



Employment experiences of Polish migrant workers in the UK hospitality sector

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ABSTRACT

The research explores the experiences of Polish migrant workers in the UK hospitality sector. It reports quantitative and qualitative empirical data on the migrants' reasons for entering the hospitality workforce and their subsequent employment experiences. The findings reveal the main motive for entering employment in hospitality is for self development as migrants wish to use and learn foreign languages, gain work experience and receive other benefits that the sector provides. These self development opportunities are viewed as a means to improve career prospects in the UK or upon return to Poland. Once in the sector, positive experiences associated with hospitality employment include opportunities to meet people and work in a lively environment. Negative aspects relate to working conditions, low pay, physically demanding jobs, discrimination and management behaviour. The research suggests that certain practices and working conditions in the sector pose an obstacle to the long-term commitment of migrant workers. Suggestions for the management of migrant human resources are outlined.

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1. Background

As a consequence of EU enlargement in May 2004, the UK has experienced a rapid influx of migrant workers, with Poland as the country of origin dominating arrivals (Janta & Ladkin, 2009). Although accurate figures are difficult to obtain, there are an estimated 610,000 Polish workers registered as employed in the UK (Home Office, 2009). It is widely recognised that these figures are under-estimated, with variations reported by different agencies (Lyon & Sulcova, 2009). Records for the Accession Monitoring Report (Home Office, 2009) show that a total of 965,000 applicants applied to register to the Workers Registration Scheme between 1st May 2004 and 31st December 2008, with the highest proportion (66%) coming from Poland. By sector, in total 171,940 registered migrants are employed in hospitality and catering and 109,205 of those are of Polish nationality. A debate on numbers notwithstanding, the UK hospitality sector has absorbed large numbers of Polish migrants into the workforce in recent years.

In tourism studies, Poles are recognised as the largest group of international workers in the UK (Baum et al., 2007; Devine, Baum, Hearn, & Devine, 2007a, 2007b; Evans et al., 2007). As with any influx of foreign employees, changes in the receiving countries

workforces have been reported, with migrant workers having economic, social and cultural effects at the destination. For example, in the case of Polish hospitality workers in the UK, Janta and Ladkin (2009) outline the social implications in terms of workers leaving existing ties and social support structures and making new relationships in the host destination. Culturally, the workers bring with them their own specific style of working. In other examples the influx of migrant workers has resulted in such workplace diversity that traditional imagery often used in destination marketing is not a true reflection of the situation, as in the case of Ireland (Baum, Hearn, & Devine, 2008: p. 6). In many instances, the implications of the movement of large numbers of people with different backgrounds has a profound influence on all social and cultural aspects of host societies (Kinnaird, Kothari, & Hall, 1994). The departure of workers across international boundaries also has an impact on the migrants' home country. The exodus of workers who leave may result in labour market gaps, conversely human capital is subsequently gained if migrants return to their home countries.

In the UK, hospitality employers have reported positive stereotypical assumptions of Polish workers, which include having a good work ethic and commitment and acceptance of low wages (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly, & Spencer, 2006; Matthews & Ruhs, 2007; McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2008). Furthermore, it has been stated that businesses have come to rely on migrant workers in the hospitality sector and even prefer them to British workers (Matthews & Ruhs, 2007). Lyon and Sulcova (2009) indicate that within the hospitality industry, the general view towards the influx

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of migrant workers is positive as they have a better work ethic than their British counterparts, a positive attitude to work and more skill and experience than UK nationals. The nature of hospitality, with its significant turnover rates and irregular working hours drives the sector towards a constant need for more workers, of which it seems there is an unlimited supply. These needs create employment opportunities for migrant workers due to the labour shortages the UK hospitality sector faces. Given the widely accepted positive effects that the Polish migrant workers have brought to the UK hospitality industry, the management of these human assets has significance for the longer term development of the sector.

Set against this background, our paper explores the reasons for Polish migrant workers coming to the UK and entering employment in hospitality. Once in the sector, their subsequent views and experiences of employment in the sector are outlined, and human resource management implications are discussed.

The focus of our paper is on migrant worker experiences. However, there is a valid criticism by MacKenzie and Forde (2009) that migration employment studies often ignore the role of employers, other labour market institutions and broader regulatory constraints. Whilst this is not the main focus of our research, we aim to illustrate that the features of the hospitality sector provide a framework for certain conditions and employer needs that have a significant influence on migrant experiences, thus acknowledging the role of employers and wider labour market issues.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism and labour migration

Tourism employment has particular characteristics arising from the spatial and temporal boundaries of tourism consumption (Shaw & Williams, 1994). The extent to which the production and consumption of tourism generates migration flows rather than relying on the local labour market is a function of the scale of demand, the nature of the demand in terms of skill and educational requirements, and the speed of tourism development (Hall & Williams, 2002). As a consequence, migration into tourism employment has predictable patterns and is not a random occurrence, except possibly in the context of new forms of mobility where migrants whose love of place has over-riden the logic of labour market material incentives (Hall & Williams, 2002: p. 1). Straggling international boundaries and the worlds of work and leisure, these new forms of mobility constitute and are the results of globalisation (Held, 2000). At its simplest level, the rationale accounting for migration into tourism labour markets is it serves to fill both absolute and skill shortages of labour, thereby reducing labour market pressures including wage inflation issues. However, migration into tourism employment is a complex phenomenon with migration flows being shaped by a complex combination of self-selection and out-selection mechanisms (Beine, Docquier, & Ozden, 2009).

Despite the difficulties involved in attempting to unravel the complex tourism and labour migration relationship, there is little doubt that tourism employment is an important component and driver of human mobility. The production and consumption of global labour along with goods and services is an important factor with respect to mobilities (Hall & Williams, 2002). Despite the criticism by Coles, Duval, and Hall (2005) that tourism studies have yet to embrace wider perspectives of mobility, these being, for example, engagement with mobile labour markets, commuting, and migration and diasporas as suggested by Franklin and Crang (2001), the spatial movement of individuals for tourism is a significant area of research. Exploring the range of mobilities undertaken by *individuals* as opposed to *tourists* is seen as one of the ways in

which tourism studies connects to mobility theory (Coles et al., 2005). Individual mobility is the premise adopted in this research.

Whilst individual mobility facilitates an understanding of the patterns of and experiences of migrant workers, it cannot tell the whole story. The socio-economic context behind individual mobility is a vital part of understanding the experiences, attitudes and aspirations of migrant workers (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009). They rightly argue that the socio-economic context in which employers make decisions and migrant workers exist are micro level processes that occur within a wider framework, which includes the broader regulatory context. Set within the context of increasing freedom of movement for labour within the EU to meet shortages across a range of jobs, the reality is migrant workers are more likely to work in lower paid jobs for which they are over-qualified (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009). There are different explanations for this; however the role played by employers and regulatory frameworks is significant (Rodriguez, 2004). Meeting labour market shortages and cost minimisation are often cited as reasons for employing migrant workers. Employers may recruit directly from abroad and will often reap the benefits of recruiting workers with skills higher than the job requirements (Fellini, Ferro, & Fullin, 2007; Rodriguez, 2004). Linked to this are the different stereotypes of attitudes towards work commonly perceived by employers as migrants are often seen as harder working than local populations (Dench, Hurstfield, Hill, & Akryod, 2006). However, it is argued that such preconceptions of 'hard work' and 'workers attitude' ignore the socio-economic context in which migrant workers exist (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009: p. 145), as through a natural process of adaptation, workers attitudes may change over time to reflect the norms of the local population (Bauder, 2006). Therefore, the benefits are only temporary and for those who settle into permanent residency, the willingness to accept low pay and low status work diminishes over time (Knocke, 2000). Considering the characteristics of the hospitality industry, the short term nature of work favours employers who rely on a constant turnover of unskilled employees, of which migrants form a significant group. The expectations of both employers and employees are clearly linked, and are likely to have an impact on the experiences of both.

To summarise, the mobility of migrant workers is a complex mix of macro level frameworks, micro level employer strategies, and individual freedom and choices. Each of these will have an influence on migrant experiences. It has been correctly stated by Lucas and Mansfield (2008) that "*it is impossible to generalize the experiences of migrant workers, which may vary from working illegally under exploitative terms and conditions, to working in highly paid, rewarding and skilled jobs*" (p. 7). Furthermore, research into the lives and experiences of migrant workers is not without problems, specifically in terms of data collection methods and availability (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). These constraints notwithstanding, the paper aims to shed light on migrant experiences within the hospitality sector.

2.2. Migration and hospitality workers

The hospitality industry has historically relied on migrant workers (Baum, 2006, 2007; Christensen-Hughes, 1992; King, 1995). The hospitality workforce is characterised by a reliance on particular types of workers who are associated with being marginalised within secondary labour markets; specifically women, students, ethnic minorities, young people and migrants (Lucas & Mansfield, 2008). Migrants arriving in the UK find jobs in hospitality for a number of reasons, including higher wages in this sector than in their home countries and opportunities to improve English language skills which are valued for further career development. Employers are willing, and in some instances actively seek to

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