

Can Universities Facilitate Cities to Function Better?

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1 ABSTRACT

According to Florida (2003), a better functioning city, offering high quality life style and amenities, can attract a huge number of creative people who in turn can influence businesses to locate there. In the tourism literature it has been mentioned that among the limited things the tourists want a city to have are good public transport, less congestion, safety, and night life. Therefore, it seems that the prospective permanent settlers and visitors look for a few common qualities in a city. Both of these groups of people have the potential to boost the economy and quality of life of a city.

Campuses of many universities across the world are located in a major city. Auckland is one of them. It locates two universities in the heart of the city. Among these two, The University of Auckland is the prime one with over 30,000 students studying on the City Campus. With so many students commuting to the university and spending a significant portion of their time in the city, they are likely to make an impact on the way the city functions.

Auckland is New Zealand's premier city and has been recently rated as the third-best city of the world to live in as per Mercer's rating. However, a record number of people have left New Zealand shores in recent times. Auckland is beset with some problems, such as traffic congestion and it hardly functions as a 24/7 city. Through literature review and a recent survey of the students at The University of Auckland, which mainly examines their commuting behaviour, this study tries to find out whether the university can facilitate Auckland to function better and thereby attract more tourists and reverse the brain-drain.

2 INTRODUCTION

In his legendary study, Florida (2003) observed that Pittsburgh had been losing talented young people from the core of the city and the surrounding areas since 2000. This was contrary to the fact the city became the top ranked liveable city in the USA in 1986 and continued to be ranked high since then. Their departure has been accompanied by a relocation of new companies to other regions and plateauing of the economy. Florida found that young people might even be moving to much smaller cities like Austin for lifestyle reasons including great night life. He termed these people, who were highly educated and drawing a handsome salary, as creative class. They are engaged in different types of work across different industries. The corporate profits from their input and economic prosperity increasingly depend on them. From Florida's study, it seems that for a city to prosper economically it must retain and attract quality workforce by providing amenities desired by them.

Along with the permanent residents, the temporary visitors or tourists are also important for the economy of a city. Coincidentally, the amenities that attract urban tourism are somewhat common to the ones desired by the creative class (Florida, 2003). Among the limited amenities cherished by the tourists in a city are nightlife, good public transport, shops and restaurants (Enright & Newton, 2005).

Auckland has been recently ranked as the third best liveable city as per Mercer Rankings. Unfortunately, it does not guarantee that the city would experience a huge economic growth. In fact, like Pittsburgh the signs are not encouraging for Auckland. Recently there has been a trend of a huge number of people leaving Auckland for other countries, especially Australian cities (Inkson et al., 2004). It is time that attention is given to a few key aspects of the city that could enhance its attractiveness to the creative people as well as the tourists, as tourism is one of the largest foreign currency earners for New Zealand.

Auckland is one of the few major cities in the world that has two universities located in the Central Business District (CBD) – The University of Auckland (UoA) and Auckland University of Technology (AUT). UoA is one of the leading universities of the world and New Zealand's largest with over 33,000 students. Cities function as complex systems (Batty, 2008), but it is difficult to study the urban phenomenon as a whole (Lefebvre, 2003). In this study, we mainly focus on two aspects of a city, public transport and nightlife, and try to determine the ways UoA could facilitate Auckland to function better. Besides literature review, a recent survey of students regarding their commuting behaviour is used for this purpose.

3 NIGHTLIFE AND 24-HOUR CITY

The city centre has been experiencing the loss of its status as the hub of the retail, business, entertainment and cultural activities for the surrounding areas since the early 1950s in the US and later in the advanced western countries (Thomas & Bromley, 2000). In recent years there have been initiatives in some of these countries to revitalise the Central Business District (CBD). Revamping the nightlife economy and extending the operation of the downtown for even up to 24 hours have commonly featured in the solutions to the problem (Bianchini, 1995; Hollands & Chatterton, 2002; Roberts & Turner, 2005).

There have been a number of research carried out in different cities in Britain in recent times, with a view to adopt the '24-hour city concept' and address issues related to it, using the lessons learnt from the European cities since the late 1970s (Heath, 1997; Hollands & Chatterton, 2002; Roberts & Turner, 2005; Thomas & Bromley, 2000). From his literature review, Heath (1997) listed the reasons for adopting the 24-hour city strategy in Britain, which included safer city, economic regeneration and city image. The last aspect is important for giving a competitive edge to a city (Lovatt & O'Connor, 1995). The initiatives based on the strategy included prolonging the activity period and introducing a variety of evening and nighttime activities to cater to different categories of people (Thomas & Bromley, 2000). One of the issues that needed to be addressed first was to fill the void in time between closure of offices and shops and early evening services, such as restaurants, theatres, cinemas and concerts. This could be done by extending the shopping hours and promoting a café culture (Bianchini, 1995; Heath, 1997; Thomas & Bromley, 2000).

The integration of office hours with the evening activities would also address the important issue of safety in between 5pm, when the offices and shops usually close, and 7pm, when the diners, cinema- and theatre-goers set into the city, who are later followed by pub and club clients (Thomas & Bromley, 2000). The city centre is sparsely occupied during 5-7pm, leading to a concern about the safety by the potential visitors, especially in winter. The perception of lack of safety has discouraged people, living in the suburbs, to visit the central city and reduced the amount of pedestrianised activities. For example, Thomas and Bromley (2000) report from a survey of potential shoppers in New York that 63 percent of the sample did not visit the city centre regularly owing to fear for safety. In another survey conducted in Birmingham, it was found that 69 percent of the respondents refrained from visiting the CBD at night. Similar findings were found from a survey in Swansea. In Britain, the reduction in natural surveillance due to the loss of people living in the core of the city is often associated with worsening of the safety factor. The decrease in natural surveillance in evening often leads to avoidance of the central city by the public.

In line with Florida (2003), Hollands and Chatterton (2002: 292) mention that 'young urban service workers, graduates and students, knowledge professionals and cultural intermediaries' are the main consumers of a city's nighttime and cultural economy. Thomas and Bromley (2000) conducted a survey in Swansea to learn about the pattern of evening and night use of the city centres. The respondents who visited central Swansea in the evening mainly went to the theatres, restaurants, shopping malls, cinemas and pubs. Each of these venues had different appeal to different categories of people. For example, both middle and youthful age groups resorted to latenight shopping, while cinemas, pubs and clubs attracted the youthful age group (16-29 years) more. Hollands (2002) also mentions that young adults are more likely to visit pubs and nightclubs compared to the general population. He indicates that young people have been found to be attracted to café type bars in recent times. In order to increase the social mix, the activity patterns in the central city could be diversified through street entertainment and festivals, and creatively organised functions in venues like museums, galleries and leisure centres (Thomas & Bromley, 2000).

Nearly half of the survey participants in Swansea avoided bus for their trip to the CBD, due to concern for safety. The steps for expansion of the nighttime economy needed to be complemented by improving the access to the area through adequate public transport provision (Hollands & Chatterton, 2002; Thomas & Bromley, 2000). Thomas and Bromley (2000) particularly put emphasis on increased surveillance on board and at major transport terminals.

The 24-hour initiative and vibrant nightlife have negative aspects as well, such as violence, disorder and crime (Chatterton, 2002). Especially, late hour trading has given rise to alcohol consumption in many cities across the world (Peters, 2010). Some of the incidents at nighttime are linked to alcohol drinking. Mostly male and youth were found to be associated with heavy drinking in Britain (Bianchini, 1995).

4 URBAN TOURISM

Urban tourism means tourism in the city (Law, 2002). Law (2002) mentions that large cities attract a number of visitors. They visit central cities due to their diverse functions and varieties of activities (Lawton & Page, 1997). The tourists definitely need transport to move around and travel to different destinations. Albalate and Bel (2010) report that urban tourists prefer to avoid private transport due to high cost, effort and hassles associated with driving. They are more likely to use public transport. In one study it was found that three-fourth of the tourists in Manchester used public transport (Thompson & Schofield, 2007). In fact, Public transport plays a big part in urban tourism development as it can even influence destination choice and raise the image of a city (Albalate & Bel, 2010; Thompson & Schofield, 2007). Tourists are becoming more environment-concerned these days and attach importance to sustainable modes (Baysan, 2001).

In order to attract more visitors through maiden visits, repeat visits and referrals, a city needs to demonstrate its competitive edge (Enright & Newton, 2005). Transportation facilities, along with shopping and nightlife feature in the factors influencing competitiveness of destinations in a study by Enright and Newton (2005). Nightlife is ranked highly for two cities – Hong Kong and Singapore - in the statistical analysis conducted by them.

Auckland contributes a big chunk to New Zealand's tourism revenue with a share of 27 percent (ARC, 2009). Lawton and Page (1997) conducted a survey with the tourists in downtown Auckland and found that most of the respondents had strong educational background and there were 32 percent professional or managerial workers. Coincidentally, their profile is consistent with the creative class people defined by Florida (2003). Among the activities or attractions the tourists wanted to visit, shopping was the most favourite choice followed by bar/nightclub, museum and art gallery. It seems the visitors are more interested in the activities of the city centre and attracted by its nightlife. The extension of the operation time of the city centre favours the tourists (Deffner, 2005). However, there is a little concern about safety in Auckland. While discussing the results of two surveys, Barker and Page (2002) mention that Auckland was rated the lowest among nine major national destinations with regard to safety in a survey of tourists, and in another survey 71 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that the level of safety needed to be improved in the CBD. In their own survey of tourists, they found that 10 percent feared for safety at some point in their trip.

5 AUCKLAND CBD AND THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

The CBD is the hub of business, culture, recreation and leisure in Auckland (Auckland City Council, 2003). It is a triangular area covering 433 hectares of land (Fig. 1).

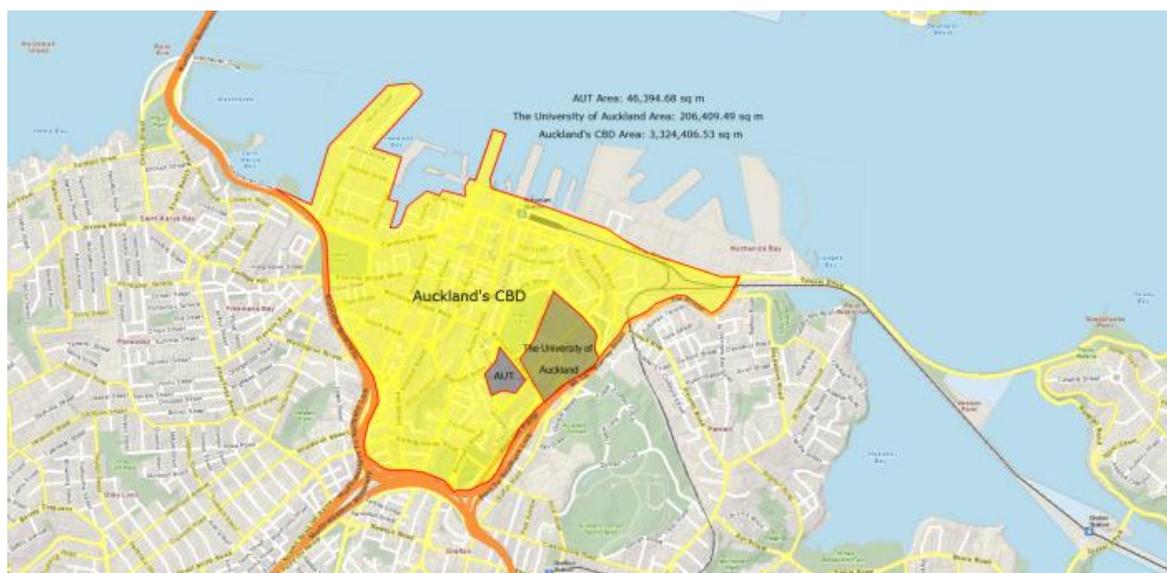


Fig. 1: Map showing The University of Auckland and Auckland University of Technology within Auckland CBD. (source: generated by the authors using Auckland Council GIS Viewer)

The number of tourists staying in the city centre has been increasing gradually over the years and doubled between 1991 and 2001. So has their duration of stay. Auckland CBD is New Zealand's largest centre in terms of employment with about 78,000 workers at the moment, increasing by 30 percent in the last ten

years. It has maintained a stable share of around 25 percent employment of Auckland City over the years. Tertiary education contributes to 5.7 percent of the centre's employment that makes it the fourth largest industry there. Area-wise the education sector uses around 15 percent of CBD's office space. This sector has experienced growth in the CBD and took 29 percent share of total education industry's employment in the Auckland City in 2002. The number of educational institutions in the central city stood around 100 that year. These include private secondary schools, private training establishments, and public tertiary institutions. Among these, UoA and AUT are the largest ones with current enrolments of about 19,000 and 30,000 students respectively. They are located in the central-east part of the CBD (Fig. 1). The University of Auckland is one of the leading universities of the world and the largest in New Zealand. It has 5 campuses with the main one in the downtown occupying 20.3 hectares of land (The University of Auckland, 2010). Unlike other universities, UoA operates from 8am to 6pm, with classes mostly taking place between 9-5. Most of the university offices also operate from 9am to 5pm. This pattern of operation deprives the university to bridge the time gap between the closure of business and nighttime activities in the city centre. Moreover, the students and staff are compelled to commute during the morning and evening peak hours, contributing to the congestion in the CBD.

6 THE SURVEY OF THE UOA STUDENTS

A random questionnaire survey was administered on the students of UoA in 2010 at a common space on the City Campus, which attracts visits by most of the students on a regular basis. The main purpose of the survey was to investigate the commuting behaviour of the students. There were 249 respondents. The survey provides some data which gives insights into some of the issues investigated in this paper.

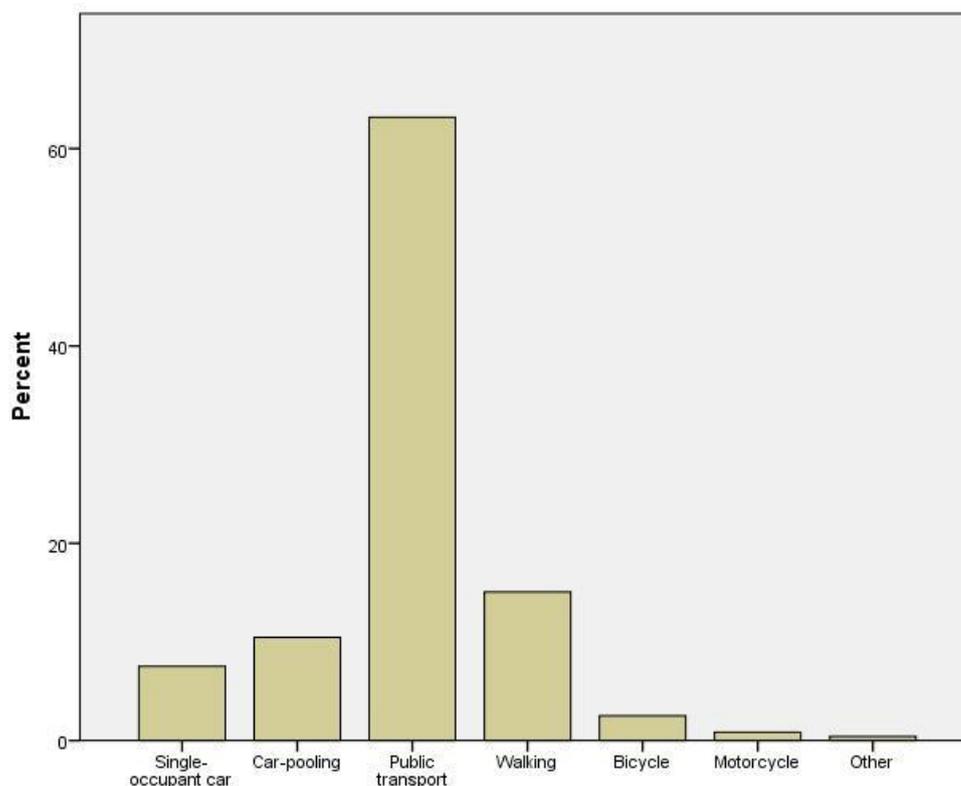


Fig. 2: Major mode usually used by the students to commute to The University of Auckland (source: survey conducted by the authors, 2010)

Fig. 2 shows the modal shares for the main mode used for commuting to the university. Contrary to the trend found in Auckland, the students used public transport extensively with more than 63 percent of the students using either bus, train or ferry to commute to the university. The modal share for bus was the highest with 51 percent. While this is positive for public transport patronage in general, there is a concern when we look at their commuting times in Fig. 3. It can be observed that 75 percent of them travelled to the university between 7-9am, which is considered the morning peak for Auckland (Ceder, Net, & Coriat, 2009).

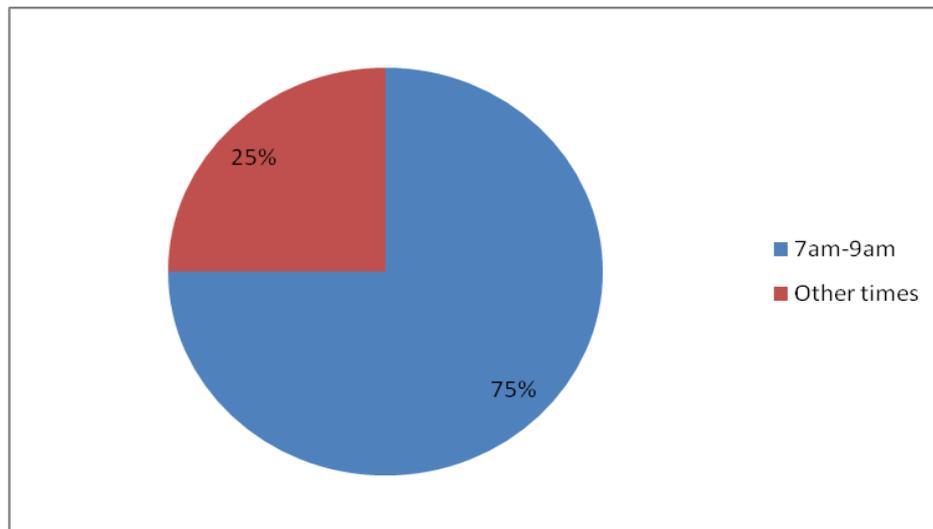


Fig. 3: Period of the day when students commute to The University of Auckland (source: survey conducted by the authors, 2010)

Though overall public transport usage is low in Auckland with a modal share of 4% (Auckland Regional Council, 2010), buses are usually crowded in the morning peak hours. This might deter some of the potential commuters from using the buses and some of the existing bus riders might consider switching to private vehicles. In the survey, we asked the students to indicate what they perceived as the main problems of morning peak-hour travel. More than 50 percent of the respondents mentioned congestion and about one-fifth mentioned inadequate public transport (Fig. 4). It is not surprising given their experience of travelling in crowded buses in the morning.

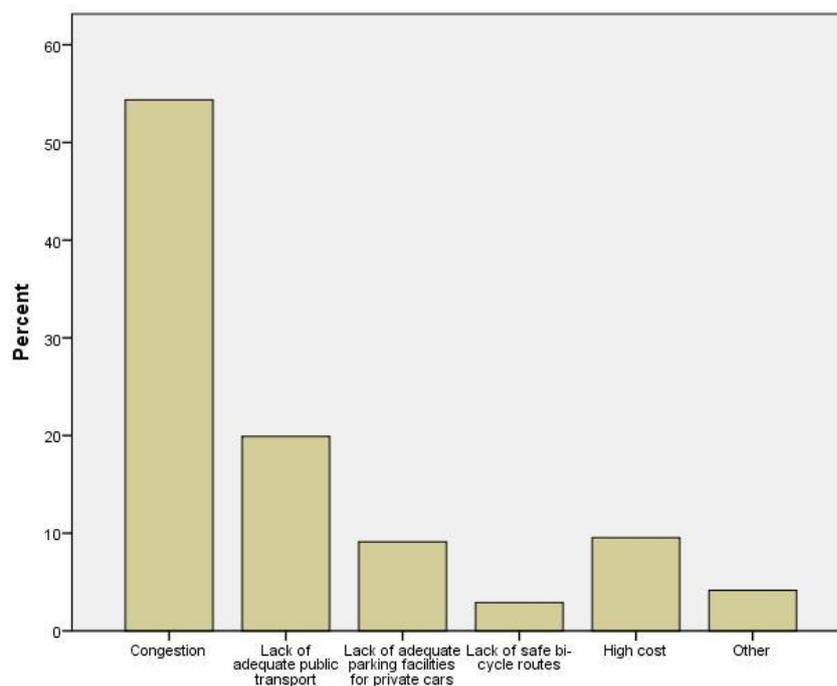


Fig. 4: Students' perception of main problems of morning peak-hour travel in Auckland (source: survey conducted by the authors, 2010)

If it was possible for the students to travel to the university after the morning peak period, it would mitigate some of the problems associated with morning peak-hour commuting to the CBD and public transport patronage in the off-peak period.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With so many students studying at The University of Auckland, they can contribute to better functioning of the city centre if the operation period of the university is extended like many other similar universities of the world (e.g., The University of Sydney, Australia). One of the main hurdles for the nighttime economy to

flourish is the period after the offices and shopping centres in the CBD close. As the streets become empty the people are hardly encouraged to visit the CBD in the late evening to participate in different nighttime activities. Due to lack of patronage, some of the activities which could have run in late evening do not operate. Like some other cities, Auckland also faces the problem as most of the offices and shopping centres close between 5-6pm. As per previous studies, one way of mitigating this problem is to bridge the gap between closure of offices and evening dining time by extending the shopping time and café culture. The students could play a role here through their presence on the campus and movement through the CBD. As a large proportion of students use public transport, it is likely that most of them access the service at Britomart, the transport hub of the city, and at other locations of the CBD. Their presence and movement would increase the natural surveillance, which has been identified as a key factor for people to feel safer and encourage them to visit the city centre, especially since the university students have a good image in the eyes of the public. The students themselves could be the customers of the shopping centres and café and participate in the nighttime activities. By encouraging more people to stay on and enticing more people to visit downtown in the evening, the nighttime economy could flourish and the nightlife could be made exciting and entertaining through varied activities.

Longer operation of the university would also allow flexibility in class hours and the students would be able to commute to the university after morning peak period. That would make the buses less crowded in the peak period and encourage office goers to ride buses more. It would also solve some of the problems related to shortage of public transport patronage in the off-peak period, especially in the evening, leading to balancing the demand throughout the day. As a result, it would help the public transport operators to offer better and frequent services, and reduce the dependency on subsidy. The central city would be greatly benefitted from the better service.

A vibrant nightlife served by a high quality public transport is likely to attract more tourists to Auckland and also fulfil the expectations of the creative class people. By having more overseas visitors and retaining and attracting highly talented people, the economy of Auckland could experience better growth.

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