



# Invisible until they're gone

## 'Keystone' occupations for sustainable visitor experiences

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### Abstract

Authentic and unique hospitality, tourism, events and culinary experiences form a crucial part of visitors and travellers' enjoyment and positive evaluation of a destination. This paper explores some of the workforce issues associated with creating authentic and unique visitor experiences. It highlights two essential components of providing positive visitor experiences - infrastructure, and a skilled tourism workforce. We introduce the emerging concept of 'keystone occupations'. Using cases from across the Tasman we show how destinations depend on these critical occupations, especially as their skills are vital to fully functional infrastructure in mobilizing visitor experiences.

### Keywords

HTEC, labour and skills crisis, destination, keystone occupations

## Introduction

Engaging in authentic and unique experiences form a crucial part of visitors and travellers' enjoyment and positive evaluation of a tourist destination. Successful engagement and genuine local encounters in unique locations significantly influences tourists' desire to return and capture new 'enchanted' experiences in the future (Alanzeh *et al.*, 2018). This is most challenging in the case of Australia, a long haul destination for nearly all its inbound markets and even more so regarding Aotearoa New Zealand, where visitors from overseas invest also considerable time and financial resources into travelling to a remote and geographically isolated country of 4 million inhabitants. Our paper examines some of the workforce issues associated with creating authentic and unique visitor experiences. First, it presents two essential elements for providing positive visitor experiences, infrastructure, and a skilled tourism workforce. Focusing particularly on remote or rural destinations, we utilise the emerging concept of 'keystone occupations' to indicate how significant the notion of a sustainable workforce is for tourism destinations. In turn we address infrastructure and the tourism workforce, then discuss the issues associated with both. Our context is regional Queensland Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in mid-2023, where the failure to provide both elements has had a detrimental effect on ability to provide valuable experiences for visitors, domestic and international.

## The tourism and hospitality labour force

Post pandemic, the tourism and hospitality sector has been in the grip of a labour and skills crisis, amplified by COVID-19 impacts (Baum *et al.*, 2020; Kwok, 2022). The majority of the sectoral employees were abruptly furloughed and former sector workers, most hourly paid with little job security, decided not to return to the industry (Horn, 2021). Due to a combination of factors, hospitality, tourism, events and culinary (HTEC) sectors across many developed economies are competing with other industries for talent. This talent, or workforce, is key to delivering experiences and sustainable futures - yet tourism workers' interests are ignored despite their crucial role in co-creating the guest-host experience (Mooney *et al.*, 2022). Strategies for attracting and retaining workers are highlighted in popular media, but they appear ad hoc, and many do not seem sustainable. For instance, the folly of the overreliance on migrant labour (cf Peterson & Smith, 2022) was laid bare by complex geo-politics as national borders reopened -or did not- following the relaxing of lockdowns. Similarly, targeting under-employed labour markets, such as disability, Indigenous, youth and women, is a resource-intensive exercise that the MSME-dominated HTEC sectors are ill-equipped to provide the requisite supports for - and run the risk of exacerbating the precarity of these often already vulnerable groups of workers (cf. Robinson *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, it is clear that poor pay and exploitative working practices (Williamson and Rasmussen, 2023; Robinson, Oren & Riordan, 2022) and lack of respect for the skills possessed by tourism and hospitality workers, mainly young people means that it is not considered an aspirational career choice (Auckland Tourism, Events and Economic Development and Tourism Industry Aotearoa, 2018; Mooney and Jameson, 2018). The extreme consequences in the 2022/2033 tourist season were withholding of perishable tourism experience products, for example, ocean experience day trips in Regional Queensland Australia (Trajkovich, 2022) and the closure of customer sections in

restaurants and withheld vacant hotel rooms due to lack of staff in Aotearoa New Zealand ('Staff shortages back in the spotlight as student workers return to university', 2023).

## Infrastructure and people

Many prized and unique tourism locations in Aotearoa are in remote areas or not easy to access via land. Extreme weather events such as earthquakes and cyclones have had a devastating effect on Aotearoa New Zealand North Island tourism destinations, such as Hawkes Bay, home of orchard and vineyard agritourism businesses and the Coromandel, a prime holiday destination for Aucklanders. Landslides and floods destroyed key highways and swept away bridges leaving tourism dependent communities inaccessible and without livelihoods (Cropp, 2023). However, tourism infrastructure is not just about sealed roads, airports or railway lines, some elements are also dependent on key highly skilled operators to allow them to function. Without them, tourists cannot access their 'experiences'. Regional Queensland is dependent on airline connectivity, which the major carriers retracted from amid-COVID losses to be replaced by smaller carriers, but even these are being withdrawn (Vistonay, 2023) citing low demand despite forecasted pilot and airline crew shortages (Klapper & Ruff-Stahl, 2019). In another example, Waiheke is a small island 30 minutes sailing time from Auckland and only reachable by ferry, private boat or helicopter. It is very popular with day and weekend trips from Auckland due to its proliferation of boutique wineries offering exceptional dining experiences in pristine native bush and hidden coastal location. However, during high tourist season in 2022 and 2023, tourist access to the island was severely disrupted by cancellations, reduced capacity and three hours queues for ferry seats due to the lack of trained ferry skippers (Smith, 2023; Auckland ferry woes: Cancellations, breakdowns, poor communications and anger at Fullers, 2023). Tourists reported queuing for lengthy periods and missing restaurant reservations and hotel bookings. Therefore, this paper introduces the novel concept of *tourism keystone occupations* to draw attention to occupations that although generally ubiquitous, and therefore invisible until absent, are of critical importance to tourism experiences.

## Keystone (or tourism gateway) occupations

This innovative concept of keystone tourism occupations proposes that certain 'in crisis' skills-shortage occupations are key for businesses, and subsequently destinations, to operate at capacity – and therefore should become a priority for active labour market policies (Solnet et al., 2014). While for some occupations, transferable skill sets can be mobilised in HTEC contexts for functional flexibility (cf Knox & Walsh, 2005), for specialist roles, these skill sets are not readily substitutable. Occupations such as revenue managers for hotels, sound and light technicians for events or tour guides for cultural eco-tourism destinations require a comprehensive technical expertise, legal knowledge and experience in pressure or high-risk situations. To compound matters, other industries also compete for skilled workers for these occupations – real estate for revenue managers, aged care for chefs, commercial shipping for skippers and so on.

## Discussion

Based on the initial findings of ongoing consultations with HTEC stakeholders in regional Australia and New Zealand by the paper authors, this paper proposes a strategic labour market policy

based on the innovative concept of 'keystone-occupations'. Chefs and managers roles for culinary/agritourism businesses, who are traditionally in short supply (Stokes, Hurren & Williams, 2017), provide a case in point. Social enterprises, such as cafes, theatres, or local artisan centres run by local groups are an integral part of the rural New Zealand experience (Grant, 2017) and Keen (2013) suggests that community involvement is crucial to create and sustain small tourism businesses. Yet, the right skills are essential, without skilled chefs and managers the business are unable to remain viable. Likewise, in the tribal tourism destination of Whakarewarewa destinations, skilled Māori tour guides (the indigenous people of New Zealand) with deep cultural roots in their ancestral land provide a vital connection between locals and tourists (Wikitera and Bremner, 2017). Yet, such tour guide jobs are seasonal and minimum wage.

The unit of analysis in tourism is usually the destination and many destinations are branded on a special visitor experience, for example marine experiences like whale watching (Lück and Porter, 2019), scuba diving (Musa and Dimmock, 2013) and coastal boating and recreation activities (Orams and Lück, 2014). For these destinations to function effectively, they require enough skippers for the boats to operate at peak capacity during a limited season. If the experience that attracts visitors (marine adventures) is not able to accommodate the visitors who wish to enjoy the experience, then not just that business but the whole destination, and all other operations, suffer from the loss of visitors. This has been amply illustrated by the skipper crisis for popular tourism destinations not just in Aotearoa but also on the other side of the Tasman, The Whitsundays. There, operators have been forced to reduce capacity by limiting the number of vessels operating and their bookable days (Osman, 2023). The restricted numbers of tourists coming to these destinations directly impacts auxiliary products and services such as accommodation, foodservice and retail.

## Conclusion

We recommend that that critical tourism keystone occupations are identified per tourism subsector. This should then form the basis of a central state data base, which plots qualification routes, numbers entering the occupation, attrition rates as well as the level of their concentration in specific types of enterprise. The data base is not to be confused with an Immigration Department's desirable skilled worker category. As noted earlier, some key occupations are not regarded as tourism specific roles, yet their absence can critically affect an entire tourism location. Hence to the notion of tourism keystone occupations.

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