

# Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision

14

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## Charting a journey: from refugee to tourism employee and tourism entrepreneur?

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# 14 Charting a journey: from refugee to tourism employee and tourism entrepreneur?

Tom Baum and Geri Smyth

## Introduction

The development of international tourism since the middle of the 20th century has seen a process of continuity but, more fundamentally, progressive and accelerating change in terms of consumers and their expectations; the products and services that they consume; the social, political and economic environment within which international tourism is located; and the impact of technology in the marketing and distribution of tourism products and services. Changes such as these have rendered international tourism unrecognisable today from its counterpart some 60 years ago.

A parallel process can be seen with respect to work within the tourism sector, both at the level of the firm and the individual and in terms of the macro labour market, national and international, within which the sector is located. In quantitative terms, a tourism sector which has grown hugely over the past 60 years requires a far greater number of people at all levels to deliver its services. The nature of the industry has created a significantly greater range of employment categories within tourism than was the case in the past, driven by the changing nature of tourist activities and the technologies used to service them. At the same time, a rather more limited range of roles in tourism have decreased in importance or disappeared altogether. Finally, it is important to recognise that the geographical spread of tourism to encompass most communities in both the developed and less developed world has created employment opportunities within the sector in locations that previously had little or no contact with commercial travel and tourism.

Notwithstanding such change, many aspects of tourism work have remained similar over the timeframe of the past 60 years. Baum (2007: 1385), in reviewing tourism work from the early 1930s to the present day, concludes that 'there is, therefore, little evidence, notwithstanding exceptional best practice examples by some organisations from across the industry, that working conditions in tourism have improved significantly'. Baum's reference here is primarily to low skills work in the accommodation and food service sub-sectors of tourism where the impact of technology and

productivity enhancements have been limited, especially within smaller operations. However, all sectors of tourism include work which is labour intensive, widely described as requiring low skills and relatively unchanging in the nature of the work and skills required over the past half century such as front-line service work, cleaning functions, estates functions and baggage handling. Tourism and related service work has traditionally and widely been characterised as low skills although this stereotype is challenged by a number of authors (Baum, 1996, 2002, 2006a; Burns, 1997) on the basis that this represents both a technical and western-centric perception of work and skills. There is a dominant if not universal view that much work undertaken within the sector can be described as low value, demanding few, if any, conceptual or knowledge-driven attributes.

Demographic change, economic development and the growth of tourism demand in all mature western economies have created shortages within all low skills sectors, wherein current and anticipated demand for labour far exceeds that available within the locality of most businesses. As a consequence, the tourism industry in many developed countries has relied on a combination of productivity enhancement and sourcing new supplies of low skills labour in order to meet its staffing needs. A widespread response to staff shortages in the sector has been through the recruitment of migrant labour, whether from elsewhere in the country or from international sources. Many countries in Europe (e.g. Ireland, Switzerland, and the UK) and elsewhere are now heavily dependent on migrant labour for the delivery of core tourism services (Baum *et al.*, 2007a; Devine *et al.*, 2007). While migration for work in tourism is by no means a new phenomenon, the scale of contemporary migration is unprecedented and has implications which challenge the delivery of traditional services and tourism experiences (Baum *et al.*, 2007b).

Employment in tourism-related businesses, alongside similar weak labour market sectors such as agriculture and construction, is frequently the first step towards economic independence taken by newly arrived migrants to a host country, whether their status is one of choice or that of refugee. A diversity of employment requirements at low and semi-skilled levels, stochastic demand patterns and the wide geographical dispersal of the tourism sector combine to create opportunities for 'incomers' to find ready access to work within both the legitimate and the grey economies of most developed countries. This work is frequently based upon low pay and exploitative conditions, within what Jayaweera and Anderson (2008) describe as 'vulnerable employment'. Migrants and refugees are also widely under-employed in terms of the skills set that they often have gained in their country of origin and find accessing employment commensurate with their qualifications difficult. At the same time, the tourism context provides significant opportunities for entrepreneurial activity by migrants and refugees in areas such as ethnic cuisine, arts, crafts, and wider cultural presentation.

This chapter draws on a number of conceptual strands, notably those relating to the impact of migration on tourism work (e.g. Devine *et al.*, 2007) and builds upon the work of the authors in addressing issues of refugee integration, including economic

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