A marriage of convenience: how employers and students working in hospitality view the employment relationship

Key words: student-employment, part-time, hospitality, casual work, employment synergy

Metadata

Claire Evans and Caroline Ritchie: Cardiff School of Management, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Llandaff Campus, Western Ave, Cardiff CF5 2YB

Hilary Drew and Felix Ritchie: Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY.

Claire Evans is a Chartered Accountant who previously worked in both public practise and in industry. At Cardiff Metropolitan University, Claire is one of the team lecturing on modules, which contribute towards gaining professional exam exemptions from a number of accounting bodies. Claire has a variety of research interests including gender, inequality and low pay.

Caroline Ritchie was a Reader in Hospitality in the Welsh Centre for Tourism Research at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Caroline's research interests include socio-cultural consumer behaviour in relation to food and beverages, wine consumption behaviours, hospitality and hospitality management issues, ethical behaviours.

Hilary Drew is Associate Head of Department for Partnerships and a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of the West of England. Hilary's research interests are broad and include wellbeing, international HRM and English for Academic Purposes. Together with Felix Ritchie, she has worked on a number of projects around low pay and is a qualitative researcher.

Felix Ritchie is Professor of Applied Economics whose research interests including the use, quality and accessibility of government data and labour economics, particularly low pay. Felix joined the University of the West of England after working in a range of jobs in the public and private sector in the UK and internationally. His work is inherently multidisciplinary, working with lawyers, computer scientists, statisticians, psychologists, criminologists, sociologists and HRM experts.

Statement of contribution

There is little UK research under ten years old on the casual employment of higher education (HE) students in the hospitality industry. The limited research available has largely: treated students and non-students homogenously, without highlighting student peculiar attributes; failed to identify employers' utilization of the different characteristics of the two groups; and/or focused on student casual employment in the general labour market. This study addresses the gap and has significant policy implications for hospitality as well as other industries with substantial student employment. This research shows: employers and HE students take a pragmatic symbiotic view of their relationship; employers are protective of their non-student workforce and an HE student workforce

can provide long-term stability. In both groups, the attributes are complementary and future leaders are nurtured. These results challenge some of the common assumptions about student employment within the hospitality industry, and of its perception as exploitative, long hours, low pay nature.

Highlights

- Student employees usually complement rather than compete with non-student employees
- Hospitality employers may take a protective view of their non-student workforce
- Employers and students view their relationship as one of mutuality and reciprocity
- Students can enhance job stability in a high turnover industry such as hospitality
- Student employment can enable nurturing of leadership and entrepreneurial talent

Abstract

Since the 1990s, the hospitality industry has been increasingly characterised by temporary and insecure forms of employment, a development, which has coincided with rising numbers of students seeking part-time employment. This provides increased job competition for non-students and would appear to be of primary benefit to the employer in terms of an enhanced labour pool.

This study reports the findings from seven semi-structured interviews with hospitality employers and six student focus groups (thirty-one participants) in South-West England and Wales. It suggests that hospitality employers manage students and non-students to complement each other, particularly with reference to working time preferences. There is evidence that employers pay more attention to the welfare and needs of non-student workers in order to protect their core of full-time and permanent part-time staff. However, when employing students, employers and students take a pragmatic commercial view of their symbiotic relationship and both parties report satisfaction with this arrangement. Employers also consider both student and non-students as potential leaders. Finally, the study shows that student-employees can, and frequently do, provide long-term commitment to employers, contradicting the usual view of student work as transitory within the hospitality industry.

1. Introduction

In the UK, between 1992 and 2019 the number of students aged 16-24 in full-time education and working increased from 611,000 to around 1.1m (ONS, 2021a). As well as there being more students, the removal of grants has meant that students in higher education (HE) are increasingly likely to search for casual work to finance their studies (Yorke and Thomas, 2003). Since the 1990s, these low-wage labour markets have been increasingly characterised by temporary and zero hours contracts.

Student workers are concentrated in a small number of industries, including hospitality, yet the impact of their employment has gone largely unrecognised in recent academic literature (Whittard et al, 2020). Hospitality represents 3% of GDP and 7% of employment (Hutton and Foley, 2021) yet few recent studies focus on the hospitality industry except Lashley (2013), a quantitative study of student characteristics, and Mooney (2016) and Mooney and Jameson (2018), qualitative studies on hospitality students' perceptions of their work. Gibbs' (2019) investigation into the significance

of the natural hospitality experience within the hospitality industry includes reference to, but does not focus significantly upon, either students or part-time work.

Insecure forms of employment, a key feature of the hospitality industry, have come under significant criticism (TUC 2021) as being beneficial for the employer (reduced payroll costs, increased flexibility) but detrimental to the employee (reduced ability to plan for caring or financial responsibilities). It would suggest that hospitality employers might find students more appealing than non-students: students may be more willing to accept low-paid, unpredictable work with unsocial hours as they believe that it is a temporary stage in their career (Lashley, 2013; Mooney and Jamieson, 2018; Gibbs, 2019). Students have a close relationship with hospitality; they reflect the customer demographic for many hospitality venues (Mooney, 2016), and live and work in large, growing urban environments, providing customers as well as staff (Lashley, 2013; Whittard et al, 2020). In addition, peak demand for part-time staff (evenings, weekends) fit round student schedules.

This study addresses this important gap in current understanding of the employment of HE students in hospitality. It also has implications for other industries, such as retail and call centres, which also are substantial student employers. By combining employer interviews with student focus groups, the study shows that

- Employers and HE students take a pragmatic contractual view of their symbiotic relationship
- In contrast, employers take a more familial, protective view of their core, non-student workforce
- An HE student workforce can provide long-term stability to hospitality employers
- Employers regard student and non-student employees as complimentary and support hospitality potential in both groups

The next section reviews how student employees are seen in the literature. Section 3 describes methods, and section 4 findings. Section 5 discusses the findings, and section 6 notes the limitations associated with the study. Section 7 concludes.

2. Background

The demand for youth labour has changed over the past three decades due to a decline in manufacturing and a rise in the service sector in the UK, which has resulted in employers' increased demand for non-standard forms of employment (Maguire and Maguire, 1997). This in turn has affected both the skill requirements and occupational profile of employment (Green et al, 2016). Historically, the service sector tended to attract older workers, primarily female, who use part-time work to fit around caring and domestic responsibilities (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990; Rubery, 1998). However, in the last two decades this type of employment has proven attractive to HE students as well (Canny, 2002; Whittard et al, 2020) leading to a significant increase in HE students engaged in part-time employment. The underlying reason for the increase in the supply of student labour has been largely attributed to changes in student finances (Watts and Pickering, 2000; Lashley, 2013). Various different reasons have been attributed to the increase in its demand by employers: McMullen (1995) and Curtis and Lucas (2001) suggested decreased costs compared to full time, permanent employees; Lucas and Ralston (1996) argued that students provide employers with a highly flexible workforce which is very useful in industries with unstable demand (Krakover, 2000: Walmsley, 2015).

The most common source of part-time employment for students is found in retailing and hospitality (Lashley 2005, 2013), industries where age profile is more important than educational background (Mooney, 2016). These are also industries which possess relatively low entry thresholds and the opportunities for unskilled positions (Milman, 1999); temporary and zero hours contracts are an additional key feature of both industries (IDR, 2018) and may be more acceptable to students than non-students (Whittard et al, 2020).

Feldman and Doerpinghaus (1992) and Whittard et al (2020) found evidence that employers distinguish between two distinct groups of part-time employees. One group is permanent part-time employees: individuals who choose to work part-time due to external circumstances. The second group, temporary part-time employees, are generally students, and saw their part-time work as a stopgap to earn money whilst completing their education (Mooney and Jameson, 2018). Sobaih et al (2011) suggested that this latter group was associated with lower organisational commitment, possibly due to their view of hospitality as low status, interim work, a perspective also held by school-leavers (Walmsley et al, 2020). However, as Johnson (1981) pointed out organisations dominated by a transient workforce will have a raised and costly staff turnover and risk losing high as well as low skilled staff.

Unlike other sectors such as retail, hospitality is dominated by micro-sized businesses; the median size of a UK hospitality business is under five employees (ONS 2021b). Therefore, the majority of hospitality businesses need their employees to demonstrate multi-faceted skills, which include good customer facing proficiency. As many authors (O'Connor, 2005; Ariffin, 2013; Gibbs, 2019) have pointed out, natural hospitableness and emotional intelligence skills underlie the ability to empathise and react appropriately, which is of great importance in developing customer loyalty and thus competitive advantage (Pine and Gilmour, 1999). Despite their lower organisational commitment Sobiah et al (2011), Lammont and Lucas (1999) and Canny (2002) found that students working part-time bring certain qualities to employment: intelligence, articulation, good communication, and training receptivity. These are traits valued in the hospitality industry to help co-create the triadic relationship necessary for an authentic enjoyable experience: employer, employees and customers (Lashley, 2013; Partington, 2017; Gibbs, 2019).

From a macro perspective, student labour is concentrated, uneven and has locally distinctive impacts (Green et al, 2016; Whittard et al, 2020). Students cluster in local areas and show a high degree of segregation from local populations (Munro et al, 2009). The spatial distribution of students can drive local economic growth and the creation of new jobs for the local labour force, including the low pay population (Drucker and Goldstein, 2007; Whittard et al, 2020). However, Green et al. (2016) and Whittard et al (2020) also point to increasing 'indirect' displacement of local labour by a growing and better educated student labour force. Indirect displacement occurs through the compartmentalising of the labour market, as students are able to influence employers to shape employment opportunities in line with their skill set. These new flexible roles, shaped by short-term aims are frequently considered to be at the expense of the longer-term aspirations of local workers; Lawrence (2004) identifies a similar process in agriculture. However, Whittard et al (2020) suggest an alternative hypothesis, based on Atkinson's (1984) work: due to their different characteristics and motivations, students complement the local workforce by taking on hard-to-fill jobs.. This implies a different employer-employee relationship for students and non- students, but not necessarily a worse one.

In summary, there is little UK research under ten years old on the casual employment of students. Three exceptions are Sobaih et al (2011); Lashley (2013) and Whittard et al, (2020). Sobiah et al (2011) primarily investigated differences in hospitality employer attitudes between full-time and part-time employees rather than students *per se*. Lashley (2013) provided extensive quantitative evidence on the characteristics of students (including motivation), but not employer perceptions. Whittard et al (2020) uncovered evidence that casual student employment enhances the employment experience of core permanent non-student employees, but the study's focus was the general labour market and employers' views only. This paper investigates the part-time student labour market by (1) focusing on hospitality, (2) considering how students and employers view their working relationship, (3) assessing the impact of part-time student employment on the non-student work force and (4) using student focus groups as well as employer interviews to reflect both sides of the employment equation.

3. Research Approach

Primary data was collected from employer interviews and student focus groups to assess the impact of student part-time employment on the hospitality industry, utilising a qualitative approach to uncover attitudes and beliefs. The qualitative research design aimed to generate rich in-depth data (Silverman, 2013), by providing opportunities for employers and students to reflect upon the nuances of their shared experiences.

The research was carried out in two city-regions, Cardiff and Bristol. Both city-regions comprise two cities (Cardiff/Newport, Bristol/Bath) with several universities in each and a high student share in the population. Additionally, both city-regions have similar financial profiles as measured by average gross value added, Cardiff being slightly below average and Bristol slightly above (ONS, 2018). No attempts were made to contrast locations, and results should be interpreted as pertinent to the individuals and location at the time the research was conducted.

Given the in-depth nature of the study - gaining nuanced understanding of the reasons, opinions and motivations of a particular sub-set of part time hospitality employees - a convenience and opportunity sampling strategy was followed which included two data collection phases. For comparative purposes, the same themes were investigated in both phases. In the first phase employers were initially contacted through physically visiting locations to identify potential respondents then snowballing techniques were engaged. Resulting from this, semi-structured interviews of up to 60 minutes were carried out with six hospitality employers and one hospitality recruitment agency. A mix of hospitality businesses was targeted:

- Nationwide hotel chain manager
- Manager for small hotel/restaurant chain (3 units)
- Boutique hotel/restaurant owner/manager (1 units)
- Director for medium-sized regional pub chain (50 managed units, 200 tenanted)
- Café owner/operator with attached own-product retail business (2 units)
- Manager, large (10,000 seat) multi-use corporate and entertainment venue
- Employment agency manager, catering recruitment specialist

To facilitate the semi-structured interviews, a list of indicative questions was sent in advance. This enabled the respondents to prepare and to understand the remit of the study to limit apprehension about engaging in conversations (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with permission from the respondents. Interviews with employers are indexed below

(E1, E2 etc. not necessarily the order listed above). Seven interviews were considered sufficient since, despite the wide range of businesses which the employers operated, saturation point was reached with regard to their attitudes and beliefs towards this particular sub-group of employees, a phenomenon also noted by both Gibbs (2019) and Minor (2018).

In the second phase, thirty-one students participated in a series of six focus groups from universities in both regions. Since students frequently discuss their part-time work with their peers, focus groups were considered to be a good arena for in-depth discussion to occur as naturally as is possible in an interview situation (Barbour and Schostak, 2005). To reduce potential power issues each focus group was administered by a researcher not connected to the university in which the focus group was held. Twenty-four participants currently worked in hospitality, others had in the past and one focus group was composed of students carrying out hospitality internships. Apart from the hospitality-based focus group, the participants were self-selecting; the only requirement was a current part-time job that they fitted around their academic studies. While, for pragmatic reasons, all student comments were included in the transcriptions of the focus groups only those comments relating to work in the hospitality industry either currently or previously were analysed for this paper. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed and individual identifiers removed. The reference below (FG1, FG2 etc.) are to focus groups, and not to individuals. Data collection ceased when saturation point was reached.

4. Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data: a symbiotic relationship between student and employer; the particular characteristics of student employees; and the question of how transient student employment in the hospitality industry really is. Within these major themes, some significant sub-headings emerged. This section is presented to reflect these findings.

It should be noted that although no restrictions were placed by the researchers on the types of hospitality work offered, the majority of the employers and student-employees discussed the use of student labour in customer-facing roles, particularly bar, waiting staff and stewarding: *'When we put out our job advertisements I would say 97-98% are students that apply for the bar roles or the steward roles'* (E4). The employers believed that these roles did not require significant technical skills, unlike back office or reception (E5) and felt that those skills required could be taught quickly; *'I could train you to make our cocktail menu within 2 hours'* (E6). This reflects Partington's (2017) view concerning the increasing value placed on soft skills, particularly in customer-facing jobs and explains why these are the primary employment roles discussed.

4.1 A symbiotic working relationship

Flexibility

There was a consensus that both student and non-student part-time employees were needed to complement the small, essential core of more technically skilled employees. Both parties recognised that the student-employee/employer relationship differed from the relationship with non-students and that the dynamics of this employment worked well for students, other employees and employers:

> *Our business is seasonal so it works really well with the student population […]So they* [local] *are more likely to come in full-time whereas the students will come in and just do evenings […] On a Saturday night we rely on our students heavily […] but we don't need them on a Monday morning. (E6)*

E1 confirmed:

> *you will have people that just come and work Saturday and Sunday to do breakfast and they are a student. So it's those little part time odd positions because it works well for students […] I think it gives me that flexibility. (E1)*

These observations were reflected in many of the comments made by other employers interviewed.

Cardiff and Bristol both have lively events and sports fixture scenes. Repeat events, such as Six Nations rugby in Cardiff and The Festival of Ideas in Bristol, require extra stewarding and hospitality staff in the venues themselves and in the local hotels, pubs and restaurants. This results in frequent short, high-demand periods often followed by periods of very limited hospitality need. In such situations, the student workforce is particularly relied upon:

> '*if the hotel suddenly gets busy because there is rugby in Cardiff […] we wouldn't intentionally select a student over a local worker but clearly if the students weren't here we would have a smaller pool to recruit from'* (E5).

This perspective was supported by E4: '*we have a very large pool of students […]* (after an in-person induction event) *[…] We will send an email out… in advance of an event booking in and say can you work this and we wait for emails to roll back in [...] If they can't work, they just don't email back which suits us*.' The system, also used by other employers, was simple and relied upon social media to communicate, a platform with which students were comfortable.

Similarly, all participating students recognised the benefits which casual work provided, the main one being flexibility. They could '*choose which shifts they work around their university […] They can rota on to do their contracted hours but part-time*' (FG5), whether working directly for a single employer or finding work via an agency: '*with my agency you pick up when you want the shifts, so it's up to you as a person'* (FG3). However, employers were clear that this flexibility had some boundaries, particularly for those employers looking for a part-time employee for a set number of hours per week. For example, E2 said that '*we don't have any zero hours contracts […] We will offer a minimum amount. I will always speak to them and ask them what they are looking for*'. E1 confirmed this: '*you advertise clearly number of hours, what the shifts are and it's always a permanent contract*'.

The students were aware that being offered work hours around their university studies gave the employers capacity to demonstrate flexibility to the core employees: '*so you have students who can work weekends or Wednesdays or Thursday evenings or whatever […] I think it encourages flexible working hours for the full-time people as well*' (FG3). However, they were also aware that some of the shifts they were given were long and at times many would consider anti-social '*they were 9 hour shifts, so they would be from 3 o'clock to midnight which could be easy for us'* (FG3). They also confirmed that those who had a set number of contracted weekly hours could vary them, if mutually agreed. Additionally, the students highlighted an interesting advantage of their type of employment contract; they had negotiated the right to work flexibly around their academic commitments '*with an* [full-time] *employee, they have to request time off, it's not always*

guaranteed unless you book it off in advance' (FG5). The positive impact on their work-life balance was highly valued.

Protected

Both employers and students were aware that the full-time core employees were protected from unpredictable work patterns in different ways to part-time student-employees. Indeed, the student-employees felt that this protection was justified and some expressed a view that '*their full-time, more permanent staff, you know, they* [employers] *should value them more and make sure they get what they want and then just give whatever else to the students'* (FG4). A more common view was that there were *'more shifts for the full-time person'* (FG3) implying that, beyond the terms of their contracted hours, the needs of the permanent staff were considered above those of the students. This was not necessarily a negative view, more a pragmatic reflection of reality: '*I think students, they were quite good at filling in the gaps'* (FG2) *'so the people that want to work full-time generally can get what* [shifts] *they want'* (FG4).

From the employers' perspective there was recognition that the use of a flexible student workforce enabled employers to reward core staff, particularly with time off at busy periods: '*they can get a weekend evening off […] give them a bank holiday off for a change*' (E7). This would enhance loyalty and nurture feelings of allegiance to the company: *'I am a big believer in Richard Branson's ethic, which is you train a person so that they are qualified enough to leave but you treat them well enough that they don't want to'* (E7). In addition, in an industry where demand fluctuates significantly, they were acutely aware that their loyal core workforce needed a regular number of hours and a predictable income *'to survive, to be able to pay their bills'* (E3) whereas most students had lower financial needs which they were happy to accommodate around their academic imperatives.

Positive work environment

Following the traditionally accepted view, Lashley, amongst others (Lashley, 2005; Lashley, 2017, Gustafsson et al, 2006), has written consistently about hospitality employers' focus on financial goals; enhancing profits and reducing wage bills rather than retaining staff. However, in this study all employers were keen to emphasise that a positive work environment was essential to support employees' genuine happiness that is reflected in the positivity shown to customers. The enhanced hospitality experience, encourages customers to spend more and to return (Pine and Gilmour, 1999; Partington, 2017; Gibbs, 2019): *'we try to make it a nice workplace to encourage people to stay which is good for everyone'* (E2). Subconsciously reflecting O'Connor's' (2005) findings E7 commented that anyone *'can be taught to wait at table and to pull a pint of beer but if they don't have a personality and charisma to pull it off […] you can sense that and the customers can sense that as well*'. This can be very detrimental to the business '*especially when you are working in a competitive market*' (E7).

Where they found student-employees possessing these skills, employers sought to retain them; '*she was full-time and then she went to university and she stayed on on a casual basis'* likely to last the length of her course (E1). There was a desire to retain good staff where possible whilst accommodating the cyclical nature of the academic year: '*we want them to come back… If we treat people right, they come back in September/October'* (E5). The students generally acknowledged support from their managers; a member of FG4 saying that when she had worked particularly busy

shifts her manager '*will say you can come in later because you have had* [hard] *work for the last two days and you have uni as well, you can come in* [start] *later'*.

Mirroring

The employers believed that student workforce availability mirrored the demands of their businesses: '*our business is seasonal so it works really well with the student population*' (E6). E1 explaining:

> *I have got people who work weekends all year round. But in the summer time, my mid-week then gets even busier and I need more people. So it works because they* [students] *have finished their studies, they want some extra hours and it works. Then come September they want to drop back down and I want them to drop back down.* (E1)

In this quote, E1 wants to reduce staff numbers in September; in the previous section E5 wanted student-employees back in September. These comments are not contradictory; they simply reflect the differing needs of the diverse businesses in this study and Krakover's (2000) earlier work. They do emphasise the point made by all the employers: the importance of clarity of commitment at interview stage. Some students would remain in their university city over the summer to the benefit of some employers whilst others would go home – benefitting another type.

The employers acknowledged that this was not a perfect fit, with most confirming that Christmas was a particularly difficult time: '*you can utilise them but then they do finish about two weeks too early'* (E5). This leaves the employers to recruit from a potentially depleted pool – although hospitality employers in non-student cities are likely to benefit from the influx of trained available student staff returning home for Christmas. Whilst Whittard et al (2020) reported some large retail employers facilitating transfers between shop locations to accommodate Christmas holidays; this is not an option for hospitality, dominated by micro-businesses.

4.2 Characteristics of student workers

Universality of skills

The opportunity to work '*throughout the summer*' (FG1) and save money to finance the next term was important. This reflects an important part of the student cycle: in university cities, the students studying locally return to their homes and are replaced by students studying in other cities. The student-employees retained the same characteristics that made them attractive to employers whether they were working in their university or home city. For E6, whose company employed sixth form school students in appropriate areas, such as waiting or glass collecting, a student-employee was both one who studied in Cardiff and worked during the term time, and one who '*would work for us in the summer and are studying away. When they come home, we will have some of them for 3 years*'.

Attitudes to work and study

Some students felt they were just treated as extra bodies to fill in gaps in shifts '*because* [the employers believe] *that we just want the money and we are easy'* (FG4), but many others agreed with the employers that '*they can choose which shifts they work around their university*' (FG5). Employers recognised that their main commitment was to their studies; however, they also identified that '*those who really like the job […] they become loyal staff'* (E4) with no difference

between student and non-student. This was in direct contrast to those students who were seen to be just there to earn money '*to work but they don't want to sweat'* (E7); for them '*it would be time to go*' (E7) and the employment would cease.

Both employers and student-employees were clear that the students' main priority was academic study. The employers were well aware of this difference in attitudes between students and non-students: '*a non-student is more about a career and progression the majority of the time whereas a student is more about just a bit of money, a stop gap kind of thing*' (E1).

Even where a student was considered to perform better and stay for longer than the average non-student, employers noted that the academic workload still took priority and they had to accommodate this or risk losing a valued employee. For example, *'3rd year students with regards to their dissertation'* (E4) might cancel their shifts with short notice. In addition, students sometimes had their university timetables changed unexpectedly, *'I did apply for the job [...] because we were free on Thursdays but then it got moved around'* (FG4). The students acknowledged that most employers were understanding and *'when there is a big workload or a deadline or exams or even if you have to cancel last minute because of something university related, they are a lot more flexible with changing shift*' (FG3). While recognising that they expected (and received) flexibility from employers, the students pointed out that they '*do weekends or evening shifts around uni*' (FG3); since these are usually the peak times in hospitality and this availability was particularly useful to employers.

Accidental hospitality workers

Whilst many students, not enrolled on a hospitality programme of study, viewed the casual hospitality work as a job rather than future career, some employers shared their experiences of those who had unintentionally become permanent hospitality workers. Several employers noted that they often encountered part-time student employees who seemed '*a bit lost*' (E5) after graduation but were enjoying their hospitality work:

> *she studied* [arts subject] *which I suppose, is less of an obvious career that it leads to…that's a good example of somebody I retained […] (she)wanted to work, dedicate herself to something and really that's what I look for (E1)*

E6 commented that some part-time student-employees were promoted into full-time assistant managers after the students had graduated without a significant career plan. Interestingly, once the student moved from casual to permanent member of staff, they became '*more switched on, a little bit more focussed*' (E6).

This nurturing of student talent may have its roots in, and reflect, the manner in which many of the employers found themselves working in hospitality. Of the seven employers interviewed only one had not worked in hospitality as a young adult; two had progressed within hospitality without gaining higher education qualifications and two had studied subjects other than hospitality before pursuing a career within it. Such origins made employers aware that many of those who developed long-term careers in hospitality started as casual employees, finding the work environment appealing. This reflects the employment profile of Gibbs' (2019) interviewees, which suggests that casual work in the hospitality industry awakens the nascent skills of the 'natural host', developing innate hospitableness and future micro hospitality business entrepreneurs. It further reflects the importance that employers put upon what they called people skills, but which academics tend to

classify as empathy, natural hospitableness and emotional intelligence (e.g. O'Connor, 2005; Ariffin, 2013; Gibbs, 2019).

Training

Initial comments from both employers and students concurred there was little difference between the quantity of training offered to students and non-students. E5 stated 'the *training calendar runs throughout the year regardless of when somebody is working for us*'; comments from the student focus groups agreed that they '*get the same training opportunities as other people in my job role'* (FG2). This may be because much hospitality training is undertaken to meet legally required thresholds: kitchen health, safety and hygiene, the sale of alcohol etc.

However, further investigation suggests that the undifferentiated training tends to be on-line and at a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level. So, when the Employment Agency stated that it provided '*the unskilled* (kitchen staff) *we do a free level1 for them [….] it covers due diligence*' this referenced a basic on-line NVQ in food hygiene such as that offered by the Royal Society for Public Health. E3 confirmed this behaviour: '*there is a lot of training you can do online now and you can pay 50p per person per month*'. More advanced training and in-person courses were offered predominantly to full-time staff, as they were more expensive. Employers performed a cost-benefit analysis where the perceived transient nature of the student-employees meant that the value derived from the training would not cover the cost. One employer suggested that training a part-time member of staff (e.g. 24 hours per week) on a permanent contract might be as beneficial as someone on 40 hours, but not for anyone on less.

Interestingly both employers and students agreed that, although training was available, the students rarely took advantage beyond that which was legally required or imposed by the employer. Students were aware of the opportunities but '*it's just that I haven't had time to take it up*' (FG2). As E7 commented, the online training was available to all but '*they have to want to do it. I generally find that the students don't unless it's something they are interested* [in]'. Students often cited study commitments as a barrier to training; but they also admitted that the perceived temporary nature of their employment did not motivate them to engage; '*if I am being completely honest because you know, you have less attachment to the job role than someone in the same full-time position*' (FG1). Interestingly, this did not reflect any overall negative attitude towards their part-time work.

Pay

The general lack of distinction between student and non-student part-time workers was reflected in pay scales. Ethics and morale were two reasons given for this: '*it's the same job almost regardless of whether you are part-time or full-time. I expect the same from everyone*' (E2). Another reason was administrative ease: '(flat rate pay is) *a decision we have made, we have looked at the unit, the cost attached to kind of differentiating, the cost was so minimal for us that it was easier*' (E5). Where employers did pay a differential rate, it was at age 25 (the National Living Wage (NLW) at time of research), which excluded most students.

Students however, perceived themselves as being paid less: *'the older you are the more you get paid'* (FG2). The student-employees appeared unaware that they were benefitting from non-differentiation below the NLW. In addition, several commented that it was '*mostly people who are full-time* (who) *get the pay rise*' (FG3). Rather than different pay scales, this more likely reflects

employers' preference (Sobiah et al. 2011) for promoting full-time employees over part-time employees.

4.3 Transience brings stability

Both parties regarded student employment in the hospitality industry as transient; '*There is no longevity. We know it's a short-term game for both parties*' (E6). Student-employees and employers found that hospitality work satisfied the immediate short-term needs of both: a readily available pool of labour for the employer and a source of money for the employee. Many of the students recognised that a career in hospitality was not a long-term aspiration of theirs '*it's just giving me the experience of working with people but not the experience to go into the field I want to*' (FG3). Interestingly, even those students who were enrolled on a hospitality degree, still believed their current employment was temporary, '*it's giving me the experience and skills that I need but I can't see myself staying with the company*' (FG3). Some employers shared this view '*I have never experienced anyone personally myself being a* [hospitality] *student graduated and then stayed on in the* [same] *hotel*' (E1). This may have been because, while studying, all were employed at a casual level; but having graduated they would expect to be employed at graduate level: '*I wouldn't mind starting at the bottom, like maybe as a supervisor role because, I mean, I graduate with a degree*' (FG5). Since most hospitality businesses are micro businesses, those hospitality students intending to pursue a career in the industry would need to search for a larger organisation offering graduate training schemes. However, many of the students did recognise that working in hospitality provided them with additional skills that they could apply to future careers, *'communication, punctuality, time management, sort of very big transferable skills*' (FG1) as well as *'work under pressure and all that*' (FG3). Employers also held this view.

In contrast to much previous work, this study suggests that, despite the temporary nature of their employment, student-employees may be contributing to long-term stability of employment in an industry which traditionally accepts very high turnover rates (Johnson, 1981; Lashley, 2005); E6 confirmed the view that '*our work is very transitional. As a young chef I wouldn't spend a year with anyone or more than a year*'. However, E1 identified similar retention rates between full and part-time staff '*there's not much difference*. Reflecting the majority view of the employers, E1 commented that '*while a student, they tend to stay the length of their studies* […] *if they are happy*'; E5 added to this view of longevity by suggesting that '*a "short space of time" could be 3 to 5 years*' depending upon the students' course of study. This consensus suggests that while academic focus may create a lack of career motivation in the job *per se* it may also lead to a reduced willingness to move jobs, especially if the student is content with their work environment. Employers were aware of the importance of this '*because to me a happy team is a productive team*' (E7).

5. Discussion

The interviews with both employers and students showed a significant degree of agreement around the value that students brought and received from the employment relationship and the nature of the relationship was clear to both. Students were employed largely for their flexibility and a willingness to work unsocial hours. This reflects much of the research from twenty years ago (e.g. Lammont and Lucas, 1999; Curtis and Lucas, 2001; Canny, 2002); it suggests that despite all the other labour market changes, students are still regarded as a source of relatively cheap, flexible labour. Mooney's (2016) finding, that 'Generation X' (non-student) employees were less likely to accept

antisocial working hours than their predecessors were, potentially increases the value of student flexibility

Both students and employers concurred that the motivations of students were different from non-students. The students reported relatively neutral attitudes towards the work they undertook, acknowledging that while it may not have been the place or type of work they would seek in their future careers it did bring in income to support their studies and that it was developing many useful transferable skills. This attitude was apparent even amongst those students studying for a career in hospitality; Lashley (2013) and Mooney and Jameson (2018) show that a poor work environment experienced during study can dissuade students from pursuing that career and Walmsley (2015) that a positive experience can change career trajectories.

Students' priority was study, and their availability was strongly determined by this and academic term times. As a result, they wanted flexibility in any employment they undertook. Although workers and employers often differ in their perceptions and interpretations regarding the terms of employment (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2002), some degree of mutuality or shared understanding is essential for the parties to achieve their interdependent goals (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004). As Whittard et al (2020) note, managers are increasingly likely to have worked as students themselves. In this study, all the managers repeatedly commented on their understanding of the students' situation, demonstrated by their acceptance of the employment flexibility required by students. Employers saw it as the cost of flexible labour but also as a method of retaining good employees. Additionally, they acknowledged that without the students they would have a much smaller pool of local casual labour to draw upon. Both sides confirmed that it was essential that they approach the relationship with an 'eyes open' honesty.

This did not mean that employers disregarded their non-student work force; quite the contrary. The employers were well aware of the importance of their core employees (Johnson, 1981) and positively sought to retain them and their skills. Employers believed, for example, that their student-employees did not need the work financially to the extent of their core employees, primarily because of lesser family commitments; therefore, students were more expendable when demand was lower. An awareness of staff personal circumstances was previously highlighted by Tomasella and Ali (2019), who argued that the small scale of most hospitality businesses heightened the importance of the owner's personal values. Moreover, and in direct contrast to Lashley (2017), both Gibbs (2019) and Tomasella and Ali (2019) support the employers' views that contented staff directly improve finances in terms of reduced turnover and positive reputation. This duality of the hospitality labour force reflects the work of Whittard et al (2020), who argued that students complement rather than compete with non-student labour.

The key finding of this study however relates to the longevity of employment, its nature and the potential to develop future managers in the context of university cities. In order to retain a student employee, the employer had to appreciate the students' academic demands and to work alongside the student cycle. However, both employers and students agreed that, if happy in the place of work, the student might stay there for the entirety of their course of study which could last up to 5 years; a term longer than many core employees. Whilst both employers and student-employees were conscious of the overall transient nature of the employment, the employers pragmatically and paradoxically also recognised that student employment could bring employee stability to their businesses. This nuance of the employment relationship has not been identified in earlier research (e.g. Barron and Anastasiadou, 2009; Mooney, 2016) which only saw the temporary nature of

student employment. However, it is supported by Lashley (2013) who found clear statistical evidence that 'students tend to be quite stable employees' (p7) although he did not consider the implications of this stability to be applicable to the hospitality industry overall.

This study suggests that if complete openness about the requirements of the employment exists, the flexible needs of the student could complement the unpredictable fluidity of many hospitality businesses, enhance the atmosphere of the business and the experience of the customers and identify future potential managers. Therefore, in many instances a positive symbiotic relationship provided mutual benefits for employer and student-employee, challenging the negative image of the hospitality industry often depicted (Partington, 2017).

6. Limitations of the study

This was a small qualitative study investigating the complexity of student employment within the hospitality industry in the UK. Whilst the findings have identified several previously unacknowledged key issues which would benefit from further exploration in a larger study able to cluster multiple responses for differing types of organisations.

The interviews were done at a time of a growing labour market (2018/2019). Re-interviewing in an economic downturn could show a greater willingness from employers to sacrifice paternalism for flexibility. This is an important consideration for different labour market conditions. Whittard et al (2020) noted that data on a wider employer sample was collected at a time of labour market tightness, and speculated whether the 'complementarity' they identified would survive a downturn. The complementarity identified here, reflecting the time-sensitive nature of the hospitality industry, is perhaps less likely to be affected by a general overall lowering in demand.

The interviews and focus groups were all carried out pre-pandemic. The pandemic disproportionately affected the hospitality industry and while some workers were eligible for furlough payments, these are most likely to have been the core permanent staff. In addition, as most courses went online many students returned home where they could live more economically. It is unclear what the long-term impact of the pandemic has for student workers and the relationship between hospitality employees and employers.

7. Conclusion

This study has found that employers and students view the employment relationship as one of mutuality and reciprocity: students provide employers with flexible staffing options, while employers provide employment which suits students' work-life balance. This allows the student to prioritise their academic workload and the employer can protect their non-student core work force who require a regular income and predictable hours.

Therefore, the employment of students appears to complement the needs of other groups of full and part-time employees particularly in respect of working times and short-hours contracts reflecting often unpredictable and fast changing demand. Employers are aware of the merits and drawbacks of employing students, and are effective at exploiting differences in the labour force available to them, managing different groups of employees to the advantage of the business.

There is clear evidence these views are reflected in operating practices. Employers feel responsible for their core permanent staff, which is at odds with the usual negative criticism directed at flexible employment contracts dominating the current UK economy. This illustrates that flexible

employment is more nuanced in hospitality than a simple compete-or-die model; and it contrasts with, for example, the winner-takes-all model in agricultural work (Lawrence, 2004). One reason for this may be that hospitality involves a host of legal requirements to work in a kitchen, on the door, or serving alcohol: a good relationship with a core of trained staff, including students, is more profitable for the business.

This study suggests that, for an industry troubled by an exploitative employment image, the use of student-employees supports a positive environment for nurturing leadership and entrepreneurial talent. Despite the small sample size involved in the study, the overwhelming agreement as to the retention and development of future managers suggests this as an area that would benefit from further study. This study also shows that the emphasis in much academic research discussing the long hours, low pay and hard work frequently fails to note that the fluidity and flexibility of the hospitality environment often creates a very positive working environment. This suggests a further area for research, into how to better promote the positive aspects of working within the hospitality industry.

Finally, this study also challenges another commonly accepted view of student-employees in hospitality, that they are opportunistic, transient and create workforce instability. The findings clearly show that where the student finds a positive work environment they may well stay for the length of their studies, often a longer period than that of core employees suggesting a final area for further research. Although this study is UK-centred, the same demand and supply factors are present in other countries; therefore, other researchers should be encouraged to review local effects elsewhere.

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