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## The Changing Role of Regional Australian Destination Management Organisations in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

This study explores the changing role of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic within the regional context of Tropical North Queensland. A case study of a Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) is utilised to gain insights into external and internal stakeholder perspectives on the changing role of DMOs in response to COVID-19. This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate insights into the specific phenomenon of the changing role of regional DMOs in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The research was conducted in two stages: semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of the transcripts. This research project (including methodologies engaged) was approved by James Cook University's Human Research Ethics Committee, reference number H8559, on September 29 2021. The insights provided suggest that changes made within the RTO were mostly temporary and that there is a desire from external and internal stakeholders for the RTO to return to a marketing function post the acute phase of the Pandemic. Findings indicate that the role of a regional DMO can shift to a role of destination management in times of crisis and then revert to one adapted to marketing functions in the recovery period. Recommendations for the role of destination marketing and management organisations in response to times of crisis are presented and include flexibility of the role of DMOs in crisis management, the requirement for strong leadership and the need for ongoing consultation with the industry about the desired role and function of DMOs.

**Keywords:** Destination Management Organisation, COVID-19, Regional Tourism Organisation, Crisis Management, Tourism Tropical North Queensland

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## 1 Introduction

Tropical North Queensland incorporates two World Heritage sites The Great Barrier Reef and The Daintree Rainforest and has been an important economic contributor to Queensland and Australia as a nature-based tourism destination. The destination stretches from Cardwell in the south, to the Northern Territory border in the west and to The Torres Strait in the north. (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, 2019, p.3). Tourists from international, interstate and intrastate markets have frequented the destination with a desire to experience these World Heritage sites. The local Regional Tourism Organisation's "Destination Tourism Plan 2021" states that "in 1971 visitor spend was at \$50 million and by 2019 was worth \$3.2 billion with tourism contributing around 18% of Tropical North Queensland's gross regional product and supporting one in five jobs" (2021, p.7). As such, the Tropical North Queensland tourism industry holds great significance for the local community, state, and nation.

The Regional Tourism Organisation (referred below to as 'the RTO') that is the subject of this study is a membership-based organisation set up in 1978 to focus on the emerging marketing needs of the tourism industry. At the time, the destination shifted from agriculture, forestry, and mining to international and domestic tourism (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, n.d). The RTO navigated many challenges over the history of the Organisation, including the 1989/90 Pilot Strike, The Global Financial Crisis, cyclones that impacted the region and, more recently, reports of mass bleaching events on The Great Barrier Reef (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, n.d). The RTO's greatest challenge has been a contemporary one: the impact of COVID-19. Current Chief Executive Officer states, "The blow dealt to our industry by COVID-19 in the 2020-21 financial year has eclipsed all man-made and natural disasters that the Cairns & Great Barrier Reef tourism industry has weathered" (TTNQ, 2021, p.2).

In December 2019, reports of a mystery pneumonia-like illness in China began to circulate globally, raising concerns for the tourism industry (Katella, 2021). In February 2020, as COVID-19 was officially named as a pandemic by The World Health Organisation, the media began to ramp up their coverage of the emerging Pandemic as China and parts of Europe went into lockdown (World Health Organisation, n.d). The global tourism industry rapidly encountered a time of crisis (Austrade, 2021). According to Austrade (2021),

Australia began to restrict arrivals from countries with high COVID-19 cases from February 2020, and closed borders to all international tourists on March 20, 2020. This was followed by a national lockdown to limit the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the tourism industry faced sharp declines across all sectors. (p.3)

The impacts of the virus were felt with severity in Tropical North Queensland in March 2020, with citizens in lockdown, non-essential businesses (many in the tourism industry) banned from trading and fear about the illness associated with the virus, causing a time of utmost crisis for operators in the destination. The RTO had to change their management strategy to assist its members and the destination's tourism industry in navigating this period of turmoil.

This study is important as the research findings contribute to a greater understanding of the changing role of regional DMOs in Australia and acknowledge the people, functions and actions that have assisted them to be effective in

driving destination competitiveness at a time of crisis. This novel research benefits DMOs when considering crisis management planning and implementation strategies. It provides insights for the Tourism Tropical North Queensland members and stakeholders of the Organisation regarding the work, role, and function of the Organisation over the Pandemic and into reimagining its role in the future. As the RTO will play a critical and pivotal role in the recovery and rebuilding of the tourism systems in Tropical North Queensland post COVID-19 Pandemic, this research will be shared with the RTO to supply insights from stakeholders for their consideration.

The research objectives guiding this study are as follows:

RO1: To understand stakeholders' perspectives of the historical (pre-COVID-19) role of the regional destination marketing organisation.

RO2: To explore stakeholders' perspectives of whether the role of the RTO has changed during COVID-19.

RO3: To identify stakeholders' perspectives of what the role of the RTO should be as the destination seeks to adjust and recover from COVID-19 (post the acute phase of the Pandemic).

## 2 Literature Review

### *Destination Competitiveness*

This research utilises Ritchie and Crouch's Model of Destination Competitiveness (2003) as a conceptual framework to investigate the changing role of RTOs in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic (Figure 1). Ritchie and Crouch (2003) note:

What makes a tourism destination truly competitive is its ability to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination (p.2).

This definition acknowledges the complexity of destination competitiveness, and as such, they need successful destination management to meet both destination competitiveness and sustainability goals.

The Ritchie and Couch Model (2003) has been designed to analyse tourism system-related questions and considerations as "each set of circumstances is dynamic" (p.62). This research focuses on the concept of Destination Management referred to in the model within the context of a broader tourism system impacted by the crisis. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) acknowledge that the tourism system "is subject to many influences and pressures that arise...in the macro or global environment" (p. 63). The COVID-19 Pandemic is a global phenomenon that has placed profound pressure on the tourism systems in Tropical North Queensland. The Ritchie and Crouch (2003) Model further identify that the competitive environment or smaller micro-environment "concerns the actions and activities of entities in the tourism system that directly affect the goals of each member of the system" (p. 63).

Such is the case of Tourism Tropical North Queensland, its members, and stakeholders.



Figure 1-Ritchie and Crouch's Model of Destination Competitiveness & Sustainability (2003, as cited in Ritchie, Sheehan & Timur, 2008).

Ritchie and Crouch's Model of Destination Competitiveness & Sustainability was used to audit elements of the RTO's destination marketing and management with a focus on the category of Destination Management from within the model. This research adopted a qualitative approach using the Destination Management Framework provided within the model to review the role and function of the RTO in relation to Destination Competitiveness pre, during and post the acute phase of COVID-19. Within this framework, internal and external stakeholders could share their insights about the role and capabilities of the RTO in managing the impacts of COVID-19 on members and the destination. The model also acknowledges that destination management can be affected by global forces (such as the Pandemic) that require "constant attention by top-level DMO managers" (p. 82) and further allows for analysis of the response mechanisms of the RTO to maintain destination competitiveness based on managerial process, policy, and activity (p.92).

### **The Changing Role of Destination Management Organisations**

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Tourism Tropical North Queensland had a targeted marketing role with a purpose to "drive visitor revenue and long-term benefits for the region by leading the destination's tourism marketing, positioning and brand story – and by being a unifying and coordinating voice for the industry" (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, Marketing Update, 2019, p.3). Wang (2011) notes that destination marketing is both complex and competitive and, for this reason, requires a comprehensive approach. As such, many destination marketing organisations have entered a destination management capacity with roles such as the training of operators and advocacy to achieve government funding to support campaigns and infrastructure. "Over time, the acronym DMO has evolved from a meaning centred on marketing (i.e., Destination Marketing Organisation) to a meaning centred on management (i.e., Destination Management Organisation)" (Sheehan et al. 2016, p.1).

Ritchie and Crouch acknowledge that destination promotion is not the sole function of a DMO, and to ensure destination competitiveness, they must move towards a management function (2003, p.74). For decades, academic findings have suggested that Destination Marketing Organisations have shifted towards becoming Destination Management Organisations, with marketing remaining a key

pillar of their role. "There are ample evidence from the literature which indicates these tourism destination organisations have been used interchangeably, separately or combined as one entity in the management and marketing of tourism destinations" (Bhat & Gaur., 2012; Wang, 2011, cited in Adeyinka-Ojo et al. 2014). This research investigates the role that regional DMOs played in Far North Queensland in response to COVID-19 and if they had to change their role during a pandemic.

As destinations move into the recovery phase from the COVID-19 Pandemic, consideration should be made about their role and function. Skift (2021) reports that data from the United Kingdom's "de Bois Review" suggests that in a modern economy, DMOs should be actively involved in destination management and not solely focused on marketing. It recommends that they are strategic and work towards a long-term vision for the destination and that they become a "broker" between members, organisations, and businesses to achieve competitiveness for the destination. This is echoed by the Ritchie and Crouch model (2003) which refers to the positioning of DMO's within the context of Destination Management, with varied roles and functions, including but not limited to marketing. Research of the role and function of Australian DMOs as they shift into a recovery phase from the Pandemic would benefit the internal and external stakeholders of the RTO to provide information and insights for decision-making to ensure the destination remains competitive. There is a gap in the knowledge of the role of DMOs during a pandemic such as COVID-19. This research will address this gap in the literature by providing a case study of the Tropical North Queensland RTO's role prior to COVID-19, during COVID-19, and during the recovery phase of COVID-19.

## **3 Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate insights into the specific phenomenon of the changing role of regional DMOs in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The RTO is examined as an exploratory case study. The project investigates the role changes that the Organisation has made to achieve outcomes and competitiveness for the destination, members and for the industry during this time of crisis. This research project (including methodologies engaged) was approved by James Cook University's Human Research Ethics Committee, reference number H8559, on September 29 2021. The research for the study was conducted via semi-structured interviews.

This research investigates the understanding and perceptions of respondents toward the changing role of the RTO in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Saunders & Townsend (2018, p. 8) suggests purposive, non-probability sampling of a small group of respondents with specific characteristics relevant to the study is appropriate for distinct research purposes. Saunders (2018) further suggests that a researcher's judgement to identify appropriate respondent candidates is appropriate if they have insights into the context of the research. The researcher is a tourism business owner in Tropical North Queensland who has owned and operated a business impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic and is embedded in the industry in Cairns. The researcher's familiarity with the tourism sector helped recruit respondents that have had a level of consistent and engaging activity in dealings with the RTO and were all activities associated with the RTO prior to the Pandemic and through the Pandemic, thus

best positioned to address the research questions. No respondents chosen were in a commercial relationship with the researcher.

Eleven respondents from various sectors of the tourism industry were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. Five respondents were internal staff or contractors to the RTO, and six were external partners or members of the RTO. Interviews were held in private office environments in Cairns as these allowed respondents to speak with candour, and open-ended questions could be followed up should clarification on the response given be required (Adams, 2015, p.493-494). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview questions asked respondents to discuss the RTO’s various roles, actions, and effectiveness in the pre/during and post-COVID-19 pandemic.

**4 The Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was applied to the data received from the interviews with central and recurring themes determined. Braun & Clarke (2006) acknowledges that “thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis... thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (p. 78). The sample size was designed to represent a suitable representation of stakeholders to provide insight into role changes within the RTO and the scope for thematic saturation (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Interviews continued until data reached saturation point. Selected respondents had been actively involved with the DMO both historically and currently and so were deemed suitable to provide insight into the changing role of the DMO.

Transcripts from the interviews underwent content analysis and categorisation for reporting. Three key temporal themes were created to guide the results of “pre, during and post COVID-19.” From here, emerging themes were identified for each period with respect to the role and functions of the RTO. Themes are discussed within the context of the findings and discussion on their alignment with the Ritchie and Crouch (2003) Model of Destination Competitiveness and Sustainability Framework.

**5 Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the findings from the interviews held with both internal and external stakeholders of the RTO. It highlights the themes that emerged from the interviews for each of the following:

1. The role of the RTO pre the COVID-19 Pandemic
2. The role of the RTO during the COVID-19 Pandemic
3. An analysis of the effectiveness of the RTO during the COVID-19 Pandemic
4. The proposed role of the RTO post the COVID-19 Pandemic

A summary of the themes from the internal and external stakeholders is presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

*Table 1-Internal Stakeholders Summary of Themes*

| Pre COVID-19                   | During COVID-19                                  | Post COVID-19 (recovery)     |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| International Trade Activities | Advocacy   | Pursue International Markets |
| Membership Benefits            | Communications                                   | Destination Marketing        |
| Destination Marketing          | Member Support                                   | Maintain Domestic Marketing  |
|                                | Domestic Sales Activations                       | Train Industry               |
|                                | Destination Marketing Leadership (by Management) |                              |
|                                | Strong Team of Staff                             |                              |

*Table 2- Table 2: External Stakeholders Summary of Themes*

| Pre COVID-19  | During COVID-19   | Post COVID-19 (recovery)     |
|---|---|------------------------------|
| International Trade Activities                                | Advocacy  | Pursue International Markets |
| Collaborating with State and National Marketing Organisations | Destination Marketing   | Leadership                   |
| Destination Marketing Organisations                           | Domestic Sales Activations  | Destination Marketing        |
|   | Member Support  |                              |
|   | Leadership (by Management)  |                              |
|   | Collaboration with State and National Destination Marketing Organisations |                              |

As listed in tables 1 & 2, the internal and external stakeholders had very similar themes for the roles of the RTO pre, during and post COVID-19. All sections following here include an alignment of findings in conjunction with a review of the Ritchie and Crouch 2003 model of destination competitiveness and sustainability. These are summarised in Table 3.

***The role of RTO before the COVID-19***

***Pandemic:***

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the RTO published an Annual Report stating that its role was “to market Tropical North Queensland as one of the world’s most inspiring nature-based destinations.” (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, 2018, p. 4). This report further acknowledged the role of the RTO to promote the region and as a member-based Regional Tourism Organisation to increase visitor arrivals and expenditure to benefit the destination (2018). Evidence from the 2017/18 Annual Reports disclosed that the RTO had a plan for advocacy work as part of their role, specifically listing six key areas for advocacy over the period as follows:

- Aviation Route Development – with a focus on growing international capacity.
- Great Barrier Reef Messaging – around the resilience and health of The Great Barrier Reef.
- Funding Acquisition – for the tourism industry to market the destination.
- Regional Connectivity – including digital connectivity in the destination.

Table 3- Alignment of Findings with the Elements of Ritchie and Crouch's Model

| Element of Ritchie and Crouch's model of Destination Competitiveness & Sustainability | Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) considerations  | Relevant findings from the present study  |
|---|---|---|
| Organisation  | The model acknowledges that destination management can be affected by global forces (such as the Pandemic) that require "constant attention by top-level DMO managers" (p. 82) and require crisis management by the DMO.  | The study found the RTO to be an organisation that had the ability to influence and manage the competitiveness and sustainability outcomes for Tropical North Queensland, including in times of crisis (specifically the Covid-19 Pandemic).  |
| Marketing   | Ritchie and Crouch acknowledge that destination promotion is not the sole function of a DMO, and to ensure destination competitiveness, they must move towards a management function (p.74).  | The RTO had a strong focus on international marketing prior to Covid-19. During the acute phase of the Pandemic, the RTO shifted to include roles of advocacy and member support and refocused its marketing efforts to include domestic campaigns.<br>The study concludes that stakeholders were happy with this shift and expected the RTO to return to a largely marketing-focused remit in the recovery period from the Pandemic. |
| Quality of service/Experience   | This was not a focus of this study  | This was not a focus of this study  |
| Information/Research  | This was not a focus of this study  | This was not a focus of this study  |
| Human Resource Development  | Ritchie and Crouch advise that the role of management within a DMO is "critical and vital...for providing leadership and coordination for the many destination stakeholders that must contribute and work together if a destination is to succeed" (p. xi).   | The leadership of the CEO was critical to the success of the RTO in rallying the industry   |
| Finance & Venture capital   | "The DMO plays a potentially critical role in managing the competitiveness of the destination." (p. 106)  | The RTO secured funding from the state government to promote the region to the domestic market during the Pandemic. The RTO advocated on behalf of members for wage support and funds to support operators  |
| Visitor Management  | Ritchie and Crouch suggest that the DMO must play a focal role in interaction and communication, and cooperation to work towards a shared vision about where the destination "is trying to go" (p. 98).   | The RTO took on the role of training and preparing the industry to reposition their products to suit the domestic visitor while international borders were closed. In the recovery period from the Pandemic, stakeholders suggested that the RTO would need to train and retrain members to accommodate for international visitor expectations again.   |
| Resource Stewardship  | This was not a focus of this study  | This was not a focus of this study  |
| Crisis Management (Focus for the study)   | The tourism system "is subject to many influences and pressures that arise...in the macro or global environment" (p. 63). The COVID-19 Pandemic is a global phenomenon that has placed profound pressure on the tourism systems in Tropical North Queensland and thus requires management from the RTO. | The RTO adapted their role from an international marketing focus to one of advocacy and support for members and the destination and of securing market share of domestic and local markets for the region while borders were closed. The RTO adopted many strategies to manage the crisis that received positive feedback from stakeholders in this study.  |

- Road Infrastructure – to maintain safety and connection in the destination, particularly in monsoonal months.
- Safer Waterways Bill – Including crocodile and wildlife management (TTNQ, 2018, p. 14-15).

In contrast, none of the respondents noted advocacy as a role of the RTO before the Pandemic. The following sections report the findings from the internal and external stakeholders' perspectives.

### *Internal stakeholder perspectives*

Results of interviews found that internal stakeholders noted that the role of the RTO prior to COVID-19 centred around international trade activities, providing benefits to members and destination marketing. This point was evident from comments like the following:

“To go back to what the core establishment of it was, what the constitution says, we are a destination marketing organisation. We have members. We are beholden to our members at the end of the day.” (R1)

Another participant highlighted that marketing with trade partners was the main role of the Organisation, as follows:

“So, I think building on that relationship and having such strong and successful relationships directly with trade would be the biggest success.” (R2)

Internal stakeholders acknowledged the historical role of the RTO in providing benefits to members, including supporting local businesses, assisting with language and cultural translations between members and their trade partners or customers, hosting networking opportunities and organising media and trade familiarisation trips for members.

### *External Stakeholder Perspectives*

External Stakeholders also acknowledged the historical role of the RTO prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic as being one focused on international trade activities and destination marketing. In addition, a common theme amongst external stakeholders was the collaboration of the RTO with the State and National Destination Marketing Organisations to benefit the destination. The following comment illustrates this point:

“They were really starting to get much more attention of TEQ (Tourism and Events Queensland, the State Tourism Agency) and amplify what TEQ and TA (Tourism Australia, the Federal Tourism Agency) were doing for our region. And that came down to campaign activity. It came down to media families and trade families. It came down to sort of galvanising the industry to get together and support TEQ activities as well.” (R6)

In this capacity, the RTO acted as a conduit between operators, members and the larger state and federal Destination Marketing Organisations to rally support for these larger Organisations' campaigns and drive outcomes for the region. External Stakeholders' commentary supporting the historical role of marketing for the RTO centred around inbound

activations and efforts, including trade show attendance, roadshows in overseas markets, and international marketing campaigns.

### *Alignment of findings with the Ritchie and Crouch model and insights*

The Ritchie and Crouch model of Destination Competitiveness can link the historical roles and functions identified by stakeholders in this research with several factors within destination management that lead a destination to be competitive. These include marketing, resource stewardship and human resource management with the effective engagement of the RTO staff to enact outcomes for the destination of Tropical North Queensland. They acknowledge that “destination promotion is no longer the sole purpose of the DMO...to ensure destination competitiveness.” (2003, p. 74) and as such, while destination marketing has been highlighted as an important role of the Organisation historically, it is not the single function.

### *The role of Tourism Tropical North Queensland during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the role and function of the RTO had to change to meet the needs of operators, members, and an industry in crisis. In March 2020, as the country was shutting down and Tropical North Queensland businesses were forced to close, the RTO embraced a role of advocacy and support for members. From the first travel restrictions, the RTO began advocating directly to Government for business and wage funding and an immediate pivot towards looking at markets that would potentially recover fastest. In this dire time of the Pandemic, as businesses closed and were uncertain about their future, the RTO was vocal and available, engaging with members, connecting them with federal and state ministers to share their stories and starting to enact crisis management strategies within the Organisation.

The advocacy resulted in a significant investment into the region that enabled the Organisation to invest heavily into campaigns that would target markets available to the destination while the Pandemic impacted the country and the globe. Over this period, the RTO maintained its international specialist staff but adapted their role to encompass elements of the domestic activations too.

### *Internal Stakeholder Perspectives*

Internal stakeholders highlighted the role of advocacy within the Organisation as one of the most significant changes during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The commentary was largely focused on the important role the RTO's CEO had in this capacity and his ability to advocate well for the industry in his discussions with Government and through the media. Along with advocacy for wage support, clarity on COVID-19 policy and regulations, a push for border restrictions to relax and a call for vaccination rates in the destination to increase, a by-product

of the advocacy was also additional exposure for the destination, with one respondent commenting:

“We've had a very loud voice during the Pandemic, probably the loudest. It is the loudest voice we have ever had. We've had extraordinary media interest as well as a massive amount of money compared to what we've had in the past. So, we've really been able to put our name, the destinations name, sorry out there.” (R3)

Internal stakeholder respondents acknowledged that marketing was still a key role and function of the RTO during this period; however, specific domestic marketing that included sales functions became important for the Organisation. Over the period of the Pandemic, the RTO has had to be nimble and agile in sales and marketing strategies to resource markets that were open and able to travel to the destination and ensure that return on investments was maximised in a challenging environment.

Internal stakeholders noted the RTO took on a communications role with members during the Pandemic, distributing information through formal channels such as electronic newsletters and social media posts. Internal stakeholders further identified that the RTO took on a more focused form of member support that was, at times, one-on-one. It ranged from advisory about possible campaigns, grants availability and funding availability to very personal and supportive exchanges, providing emotional and empathetic support to members. The following comment illustrates this point:

“And I also think just being more of a point of contact to listen and advise on HR; we've definitely stepped up in that role. And we're kind of doing a lot more kind of helping and mentoring as well in terms of how you manage your business going forward.” (R5)

### ***External Stakeholder Perspectives***

External stakeholders also acknowledged the Organisational shift to an advocacy role led by the CEO during the Pandemic. Several respondents provided commentary on this.

“[The RTO] really became much more of a government advocacy group than they have ever had been in the past. And they've been agitating for government support, both federal, state and local in a way that was never really done before.” (R6)

”[The RTO's] CEO has been a very vocal advocate in the media. But, also with that advocacy role, it's been good that [the RTO] and [the CEO], in particular, has played a role in, I guess, mentoring industry to also take on an advocacy role.” (R7)

External stakeholders were all positive about the advocacy role that the RTO focused on during the Pandemic. Common themes included excellent leadership in advocacy from the CEO, the ability of the RTO to work with the industry to assist them in advocacy work over the period and the

professional way that the Organisation executed advocacy work over the period of the Pandemic.

External respondents further highlighted a continuation of the role of destination marketing with a shift to the domestic market and inclusion of domestic sales activations. Respondents external to the Organisation also referred to the level of support that the RTO supplied to members over the Pandemic as one that was personal and supportive, noting:

“I think they also provided a bit of a shoulder to cry on in a commercial sense for a lot of people.” (R6)

This role of care and nurturing was echoed internally and externally as respondents acknowledged that the RTO was a role of mentorship and support to members during the Pandemic in a commercial, emotional, and empathetic framework.

### ***Alignment of findings with the Ritchie and Crouch model and insights***

The RTO's focus on advocacy during the Pandemic was implemented to achieve financial support for the industry and to forge a way through the challenges of the time. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) acknowledge that global forces of high impact (such as COVID-19) require constant and systematic attention by the DMO to move towards stability (p.81). In many cases, the leadership of the CEO determined the day-to-day responses and duties of the Organisation's staff and drove the Organisation's focus at this time. In a model of destination competitiveness, the CEO's ability to galvanise the industry and advocate for it became a competitive advantage for the destination, driving efficiency and effectiveness in a time of unprecedented challenge. As the Organisation enacted crisis management strategies and engaged with available domestic markets, it encountered a competitive environment with many destinations vying for the same tourists. The Organisation's resource and funding achievements and allocations enabled it to adapt and change campaigns quickly, with a skilled and stable team of staff.

### ***The effectiveness of the RTO during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

#### ***Internal Stakeholder Perspectives***

Internal stakeholders emphasised the Organisation's leadership as a driver for effectiveness during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This was specifically related to the leadership of the Chief Executive Officer. Ritchie and Crouch advise that the role of management within a DMO is “critical and vital...for providing leadership and coordination for the many destination stakeholders that must contribute and work together if a destination is to succeed” (p. xi). Internal stakeholders noted the importance of the CEO's leadership in allocating staff roles, utilising data to make decisions, and the need for flexibility and responsiveness throughout the Pandemic. Reflections from internal stakeholders include:

“I’d say the advocacy that, that [the CEO] really pushed... that helped us in terms of securing funding to ensure that we could contribute a huge amount to the industry by marketing.” (R5)

Internal respondents also identified that a strong, skilled and flexible team of staff (sixteen in total) during the course of the Pandemic assisted the Organisation in being effective during Pandemic. Respondents advised that the collaboration between the RTO staff, management and the Board with Tourism and Events Queensland and Tourism Australia provided great benefit to members and the destination during the Pandemic. The following comment illustrates this point:

“We’ve had great support from TA and TEQ. We’ve been really lucky. We’ve been extremely lucky with the marketing funding that we’ve received and, again, I think that’s a credit to [the RTO’s CEO] and the Board and everybody that we really lobbied for that.” (R1)

#### *External Stakeholder Perspectives*

External stakeholders also recognised the important leadership role of the CEO during the acute phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic. External stakeholders’ comments reflected his ability to align the RTO with the funding, brand, and marketing opportunities available in conjunction with Tourism and Events Queensland and strengthen the destination’s brand with the larger DMOs. One respondent highlighted this sentiment in the following comment:

“I love how [the RTO’s CEO] talks... He doesn’t skip a beat. He doesn’t, he knows his stuff inside and out.” (R9)

External respondents echoed the sentiments of internal stakeholders. They advised that the effectiveness of the RTO during the COVID-19 Pandemic could also be attributed to their collaboration with Tourism and Events Queensland and Tourism Australia over the period with comments such as the following:

“Their biggest success was getting the attention of and help from both Tourism and Events Queensland and Tourism Australia, because really for them to do what they were doing just by themselves with their own resources, they would’ve found it very difficult to really have an as bigger impact as the industry demanded.” (R6)

#### *Alignment of findings with the Ritchie and Crouch model and insights*

Ritchie and Crouch determine that it is important that DMOs identify a “destination champion to lead the way in crisis management. Someone...to whom stakeholders can look to with confidence for guidance in difficult times” (p.229). Indeed, both internal and external stakeholders identified the RTO’s CEO as this champion. Over the Pandemic, the CEO had to navigate sustained turbulence and disruptions to tourism systems, markets and businesses in Tropical North Queensland. In evidence from respondents, all stakeholders interviewed were complementary of his management style with a particular

focus on the professionalism and success of his advocacy work over the period. Solid leadership offers the destination a competitive advantage within the context of destination management.

#### *The role of the RTO post the acute phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

##### *Internal Stakeholder Perspectives*

Research conducted indicates that internal stakeholders desire the RTO resumes a marketing role and function in the recovery phase from the Pandemic with a particular focus on the resumption of inbound marketing. Respondents voiced a desire to shift from advocacy and management functions such as the implementation of direct sales campaigns for the region and suggested that a return to a marketing remit would be most beneficial for the destination due to the requirement to rebuild historic international markets in a very competitive space. They also acknowledge that the Organisation’s work during the COVID-19 Pandemic with the domestic market should be maintained as this market will continue to be important for Tropical North Queensland. The following comment illustrates this point:

“We need to really grasp that destination marketing role firmly and leave, start to leave the advocacy behind so that we can put this destination back on the map because it’s going to be a really hard environment.” (R3)

Internal stakeholders further advised that elements of a management function would be required for Tourism Tropical North Queensland. This included a role of training in which the RTO’s staff would train members and their teams in product delivery, customer service, how to participate in marketing initiatives and how to leverage member opportunities as they become available. There was a focus on ensuring that tourism products were “inbound ready” and able to meet the needs and desires of international tourists as they returned to the destination.

##### *External Stakeholder Perspectives*

External stakeholders also provided clear insights that they would prefer the RTO to return to a destination marketing role with a focus on international markets in the COVID-19 recovery phase. Respondents called on the RTO to move away from advocacy and to move towards a role where they would lead the industry in destination marketing, the sharing of market intelligence and strategy with members and in the training of members to ensure their tourism products would be ready to meet the needs of international guests. This is evident in comments such as the following:

“The reality is we are going to be behind the rest of the world, and there will be a good, probably six to eight, well even in some cases, 12 months head start those other destinations worldwide have had in these key markets over us. So, that is going to be the challenge that there’s going to be so much noise for us to try and compete with.” (R7)



“I think they perhaps need to drop several gears in the space of advocacy and leave that to other groups and seriously press the accelerator on service delivery. And coaching and teaching the members on how to be the best they can be to every visitor that walks close to their premises.” (R10)

### *Alignment of findings with the Ritchie and Crouch model and insights*

Ritchie and Crouch (2003) suggest that the DMO must play a focal role of interaction and communication, and cooperation to work towards a shared vision about where the destination “is trying to go” (p. 98). Both external and internal respondents shared a desire for the RTO to focus on a primary function of marketing the destination in the recovery phase, and this role is listed within Destination Management in the Ritchie and Crouch model. The model acknowledges that marketing may be impacted by changes in the micro and macro environment. In the case of Tropical North Queensland, this may be in the form of future border closures and potential future outbreaks of variants of the virus, or even a new and different crisis to navigate. There is clarity from all respondents on the need for the RTO to assist the destination in recovering from the Pandemic through both international and domestic marketing as a priority.

## 6 Conclusions

The role of the RTO was impacted and challenged by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Since its inception, the RTO had been focused on destination marketing, and it continued to market the destination during the Pandemic, although its source markets changed and were disrupted. Its role diversified into destination management in response to the challenges of the Pandemic. This management role had a specific focus on the advocacy and leadership of members and industry. All respondents commented on the successful advocacy initiatives of the RTO over the period and acknowledged the positive outcomes for the region, such as tourism-specific grants, wage subsidies and campaigns to drive visitation to the industry over the Pandemic.

The RTO adapted their role to one of crisis management during the Pandemic, and stakeholders indicate that this happened in a timely manner. As such, many of the elements of Destination Management within the Ritchie and Crouch 2003 model of Destination Competitiveness & Sustainability were activated by the RTO at this time. Research participants commended the RTO for undertaking research on information to communicate to members, and visitor management and for adjustment of their human resources with a restructuring of staff roles.

Academic literature such as Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Adeyinka-Ojo et al. (2014) suggests that the role of the DMO is moving towards a management-focused function. This implies that marketing is included within the management framework, rather than marketing being an exclusive role of DMOs. In contrast, respondents who participated in this research noted a clear desire for the RTO to return to its marketing-focused role in the COVID-19 recovery period. Respondents did note that some of the destination management functions of the RTO should continue, particularly in training

tourist operators in customer service and product delivery and in their role in domestic sales activations. The sentiment of respondents displayed a desire for the RTO to move away from a role of advocacy and allow other industry and associated organisations and members to adopt that role in the recovery phase from the Pandemic. This can be explained by both external and internal participants anticipating a highly competitive environment post-pandemic. Considering the limited resources that a DMO has, marketing is prioritised to ensure reopened international markets come to Tropical North Queensland. Meanwhile, the training function is necessary to provide a high-quality product that will satisfy visitors and help spread positive word-of-mouth. Such focus corresponds well with the post-crisis business recovery frameworks (Ritchie, 2004; Mair, Ritchie & Walters, 2014) rather than destination management.

It would be beneficial for future research to review stakeholder perspectives twelve months post the return of international leisure guests into Tropical North Queensland to understand if stakeholder sentiments regarding the role and function of the RTO remain the same or have changed. Future research regarding the implications of the role and function of the RTO in conjunction with their relationship with Tourism and Events Queensland and Tourism Australia would also assist in a better understanding of the connection between the DMOs and their respective roles pre, mid, and post the COVID-19 Pandemic. It would be beneficial for future research to seek to clarify why stakeholders want their DMO to focus almost exclusively on marketing in the future when academic literature supports a destination management-focused role. Research into the role and function of DMOs has been well-documented historically, but research into the impact of COVID-19 on their role and function in the recovery phase is novel. It will benefit the tourism industry as it recovers from this crisis.

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