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Determining Levels of Youth Employment

Aims of the chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a baseline understanding of the scope of youth employment in tourism and hospitality. The chapter begins by defining youth employment in tourism and hospitality. Following the provision of the commonly accepted statistical definition of youth as it applies to labour markets, attention turns to the concept of youth employment whereby it will become apparent that what counts as youth employment will depend on societal context. The chapter then returns to the measurement of tourism employment and some of the difficulties associated with this, which have implications for understanding youth employment in the sector. Key statistics relating to youth employment in tourism and hospitality are then presented and discussed, drawing on governmental and non-governmental data.

Youth and employment as social constructs

Although frequently encountered in the media, the concept of youth employment, as opposed to the term 'youth employment', is in all likelihood rarely given much attention. Because this is a book on youth employment in tourism and hospitality, but also because reflection on the concept itself reveals a number of intriguing perspectives, a review of the meanings inherent in what might appear to be a relatively innocuous term is both necessary and revealing.

In a statistical sense, defining youth employment is simply about operationalising the term, setting boundaries around the concepts of youth and employment to arrive at some meaningful way of its measurement. Commonly, youth in studies of labour markets and international statistics are thereby defined as anyone between the ages of 15-24 (see for example ILO, 2012). The boundaries of youth may be somewhat arbitrarily set, and yet they are necessarily clear even though most readers might balk at the upper age limit, expecting it to be lower, and possibly consider the lower age limit too high (this could simply reflect the author's prejudices of course). Possibly the age bracket is drawn too broad; the experiences and outlook of a fifteen year old are likely to differ considerably to that of a twenty-four year old (Heggli, 2001). It is unlikely there will ever be unanimous agreement on where youth begins and where it ends.

The boundaries delimiting employment, or work, from non-work are not as straightforward as establishing age. To begin with, not all societies even accept the concept of work. As Godelier (1980:831) reminds us '...the notion of work is by no means common to all cultures or ages'. Freyssenet (1999) reviews the role and development of the construct of work in modern society. His analysis also underscores just how complex work as a concept is; a concept constantly undergoing change:

- Work is often regarded as an obvious necessity of the human condition.
- Work is not only central because it provides the material and immaterial resources necessary to live, it is becoming the manifestation of human activities itself.
- However, for some work is no longer – if it ever was – the only source of wealth and is no longer central to their lives.
- Work as it is frequently understood today relates to the emergence of the labour relationship and the 'free worker' selling her or his work capability.
- However, the labour contract is not an exchange between equals.
- Today, as in the past, it is impossible to give a substantive definition to work, i.e. to define it by the nature of the activities it is supposed to regroup or by their use.

Even in advanced economies, where work frequently assumes a dominant role in a person's life, delimiting work from non-work can be problematic. A common area of contention, for example, is domestic labour. As Grint (1991) has argued, virtually all of the chores undertaken at home can also take on the form of paid employment. This reiterates Freyssenet's (1999) view in that an

activity itself is not sufficient to determine whether it is work or not. Guiding a group of friends on an ascent of a mountain is, in terms of the physical activity itself, the same as guiding a group of tourists up the same mountain; a perceived difference may lie in the monetary remuneration of the latter activity. The distinction between work and non-work, based on monetary remuneration alone may also be found wanting however. For Grint (1991) the fact that work is frequently regarded as paid employment says as much about the centrality of paid employment in modern societies as it does about the intrinsic nature of work.

The debate is not purely academic. If we exclude unremunerated activities from an analysis of tourism employment, we would be casting aside swathes of workers and work in the sector. Drawing on unpaid family support is widespread practice in many tourism and hospitality firms. Young people in particular can often be found *helping out* in the family business. In many developing countries the reliance on unpaid family support is the norm. This kind of informal work is crucial to the survival of many tourism businesses (see also next section).

The relative clarity pertaining to statistical definitions of youth, in contrast to definitions of work or employment, may detract attention from what is also arguably a complex social construct. Foster (2013) reveals the importance of generation as discourse and by the same token it is possible to talk of a youth discourse. According to Purvis and Hunt (1993:485) discourses shape social relations, they provide 'a vehicle for thought', although they 'channel' more than they 'control'. Just as the concept of generation provides such a vehicle for thought, channelling the way people not only think but consequently act, so does a youth discourse connote certain thoughts and feelings, prejudices and understandings that permit a socially constructed notion of youth. Foster's (2013) investigation of generation as discourse among a cross-section of 52 Canadian citizens (all over 25 years of age) revealed the notion of *generation as an axis of difference*: participants of all ages understood generation to imply differences in attitudes towards work. Whereas the older generation lived to work, the younger generation worked to live. There was also agreement among participants that the younger generation had 'an overblown sense of entitlement' (Foster, 2013:200). These attitudes may prejudice employers when it comes to hiring young people as well as the way young people are treated in the workplace. The consideration of youth as a social construct is far more than just a mental exercise therefore. The discourse particularly around youth has very real practical consequences in both individual and societal terms.