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Making career decisions in a changing graduate labour market: A Hospitality perspective

Stefanos Nachmias^{a,*}, Andreas Walmsley^b^a Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK^b School of Tourism & Hospitality, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK

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ABSTRACT

The study seeks to understand how prospective hospitality graduates tackle the career decision-making task. In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 undergraduate hospitality students in the UK. The findings highlight the challenging nature of career decisions within the context of a changing graduate labour market. The adoption of a qualitative method, coupled with career decision-making theory has resulted in a study that gives a voice to the key participants in the education-to-work transition, the students themselves. These insights will enable higher education, policy makers and employers to assist students in their quest for employment.

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1. Introduction

Given the increasing focus on employability in higher education (HE) (Knight & Mantz, 2013; Wilton, 2011), in industry (Branine, 2008; Westhead & Matlay, 2005) and in public policy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011), we argue an enhanced understanding of hospitality students' career decision-making is timely. However, the factors influencing graduate career decision-making are complex, and the process itself is characterised by unpredictability and instability (Baruch, 2008; Hart & Barratt, 2009). Despite the existence of numerous studies that touch upon hospitality students' career decisions (e.g. Chang & Tse, 2015; Damonte & Vaden, 1987; Jenkins, 2001; Knutson, 1987, 1989; Laker & Gregory, 1989; McCleary & Weaver, 1988; Pittaway & Thedham, 2005), the empirical evidence base lacks depth in terms of how career decisions are in fact made; the vast majority of previous studies having focused on attitudes and preferences. To address this gap, the study explores how hospitality students' career decisions are formed and investigates factors that influence the decision-making process.

Hospitality students are now more concerned about their careers due to the ongoing challenging labour markets, particularly for youth, found in many countries (Choi, Kwon, & Kim, 2013). For many students, obtaining a satisfying career is the main reason for pursuing a university degree (Docherty & Fernandez, 2014; Fidgeon, 2010). However, the complexity of the graduate labour market can present a significant challenge for students to negotiate as they find themselves approaching graduation (Docherty & Fernandez, 2014; Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009; Connor & Shaw, 2008). Changes in the structure in the composition of graduate labour supply and in the diversity of occupations that graduates subsequently enter upon graduation have necessitated readjustment between HE and graduate employment (Baruch, 2008; Dredge et al., 2013;

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: stefanos.nachmias@ntu.ac.uk (S. Nachmias).

Gallagher, 2013; Green et al., 2009; Hart & Barratt, 2009; HEFCE, 2012; Wilton, 2011). It is upon this backdrop that the study seeks to provide a theoretical foundation that might effectuate a smoother transition from HE to career, an issue that is of continued concern (O'Regan, 2010; Tomlinson, 2007).

Identifying the processes of career decision-making and antecedents of career decisions is key to employers, educators and policy-makers in crafting appropriate employability strategies and facilitating the transition into satisfying employment. It is important to advance our comprehension of this crucial time in graduates' careers. While the study draws on a UK context, in an increasingly globalised world, the changes witnessed in the UK are not unique to it.

In setting out this study, we initially discuss hospitality careers literature specifically, and then draw upon literature in the field of career decision-making. After explaining the methodological aspects of the study, the findings are presented and evaluated leading to implications for future research and policy-makers alike.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Hospitality students' career decisions

Although, various studies have explored hospitality students' career decisions (see for example, Chuang & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2010; Chuang, Goh, Stout, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins, 2001; Kim, McCleary, & Kaufman, 2010; Richardson, 2009), it is an area where many questions still remain unanswered. For example, some studies suggest that hospitality students are driven by intrinsic rewards (e.g. interaction with people, nature of the work) (Chuang & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2010), whereas others suggest it is primarily by extrinsic rewards (e.g. pay, career progression) (Kim et al., 2010). However, these studies are in favour of surveys with little space to make sense of hospitality students' perception towards career decision-making. This is important as career decisions represents a significant challenge for students approaching graduation. The graduate labour market is characterised by considerable flux and change as concerns exist about students' ability in making the transition from student to employee (Docherty & Fernandez, 2014; UKCES, 2013).

There is a growing body of literature suggesting the 'graduatisation' of non-traditional jobs, i.e. jobs that were previously typically not held by graduates are now increasingly being filled by graduates (Connor & Shaw, 2008; Walmsley, Thomas, & Jameson, 2006). The 'graduatisation' of jobs is what DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) explain as the phenomenon where graduates find employment in areas where financial rewards and qualifications are often to be less than expected. Frequently, non-graduate jobs are being transformed into graduate positions (Connor & Shaw, 2008). This is because the supply of the 'traditional' graduate job (long-term, linear career progression that exists solely in large organisations either as a result of graduate training schemes or by direct entry into functional positions) is far lower than the demand for this type of employment from graduates now entering the labour market (King, Pemberton & Burke, 2005; Rowley & Purcell, 2001). For example, HESA (2012) data show that only 24% of graduates went into graduate-commensurate hospitality management roles upon graduation.

There is a growing attention on non-traditional graduate employment (Connor & Shaw, 2008; Knight & Mantz, 2013; Wilton, 2011) where considerable importance is attached to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Connor & Shaw, 2008; Hart & Barratt, 2009). However, it has been argued that hospitality students tend to hold less favourable attitudes towards SME employment than towards large organisations (Jenkins, 2001; Nachmias, Paddison, & Mortimer, 2014; Pittaway & Thedham, 2005). Part of the reluctance is down to graduates' lack of awareness of SME employment opportunities (Belfield, 1999), lack of an attractive salary and long-term career prospects (Nachmias et al., 2014), and students' socialisation towards large organisation employment within their studies (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). In fact, HE plays a critical role in preparing students for entering the 'world of work' (Kroger, 2004; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). The literature argues that hospitality higher education is heavily weighted towards large graduate recruiters and undervalues SME graduate employment (Doherty et al., 2001).

The general preference for large firm employment, moreover in traditional graduate positions, stands in contrast with the realities of the supply of jobs (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). The UK Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey, and as reported in the Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) report on hospitality management education, found that graduates were more likely to be in a graduate job if they were in a SME than if they were employed by a large organisation (Walmsley, 2011). It is therefore quite possible that the hospitality graduate misperceives the nature of many forms of large firm employment, attributing to these the characteristics of graduate training schemes with managerial connotations. Such observation raises questions as to how different factors are important determinants in forming hospitality students' career decisions. Looking at existing studies it appears that little effort has been made to generate insights into the complexity of the career decision-making processes in hospitality. Therefore, understanding this process becomes an important element for this study.

2.2. Career decision-making process

We now turn to literature in the area of career decision-making. We need to preface this with the caveat that only a cursory glance can be provided here of what constitutes a vast body of literature going back at least as far as Parson's (1909) guidelines on choosing a vocation. Nonetheless, as many studies of hospitality students' and/or graduates' career decision-

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