

Good Migration Paper

‘Global Welcome? Migrant workers, service cultures, tourist places’ An exploration of the welcome provided to and by hospitality migrant workers in the South Lakes in 2009

Paper presented to the Good Migration conference, Carlisle Racecourse, 26th May 2010.
Viv Cuthill, Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University.

Introduction

I am going to present some of the results of a one year project I carried out last year, looking at hospitality migrant workers (people working in hotels, restaurants, cafes, bars, B&Bs and so on) in the South Lakes and Scottish Highlands. I was based in the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University and the project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, entitled: Global Welcome? Migrant workers, service cultures, tourist places.

OHP 2

This was a qualitative research project and my overall aim was to conduct a socio-cultural analysis of the welcome provided *to* and *by* migrant workers employed in hospitality venues in rural tourist places, exploring how the mobilities of an international service sector workforce are influencing perceptions of migration, service and place.

Views were sought from migrant workers, employers, and co-workers from Feb – Dec 2009, and I am just in the process of writing up final reports now. In Cumbria I carried out 18 preliminary interviews with key informants; I conducted 12 taped interviews with individual migrant workers and 7 interviews with migrant workers and co-workers in a case study venue; and carried out a focus group with employers via the Lakes Hospitality Association

The study was conducted in consultation with a steering group. Cumbria Tourism and Migrant Workers North West were the Cumbria representatives, and we agreed the focus of my Cumbria study should be Windermere, Ambleside, and the South Lakes.

One of my research strands related to examining perceptions of place and the concept of ‘local distinctiveness’, therefore I focussed on workers in hospitality venues promoting this feature, and did not look at ethnic restaurants.

Today I will focus on some of the results from the South Lakes and briefly summarise the following:

OHP 3

Background to the study
Motivations and opinions of migrant workers
Experiences and opinions of employers

Other factors to take into account

Background to the study

The arrival of increased numbers of Central and Eastern European A8 accession state workers into the UK since 2004 has drawn much attention from policy-makers and the media. However, with the exception of a few academic studies, migrant workers in the hospitality sector have attracted less attention. This is surprising, given that the British Hospitality Association claims that hospitality work is the first point of entry and likely to employ more migrant workers than any other sector (BHA, 2008).

People immediately assume with this project that I must be focussing on workers from Eastern and Central Europe. However, as there is little evidence of the mix of nationalities working in the hospitality sector in either of my case study regions, I actually wanted to speak to a range of people and reflect the mix of nationalities that were working in the sector in 2009, so I've spoken to people from all over the world. In Cumbria I have interviewed people from: Poland, Spain, South Africa, Germany, New Zealand, China, Jamaica, South Korea, In addition to those nationalities, employers have confirmed that they employed people from: Slovakia, the Phillipines, Japan, Hungary, France and other countries.

Writing in 1997, the hospitality sociologist Roy Wood observes: “.. it is clear that hospitality work is largely exploitative, degrading, poorly paid, unpleasant, insecure, and taken as a last resort because it can be tolerated in light of wider social and economic commitments and constraints”. In what is perceived as a quite notorious sector in terms of employment, I was interested to find out about the experiences of migrant workers in rural tourist places. In fact, I have encountered a distinct lack of expressed dissatisfaction about the sector, and about migrant workers in general, which I will tell you more about later.

It is difficult to recruit hospitality staff, especially British staff, in rural areas, so the hospitality sector is competing to attract an international workforce. Hospitality is a very volatile, fast-moving, quick-witted sector that is affected by and has to immediately react to local and international threats to business performance, and changes in the external environment. A migrant workforce suits the needs of the sector in many ways, and has done for many years. But with accession state workers arriving since 2004, change in migration policy, and the new challenges created, it's interesting to see how the sector reacts.

Cumbria Tourism estimated in 2008 that between 5,000 and 10,000 or the 22,000 people working in tourism in Cumbria were migrant workers. Whilst it must be noted that some employers do not recruit any migrant workers, estimates from employers put the number of hospitality migrant workers in Cumbria at 50-60% of the workforce in 2009.

OHP 4 Motivations and opinions of migrant workers

There are a range of motivations for overseas workers working in the sector. Wood (1997) noted that migrant workers enter the sector because hospitality work pays better than home and may provide better career opportunities; some come to learn or improve their English; others come because of the desire to travel. From my research, I don't think, in general, that these motivations have changed greatly.

Many work in hospitality because of the desire to travel, to learn English, or because hospitality work pays better than work at home, and because working with people of different nationalities is 'fun'. Length of stay varies with motivation and may be from three weeks to five years and upwards. Most did not actively seek hospitality work in rural tourist places, but arrived for a variety of reasons, including, importantly, friends and family networks. Migrant respondents in Cumbria were aged between 18 and 36.

I have developed a typology to categorise the mobilities and motivations of hospitality workers that encompasses:

OHP 5

Global Drifters

I've spoken to Global Drifters from Canada, South America, Australia, Old and New Europe. They drift from place to place and / or job to job, and sometimes from relationship to relationship. Their total travel time is undetermined. They'll stay in a place as long as it suits them, and may stay extended periods in a country to enable them to get citizenship and a passport, so they have at least dual nationality, to enable further global travel.

New European Adventurers

I'm not sure if 'New Europe' is the best term. When I talk of 'new Europe' I'm thinking of citizens of Eastern and Central European countries, but I wanted to find a vocabulary that takes us away from stereotypical views of these workers. I think there is a sub-conscious tendency to view all workers from ECE countries as economic migrants, or to perceive them as inexperienced travellers. I have found that: a. Some are here to travel and learn English, b. Some are here for money and a better life, c. Some are here because family and friends are here and they thought they'd come and join in. There is some boomerang activity in this category, with people returning home for a few months and then heading back over here, often to the same employer and job.

Students

These are not just young people, but mature students as well, and they fall into several categories. a. summer holiday students from overseas, b. overseas students in UK, c. semi-drop outs from education, d. placement students. Generally they're not British. Many Eastern and Central European students come back to work in the same place in the summer every year- to save up to pay their study fees back home.

Hospitality Careerists

This is a tiny category – I met very few. But certainly chefs want to come to the UK to gain catering experience to improve their employment prospects back home, especially in international hotel chains. They may be here for a short stay, an extended stay, or increasingly on a visa restricted stay. I've met chefs from China, Jamaica and Kenya (it's estimated there are currently 20 Jamaican chefs in the S Lakes). Some have built relationships here, others bring their families over.

Old European (recession-induced) Self-Improvers

Given the current economic climate, I met people from Spain, and also France, who were here to work and to either learn English from scratch or improve their English to improve their job prospects back home. I met a Spanish airline pilot working in housekeeping in a hotel in Windermere, attending language classes on Wednesdays in Ambleside and all day at Kendal College on a Friday. He intended to stay until his English was fluent, then he could apply for jobs with international airlines.

International Seasonal Career Boomerangs

People in this category follow the summer seasons in the southern and northern hemispheres. I met a South African beautician who worked in hotels in S Africa in the summer there, then did the same in the Lakes in our summer.

Settlers and Semi-Settlers

I met people of several different nationalities, who had fallen in love either with locals or other international travellers, and to stay on in the country they were working in hospitality, as hospitality is an easy rural job option. Also there are people who are enjoying the work and living here, but there's a pull of family and home but maybe not for 10 years or so. Also the prohibitive cost of buying accommodation in rural areas might cause them to go home.

Volunteers

This is a category I did not expect to encounter in the hospitality sector, but for people who are unable to get visas / work permits for the UK, and who really want to come here to learn English, volunteering is an option. I spoke to a S. Korean law student who was volunteering in hospitality work.

Brits

The British people working in hospitality are owners, managers, supervisors, head chefs, people who've been resident in rural areas for some time and work in hospitality either as career, or an extra job, and some young people who are students, but usually only if they have family or friendship connections to the venue or area. People do these jobs to stay in countryside.

Recruitment

People access jobs via dedicated websites such as Gum Tree, the Job Centre or by applying directly to employers. Many followed friends or family members when a job came up, or replaced friends who were moving on. Others needed to get out of the city, because they'd run out of money. Others paid agencies to go to a city and ended up in the countryside.

Working conditions

Migrant Workers North West specifically wanted me to ask about pay, hours, terms and conditions as they have no such concrete information on the hospitality sector. Everyone I interviewed was at least on minimum wage, averaging a 40 hour week, paid overtime when working over 40 hours and had 2 days off per week. Respondents were generally content. There were some grumbles about levels of pay, but an acceptance that that was the pay in the sector. Some people weren't even aware of their pay rate per hour and said they weren't bothered. Time after time, people said it was 'fun' to work in hospitality with a mix of people from all over the world and that's what made it interesting, and kept them there.

Training and Development

Staff training was on-the-job and delivered by other staff. In the Lakes workers had to find out about and arrange and pay for their language learning on their own. Migrant workers expressed dissatisfaction when shifts did not enable them to attend language classes provided by Learning Plus in Ambleside or by Kendal College.

Rural Places

Working in rural places, everyone praised the beauty of the landscape, the fact you can walk out into the hills and be instantly alone and peaceful, the safety of the area, friendliness, and the fact that you're recognised every time you walk down the street. They even overcame revulsion to the weather and the long winters. Also they managed to save money in the countryside, due to accommodation and food packages usually provided with jobs, and the lack of things to spend money on. So it was a way to save up to move on, save up for studies, or to send money back home. Even people who initially found places too quiet, found themselves drawn back to work there. Time after time respondents described the tourist places they were working as cosmopolitan places. However, at times, and for certain respondents, working in rural areas was also very isolating.

All respondents found rural areas expensive for shopping for basic provisions, bus fares were seen to be extremely expensive, as was accommodation, if they had to arrange their own. In staff accommodation workers were concerned about having comfortable beds and access to the internet.

Support for Migrant Workers

The networks of workers in the hospitality sector in rural areas are strong, even if you're new to the area. People often arrive through friends and family networks, and move around via friendship recommendations. Nationality groups support each other and pass on information and advice. If workers don't like their conditions, accommodation, or rate of pay, they move on, they let each other know about vacancies, not just locally and nationally but also internationally. They're very mobile. Employees generally seem very self-sufficient, and unaware of support services that may be on offer.

One thing all the interviewees agreed is that they would not class themselves as migrant workers – some had not heard the term and had never engaged with it; for others it was a term to react against and reject; others just thought of themselves as travellers or workers, or 'a local for as long as I live here'.

OHP 6 - Experiences and opinions of employers

From the employers perspective, Wood (1997) noted that employers are willing to employ migrant staff because it's difficult to find resident workers willing to work for the wage on offer; overseas staff are more likely / willing to work long hours and more likely to work shifts and weekends; employers think they're more docile and work harder. From my research this sums up the current situation to a certain extent, but not quite.

Employers admire the high educational level of overseas employees, their work ethic, honesty, reliability, loyalty, interest and knowledge of current affairs, and their commitment to self-improvement. Overseas workers currently employed have high levels of cultural capital in comparison to local workers available to work, which is a bonus for employers, especially in frontline staff. Turnover is notoriously high in the sector, but staff retention for those employers who gave me figures is high when you have migrant workers in the workforce.

Young British workers, not long-established or mature staff, have been described variously as disastrous and unreliable. Employers tell tales of young British people who, in their opinion, don't know how to dress appropriately, behave, and interact, who have been into drink and drugs and don't turn up for shifts. They tell of the Job Centre sending 10 people for a job, and how the 9 young British people make it perfectly clear they don't want to be there and don't want the job, so the one overseas worker gets the job.

Recruitment

Managers have developed continually evolving systems for recruiting workers at-a-distance. They prefer to by-pass agencies wherever possible, and recruit using either friends and family recommendations, website or specific magazine recruitment followed up by email contact, receiving CVs direct followed by e-mail contact, and sometimes a phone call. Generally one person in the organisation is responsible for engaging with government migration policy and ensuring they are meeting their legal requirements.

Workplace conditions

In the workplace, employers have learned to employ a mix of nationalities across departments, to ensure good working relations and to prevent nationality cliques. Managers felt that working in multicultural teams led to intercultural awareness. There are strict rules about spoken English in the workplace – front of house and back of house - so people don't feel left out. If you're not fluent in English, as a female you tend to end up in housekeeping, as a male you become a kitchen porter. Ideally employers provide board and accommodation.

Staff Development

There is certainly evidence that workers who've been in a post over a period of time who started in junior positions, often not fluent in English, have risen through the ranks and are now chefs, restaurant managers, and deputy managers.

Other factors to take into account

While a seemingly positive picture has emerged from my official interviews, in rural areas, everyone knows everyone else in the sector and what's going on. Employers have told me about bad practice that they disapprove of off the record, and employees have told me about other people they know who've had a bad time. Issues that I haven't got recorded during my official interviews, but that I know about are, for example:

Being paid at minimum wage for a 40 hour week, but working 60-80 hours without being paid overtime.

In rural areas when accommodation is part of the job package, if you speak out, and stand up to your employer, you don't just lose your job. I've heard tales of people losing their job / income / accommodation and being out on the street on the same day. But equally I've heard of employers who immediately took them into their staff accommodation until a job came up.

I've spoken to employees who felt there was discrimination between people who speak English as a first language, and those who don't, and when not just your working life, but your home life is all in the same place twenty four hours a day, this can be quite unpleasant.

Conclusions

For hospitality migrant workers in rural tourist places in the Lakes, positive experiences seemingly outweighing negative ones in the workplace. There is a complex relationship between tourism, work and migration in the flows of hospitality migrant workers. For many it would seem that working in hospitality is a form of extended tourist experience, with pay, and the profile of workers from overseas is more varied than might be anticipated.

In rural areas, I'm concluding that in the main, employers have learned how to provide just enough to attract a migrant worker. Migrant workers are vital to the hospitality sector in the Lakes and employers have to behave competitively in order to retain them. The hospitality sector is a fast-moving reactive sector that benefits from the type of worker that wants to travel and learn English. The typically negative features of working in the hospitality sector, such as casual labour, seasonality, flexible working, temporary contracts and lack of unionisation take on a new dimension and seem to fit with the demands of many travelling workers.

For more information please contact Viv Cuthill: v.cuthill@virgin.net

Website: www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/globalwelcome