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Conclusion

This aim of this book was to establish a baseline of information on youth employment in tourism and hospitality, as well as to review the nature and determinants of youth employment in the sector. In doing so it has covered a broad body of literature and, on occasion, been quite critical in the process, notably in relation to educational policy but also in relation to working conditions. Notwithstanding the critique, the text seeks to offer a conciliatory tone and acknowledges that many young people go on to find extremely satisfying careers in the sector. As examples throughout have demonstrated, being a responsible employer and being successful are not mutually exclusive – far from it. Ultimately, ensuring young people are offered meaningful work, which tourism is well placed to do, is in everyone’s interest, from key stakeholders such as young people and the business community, to policy makers, and educational institutions, as well as to wider society who all suffer the effects of high rates of youth unemployment.

The absence of any substantive text in this area to date is surprising for a number of reasons, not least because of the widespread acknowledgement of the sector’s reliance on frequently marginalised groups including young people. Moreover, given the continued concerns about youth unemployment in both developed and developing economies, as well as tourism’s ability to provide avenues into employment, the surprise is even more justifiable. There is some evidence of a growing concern with issues relating to youth employment in the sector and this text is indicative of this increased awareness. This final chapter draws together key themes that have arisen within the text, summarising what we know but also reviewing ongoing dilemmas surrounding youth employment in tourism of which plenty exist.

At the outset it can be concluded that data on youth employment are still found wanting. In fact the same could be said for data on tourism employment more generally. What Wanhill (1992:78) stipulated over twenty years ago in relation to the availability of tourism statistics: ‘compared to other human activity tourism is not well served in terms of published statistics’ certainly still holds true for tourism employment. Ladkin (2011) shares this view, claiming

that one explanation for the relatively scarce research in the area of tourism labour is a lack of reliable employment data. Official statistics in advanced economies suggest youth employment in tourism, defined as employment by those aged 15-24, hovers at around 20 percent but can vary quite considerably from one country to the next. Non-governmental statistics frequently offer a higher proportion of youth employment in tourism, often between 30-35% (and sometimes even higher than this). Effectively, the figure will vary depending on which definition or proxy for tourism is used as well as the prevalence of informal employment in tourism (the assumption here is that youth are disproportionately affected by informal employment). What data exist suggest youth employment is particularly elevated in certain sub-sectors of hospitality (e.g. bars) but lower in others (e.g. campsites and short-stay accommodation). When speaking of a rate of youth employment in tourism these distinctions and 'data difficulties' should be borne in mind.

Global levels of youth unemployment remain stubbornly high. Being unemployed can have deep-seated and long term negative implications for the individual and for society. Doyle (2003:336) writes: 'The sad fact is that our earliest, often least-considered decisions can determine the rest of our lives, and each generation has to learn this anew'. While undoubtedly true, this presumes a degree of personal agency but in many instances young individuals have very limited agency as there are few alternatives to choose from. Levels of youth employment in tourism are determined by a host of factors, not least wider economic circumstances. An example was provided where, based on recent economic data, an inverse relationship was established between general levels of unemployment and levels of youth employment in tourism. A possible explanation was offered that suggested with rising levels of unemployment, those who might traditionally not have sought employment in tourism (i.e. non-youth) then turn to tourism as a quasi refuge sector (a similar argument in relation to economic change in Hungary has previously been made by Szivas and Riley, 1999).

Upon a challenging economic backdrop tourism and hospitality can offer a vital source of work for youth. The kind of employment presented by the sector varies greatly, from permanent, full-time positions offering rapid career development to short-term, precarious forms of employment with limited career prospects. Even this latter type of employment can prove beneficial for some youth however who are struggling to obtain any form of work and, by implication, work experience. Whether used as a stepping stone into other forms of employment subsequently, or as a source of sustained employment

in the sector, tourism will continue to play a role in many youth's career development.

This sanguine view should not detract from a variety of dilemmas relating to youth employment in tourism. Poor working conditions and limited career opportunities are two main areas of concern. It is all too easy to extoll the virtues of tourism employment whereby in reality many youth are trapped in 'dead end' jobs with limited career prospects. Today, many youth are caught in a vicious cycle of periods of unemployment and precarious short-term employment. Employers are in a powerful position where demand for jobs is so great that low pay and poor working conditions are simply tolerated because there are few alternatives. A move towards a more responsible tourism sector is of course to be welcomed and yet the employment perspective seems to be regularly side-lined. Labour standards as stipulated by the ILO along with its Decent Work agenda are moves in the right direction but ongoing reports of employment malpractices demonstrate there is still some way to go to ensure workers' rights are not simply overlooked. It is worth noting that examples of enlightened human resource management practices can be found in many large tourism firms, but equally, there are many large employers who are shirking their responsibilities towards their employees. Poor working conditions are not restricted to small and medium-sized tourism organisations and moreover, while generalisations about youth employment in the sector need to be made, there is a danger that we overlook the specific. This would impoverish understanding of what is arguably a fascinating precisely because complex, at times seemingly contradictory, phenomenon.

A case in point is youth employment in tourism in developing countries. It was noted that not only are official data on youth employment lacking, but the majority of academic studies of employment in the sector relate to advanced economies. This can be explained on the basis of data access issues but it does not remove the need to acknowledge that what holds true for advanced economies may not necessarily hold true elsewhere. The review has provided some evidence that tourism in developing countries is frequently regarded more favourably than other alternatives, particularly where the other alternative relates to physically demanding, low-paid agricultural work. In many developing countries tourism provides an important route out of poverty, offers relatively decent working conditions and work that is on par with other available alternatives in terms of esteem.

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