

Does gender make a difference on career choices following hospitality placements?

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of gender on career decisions following hospitality placements. Although placements aim to encourage long-term employment in the industry, student retention remains a growing concern. Existing research shows limited exploration of whether gender influences this issue. This study analyses how hospitality placements affect male and female students' future career paths. Using a qualitative approach, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 female and 7 male hospitality management students. Findings support existing literature, highlighting a lack of structure and support during placements. However, results indicate that gender significantly influence placement experiences or decisions to leave the hospitality industry. These findings can inform the development of more effective placement programmes and highlight areas for future long-term research.

Keywords: placements, hospitality, management, gender, hospitality careers

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, hospitality careers did not require formal education; however, industry growth and professionalisation have increased the value of university degrees, with some roles now requiring minimum qualifications. As a result, placements and sandwich courses have become a key method for applying theory to practice, developing professional skills, and gaining insight into industry expectations (Jack et al., 2017). Placements also support the transition from education to employment, helping students identify skill gaps to address in their final year (Inceoglu, 2019; Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2013). Hirschi's (2012) career resource model highlights how placements build human, social, and psychological resources that support career development.

Despite these benefits, the effectiveness of hospitality placements requires further examination. Research by Lu and Alder (2009) found that 32% of hospitality graduates who completed placements intended to leave the industry, indicating shortcomings in placement design and support. Understanding which aspects of placements influence these decisions is vital to improving retention. Additionally, the hospitality industry continues to experience a gender imbalance. While women comprise over half of the workforce and the majority of hospitality students, they remain underrepresented in leadership roles (Ali et al., 2022; Neil, 2020). This study therefore explores whether gender influences placement experiences and post-placement career choices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Placements play a vital role in preparing students to be work-ready upon graduation (Nisbet et al., 2022). Two main models exist: the "thick" model, involving a year-long placement, and the "thin" model, consisting of multiple shorter placements throughout a degree (Ryan et al., 1996). Placements enhance academic learning by providing practical experience, particularly in hospitality, where soft skills such as communication, attitude, and enthusiasm are best developed through practice rather than classroom teaching. Drawing on social learning theory, students develop these skills by observing professionals in real work environments (Kitterlin-Lynch et al., 2015). Year-long placements expose students to workplace culture and, when supported by academic guidance, lead

to higher motivation and stronger career identity (Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2021; Wallace et al., 2009). They also benefit employers by allowing them to develop skilled and motivated future employees (Mooney and Jameson, 2018). Kolb's learning cycle highlights the importance of active experience and reflection, reinforcing the value of placements in achieving deep learning (Nyanjom et al., 2023). Despite these benefits, placements often lack structure. Many students are assigned repetitive, low-skilled tasks, creating a mismatch between expectations and reality. With only 51.3% of companies providing structured placement plans, poor experiences can reduce motivation and increase attrition from the hospitality industry (Donina, 2015; Pusiran et al., 2020).

Hospitality placements have both *positive and negative impacts* on students. When well-integrated into degree programmes, placements provide experiential learning, build confidence, and develop practical, managerial, and interpersonal skills valued by employers (Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2021). They help bridge the gap between theory and practice, improve employability, and encourage graduates to remain in the industry. However, poorly structured placements can lead to dissatisfaction, unmet expectations, and negative perceptions of hospitality careers. Many students report repetitive tasks, poor working conditions, and a lack of support, which can reduce motivation and prompt career changes. Overall, placement quality is critical in determining whether experiences positively or negatively influence career outcomes (Pusiran et al., 2020).

Career paths in the hospitality industry are influenced by family, education, community, social factors, and increasingly social media (Lee et al., 2019). Career development theory suggests individuals make informed choices once they understand available opportunities and how to achieve them (Hansen, 1976). Research identifies five graduate groups, with nearly half leaving the hospitality industry within five years of graduating (Smith et al., 2018). This high exit rate highlights ongoing workforce challenges and questions the effectiveness of placements. Career longevity in hospitality is shaped by progression opportunities, professional identity, meaningful work, and social belonging. Studies show that workplace relationships and a supportive social environment significantly influence retention (Brown et al., 2015). Hospitality careers are also characterised by frequent job movement, including "butterfly progression," where individuals move between roles or organisations to build skills and experience (Cassel et al., 2017).

Women remain underrepresented in leadership within the hospitality and tourism industry despite forming over half of the workforce. In 2019, women held only 23.6% of leadership roles, and significant gender pay gaps persist across the sector (Ali et al., 2022). The industry's high labour turnover and fast-paced nature demand resilient leadership, yet stereotypes portray leadership traits as masculine, limiting women's progression. For example, Marinakou and Karypi (2021) propose that horizontal and vertical job segregation further restricts women to lower-status, lower-paid roles with limited advancement. Although hospitality offers flexible work attractive to those with domestic responsibilities, this flexibility reinforces the "glass ceiling," as expectations of the "ideal worker" often conflict with women's roles (Gebbels et al., 2020). *Gender* inequality is also evident in placements, where women report bias, harassment, and microaggressions, negatively impacting confidence and career intentions (Bowen, 2020; La Lopa and Gong, 2020). These experiences contribute to women leaving both organisations and the industry, weakening workforce sustainability and long-term career development.

METHODS

Semi-structured interviews conducted either online or face-to-face. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form detailing the study and their right to withdraw, per

BU research ethics. Interviews consisted of about 18 questions and lasted 15–30 minutes. All interviews were recorded, anonymised using pseudonyms, transcribed, and the recordings subsequently deleted.

Purposive sampling was used as the primary method, enabling the researcher to select participants likely to provide the most relevant information. Snowball sampling was employed as a secondary method, using participants' networks to identify additional suitable candidates (Etikan and Bala, 2017), hence 15 students agreed to participate to the study. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, considered the most appropriate method for qualitative data. This approach allows for an interpretative narrative, connecting the data to the research questions and highlighting patterns and themes which were agreed between the researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2024).

Table 1: Participants' profile

Participant	Gender	Employment type	Location of placement	Rotational programme	Placement Company
Amelia	Female	Placement student	UK	NO	Hotel
Anna	Female	Placement student	UK	YES	Hotel
Bob	Male	Manager	UK	NO	Bar/ restaurant
Catherine	Female	Placement student	UK	YES	Hotel
Chris	Male	Employee	UK	NO	Care home
Clara	Female	Placement student	UK	YES	Hotel
Ella	Female	Supervisor	UK	YES	Hotel
Jacob	Male	Placement student	UK	NO	Hotel
John	Male	Placement student	USA	YES	Golf Club/hotel
Max	Male	Placement student	UK	YES	Hotel
Megan	Female	Duty Manager	UK	NO	Hotel
Rose	Female	Placement student	UK	NO	Hotel
Tom	Male	Placement student	UK	YES	Hotel
Victoria	Female	Placement student	AUSTRALIA	YES	Hotel
William	Male	Manager	UK	NO	Hotel

RESULTS

Three overarching themes emerged: placement experiences, views on placements, and career choices after placement.

Most participants (73.3%) reported generally positive treatment during their placements, feeling valued and supported by managers. However, some participants, predominantly female, felt undervalued or taken advantage of, often due to unmet expectations around responsibility and development. Even those with positive experiences described feeling like a “burden” at times. Compared to previous research, these findings suggest some improvement in placement organisation, though gaps remain.

So I definitely think I was taken advantage of in that sense. And I think from what I was promised to, what I actually experienced, there was absolutely no match’

Working conditions were widely described as demanding, with long hours, unsustainable shift patterns, and staff shortages common. Many participants felt placement students were used to fill labour gaps rather than being developed. Despite this, strong social relationships with colleagues and positive team environments helped mitigate stress and improved job satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of social belonging in retention.

They really need the placements because they're so short staffed

So it can be stressful, but it's really fun if you're working with your friends

Gender experiences revealed mixed progress. While several participants observed balanced or female-dominated management teams, most reported witnessing or experiencing gender-based differences, particularly in guest interactions. Female managers were often undermined by guests, and stricter expectations around dress codes for women were noted. These findings suggest representation may be improving, but respect and equality remain significant issues.

Like dress code more so it's a lot more lenient for guys than it would be for the girls. In terms of like skirts and like shirts and all of this, that and the other, they're a lot stricter on the girls

Regarding learning and development, two-thirds of participants felt they received good training and valuable skill development, regardless of gender. However, the remaining third reported insufficient training, high pressure to learn quickly, and limited ongoing support. Participants consistently emphasised that placement quality strongly influenced motivation and career interest. All participants suggested improvements to placements, most commonly calling for better support, clearer structure, rotational opportunities, and greater autonomy. A lack of structure was linked to reduced motivation and dissatisfaction, echoing long-standing issues identified in prior research.

I'd make sure that you know they had the right resources available if you needed them

Career outcomes showed low retention: only 26% intended to remain in hospitality and interestingly female participants expressed intention to leave the industry. Many participants planned to move into tourism or alternative sectors, while others used placements to refine broader career goals, including entrepreneurship. Overall, placements were influential in shaping career decisions, highlighting the need for structured, supportive, and developmental placement programmes to improve retention and strengthen the hospitality workforce.

One of the hardest times I've ever been through

I do want to stay within the hospitality industry

CONCLUSION

Industry placements are intended to benefit students, institutions, and the hospitality industry by providing practical experience, skill development, and access to motivated talent (Pusiran et al., 2020). However, research shows that poorly executed placements can have negative consequences (Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2013). Our study confirms that many students are discouraged from pursuing careers in hospitality after placement, with around 50% considering alternative industries (Lee et al., 2019), with higher scores among female students. Exposure to the demanding work environment and lack of structured support often results in low retention, with few students returning to their placement companies (Gebbels et al., 2020). Common issues include placements being used to fill staff shortages, insufficient structure, and limited opportunities for skill development. These findings confirm previous studies on placements (i.e. Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2021) and demonstrate that very little if nothing has changed on perceptions and quality of hospitality management students' placements. Furthermore, they indicate that current placement programmes are failing to inspire students and maximise their potential, highlighting the need for businesses to redesign placements to improve support, structure, and engagement to retain future talent in the hospitality industry.

This study highlights that poorly structured hospitality placements negatively impact students' experiences and retention. Key suggested improvements include implementing support systems, regular training, and rotational placements to provide structure, cross-training, and career development, ensuring students gain well-rounded skills and are motivated to remain in the industry.

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