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Tourism workforce research: A review, taxonomy and agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical review, purview and future view of 'workforce' research. We argue that the tourism (and hospitality) workforce research domain, beyond being neglected relative to its importance, suffers from piecemeal approaches at topic, analytical, theoretical and methods levels. We adopt a three-tiered macro, meso and micro level framework into which we map the five pervasive themes from our systematic review across a 10 year period (2005–2014). A critique of the literature, following a 'representations' narrative, culminates in the development of a tourism workforce taxonomy, which we propose should provide the starting point for a pathway to guide the advancement of a more holistic approach to tourism workforce knowledge development.

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Introduction

Tourism relies intrinsically on those who work directly in, or impart influence on, its various sectors. Notwithstanding the impact of technology and technology substitution within the workplace, tourism organisations depend largely on the labour-intensive inputs of their workforce. Consequently, tourism jobs which, to varying degrees, depend on location and the nature of the business, have an important role to play in driving economic and employment growth. Yet, the workforce is widely cited

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as a neglected research domain (Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009; Baum, 2007, 2015; Baum & Szivas, 2008; Ladkin, 2011; Solnet, Nickson, Robinson, Kralj, & Baum, 2014).

The argument for neglect is reinforced by reference to classifications of tourism topics addressed in the published literature—Ballantyne et al. (2009), for example, identify 20 themes in tourism research, of which only one (Education) has partial overlap with our field of concern here, the workforce. Likewise, Cheng, Li, Petrick, and O'Leary's (2011) study classifies tourism research (in this context inclusive of hospitality) into 29 'subjects' none of which can be linked directly to the workforce with the exception, again, of Education. It is probable that workforce themes have been subsumed into classifications such as 'Hotel and Restaurant Administration' and 'Management and Administration' which hardly does justice to our area of interest, given that themes such as 'Literature', 'Agriculture' and 'Medicine' merit separate categories.

In this paper we set about qualifying this contention of neglect by positing the reason as partially due to the complexity and heterogeneity of the tourism industry (Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010). There are perceptions of the sector and its workforce that are both entrenched and well-reported, addressing characteristics of employment across tourism's sectors, for example low entry barriers, mobility, seasonality, and challenging working conditions. These seemingly intractable perceptions may well have dampened the appetite for research, led to fatigue in the sense that no obvious 'solutions' have emerged from much of the research and, as a consequence, have resulted in a general ambivalence regarding persistent workforce issues (cf. Iverson & Deery, 1997).

We will argue and substantiate the case that these factors have culminated in three structural research issues in need of attention. First, because much prior empirical research conducted in this domain has been at the organisational and managerial level, there is a risk that the body of work fails to position itself within the wider social, political and economic context or schema of tourism research and, as such, could be adjudged to make a limited contribution to the consolidated advancement of the tourism workforce narrative. Such studies frequently have, as their underlying objective, the desire to 'solve' a perceived 'problem' rather than to explain a phenomenon (e.g., Terry, 2014). Similarly, more often than not such articles are limited to human resource *management* research. As such there is until now no consolidated and comprehensive thematic review of the wider tourism workforce area, although a number of papers review sub-categories of tourism issues. Second, as characterised by a number of such review articles (e.g., Davidson, McPhail, & Barry, 2011; Deery & Jago, 2015; King, Funk, & Wilkins, 2011; Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, & Buyruk, 2010; Lucas & Deery, 2004; Ryan, 2015; Singh, Hu, & Roehl, 2007; Tracey, 2014; Woods, 1999) much of the extant work is categorized as 'hospitality' to the neglect of a wider tourism context. And thirdly, those articles that have attempted to scope tourism employment more broadly have done so largely thematically, or 'atheoretically' (e.g., Baum, 2007, 2015; Ladkin, 2011), without sufficient critique of the underpinning assumptions inherent (or absent) in the literature. In undertaking this discussion, we acknowledge that the term 'workforce' itself is largely absent in the tourism literature. 'Workforce' has much wider currency in relation to other sectors such as health (see for example, Kirch, Henderson, & Dill, 2012). However it may be that other discipline and context research areas view the workforce 'resource' and the language associated with it in a slightly different way and with differing terminologies. Our use seeks to accommodate a breadth that other available terms (such as the more widely employed 'human resource management') do not afford.

This paper reconciles the disparate 'component parts' of the tourism workforce or employment domain, to include, *inter alia*, the industry's labour process; human capital policy and planning and labour markets; industrial and employee relations; education, training and the development of talent; service delivery; organisational and occupational cultures, and many others—under the unifying nomenclature of 'workforce'. As suggested above, these themes are frequently bundled together under what is, arguably, the somewhat lazy umbrella of human resource management (or HRM) which implies a particularly nuanced perspective on tourism work and the roles that are played within it. As we will explain later in this paper, we consider 'workforce' to be a far more inclusive and, from a labour process perspective, rather more neutral concept. In adopting this approach, hitherto neglected interrelationships between these component parts can be identified and gaps prised open.

Specifically, the aims and, concomitantly, the structure of this paper are to: define and clarify workforce research in tourism and propose a unifying definition and model, that incorporates its

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