Towards understanding the experiences of students working on zero-hour contracts in hospitality

Policy Brief

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Introduction

This document presents findings from a study conducted at the University of Lincoln by Dr Agnieszka Rydzik into the employment experiences of students working on zero-hour contracts in UK hospitality. It draws on 44 interviews with student-workers and discusses key policy implications and recommendations. Understanding experiences of hospitality work from the student-worker perspective can bring rich and novel insights useful for a range of stakeholders. This is important in the context of wider pressures on young adults around employability, youth underemployment, a competitive graduate market and the mental health crisis. Through understanding the challenges student-workers face, the sector and employers can begin to consider how to better integrate this worker group to realise mutual benefits, and help address the key recruitment and retention challenges hospitality employers face post-Brexit.

Background

- Youth labour markets are increasingly insecure and there is a sharp increase in young workers on zero-hours contracts.

- University students increasingly work while studying.

- The hospitality sector is known for continuous skills and labour shortages, high staff turnover and issues with staff retention. These have been exacerbated by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to Brexit, the supply of migrant workforce has diminished significantly, and the sector is seeking solutions to these pressing challenges.

- Hospitality is considered one of the most attractive and accessible sectors for students due to its flexibility.

- Few in-depth studies exist on student-workers' lived experiences of engaging in zero-hour hospitality work, a knowledge gap this study addresses. Existing research focuses on the impact of work on students' academic performance rather than students' working lives and experiences of work.

- Gaining deeper understanding of the experiences of student-workers on zero-hour contracts in hospitality and the tensions involved in navigating the education-work nexus can inform broader efforts to alleviate the insecurities student-workers face on both organisational and societal levels, and ultimately improve worker retention and performance.

Findings

- Students are attracted to hospitality due to its flexibile working hours that facilitate combining work and study. Hospitality is seen as a much more flexible employment choice than retail work.

- Students mainly work in front-of-house customer-facing roles (receptionist, waiting staff, bar staff, barista) and report acquiring a range of transferable skills (customer service, communication, teamwork etc.) which they see relevant for their future career.

- While some students work 12-15h, many work over 20-30 hours per week, and report that this impacts on their university performance and general wellbeing.

- Working while studying is seen by students as a necessity rather than choice. While the general perception is that students work for 'pocket money', student-workers in the study work to cover their living costs, as government and family support is insufficient. Work is thus seen as essential for enabling students to maintain their aspirations for social mobility, and jobs in the hospitality sector make this possible.

- Students often worked in hospitality before they started university and were not new to the industry. Some had more than five years' experience in the industry and of multiple workplaces. Many started working as adolescents and carried on throughout their education. Therefore, hospitality workplaces plays a significant role in introducing young people to work.

- One of the key issues is the need for flexibility as well as stability of income. The vast majority of student-workers report stress around scheduling. Many feel pressurised to accept all shifts offered and feel they have limited voice in shaping their schedule. Others experience anxiety around instability of income as shifts are distributed based on business-demand (e.g. shifts cancelled last minute, workers sent home early). Flexibility is thus largely employer-driven. Some of the positive accounts, where scheduling is done in collaboration with student-workers, show that this can be positively negotiated and managed.

- Hospitality working practices often make students feel easily replaceable and disposable. Students have a perception of competing with other students for jobs, which intensifies feelings of anxiety and instability.

- Students report issues of high staff turnover. Change of employment is prompted by poor working conditions and management practices.

- Relations with employers/managers are key to work satisfaction. Student-workers feel under-valued by managers, find themselves excluded from social events,

treated as transient and temporary rather than as team members, which impacts on their commitment to the employer. Students have a need for acknowledgment and recognition of their contribution, and this has implications for retention and commitment. Where student-workers feel valued and acknowledged, they stay longer and are keen to go the extra mile.

- Most student-workers receive training on the job (e.g. by shadowing other workers). They express willingness for more training and development opportunities beyond the limitations of the role. Such opportunities are appreciated by student-workers who feel recognised and invested in.

- Many students, in particular female students, feel employers do not prepare them well for dealing with difficult customers (drunk customers, anti-social behaviour, sexual harassment was common) and would like more support and training.

- While many students do not plan to work in hospitality long-term, some do see themselves staying in the industry beyond graduation, particularly when their employers offer career development opportunities. Many students see hospitality work as a stepping stone or as a back-up plan. High staff turnover, limited development opportunities and poor working conditions are key factors discouraging students from staying longer-term in hospitality.

Policy implications and recommendations

Hospitality jobs are often the first ever jobs for many young people, and thus shape future generations of workers in broader ways than generally appreciated. Hospitality workplaces act as socialisation spaces for the youth, influencing their work identity development and perception of working realities. It is thus important to ensure that these experiences are positive for young workers, which in turn will also have beneficial implications for the local hospitality sector and other employers in the local area.

Employers

- Student-workers experience specific challenges and require distinct HR approaches. Acknowledging these and building meaningful employment relations with student-workers can mitigate power asymmetries and reduce insecurities.

- In principle, zero-hour contracts could work for students. However, in practice, this depends on implementation by individual workplaces and managerial relations with student-workers. For employers hiring students, it is thus important to acknowledge the diverse needs of student-workers, their commitments beyond work and their need for flexibility, taking the needs of individual workers into account when scheduling. In particular, it is important to consider the existing flexible scheduling practices and how they are implicated in contributing to student insecurity, financial pressures, stress and adversely impacting on university performance. It is recommended that introducing more collaborative scheduling

that recognises the university responsibilities of student-workers can improve work satisfaction, reduce stress and enhance workers' commitment. Employers could also offer student-workers more possibilities for stable employment.

- Student-workers can bring valuable insights and contribution to hospitality workplaces. However, to maximise their contribution, student-workers need to be recognised as team members rather than just transient workers. Recognising the contribution of student-workers and showing confidence in their abilities can result in more beneficial collaboration, meaningful employment relations (going beyond the transactional) and in the longer-term may lead to changing perceptions of the industry and make hospitality careers more desirable.

- Providing formal training, mentoring and career development opportunities beyond the limitations of the role is hugely valued by student-workers and can help make the sector more attractive for young workers.

- Many students reported feeling unsafe at work. Having a clear policy around bullying and harassment at work, encouraging reporting of incidents, and providing tailored training to employees can help young workers deal with incidents at work and feel supported.

Policymakers, industry and worker unions:

- The findings show the need for practical interventions and policy responses to address insecuritisation of student-workers through opening debate into the terms under which student-workers are employed and the broader impact this can have. This would involve re-framing how student-workers' contributions are valued and re-evaluating the instrumental way the industry uses zero-hour contracts and the impact this has on workers.

- There is a need to recognise student-workers on zero-hour contracts as a distinct group, with specific needs and challenges, facing specific pressures that require a differentiated approach to integration into the workforce.

- With Brexit-induced labour shortages, student-workers could become more important, filling labour shortages in sectors such as retail and hospitality. Recognising the distinctiveness of this worker group and managing their development through HR initiatives can bring organisational benefits.

- A new approach is needed that welcomes and incorporates the lived experiences of student-workers and moves beyond seeing them as transient. Such an approach could take the sector forward in progressing with the commitment to achieve SDG8's decent work agenda and create more inclusive and secure environments for young workers.

- As the time students spend working in the hospitality sector spans across several years, their experiences can have a profound impact on identity formation and thus ought to form a bigger part of the future of work debate.

Universities and student unions:

- Universities need to recognise that increasingly students (particularly those in post-1992 institutions) work while studying and offer more support to equip student-workers with tools to deal with the messy realities of workplaces (e.g. coping with and reporting sexual harassment, negotiating work contracts).

- More collaboration is also needed with employers to understand their needs as well as the needs of students. Universities and student unions could play a larger role in supporting student-workers through working with employers.

- Further re-shaping of the employability agenda is also needed to encompass raising awareness of worker rights among students and developing students as critical, reflective and ethical employees and employers of the future.

- Universities have made limited attempts to support working students and there is scope to better facilitate the combination of work and study that meets the wellbeing and long-term interests of the students. In the era of universities seeking to develop 'employment-ready' individuals, a more critical approach is needed going beyond the discourse of skills and encouraging students to reflexively use their work experiences to critique power relations, uncover inequalities and develop agency.

Future agenda

To comprehensively address some of the employment-related challenges discussed above, there is a pressing need for all stakeholders (scholars, industry, employers, universities, unions and third sector organisations) to work collaboratively to create employment guidelines for the future of hospitality and tourism work, taking into account intersectional vulnerabilities (age, gender, race, nationality), decent work (e.g. addressing exploitative work practices and discriminatory cultures) as well as upcoming 'future of work' challenges to the sector from technological transformation, socio-economic challenges post-Brexit (e.g. staff shortages) and post the emergence of COVID-19.

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