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## Barriers to Youth Employment

### Aims of the chapter

This chapter explores barriers to youth employment in the tourism and hospitality sector. It addresses this issue from both supply and demand perspectives. The supply side discusses perceptions of tourism employment while the demand side takes the perspective of business, trying to better understand the nature of demand for tourism employees, skills gaps and shortages, and attitudes towards employing young people specifically. The chapter concludes by describing a range of initiatives that target the barriers to youth employment in tourism.

### Supply side barriers

Supply side, as used here, relates to employees or potential employees who, in return for a wage, supply their labour, including their motivation, knowledge and skills, in other words their human capital. The point is stressed because occasionally those seeking work are referred to as *demanding* labour. It might seem peculiar to begin this chapter on barriers to youth employment by suggesting there is a supply-side dimension to this problem. Commonly the problem is solely regarded in terms of the unavailability of jobs, i.e. a shortfall in demand for labour in the economy. Nonetheless, as the next section will argue, some of the barriers to youth employment in tourism, relate to characteristics of labour supply.

## Youth perceptions of tourism and hospitality employment

One of the areas where there appears to exist least contention with regard to youth employment in tourism is the generally low esteem in which tourism employment is held. The implications of this are of concern to educators (e.g. Jenkins, 2001) but also to employers and governments (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000). In fact, this is an area that tourism firms have begun to take notice of and act upon. In 2013 the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2013) published a study across three countries – China, the USA and the UK – into undergraduate perceptions of careers in tourism. The executive summary begins thus:

There is pressing concern within the Travel & Tourism industry that companies are missing out on the best new talent due to negative perceptions of the career opportunities available in Travel and Tourism.

The results of the study in relation to perceptions of work in tourism were not as dire as might have been predicted based on other studies in this area, which we shall turn to in due course. The report suggests that overall the tourism industry is regarded as ‘reasonably attractive’ and that, presumably for those for whom this is not the case, it is ‘an industry that appears to be still poorly understood’. There are in fact many reasons why tourism employment might be particularly attractive to young people, but first we shall review the predominant theme, in the scholarly literature at least, of negative attitudes and perceptions towards employment in the sector.

Despite much literature on youth employment, and on employment in tourism more generally, relating to developed, western economies there is a growing body of literature that has sought to understand attitudes of young people outside these areas (e.g. Aksu and Köksal, 2005; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Roney and Oztin, 2007 in Turkey; Chang and Tse, 2012; Wan *et al.*, 2014 in Hong Kong and Macau respectively). In fact, in the sphere of tourism, Kusluvan and Kusluvan’s (2000) study of undergraduate tourism students’ perceptions provided the most developed, at that point certainly, attitude scale in this area. Kusluvan and Kusluvan propose that three groups of individuals’ attitudes towards tourism employment are generally investigated: secondary or high school students, tourism employees and university students. Much of the literature on the perceptions of tourism employment relates to university students, who present an accessible source of data to tourism academics.

One of the most discussed detractors from entering the sector is low levels of pay. This negative perception largely reflects reality, where graduate starting salaries have been compared across different sectors (e.g. Chang and

Tse, 2012). Richardson and Butler (2012), whose study of Malaysian tourism and hospitality students' attitudes towards careers in the sector looked at the importance of factors as well as the extent to which respondents believed the sector can provide for these, highlighted the following areas where perceptions were weakest (see also Chapter 6, page 151, for a further discussion of this paper):

- A job that can easily be combined with parenthood,
- A good starting salary,
- A reasonable workload,
- High earnings over the length of a career
- Good promotion prospects.

According to this study, low earnings both now and in the future stand out as one of the weaker aspects of tourism employment. Low pay was also a concern for a cohort of Turkish students in Aksu and Köksal's (2005:440) study where 78.3% of respondents disagreed with the statement: 'I think that the salary for most tourism jobs is sufficient to lead a satisfactory life'. A study of tourism and hospitality students in Macau (Wan *et al.*, 2014) confirmed the importance of salary expectations in determining career intentions. Barron *et al.* (2007) conducted focus groups with predominantly Scottish hospitality students who also commented negatively on pay, particularly given the tough nature of much hospitality work. It is not solely about low pay in absolute terms, but low pay relative to the nature of employment. Again, this was something picked up on by Aksu and Köksal (2005:440) where 78% of students agreed with the statement: 'Considering the long working hours and work load, salaries are low in the tourism industry'.

Another major barrier to recruitment, as well as continued rather than temporary employment in the sector, is the perceived lack of career development opportunities. Although 'opportunities for advancement' are consistently ranked highly in surveys of tourism students' career preferences, Peters' (2005) research of apprentices in tourism SMEs in the Tyrol region of the Alps indicated their dissatisfaction with career progression opportunities. Young people's concerns over the absence of career development opportunities have been recognised in a number of further studies such as those by Chuang *et al.* (2007), Richardson and Butler (2012) and Hjalager and Andersen (2000).

Part of this recurring theme lies in the fact that many tourism firms are simply not large enough to offer much progression up the so-called corporate ladder. Tourism SMEs can however provide more autonomy and responsibility than large firms, at least in early stages of employment (Walmsley *et al.*,