains it produces in the host university destination. There is significant evidence (Taylor et al., 2004) showing high participation in VFR tourism by international tourists, either as hosts or as travelers (Griffin, 2024), and this VFR tourism induced by international students follows the academic calendar, so the best times for host university destinations are to take advantage of the wealth created during those semesters of study.

The international students are able to connect education and tourism at the host university destination. The international students unify learning with traveling, enriching their abilities to better understand other cultures, customs, cuisine. With complex teaching and tourism services, Romania, Türkiye and Cuba are able to deliver high standards education services for international students.

Regarding Romania, the <https://studyinromania.gov.ro/> digital platform, administered by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) is beneficial for international students, as students from 121 countries are currently studying in Romania. The major cities offering international programs are Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași, Constanța, Craiova, and Brașov (UEFISCDI, 2025).

In the academic year 2023-2024, the total number of international students enrolled in bachelor programs in Romania was 32,092, representing a growth of 50% compared to 2014-2015 academic year (Ministerul Educației, 2023). Romania has made considerable efforts to ensure the international recognition of diplomas and periods of study. It has also implemented the Erasmus Without Papers and Erasmus Student Card Initiative programs to accelerate the digitization of Erasmus+ mobility administration; moreover, it has intensified the efforts of university sports clubs to make themselves attractive internationally. Offering education programs in English, French, Germany, Hungary, Romania is proficient to offer low cost of living and low tuition fees comparable to countries from European Union. Also, incommensurable UNESCO cultural attractions are in Romania: Horezu Monastery, Villages with Fortified Churches in Transylvania, Churches of Moldavia, Wooden Churches

of Maramureș, Historic Centre of Sighisoara, Dacian Fortresses of the Orăștie Mountains, Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu (Tigu, 2012; European Union, 2025).

Regarding Türkiye, the culture influence between Europe and Asia plays a key role in attracting international students (Agudaru and Taran, 2023). Türkiye Scholarships is a government-funded higher education scholarship program run by the Republic of Türkiye for international students (Türkiye Scholarships, 2025). In 2024, there were 121,000 application from 170 countries. It is worth to mention, Antalya playing for an outstanding chance for international students looking for a high-quality, globally known schooling in tourism and hospitality (Türkiye Scholarships, 2025).

The most popular tourist destinations for international students in Türkiye are Istanbul (Hagia Sophia and the Grand Bazaar), Cappadocia (hot air balloons), Izmir (Ephesus ruins), Ankara (history and Mausoleum Atatürk), Antalya (Mediterranean seaside resorts), Muğla and Bodrum (for the coast and sea), Trabzon, Uludağ, Palandöken, and Erzurum (for ski resorts), and Mardin (for its magical architecture) (Daxow, 2025; Tourism Higher Education in Türkiye, 2012). Türkiye is also renowned for its gastronomy and cultural arts (Koc et al., 2014). As an international student, it is recommended to try the cuisine of Gaziantep, Hatay, Afyonkarahisar, and Kayseri, which are UNESCO gastronomic cities. One of the best places to enjoy traditional delicacies is the UNESCO Gastronomic House in Hatay (Yeşiltaş et.al., 2010).

Regarding Cuba, one of the top programs for international students is The Cuba Fellowship, the programs are carried out in English and Spanish (Go Overseas, 2025). Cuba is a mixture of African, Spanish, and Caribbean cultures, which gives it a special charm for foreigners (Spencer, 2020). The University of Havana and the University of Cienfuegos are leaders in the fields of economics and tourism.

The best tourist destinations for foreign students in Cuba are Havana, with its vibrant nightlife and colonial architecture; Santiago, rich in Afro-Cuban culture; Trinidad, with its colorful streets and museums full of history, traditions, and ancient customs; Viñales, with its tobacco factories; and Cienfuegos, with its French colonial flavor (Go Overseas, 2025). Of course, all these cities are important university hubs, and also vibrant and dynamic in cultural discoveries for international students (Rutty and Richardson, 2019).

3. Methodology

The research methodology consisted of conducting in-depth interviews using qualitative research based on an interview guide. Specifically, five in-depth interviews were conducted online using the Google Meet platform between July 29 and August 29, 2025. The description of the respondents is based on confidentiality, which does not allow the identification of the names

of the international students interviewed. Therefore, we will refer to them using only their given names. The in-depth interviews with each participating student lasted 45 minutes. The research was extremely time-consuming, both in terms of discussion and transcription, but it was worth doing in this way, through in-depth interviews, because the respondent's attention is heightened, attention to detail is increased, and the experience is lived and expressed intensely. The respondents were chosen for convenience because the research team had access to them and their availability was extremely important in collecting the data for analysis (see Table no.1).

Table no.1 Characteristics of research respondents

	Characteristics		Mobility program
	Country of origin	Country of the host university	
International student one Razvan	Romania	Türkiye	Erasmus+
International student two Luca	Romania	Türkiye	Erasmus+
International student three Yusuf	Türkiye	Romania	Erasmus+
International student four Ecrin	Türkiye	Romania	Erasmus+
International student five Carlos	Cuba	Romania	Government Scholarship of Ministry of Higher Education of Cuba

Source: authors research

Respondents were asked to answer questions in accordance with the interview guide regarding affordability to study in their chosen country, tourist attractions in their country that they would recommend to other international students, university student and transportation infrastructure, and the diversity of student programs.

Following interviews with international students, they were extremely concerned about how affordable the country is in terms of the cost of living, whether they could afford to live there during their studies, being concerned about the cost of rent, the cost of food, how much a meal in a restaurant costs, the cost of public transport, and especially the cost of transport passes and their timetables. Concerns regarding the availability of the destinations were assessed from the perspective of the associated expenses for both them, as students, and for their families and relatives who visit them during their studies.

4. Results and discussions

Romania is perceived by the students interviewed from Türkiye and Cuba as a country with a low cost of living, where services are affordable in terms of

living expenses. Türkiye is perceived by the students interviewed from Romania as a country with a medium to high standard of living. According to the student from Cuba, his country is restrictive and it is very difficult to find essential and basic items there.

Learning through tourism is a recommendation of respondents; the chemistry that emerges between groups of international tourists can only be felt if you take part in such unique learning experiences. Study trips, learning camps, and volunteer programs involving learning new languages are useful for personal and professional growth. Respondents consider the effects to be beneficial in the long run in shaping personal character, precisely those soft skills that companies are seeking.

During the interviews, certain similarities were discovered, notably that Romania and Cuba share a period known as communism, during which products and services were scarce and inaccessible to the general population. Romania, Türkiye, and Cuba also share a gastronomic culture, refined cuisine, and, moreover, many dishes based on eggplant, minced meat, and beef rolls were borrowed by Romanians from Turkish cuisine. Furthermore, the characteristic of exceptional hospitality on the part of the locals is evident in all three countries to the same degree. Everyone is welcoming, happy to interact with foreigners, and eager to share their local culture and traditions. Things in common such as hospitality, music, dance, eco-agriculture, lavender plantations, tobacco, wine, and fruit trees are found in all three countries, which are concerned with agriculture and ecotourism.

Medieval cities and ruins included in the UNESCO heritage (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025) (Sighisoara (Romania), Pergamon (Türkiye), Trinidad and Camagüey (Cuba)) are once-in-a-lifetime attractions, definitely worth visiting and exploring by international tourists who are studying abroad. A good example, pointed out by Carlos, is this: "Camagüey is special to me, full of buildings preserved from colonial times with large clay pots (tinajones) standing at the entrance to the inner courtyards. The pots were used to collect rainwater, as the city has always suffered from a lack of water."

The data regarding the four components analyzed: affordability, tourism cultural attractions, infrastructure and the diversity of students' programs, has been summarized in Table no.2.

Table no.2 Summarizing the main opinions of respondents

Countries	Comparative characteristics			
	<i>Affordability</i>	<i>Tourism cultural attractions</i>	<i>Infrastructure</i>	<i>Diversity of students' programs</i>
Romania	low, budget-friendly, safe location, high-speed internet, inexpensive and widely available	Full of history, rich culture, unique traditions, vibrant nightlife, renowned festivals. Recommendation for visiting the Black Sea coast, the Danube Delta, and the Carpathian Mountains, Bran Castle and Peles Castle, as well as Transfăgărașan and Tranalpina for unforgettable experiences.	Discounted travel passes for transport, metro, buses, discounts on tourist attractions for students.	Educational summer schools, the Erasmus+ program, scholarships offered by universities, a strong focus on internationalization, and numerous volunteer programs. Strong academic reputation.
Türkiye	Medium, budget-high, stronger in cities, fairly good internet access	Renowned food festivals, ruins steeped in history, but also modern attractions, slow tourism experiences, refined cuisine, lavender tourism occupies a special place. Recommendations for visiting the Black Sea and Mediterranean resorts, the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, and the hot air balloons in Cappadocia.	Developed, subscriptions with medium to high price levels, especially in Istanbul	Camps, excursions, tours to learn about history, integration of locals into tourist tours, vibrant stories, exceptional negotiation, conferences and events supported by universities, internships. Solid academic reputation.
Cuba	restrictive, high tourists' costs, limited internet services	Wine and tobacco farms, unique music and dances, impressive colonial architecture, highly recommended are themed tourism: art and ballet, or organic farms and eco-agriculture. Recommendations for visiting Havana and the colonial cities of Trinidad and Cienfuegos with their distinctive colorful buildings, stone-paved streets, local dances, and vibrant music.	moderate development with safe environment, scooters are suggested	Exceptional cultural programs and workshops as part of the learning curriculum. Art, culture, ballet, and music are highly valued in Cuban education. Compacted academic reputation.

Source: authors research

Razvan and Luca mentioned the Palace of Parliament, the Athenaeum, Herastrau Park, and the Village Museum as must-see tourist attractions in Bucharest, Romania, along with the old town center and its vibrant nightlife. "The old town center of Bucharest is where the fun is at its peak" (Luca). Yusuf and Ecrin mentioned the Grand Bazaar, Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace, and Galata Tower as enchanting tourist attractions for foreign students in Istanbul. "To saving money and time, it is most useful to buy the Istanbul Museums Pass online" (Ecrin). Carlos recommended visiting the Gran Teatro de La Habana, the Capitol as Havana's majestic monument, the Havana Club Rum Museum, and admiring the architecture of the houses on Prado Boulevard in Havana. "Old cars and Cuban salsa music are a cool experience for young foreigners."

Regarding the academic infrastructure, more precisely the endowment of libraries with recent generation volumes, is equally highlighted in the three countries investigated. Regarding the accommodation of students in university dormitories, in Türkiye the greatest comfort is found, decent in Romania and precarious endowment in Cuba, with outmoded furniture. Modern classrooms in Türkiye and Romania, and in Cuba auditoriums with traditional architecture. Internet access in Cuba is precarious in university centers, power outages are frequent, which can cause discomfort for international students. On the other hand, internet access is fastest and free via wi-fi in Romania and good in Türkiye.

One bad thing Ecrin mentions is that when she had lunch in restaurants in Romania, the waiters, seeing that she was from abroad, tried to ask her to pay more than she should have. She was dissatisfied with the way the service was done in restaurants in Bucharest. For Carlos, dining in restaurants seemed very expensive. On the other hand, the freebies offered by all three countries to students to visit cultural attractions was a strong point of the discussion and greatly appreciated.

The need to have tutors in the host universities was expressed to help them adapt more easily to the lifestyle and integrate quickly into the academic community. The need for tours and tourist circuits in the host country was loudly expressed, the need to taste and try the culinary dishes specific to the host country was also loudly expressed. Moreover, the desire to visit emblematic tourist attractions that they read about in the guides on social media was brought to the forefront.

Taking into considerations all these important aspects, the involvement of host universities in creating organized group visit packages with tutors is beneficial for accelerating the process of learning about the tourist attractions of destinations. Respondents noted the desire of universities to offer programs in English for international students. A profound openness to internationalization and an awareness of the economic benefits for local communities resulting from interaction between student tourists and the local community were also

emphasized. It was observed that students wanted to have friends in the host country who would take them to visit destinations near the university, and especially wanted to go to concerts, festivals, parties, and shows, especially live shows, for free.

Conclusions

Tourism is an economic and social factor that promotes the professional and personal development of international students during their university studies abroad.

The limitations of the research stem from the limited number of in-depth interviews, as this can be seen as a pilot study, and increasing the number of in-depth interviews to ten would be comfortable in order to study the tourism options of international students in greater depth.

For the future, it would be interesting to study the long-term impact of international students on local host communities, in the context of sustainable development, digital innovation, and professional ethics.

In conclusion, international students focus on destinations that offer a solid combination of quality education, affordable prices, and tourist opportunities, combining tourism and education in a very beautiful way. It is a win-win situation between international students and the university destination that hosts them. On the one hand, educational tourism creates sustainable and one-of-a-kind travel experiences, and on the other hand, the host destination gets a steady flow of money, notoriety, and vibrancy.

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