



**"A good first job"?**  
Migrant workers in Icelandic hotels

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2019**



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60 ECTS thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of a  
*Magister Scientiarum* degree in Tourism Studies

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# Abstract

Mobility has shaped much of our contemporary world, including the tourism industry. In addition to mobile tourists, there is an increasing number of mobile workers who seek employment in the tourism industry. This study presents a qualitative case study from Iceland, where the number of migrant workers in tourism has increased disproportionately, resulting in the industry's dependency on migrant workers. A total of thirteen semi-structured interviews were taken at three hotels in rural Iceland in order to shed light on the benefits and challenges that employment in the tourism industry creates for migrant workers. In addition, the study presents what benefits and challenges employers face in light of an increasingly diverse workforce. The findings of this thesis indicate that communication and learning are among the key benefits of tourism employment. By interacting with co-workers and guests from various countries, migrant workers can improve their English language skills, increase their cultural knowledge and form transnational ties, which further enhances their transnational mobility. However, the English-speaking environment of the hotels does not provide all workers with the opportunity to improve their Icelandic language skills. This in turn hinders migrant workers from settling in Iceland and participating in wider society. Without an understanding of the host country's language, migrant workers' occupational mobility is difficult to increase. Implications for employers and the tourism industry include the need to foster a culture of learning, providing opportunities for learning about the host country and its language.



# Útdráttur

Hreyfanleiki er mótandi afl sem hefur víðtæk áhrif, þar með talið á ferðaþjónustu. Ferðaþjónustan einkennist ekki aðeins af hreyfanlegum ferðamönnum, heldur einnig af hreyfanlegum starfsmönnum sem flytja erlendis og starfa í greininni. Á Íslandi hefur erlendum starfsmönnum í ferðaþjónustu fjölgað gríðarlega undanfarin ár og því reiðir atvinnugreinin sig nú á fjölbreyttan hóp starfsmanna. Þessi ritgerð kynnir niðurstöður eigindlegrar tilviksrannsóknar frá Íslandi sem fjallar um þrjú hótél utan höfuðborgarsvæðisins og byggir á þrettán hálfstöðluðum viðtölum. Markmið rannsóknarinnar er að varpa ljósi á áskoranir og ávinning sem atvinna í íslenskri ferðaþjónustu skapar fyrir erlenda starfsmenn. Einnig er sjónum beint að áskorunum og ávinningi sem atvinnurekendur standa frammi fyrir í fjölmenningarlegu starfsumhverfi. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að helsti ávinningur starfsmanna felist í samskiptum og lærdómi. Starfsmenn eru í samskiptum við samstarfsfólk og hótélgesti frá mörgum löndum, sem veitir tækifæri til að bæta enskukunnáttu, læra um margvíslega menningarheima og mynda þverþjóðleg tengsl. Þar með geta starfsmenn einnig aukið þverþjóðlegan hreyfanleika sinn. Hins vegar eru hótél enskumælandi umhverfi og þar með er ekki öllum starfsmönnum veitt tækifæri til að bæta íslenskukunnáttu sína, sem gerir þeim erfiðara fyrir að taka þátt í íslensku samfélagi. Auk þess eru atvinnutækifæri og hreyfanleiki starfsmanna, sem ekki tala íslensku, takmörkuð. Niðurstöður benda til þess að atvinnuveitendur og greinin eigi að skapa lærdómsmenningu og gefa starfsmönnum tækifæri til að öðlast þekkingu um land og tungumál.





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# 1 Introduction

Mobility has shaped much of our contemporary world. Everything, ranging from people to objects and ideas, seems to be on the move. As people become more mobile, they also have more choice where to live with the possibility of relocating in search for better opportunities.

This study looks into one form of migration, that is transnational labour migration, and its interplay with one of the fastest growing industries worldwide, the tourism industry. Tourism is a service industry requiring a multitude of workers in order for the service to be delivered. For the most part, the tourism experience is place bound and is both produced and consumed within the same place. The workers play an essential role in providing and shaping the experience. However, many tourism businesses find it difficult to hire employees due to several reasons. First, the required number of workers may simply exceed the number of available local workers. Second, local workers often lack the necessary skills for working in the tourism industry. Third, locals often regard tourism employment as undesirable since it is generally seen as low-skilled and low-paid (Baum, 2007; Joppe, 2012; Rantala et al., 2019). The result is that labour demand within tourism is increasingly met by employing international migrant workers. Today, the tourism industry's workforce is therefore characterised by diversity. Migration as well as transnational mobility are important elements for creating this diverse workforce (Baum, 2007; Baum, 2015; Devine, Baum, Hearn & Devine; 2007; Duncan, Scott & Baum, 2013; Joppe; 2012). Given the tourism industry's dependency on migrant workers, it is important to gain an understanding of the workers' experience and the employment of a culturally diverse workforce.

The tourism industry is characterised by a wide variety of subsectors, including transportation, heritage, restaurants and accommodation, to name a few. Studies on migrant workers in tourism have focused on jobs within the hospitality industry, particularly on hotel employment. The presented study does the same, as hospitality employment often accounts for the majority of jobs within the tourism industry (for example, Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.a). In this study, the hospitality industry is regarded as an inherent part of tourism, thus this thesis reports findings relevant to the hospitality industry as well as to the overall tourism industry. On an international scale, research has shed light on various aspects of the migrant workers' experience in the tourism and hospitality industry. Results indicate that employment in the tourism industry has the potential to be "a good first job" (Janta, Ladkin, Brown & Lugosi, 2011, 1012), helping migrant workers learn about their new host country's environment and providing them with future opportunities. However, as rightly pointed out by Baum (2012, 1), "there are very few, if any, ubiquitous 'truths' about migrant work in the hotel sector that are applicable across all countries, cultures and contexts". Hence, case studies are necessary to highlight the various experiences which migrant workers engage in.

Since 2010, Iceland has experienced a rapid growth in tourism arrivals resulting in a high demand for workers. The Icelandic tourism industry is dependent on migrant workers, which provides an excellent setting for a case study of migrant workers in the tourism industry. It is necessary to gain an understanding of the extent to which employment in Icelandic hotels can be considered 'a good first job' in Iceland to ensure a positive work experience for migrant workers and to highlight strategies on how to retain them in the Icelandic tourism

industry. An understanding of the industry's diverse workforce provides a general insight to the benefits and challenges of this new labour composition for the Icelandic tourism industry. The study is guided by two research questions:

- (1) What benefits and challenges does employment in Icelandic hotels create for migrant workers?
- (2) What benefits and challenges does the employment of a culturally diverse workforce create for hotel managers?

By outlining the benefits and challenges that are perceived by migrant workers, this research contributes to identifying migrant workers' expectations and motivations and how these are being met, while highlighting their experience of working in an Icelandic hotel. From a managerial perspective, suggestions can be made on how to manage a culturally diverse workforce, how migrant workers can be retained and how they can be supported with suitable training. In order to shed light on the employment of migrant workers in the Icelandic tourism industry, a qualitative case study of three hotels in rural areas within Iceland was conducted. A total of thirteen semi-structured interviews were taken, of which ten interviews were with migrant workers and three with the corresponding hotel managers. This study therefore emphasizes the migrant workers' perspective.

In the following sections, the theoretical background, the methodology as well as the findings of this study are presented. First, there will be a summary of prominent concepts and research about mobility and tourism labour, including studies, which have focused specifically on migrant workers in the tourism industry. After that, the focus will shift to Iceland, the setting for this case study. It is outlined how migration to Iceland has developed and how the tourism industry's growth has been met by employing migrant workers. Following a description and the rationale of the methodology, the study's findings are reported in three separate chapters. Finally, the results are discussed in order to identify implications for migrant workers, employers as well as the overall tourism industry.



## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Mobility, migration and transnationalism

The contemporary globalised world is characterised by mobility, and this mobility can take various forms. Various bodies and materials are on the move across different scales, both locally, nationally, internationally and transnationally. This includes the physical movement of people through walking or running, but also technological movement, for example, by car or train. In addition, the concept of mobilities includes the movement of images and information, further increasing the variety of mobilities in today's globalised world (Sheller & Urry, 2006):

The concept of mobilities encompasses both the large-scale movements of people, objects, capital and information across the world, as well as the more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space and the travel of material things within everyday life. Issues of movement, of too little movement or too much or of the wrong sort or at the wrong time, are central to many lives, organisations and governments (Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006, 1).

Sheller and Urry (2006, 208) argue that “issues of ‘mobility’ are centre stage”. By focusing on mobility, it is possible to outline how mobilities as well as immobilities shape our contemporary world. Mobility is then regarded as an organisational principle that arranges our present world order and creates distinctions between groups of people. As such, there are people who move freely, and there are people who experience limits to their mobility, outlining that the freedom to move is “an unequally divided commodity” (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016, 18). Various aspects influence people's mobility, including race, gender and economic status (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Similarly, Sheller and Urry (2006, 207) write that “there are new places and technologies that enhance the mobility of some peoples and places and heighten the immobility of others, especially as they try to cross borders”. Certain infrastructure can “limit, channel and regulate movement or anticipated movement” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, 212). People who are on the move therefore engage in various experiences and labelling them as labour migrants or tourists, for instance, is an attempt at categorising their different mobilities. These terms help to make sense of people's ability to be on the move, but at the same time they also allow for generalisations. It is important to bear in mind that each group of people consists of individuals whose experiences are diverse and unique.

For this research project, the focus is on transnational labour migration. The decision of moving abroad and pursuing work is based on numerous and often highly individual reasons. Many migrants are motivated by personal factors and wish to improve their economic status as well as their lifestyles (Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2016). They may want to use particular skills and see opportunities to do so abroad. For many migrants, the job availability, work conditions, social status and wages that they have in their home country may be improved

by seeking employment abroad (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). Others may want to support their family back home by sending remittances (Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2016). There are a variety of motivations and reasons which can intertwine, as discussed later in this thesis. In addition to individual factors, there are also global factors that have facilitated an increase in international migration. Economic and social changes enable or force people to be on the move. As such, the rise of neoliberalism has resulted in a global labour market which is characterised by flows of capital, technology, goods and labour. It is assumed that a free flow of production factors will secure the lowest possible costs. Thus, flexible and mobile businesses as well as workers are needed to create an efficient labour market. While it provides job opportunities for migrant workers abroad, the flexibility of the labour market is also said to increase the vulnerability of workers. For example, short-term contracts or no contracts are common practice today (Bauman, 2001; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). Overall, labour migration is always due to personal motivations, which in turn are grounded in an economic and social context.

Another important concept relating to migration is transnationalism. For migrants, transnationalism takes the form of having ties across national borders and being connected to multiple places, including their home country and the host country they currently live in. As such, a migrant worker can have ties to people who he or she is working or living with in the host country, while at the same time maintaining ties to people in his or her home country. The ties to the home country are often manifested through cultural or political involvement in the home town or through economic remittances, which the migrant workers send to their family and friends in the home country (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2004). Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, 1003) point out that “individuals are embedded in multi-layered, multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind”. Transnationalism can result in “being neither here nor there” (IOM, 2010,1), but it also shows that social life is not bound within a single nation-state. Participation in the host country and in the home country can occur at the same time and often reinforce each other (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). In addition, transnational networks can be a source of new skills and assist with further migration (Alberti, 2014).

This research project focuses on migrant workers in the tourism industry, which addresses two forms of mobility: labour migration and tourism. Both encompass movement, but traditionally labour migration has been seen as more permanent compared to tourism. While tourists are regarded as short-term visitors, who travel to a destination for holiday purposes, often returning home after a few days, migrant workers tend to stay longer in their host country (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016). However, the distinction of migrant workers as more permanent and tourists as short-term visitors is highly challenged in today’s mobile world, as it is easy to move between different forms of being mobile (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). In fact, tourism and labour migration are closely tied to each other and are not always easy to distinguish from each other (Duncan et al., 2013; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016; Uriely, 2001). An individual may arrive in a country as a tourist and then decide to take up seasonal paid work. Others may arrive as migrant workers for seasonal or permanent work and participate in tourist activities. Some individuals may not be able to travel without working, while others do not experience economic restraints to their mobility. As such, Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir (2016) observe that tourists and migrant workers have different options and conditions with regards to their mobility. In general, the boundaries between travelling and working overlap in times of heightened mobility. What migration and tourism have in common is that they are characterised by movement, as opposed to the

relative immobility of the local population. Just by being on the move, various bodies, including migrant workers and tourists, are already regarded as different (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Although the mobilities of tourists and migrant workers are closely related, as has been pointed out, this research project will focus primarily on migrant workers. For the purpose of this research project a migrant worker in Iceland will be defined as an individual with a nationality other than Icelandic and who is employed in Iceland. This definition allows for the inclusion of migrant workers who may also be motivated by touristic pursuits.

## **2.2 Tourism labour**

In recent years, the tourism industry has experienced a vast growth and is now one of the fastest growing industries worldwide (UNWTO, 2018). As such, tourism is without a doubt an important generator of jobs, and it is estimated that one out of every ten jobs in the world is within the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2018). Job-creation is often perceived as one of the most positive benefits of tourism for the host population (Ladkin, 2011).

Given the importance of tourism labour, an increasing amount of research has focused on labour within the tourism industry, but according to Ladkin (2011, 1135) “tourism labor remains a relatively minor player in academic research despite an obvious need to be able to manage and plan for tourism labor requirements”. Ladkin (2011) does not provide an explanation for why tourism labour has not received appropriate attention, but discusses that certain characteristics of tourism labour complicate the research, such as the lack of employment data and definitional issues of what specific jobs belong to the tourism industry. With a diverse range of sub-sectors, for example accommodation, transportation, food service and recreation, the tourism industry is multi-faceted. In addition, the size, location and economic context of tourism businesses vary greatly (Baum, 2007). This wide range within the industry therefore increases the possible research topics.

While research on tourism labour can be applied to various types of jobs within the industry, it is striking that the majority of research focuses on the hospitality industry (Baum, 2007). However, one reason for this over-representation is that employment data in tourism for the hospitality and restaurant sectors is more readily available, compared to other types of tourism employment (Joppe, 2012). It is important to note that while some scholars regard hospitality as a separate industry, here it is defined as a part of the total tourism industry.

The characteristics of employment in tourism have been widely presented and discussed (Baum, 2007; Devine et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin, et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012; Ladkin, 2011; Péchenart, 2003). The negative aspects of employment within the tourism industry and particularly the hospitality industry have received notably more attention compared to the positive aspects of tourism and hospitality employment (Baum, Kralj et al., 2016). Many jobs within tourism are considered to offer low status, low wages and seasonal work (Baum, 2007; Devine et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012; Ladkin, 2011; Péchenart, 2003). They also include difficult and tiring working conditions, precarious employment, low-skilled work, a high turnover rate of employees and often unclear career structures (Baum, 2012; Baum, Cheung et al., 2016; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Ladkin, 2011). In addition, it has been argued that tourism employment contributes to economic inequalities.

Frequently, it does not meet the criteria for decent work, which is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Baum, Cheung et al., 2016; Robinson, Martins, Solnet & Baum, 2019). As such, “decent work objectives continue to be unmet in the tourism sector” (Baum, Cheung et al., 2016, 810). Consequently, the employment options and working conditions of the tourism industry are often considered undesirable, and thereby it may be difficult for tourism employers to retain local workers. In some destinations, local residents may choose other forms of employment over tourism (Duncan et al., 2013; Janta, Brown, Lugosi & Ladkin, 2011; Joppe, 2012; Piso, 2014). This in turn facilitates an easy access of jobs within tourism, which can be advantageous for migrant workers seeking employment (Baum, 2007; Baum, 2012; Devine et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012; Ladkin, 2011; Péchenart, 2003).

Among the positive aspects of tourism employment are the available options for females and minorities, the flexible hours, the variety of tasks available and the opportunities to acquire new skills. Tourism and hospitality employment also enables one to combine work with travel and to meet new people (Ladkin, 2011). It is also possible to question some of the negative sides of tourism employment. For instance, the stereotype that tourism employment is low-skilled work is challenged when considering the various skills that are required for providing a high-quality tourism service (Baum, 2007; Devine et al., 2007; Duncan et al., 2013). While technical skill demand is often low, a multitude of soft skills are still desired. Baum (2007) argues that it is vital for tourism employees to possess interpersonal and emotional skills as employees engage in communication with hotel guests from various countries. This requires communication skills, in particular the ability to communicate in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, employees are often required to manage their emotions, specifically to keep their negative emotions in line, so that their positive emotions contribute to the desired customer experience. Therefore, it is vital to move beyond the notion that tourism employment is low-skilled and instead recognise that tourism employees develop and use numerous soft skills (Baum, 2007; Devine et al., 2007; Duncan et al., 2013).

## **2.3 The migrant workers’ perspective**

Internationally, an increasing number of migrant workers are employed in tourism. The tourism industry, similar to all services industries, relies mostly on human capital and workforce for the tourism ‘product’ to be delivered. The demand for workers is thus high within the industry and cannot always be satisfied by employing local workers alone, especially in rural areas where the pool of workers is often quite small (Baum et al., 2007; Piso, 2014). As has been pointed out, the working conditions of the tourism industry often prevent locals from wanting to work in the industry. In addition, the available local workers often lack necessary skills, for example language skills, or the required number of workers may simply exceed the number of available local workers (Baum, 2007; Joppe, 2012; Rantala et al., 2019). Consequently, many tourism destinations rely heavily on migrant workers. Recent studies have tried to shed a light on the migrant workers’ perspective of tourism employment, in particular their motivation for pursuing work in tourism and their experiences. As Lucas and Mansfield (2008, 7) remark:

It is impossible to generalize the experiences of migrant workers, which may vary from working illegally under exploitative terms and conditions, to working in highly paid, rewarding and skilled jobs.

Similarly, Baum (2012, 1) notes that “there are very few, if any, ubiquitous ‘truths’ about migrant work in the hotel sector that are applicable across all countries, cultures and contexts”. The migrant workers’ experiences vary between countries and sectors, which underlines the importance of conducting case studies of migrant workers in the tourism industry in each country, including Iceland. In the following, an overview of some of the issues and considerations with regards to employment of migrant workers in the tourism industry will be presented.

As previously mentioned, the motivations behind migrant workers’ desire to work in tourism are diverse. Each person makes decisions based on various individual and unique motivational factors, which in turn are influenced by the economic or social context in which the decisions are taken (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019; Underthun & Jordhus-Lier, 2018). It is important to reiterate that the easy access to jobs within tourism constitutes the first reason why many migrants seek employment in the industry. Opportunities for migrant workers in other industries may be restricted (Janta, Brown et al., 2011). Therefore, migrant workers’ decision to work in tourism is often heavily influenced by the availability of employment.

In addition, migrant workers may wish to improve their economic status by working in the tourism industry. A lack of work and low wages in the home country create major reasons why many people search for work abroad. Tourism may offer wages that are relatively higher compared to their home country, and often they work abroad in order to send a significant portion of their savings back to relatives in their home country (Baum et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Underthun & Jordhus-Lier, 2018).

As emphasised, migrant workers frequently accept employment and work conditions that local workers would not tolerate. This is often because migrant workers’ point of reference with respect to wages and working conditions is based on their home country’s standards and thus different compared to local workers. Furthermore, migrant workers may regard their stay as temporary, be less educated and lack the language of the host country, which gives them fewer employment options (Wojtynska, 2012). This can lead to migrant workers being the least protected group of employees in terms of their rights, thereby leaving them open to exploitation (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011). They frequently have a weakened position in the labour market due to their lack of understanding the host country’s language as well as their education and skills not being properly recognised in the host country (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). Also, migrant workers, who experience a lack of work and low wages in their home country, may consider the wages offered by the tourism industry in the host country as sufficient to begin with. However, if these workers stay for a longer time or even permanently in the country they moved to, then their point of reference often shifts to that of the national economy. They then seek work outside of tourism in order to secure better pay. As a result, many workers might not commit to their workplace long-term and rather search for employment elsewhere, which further contributes to the high turnover rate within the tourism industry (Baum et al., 2007; Piso, 2014).

Not every migrant worker is motivated primarily by economic reasons. Another prominent motive for taking up work in the tourism industry is that it offers the chance to combine work and travel. Uriely (2001, 1) presents a typology of “travellers who combine work-related with tourist-oriented pursuits”. Traditionally, tourism has been regarded as distinct from working, as scholars have argued that tourism is a way to escape the everyday-life and the mundane reality of work (Urry, 1990). However, Uriely (2001) discusses that tourism and

working can be combined in several ways, highlighting the blurring boundaries between labour migration and tourism. He identifies four different types of travellers, which vary according to the emphasis they put on either the work-related or the tourist-oriented pursuits. As such, the travellers are either travelling while working as 'travelling workers' or working while travelling as 'working tourists'.

The first type are called 'travelling professional workers'. They are educated and often highly-skilled workers with a career focus. They travel as part of their work engagements and thus tourism is often considered a work-related benefit rather than a motivation. The second type are 'migrant tourism workers'. These workers are often in search of leisure while working and take on different work at popular tourism destinations. Generally, their employment is seasonal. However, like the travelling professional workers, the migrant tourism workers still put the emphasis on working rather than travelling. The third type are the 'non-institutionalised working tourists' who work primarily as a means to afford their travelling. Their goal is to finance their tourism activities, therefore they take up work that is frequently unrelated to their professional or educational background. They are usually also employed on a short-term basis. Finally, there are 'working-holiday tourists'. They put the tourism experience first, but regard work experience as part of the tourism experience. Their focus is on leisure and recreation. Similar to the non-institutionalised working tourists, they also tend to work in positions that show little or no connection to their professional or educational background. The non-institutionalised working tourists and the working-holiday tourists are considered working tourists, rather than travelling workers because they prioritise tourism-related activities rather than work-related (Uriely, 2001). The workers may spend a significant time in the tourism destination, providing service to tourists that visit. Uriely's typology reflects the distortion of boundaries between definitions of terms such as 'tourists' and 'workers', 'home' and 'away' as well as 'host' and 'guest', especially with respect to short-term migrant workers (Baum, 2007; Duncan et al., 2013; Janta, Brown, et al.; 2011).

Working and travelling in an unfamiliar country is an opportunity for migrant workers to experience something new and different from their everyday life. They may work in a position that they have little or no professional experience in, thus gaining new work experience. They may also live and work in a country of which they have little knowledge about. Workers then gain the opportunity to experience a new culture. Hence, it is safe to say that this combination of work and travel constitutes the option for a wide variety of new and often appealing experiences for migrant workers (Baum et al., 2007).

Evidently to be able to gain new life and work experience is a prominent motivation for pursuing work in the tourism industry and closely tied to that is the wish to learn and acquire new skills. By working in tourism, migrant workers can obtain new skills, in particular linguistic skills (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Janta, Lugosi, Brown & Ladkin, 2012; Piso, 2014). In their research on Polish workers in the United Kingdom (UK) tourism industry, Janta, Brown et al. (2011) found that an advantage for migrant workers in tourism is that the tourism industry arguably has greater potential compared to other industries to positively influence the migrant workers' development of cultural skills as well as aid in their integration because of the social relationships and contacts created within the industry. Their research explored how the work environment and employment within the tourism industry conditioned the adaptation of migrant workers. The study examined three types of relationships that migrant workers engage in at their workplace. First, by working in tourism, workers interact with members of the host community, both native co-workers and native

customers. This relationship resulted in interaction between the Polish workers and natives that supported the cultural and linguistic skill development of the Polish workers and contributed to their visibility to natives. Second, migrant workers engage with other migrant workers from various nationalities. This suggests that the diversity created a feeling of cosmopolitan citizenship and supports intercultural competence, though it could potentially also create enmity. Third and finally, the relationship between migrants of the same nationality was studied, in which the majority of Polish workers felt that contact with other Polish workers increased their well-being and security in the attempt to adjust to the host environment. Potential negative impacts of last type of relationship were also identified, namely the increased isolation from natives (Janta, Brown et al., 2011).

Other studies support that workplace interaction can assist migrant workers in improving their English skills (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Janta et al., 2012; Piso, 2014). In another study on Polish workers in the UK, Janta et al. (2012) shed light on the relationship between language acquisition, tourism employment and social networks. They determined that tourism employment promotes interaction and relationships that assist migrant workers in learning English. Hence, interaction with guests was a driver to improve English skills. Yet even those migrant workers that worked without direct customer contact reported that they were also able to improve their English skills by observing and listening to co-workers. Janta et al. (2012) thus argue that co-workers and customers play an essential role in improving the workers' English skills. In the UK, the location of the aforementioned study, English skills are important for two reasons. English is commonly spoken at hotels worldwide, including the UK, thus hotels are an English-speaking environment where the staff provides a service to international guests. Moreover, English is the local language in the UK; by improving their English skills, migrant workers in the UK tourism industry are not only improving their work language, but also their host language. Migrants are often able to enter jobs in tourism without any knowledge of the host language. However, a lack of understanding of the local language contributes to social exclusion and limits information that migrant workers receive. Consequently, learning the host language is considered key to adjusting to the migrant workers' new environment and lives (Janta et al., 2012). Baum et al. (2007) also present a study of migrant workers in UK hotels, concluding that their participants considered learning English not only of importance for their work at the hotel, but also for improving their chances of finding work elsewhere in the UK. Similarly, Baum (2012) discusses that language skills are necessary for migrant workers to acquire, particularly if they want to move beyond low-skilled work.

While social relations create learning opportunities and help migrant workers to settle into their new environment, they also play an essential role in providing employment opportunities. Social relations are frequently a contributor to migrant workers obtaining work within the tourism industry in the first place (Piso, 2014). Baum et al.'s study (2007) on hotels in the UK also established that just over half of the international staff members had moved to the UK and found employment at the hotel due to word of mouth, or through recommendations by friends or family. Friends and family can thus be regarded as constructing a valuable network, providing the migrant workers with employment and "emotional support, companionship and socialization opportunities in and out of work" (Piso, 2014, 12).

Social relations and networks play an essential role for migrant workers, both prior to migrating and after starting their work in the tourism industry. Before migrating, social relations with friends and family assist migrant workers in moving and securing employment

within the tourism industry (Piso, 2014). After moving to their host country, social relations can assist migrant workers with the acquisition of cultural skills and their adaptation to the host country's environment. This in turn leads to the conclusion that forming social relations can positively influence the migrant workers' future plans for staying in the community and in the work place (Baum et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Janta et al., 2012, Piso, 2014). It is widely acknowledged that the integration of migrant workers into the local society is a crucial aspect in retaining migrant workers on a long-term basis (Baum et al., 2007).

Additionally, Baum et al.'s (2007) research analysed the communication aspects of hotel work. They found that the majority of the participating migrant workers were happy in their workplace and experienced no major communication issues with either co-workers, managers or customers. However, a few negative factors were identified; some migrant workers experienced hostility at work. For example, they reported that the management showed little patience, and they were instructed not to speak their native language at work. The workers also experienced impatience from local staff and some migrant workers reported that native co-workers would shout at them and make them do the heavier and more difficult tasks. Another issue that they described were language difficulties and miscommunication. Finally, some respondents experienced hostility, rudeness and disrespect from customers, which was based on the migrant workers' cultural background (Baum et al., 2007).

Overall though, studies have shown that for many migrant workers a job in tourism is "a good first job" in a new country (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011, 1012). As stated, positions within the tourism industry are readily available, have a low entry barrier and can enhance migrant workers' cultural skills. These skills, such as improved competence in language, can then assist migrant workers in finding other employment options. In that regard Janta, Ladkin et al. (2011, 1008) comment that for many migrants "tourism was not necessarily a 'chosen' occupation, but rather was something that could be obtained relatively easily in times of economic transition and mass migration". Migrant workers often regard their jobs in tourism as temporary and as a stepping stone to a different kind of employment (Baum, 2012). Nevertheless, there are also many workers who plan to stay employed within tourism (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011). Generally, migrant workers do not make concrete plans as to how long they plan to stay in a country and/or work in tourism (Baum et al., 2007), and their experience becomes a deciding factor. Workers often re-evaluate their future plans based on their experience of working and living in the host country (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Piso, 2014). Of course, negative experiences, such as exploitation, low status and discrimination, contribute to migrant workers seeking employment elsewhere. Low attachment to the employer and/or the industry can also impact migrants' future plans (Alberti, 2014). It has also been mentioned that a shift in migrant workers' economic point of reference can change the way that wages offered by the tourism industry are perceived, as the wages then become unsatisfactory (Piso, 2014). "Unwillingness by employers to develop human capital, largely due to associated costs or a lack of need" (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011, 1008) also contributes negatively to retaining migrant workers. However, the fact that migrant workers commonly make vague long-term plans can be viewed as an opportunity to shift their plans in favour of retaining them (Piso, 2014). Positive experiences of working in the tourism industry can impact the attachment of migrant workers to their host country and the industry, which underlines that employers and the industry itself need to ensure a positive experience for migrant workers to retain them as valuable employees.



## 2.4 Managing a culturally diverse workforce

Migrant workers, like all workers, need to be supported with good management, training and integration into the work environment (Devine et al., 2007). It has been ascertained that migrant workers have different workplace and personal needs when starting a new job, compared to local workers (Baum et al., 2007). Hiring and retaining migrant workers therefore requires managers to be aware of how to manage a culturally diverse workforce effectively.

Creating and managing a diverse workforce requires that managers set up job-descriptions and hiring procedures that assist with the evaluation of an applicant's education and professional experience, while prohibiting any possible discrimination throughout the recruitment process (García-Almeida & Hormiga, 2016). However, migrant workers' qualifications and the value that they can create for a company are often not acknowledged by the employers. For example, García-Almeida and Hormiga (2016) concluded that migrant workers in hotels in Lanzarote, Spain, were hired for specific positions or hotel departments based on their nationality rather than individual qualifications. Baum et al. (2007) also determined that promotion opportunities for migrant workers are generally limited. In addition, workers are overqualified for their tasks, particularly in larger and often multinational hospitality companies (Baum, 2012; Baum et al., 2007). When similarly investigating migrants and their work conditions in Northern Ireland's hospitality industry, Devine et al. (2007) found that migrants are often perceived as a short-term solution to labour shortages. Many migrants felt that their employers underestimated their capabilities and thus migrants' tasks within the company were often restricted to low-skilled labour. Discrimination and harassment were common (Devine et al., 2007).

It is vital for companies to acknowledge the skills and qualifications that migrant workers bring to their workplace to take advantage of these skills and qualifications for the benefit of the company and the tourism industry in general. Additionally, migrant workers may possess skills or competences that native workers do not possess (Joppe, 2012). In Northern Ireland and Ireland, for example, it was reported that migrant workers showed proficiency in foreign languages that exceeded the skills of native employees, which allowed migrant workers to engage more successfully with customers (Devine et al., 2007; Péchenart, 2003). Migrants thus have the potential to decrease skill shortages of the native population (Baum, 2007; Baum, 2012; Baum, Dutton et al., 2007; Joppe, 2012). Joppe (2012) also highlights that the new knowledge and skills the migrant workers bring to their work influence the companies' competitiveness. Increased entrepreneurship and innovation are benefits that can result from employing individuals with diverse backgrounds (Baum, Hearn & Devine, 2008; Duncan et al., 2013; Janta, Brown et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012). Migrant workers are arguably more likely to be entrepreneurial and start new businesses (Lundmark, Ednarsson & Karlsson, 2014). A positive impact of hiring migrant workers on a national level is that they typically fill labour shortages within a country, both for high- and low-skilled jobs (Baum et al., 2007). Migrant workers also contribute to population growth and an increased level of employment, which in turn beneficially affects the GDP of a country (Baum, 2007; Joppe, 2012).

Whether these positive aspects of employing migrant workers are perceived by managers or not varies. Studies have pointed out that some managers regard migrant workers as superior to local workers with regards to their work commitment and flexibility as well as their

availability (Alberti, 2014; Baum, 2012). However, García-Almeida and Hormiga (2016) also assessed hotel managers' perceptions of potential impacts that migrant workers could bring about for their company's performance. They established that managers were unaware of the positive results that diversity can have on their company's performance.

It is also important to note that, while employing migrant workers in the tourism industry arguably has the potential to benefit individual businesses as well as the overall industry, a dependency on migrant workers can pose as a challenge for tourism businesses, especially with respect to their training. Devine et al. (2007) concluded that the training needs of migrant workers in Northern Ireland were different compared to the needs of native workers that are employed in the hospitality industry. The study suggested that migrant workers in Northern Ireland's tourism industry would require better training than they are currently receiving. Training would need to focus on acquiring English skills as English is the native language of Northern Ireland, but also to train job-specific skills, such as customer service or food hygiene (Devine et al., 2007). Managers that employ migrant workers must therefore adapt the training that they offer to meet the needs of the migrant workers as well as native workers.

Furthermore, migrant workers, who recently moved to their new country of residence, commonly do not possess the same knowledge about the country that the local workers have (García-Almeida & Hormiga, 2016). In tourism, cultural and natural qualities of a country are often part of the product that is sold to tourists. Therefore, managers may be obligated to educate and train migrant workers, so that they acquire an understanding of the 'product' at hand. It is thus obvious that tourism stakeholders must consider how to train migrant workers to ensure the quality of the sold tourism product and to guarantee a positive experience for the tourists.

Yet, support and training must not be limited to the companies that employ migrant workers, but should also be supported on a national level. Joppe (2012) conducted an analysis of migrant workers in the tourism industry, focusing on governmental education and training in OECD countries. The results showed that migrants often face serious barriers with regards to their integration, especially due to language barriers. In addition, only a few countries have tourism-specific programs that assist migrant workers in their integration. The study also demonstrated that individual businesses and countries frequently regard migrant workers as short-term solutions, which arguably also is why governments lack incentives to provide assistance to migrant workers (Joppe, 2012).

Finally, it must be stressed that fair management practices are crucial to ensure the same rights for all workers, local as well as migrant workers. It has been emphasised that migrant workers are more prone to exploitation since they are often unfamiliar with the host country's language, policies and workers' rights (Wojtynska, 2012). Janta, Ladkin et al. (2011) studied the employment experience of Polish workers in the UK hospitality industry. Their findings revealed that migrant workers would be reprimanded more frequently compared to their British co-workers. The migrant workers also reported that their salary had been lower compared to their British co-workers. Therefore, there was evidence that in some cases the migrant workers were treated worse compared to the local workers.

### **3 Migration to Iceland and the Icelandic tourism industry**

The previous chapter outlined findings and studies relating to international migrant workers in the tourism industry. Yet “the experience of migrant workers (international and internal), their employers and the wider community varies greatly in different countries and cultures” (Baum, 2012, V). For the purpose of this research project, it is necessary to consider the Icelandic context of migration as well as the tourism industry, which the migrant workers engage in.

Up until the late twentieth century, Iceland had barely been affected by migration with around 2% of Iceland’s total population defined as immigrants (Skaptadóttir, 2011; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). This changed quite rapidly in the middle of the 1990s, when the demand for workers in the fishing, construction and other primary sectors grew substantially (Burdikova, Barillé, Meckl & Gísladóttir, 2018; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). With Iceland joining the Schengen agreement in 2001, which concerns the external borders of the European Union (EU), migration to Iceland was facilitated (Loftsdóttir, 2017). The biggest factor to the increase in Iceland’s migrant workers was an economic boom in addition to the opening of the labour market to new member states of the EU in 2006 (Burdikova et al., 2018; Júlíusdóttir, Skaptadóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2013; Skaptadóttir, 2014). In 2008, Iceland suffered from the global economic crisis, followed by the financial meltdown of the Icelandic economy. As a consequence, the number of migrants who moved away from Iceland outgrew the number of those that moved to Iceland. However, the total number of migrants arriving in Iceland in the years after the financial crisis still exceeded the number of migrants that came before 2005 (Garðarsdóttir, 2012). The growth of Iceland’s tourism contributed largely to a rise in migration (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). While many migrants regarded their stay as temporary, the demand for labour caused many migrants to prolong their employment in Iceland. Additionally, it created opportunities for family and friends to migrate to Iceland, resulting in chain-migration (Skaptadóttir, 2014).

In the first quarter of 2019, there were a total of 45.670 migrants living in Iceland with a citizenship other than Icelandic. The total number of people living in Iceland was 358.780, so foreign citizens constituted around 12,7% of the nation’s population (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.c). This outlines the rapid increase of migrants in Iceland since the late twentieth century and illustrates that the number of migrants in Iceland has never before been as high as currently (Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2019). By far the largest group of migrants in Iceland are from Poland, as they account for around 45% of all people in Iceland with a citizenship other than Icelandic (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.b).

Even though migration is a relatively new social change occurring in Iceland, there has already been considerable research on migrants and migrant workers in Iceland, e.g. on gender roles (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013; Napierala & Wojtynska, 2017), the role of language for the inclusion into Icelandic society (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017) and on specific nationalities such as Polish migrants (Napierala & Wojtynska, 2017; Skaptadóttir, 2011; Wojtynska, 2011).

Several studies report that the labour market in Iceland is gendered. Júlíusdóttir, Skaptadóttir and Karlsdóttir (2013) found that migrant women in Iceland are commonly employed in low-strata jobs and men are generally employed in the construction industry. Napierala and Wojtynska (2017) argued that Polish migrant women were the main pioneers in migration to Iceland, but they remained in disadvantageous positions compared to Icelandic women. Their study also determined that Polish women were employed in few low-skilled positions, which resulted in low social status as well as low income (Napierala & Wojtynska, 2017). Research from the University of Akureyri in northern Iceland confirms that migrant women are the most vulnerable group of workers in Iceland. Moreover, migrant women, who often hold higher education compared to men, work in jobs that do not fit their education (Burdikova et al., 2018).

While migrant women occupy exceptionally adverse positions, migrant workers in Iceland have a low social status in general. Burdikova et al. (2018, 1) discuss that after the beginning of the twenty-first century “migrants coming to work in Iceland were not seen as active participants in the long-term economic prosperity of the country but rather as a temporary labour force”. They were thus regarded a short-term solution to the labour shortage problem. According to Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir (2016) they are commonly referred to as ‘erlent vinnuafli’, which translates to ‘foreign labour force’. This choice of wording reflects that migrant workers are seen as a means to facilitate economic prosperity in Iceland, but often their active participation in Icelandic society is neglected (Skaptadóttir, 2014; Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir, 2016). Research has also concluded that many workers experience prejudices both at work as well as in the Icelandic society (Skaptadóttir, 2014; Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2019). The precarious situation of migrant workers in Iceland manifests itself not only in the fact that the workers are employed in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, but also in the short-term and often temporary employment contracts (Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2019). Overall, Skaptadóttir and Wojtynska (2019) observe that exploitation of migrant workers in Iceland is a common reality.

Skaptadóttir (2014) presents how the precarious situation of migrant workers became evident during Iceland's financial crisis when they were the first to lose their jobs, particularly due to a lack of Icelandic skills. The study discusses that work conditions worsened and that speaking Icelandic became an important factor for employment. Migrants report that it is often difficult to obtain a job in Iceland if one does not possess proficiency in Icelandic (Skaptadóttir, 2014). Icelandic, the national language of Iceland, is an important element of Iceland's identity (Ólafsson & Zielinska, 2010; Skaptadóttir, 2011; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016). With Icelandic as “the key to society” (Ólafsson & Zielinska, 2010, 77), the Icelandic state has focused on protecting and preserving the Icelandic language from outward threats. Similarly, learning the Icelandic language is regarded as a prime goal in the integration of migrants (Ólafsson & Zielinska, 2010). In 2007, the Ministry of Social Affairs in Iceland (Félagsmálaráðuneytið) put forward the first immigrant integration policy, stating the following:

Powerful support of Icelandic language education for immigrants serves the dual purpose of speeding up their integration into society and strengthening the position of the Icelandic language (Félagsmálaráðuneytið, 2007, 6)

Skaptadóttir (2011) outlines how Polish immigrants became ‘visible’ to the Icelandic society when they increasingly began working in stores in 2006. Instead of being the invisible labour workforce, Polish migrants now engaged with Icelanders, which further fuelled the debate on the migrants’ need to learn Icelandic. Icelanders started to complain about the migrants’ lack of Icelandic, often claiming that migrants did not want to learn Icelandic. This is conflicting, as according to Skaptadóttir (2011) it is often not the migrants’ unwillingness to learn, but rather the lack of opportunity that prevents migrants from acquiring competence. Similarly, Skaptadóttir and Innes’ (2017) research on migrants’ experience of learning Icelandic showed that many migrants did not have the opportunity to learn and practice Icelandic. They frequently worked with other migrants and thus rarely had access to the Icelandic speaking community.

As outlined, there has been extensive research on migrants and migrant workers in Iceland. However, migrant workers in the Icelandic tourism industry remain understudied. In fact, little is known about these workers since both studies and statistical information of this Icelandic labour group is highly limited. Statistics Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands) record how many migrants are employed in the tourism industry, but information on the workers like their nationalities, ages, gender and the duration of their employment are unavailable. Additionally, it must be stressed that the tourism industry consists of a wide variety of jobs, and there are debates about what can be counted as tourism employment in particular. Therefore, the number of migrant workers in tourism in Iceland can be considered vague, as it may fail to include workers who work in tourism-related sectors and also include workers who would not regard themselves as employed in the tourism industry. Statistics Iceland also only count those migrant workers who are registered as workers, so migrant workers who are employed in the black market or work as volunteers are not included.

Iceland’s tourism industry has witnessed a rapid growth since 2010. The average increase in tourist arrivals since 2010 has been 24,3% on a yearly basis. In 2010 less than half a million tourists travelled to Iceland, whereas in 2017 more than 2.2 million tourists visited Iceland (Ferðamálastofa, 2018). Unsurprisingly, this growth is also reflected in

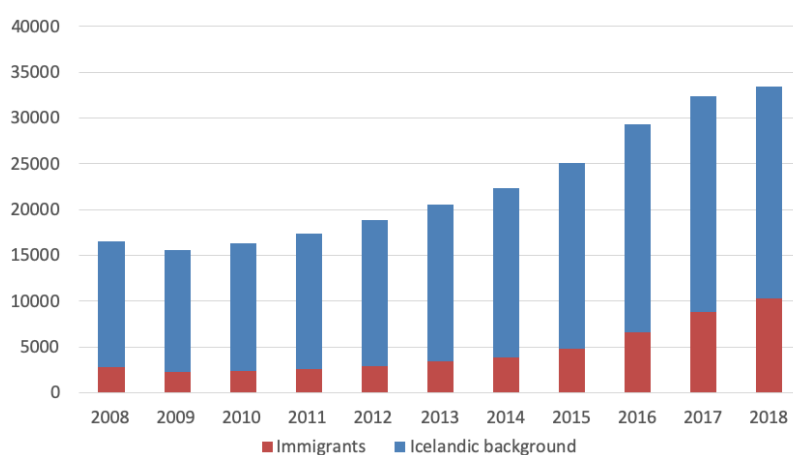


Figure 1 - Number of employees in the Icelandic tourism industry

the number of people employed in tourism, as shown in Figure 1. In 2018 there were a total of 33.394 people employed in the Icelandic tourism industry, of which 10.323 were immigrants<sup>1</sup>. Thus, immigrants account for more than 30% of the employees in Icelandic tourism (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.a). This clearly illustrates the industry’s dependency on migrant workers, a dependency that is growing (see Figure 1). For example, in 2010 migrant

<sup>1</sup> According to Statistics Iceland, immigrants are defined as individuals whose parents are not born in Iceland. Others are considered to have an Icelandic background.

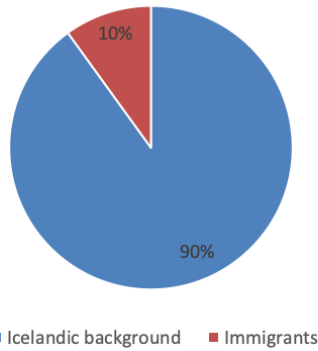


Figure 2 - Percentage of migrant workers in air transportation

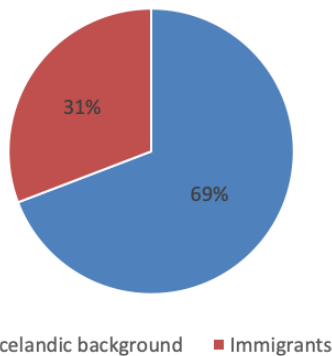


Figure 3 - Percentage of migrant workers in travel and booking agencies

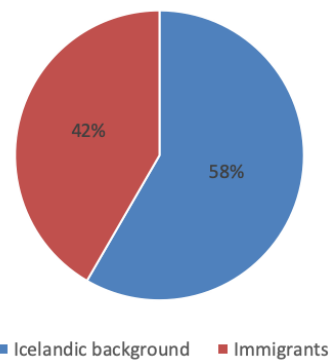


Figure 4 - Percentage of migrant workers in accommodation and restaurants

workers accounted for less than 15% of the employees in tourism. Since then this number has more than doubled.

Of all the jobs within the Icelandic tourism industry, the majority (17.472 jobs) fall within the accommodation and restaurant sector, followed by air transportation (4.824 jobs) and travel and booking agencies (4.052 jobs). Figures 2-4 outline migrant workers' contribution to each sector. The workers are most commonly employed in the accommodation and restaurant sectors, where they account for 42% of employees (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.a).

Although studies on migrant workers in Iceland's tourism industry are limited, there has been a recent interest in this topic. Research by Júlíusdóttir and Halldórsdóttir (2019) presents the perspective of the Icelandic union representatives on the employment and the position of migrant workers in the tourism industry. All registered workers belong to a union, as per Icelandic legislation, and the union representatives observed that tourism employers prioritised economic growth and profit, resulting in the negligence of human resource issues. Júlíusdóttir and Halldórsdóttir's findings highlight that migrant workers are often only connected to Icelandic society through their employer, placing the workers in a precarious situation.

Additionally, Þórarinsdóttir (2019) published a report on migrant workers in the tourism industry. She argues that the growth of the tourism industry would not have been possible without the contribution of migrant workers. According to her study, migrant workers commonly work in low-income jobs, which Icelanders are unwilling to take. The Icelandic labour market, including the tourism industry, is thereby ethnically segmented. Þórarinsdóttir focused on three subsectors within tourism: hotels, bus companies and car rentals.

The largest group of hotel workers of the same nationality were Polish workers. Migrant workers were mostly employed in house-keeping, breakfast and laundry. Many were also working as dishwashers and in the kitchen, but whether they worked in the restaurant and reception varied from one hotel to the other. In addition, English was the primary form of communication at the hotels, with Polish the second most spoken language and Icelandic the third. Managers reported that though they did not require Icelandic, English language skills were a necessary requirement that applicants needed. Many migrant workers had been able to move between jobs within the hotel and commented that it was fun to work with co-workers from various countries. However, the workers stated that a downside was the long and tiring working hours and shifts (Þórarinsdóttir, 2019).

In general, the recent emergence of interest in migrant workers in the Iceland tourism industry is an important step towards understanding the experience of migrant workers. Yet studies on the topic remain few and therefore should be encouraged. This study should thereby add to the understanding of the migrant workers' experience of employment in the Icelandic tourism industry and in the following chapter, the study's methodology is presented and explained.





## 4 Methods

For this research project, a case study was conducted examining three hotels in Iceland. Hotels were chosen because the majority of jobs within the Icelandic tourism industry fall into the accommodation and restaurant sectors (Ferðamálastofa, 2018). Moreover, most migrant workers in tourism are hired by hotels and restaurants (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.a). A qualitative approach was adopted since the objective is not to present generalisations on all migrants working in tourism in Iceland; instead this study aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of the migrant workers' perceived benefits and challenges in Icelandic hotels. The data collected consists of qualitative interviews with staff members of the three hotels and the corresponding hotel managers.

### 4.1 Field site

The selection of the hotels and subsequent choice of interviewees were based on a purposive strategy (Esterberg, 2002), where certain criteria determined which hotels were ultimately contacted and thus the participants. The main requirement was that the hotels employed a substantial number of migrant workers, allowing to speak to multiple workers at each location. As a certain hotel size was required to ensure enough participants agreed to be interviewed anonymously, guesthouses were excluded from this research as they typically have fewer employees compared to hotels. It was assumed that hotels with at least 35 rooms would employ several migrant workers. Information on the number of hotel employees as well as their cultural background is not typically readily available, therefore I first contacted hotels located in municipalities with a high percentage of immigrants. Consequently, the case study would also reflect areas where migrant workers are an important work force. A high percentage of immigrants was defined as 10% of the local population or more.

A letter was addressed to hotels that qualified as potential field sites. The letter introduced myself as the researcher, the purpose of the research project and detailed the necessary criteria the hotel would need to meet to participate. I requested that at least four, though ideally five, migrant workers would be interviewed in addition to the hotel manager. The migrant workers shall have worked at the hotel for a minimum of three months to ensure that they would have gathered enough experiences of living and working abroad in Iceland. The letter informed the potential participants that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, but also that I, the interviewer, would aim to maintain anonymity of each participant as well as the hotel.

Unfortunately, there were not many responses and it took several months to establish contact with three hotel managers willing to participate. The number of interviews was also lower than anticipated. Thirteen interviews were taken, ten with migrant workers and three with the hotel managers. For the purpose of this research and the protection of the participants' anonymity, the identity of the hotels and the individual participants will not be disclosed. In the following, whenever there is a reference to a 'participant' and his or her opinion, the

participant is a migrant worker. When opinions of the hotel managers are discussed, it is clarified that the opinion stemmed from a 'hotel manager' rather than a 'participant'.

However, it is necessary to emphasise that all three hotels were located outside of the capital area; one hotel was located in a smaller town, whereas the other two were in more rural areas within close proximity to smaller towns. All of the hotels catered to predominantly foreign guests and to a lesser extent Icelandic guests. Similarly, all employed a mix of migrant workers and Icelandic workers.

## **4.2 Qualitative interviews and analysis**

The interviews with the managers and migrant workers were semi-structured interviews with mostly open questions, allowing me to address certain issues with each participant while also giving space for individual perceptions (Esterberg, 2002). The interviews were structured differently between the migrant workers and managers, as these positions required different topics for discussion.

The interviews with migrant workers all started with questions about their personal background, such as country of origin, educational and professional background, age and current hotel position. What followed was an open conversation, addressing various topics in various orders. The main subjects of conversation included the migrant worker's personal motivation for moving to Iceland, how they had experienced moving to Iceland and how they came to work at this specific hotel. They were also asked to describe a typical day at work, how they experienced communication with their co-workers as well as how they experienced living in Iceland. Finally, they were questioned about their future plans and whether they planned to stay in Iceland or return to their home country.

Interviews with managers started in the same way like the migrant workers, with questions about their personal background. They were asked how long they had been managers at the hotel and what position they had occupied before becoming hotel manager. Then the hotel managers were questioned on how they recruited new staff members, what skills and qualifications they valued most when recruiting new employees and how new staff members were integrated into the company and trained. They were also asked about the strengths of Icelandic employees and migrant workers and whether they perceived that there were differences in hiring Icelandic staff members as opposed to migrant workers.

The analysis of the data was based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A digital recording was made of each interview with the help of a smartphone, so that it could be transcribed and coded afterwards (Crang & Cook, 2007). This allowed me to identify themes and common patterns among interviews of each group (migrant workers or managers). The interviews with migrant workers were analysed first using both open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interviews with hotel managers were treated separately, but were also analysed using open and axial coding.

## **4.3 Research participants**

A total of ten migrant workers were interviewed, nine of which were female. They were aged between 25 and 50 years, came from different countries and held different hotel positions. Five were Polish, two from Switzerland and the remaining participants from Croatia, the Czech Republic and the United States. The majority worked in house-keeping and the remaining in the reception or serving breakfast. Some participants were also working in more than one department within the hotel, for example helping out in the restaurant. One participant was unable to define their position due to shifting responsibilities, often on a day-to-day basis. Those that were working in the reception often had additional office duties, such as coordinating weddings and being in charge of arranging activities for guests, which they took turns in carrying out alongside their reception responsibilities.

All of the participants had lived in Iceland for at least three months, as this was a prerequisite for participation. Three had been in Iceland for five months, the shortest time period of those interviewed. Four participants had lived in Iceland for one to two years and the remaining three for over ten years. After moving to Iceland, most participants had only been employed at the hotel they were now working at, but three participants had also worked elsewhere in Iceland, such as the Keflavík International Airport, a car rental agency, a horse farm and a fish factory.

The educational and professional background they had acquired prior to moving to Iceland varied greatly as well. Most had completed an education, either at a university-level or job-specific education programs. In addition, they had held different positions within retail, finance, marketing, product production and public offices, to name a few. Three participants also said that their former occupations were at a managerial level, and one had experience in event planning. Only one participant said they had previously worked in tourism. In general, the participants' level of experience in tourism prior to moving to Iceland was minimal.

A total of three hotel managers were interviewed, two of which were female. All of them were Icelandic, but had also lived abroad at some point during their lives. One of the hotel managers had quite recently started to work as the hotel manager and had occupied this position for half a year. The other two had been hotel managers for multiple years (six or nine years). Two of them had not previously worked at hotels or within the tourism industry, whereas one of the managers had worked at other hotels and restaurants prior to their current position.

## **4.4 Anonymity, consent and data protection**

In order to carry out my research as planned and give the research participants freedom to address positive as well as negative issues, I have strived to ensure anonymity. First, the hotels' names as well as their exact geographic locations are treated as confidential. This study did not attempt a comparison between the three hotels, thus it is not necessary to present individual characteristics of the hotels, other than the overall criteria already stated. Second, all data regarding the migrant workers and hotel managers, their personal opinions and statements, shall be presented without noting the particular individual.

It was important to also verify the informed consent of each interviewee. Before each interview, the migrant workers and hotel managers were presented a form that they signed; this form explained the overall purpose of the research as well as their rights as participants. They were informed that the interviews would be recorded and that they had the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Once the study was completed, I protected and preserved the collected digital data by storing it safely in a password protected folder on my personal computer, whereas any hardcopy data (e.g. print out and notes) was stored in a folder, marked as confidential.

## **4.5 Limitation of the research**

Out of ten interviews with migrant workers, one was taken in Icelandic as this individual had lived in Iceland for several years. The other nine interviews were conducted in English. One participant was from the United States and therefore speaking their mother tongue. The other nine participants were interviewed in a language other than their native language. While some of them spoke English without any problems, others expressed concerns about their English skills either before or during the interview. The findings of this research are therefore limited to the aspects that participants were able to express in a language other than their mother tongue. In addition, it was not possible to interview migrant workers who did not speak English. Therefore, the findings of this study do not fully represent migrant workers who do not speak English, as their experience of working and living in Iceland may differ from those who possess English skills.

With respect to the interviews conducted with hotel managers, it must be stressed that they were in fact few. The findings from a managerial perspective are based on only three interviews and therefore do not represent a broad overview on managing a culturally diverse workforce. For this reason, the migrant workers' perspective is more prominent in this study while the perspective from the managers was mostly used to support or show incongruences with regards to the migrant workers.

Finally, it is significant to mention that at the same time as data for this research was collected, there has been a public debate in Iceland on migrant workers and their wages. The news reported that the rights of migrant workers, including migrant workers in the tourism industry, were frequently compromised and that they were often exploited. It is likely that this is one of the reasons that many hotels were not interested in participating, fearing that I would be addressing issues of exploitation, even when these problems were not present. This implies that the hotels that participated in this research are hotels who do not compromise their worker's rights, at least not willingly, hence issues of exploitation were not a major topic of conversation in the interviews.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of each study and having done so, I will now present the findings of the case study in three separate chapters. First, it is outlined how migrant workers experienced moving to Iceland and what motivated them to move to Iceland to begin with. After that the focus will shift to their experience of working in an Icelandic hotel and the key aspects that influenced their experience. Finally, work attitudes of migrant workers as well as Icelandic workers will be discussed.

## 5 Moving to and finding employment in Iceland

This chapter will present the first of three parts of the results of this study. It begins by addressing what motivations the participating migrant workers had for moving to Iceland, what factors contributed to them searching for and/or finding employment in the tourism industry and how they experienced moving to Iceland. The latter part of this chapter addresses that moving to Iceland and pursuing work in the tourism industry entailed a risk for the participants.

### 5.1 Motivations for moving to Iceland and working in the tourism industry

The decision to move and take up work in a new country is based on individual motivations, as previously mentioned. Therefore, it is impossible to present an all-encompassing overview of motivations, which influence migrant workers' decision of moving to Iceland and working in the tourism industry. However, as certain motivations are found to be more prominent, this chapter will detail what motivations the participants said to have played an important role in their decision-making process. Most participants expressed more than one motivation.

The first main motivation was that employment in Iceland is characterised by a higher salary compared to many other countries. This reason was most prominent from the perspective of those research participants who were from Poland. With regards to why they had moved to Iceland, one phrased it in the following way:

*Because of money, you know. In Poland I have a salary of like thirty, forty thousand per month. And you know we have to pay for house, for food, for everything. So here it's easier. Much easier.*

Due to the higher salary the participants were able to positively influence their economic situation. Many of them also reported that while they were able to earn comparably more money, they were at the same time also able to save more money. For some participants the prospect of an improved economic status was the most important aspect, regardless of the type of job. One participant said, *“You have a really good salary for the shitty job. [...] So it's a good place to save some money in a short time”*. From this perspective it is clear that the job in the tourism industry is regarded as a position offering low social status, but this status is accepted as a means to improve the economic status. Asked about whether a position as a house-keeper in their home country would be of interest to them, it was stated, *“It just [does] not make sense to do this job in Poland”*, where such a position would have offered both low social as well as economic status.

Another participant expressed that working in a countryside hotel was of advantage considering that:

*It's a little bit easier here to save money cause we're out in the country and not in the big city, so it's also different. [...] Our first priority was to save money so coming here and living a little bit outside of the society or whatever, it's a huge advantage because you don't spend that much money on anything pretty much.*

Here, the participant was happy that there were few opportunities to spend the money they earned, which helped achieve the goal that had originally influenced the decision of moving to Iceland.

For many participants, moving to Iceland also offered them a way to combine work and travel. One participant said that they had moved to Iceland “*just to raise some money. Also we always wanted to see Iceland. So the opportunity came and we just decided to go*”. Another described the following:

*This is the main reason. Because now me and my boyfriend we have the time in our life that we are travelling around the world so we are just staying here, here, here, saving money and go somewhere.*

Another participant felt that this was especially good for young people, “*I think especially when you are young and when you get money very fast. This is a good way to get a job for example on a holiday here*”. Without working in Iceland, some participants feared they would not have been able to come to Iceland at all. They considered working in Iceland as the only way for them to see and explore Iceland. With that regard, one participant stated that Iceland was so far away, that they could never go on holiday in Iceland, instead they decided to move to Iceland. Another explained that they had dreamed of travelling to Iceland for many years, ever since they first heard Icelandic music from Sigurrós and Björk. Working in Iceland was therefore seen as a means of making this dream finally come true.

While some participants expressed an interest in travelling specifically to Iceland, others had simply wanted to go abroad and experience a new country. They showed a general interest in getting to know new cultures by combining work and travel, rather than just experiencing Iceland. For example:

*Iceland is for me, is like pff, I don't know anything about Iceland, you know, and this is a good thing to combine for me. Work and you know to get to know some culture, some people, different than my country.*

Here, it was about getting to know any new culture and the participant had thus been open with regards to which country they would move to. Most participants expressed that they had little knowledge about Iceland before moving, consequently Iceland was deemed an exciting and unfamiliar destination, which would offer an experience in a new country and culture, unlike others they had previously lived in or visited.

The prospect of experiencing something new and different was generally seen as positive. While some participants wanted to experience a new country, others were in general looking

for new experiences. As a response to why they moved to Iceland, one participant said, “*I want to try something new and have more experience for my life*”. Another participant expressed the desire to try and live in the countryside. Coming from a big city, it was a completely new experience to live in a remote area.

The prospect of being able to experience something new, achieve a higher salary as well as combine work and travel are motivations that in themselves do not automatically lead to migrants pursuing work specifically within the tourism industry. These three goals could also be accomplished by working in other industries in Iceland, and therefore it was of interest to see why the participants chose to work in tourism rather than other industries. When asked about their application process, only a few participants had sent applications for jobs outside of the tourism industry with the majority focusing on tourism employment. Out of the ten interviewed migrant workers, two had worked in other industries in Iceland before switching to tourism. Also, two of the participants had been employed at other tourism businesses in Iceland before taking on the job at the hotel that they worked at when the interview took place. Hence, the majority of the participants had sought to work specifically in tourism from when they moved to Iceland and were employed at the hotel for the entire duration of the time that they have lived in Iceland.

Some participants felt that their previous background or their skill set would be suitable for tourism employment. They had not worked in the industry before, but had found that certain skills they possessed would be of value. As an example, the participants described that they either spoke multiple languages, had previously worked in customer service or had an educational background, such as business-related studies, all of which they thought could be relevant to a position in tourism.

While some felt that they had been able to make use of certain skills, others reported that they had been able to get a job within the tourism industry despite a lack of skills, which they had believed to be necessary for tourism employment, or which were in fact necessary for tourism employment in their home country:

*Well, for example what I am doing here exactly, the job, for me it's really, really good. It's actually been easier for me to find something in the field I want here than in [home country]. Because in [home country] there are so many rules. Typically, if you want to work in a hotel as a receptionist you have to go to the hotel school. And for example here, because I have all those languages and I type very fast, it helped me a lot. And then the rest I just learn. But for example, in [home country] they tend to be like “You need ten years of experience before applying for this job”. It's really, really hard. And I mean even if you have like let's say a diploma or something in the field you want to work in, they will be like “You need experience”.*

The entry barrier for work within the tourism industry is therefore lower in Iceland compared to some of the participants' home countries. Many jobs within the Icelandic tourism industry do not demand a particular educational or professional background, thus it is easy to enter the industry without any prior experience of working in tourism. For some participants, moving to Iceland was then a way of making their dream of working in this particular field come true. One participant had wished to work in a hotel for a longer period of time. Another had wanted to become a chef, but since they had not pursued this profession before, they had

less experience than others who had worked in the industry for a longer time. In their home country, they were therefore comparably less qualified. In Iceland, they were able to get a job within a hotel or restaurant without many years of experience. Here it becomes evident that jobs within the Icelandic tourism industry are readily available, which is positive for migrant workers with no or little experience of working in tourism.

In general, many participants described that it was easy to get a job within tourism:

*We just wrote a few hotels and then you know this hotel just wrote us back and we were already set up, so it was kind of, I was surprised that it went so easy. [...] Because it was like maybe three days of looking for work. And we were already set up for everything and yeah, so it was kind of fun. [...] Usually I have this experience of looking for a job for a long time. And you know so that was very easy.*

Another participant also felt that it had been very easy to move to Iceland and get a job within the tourism industry, saying that “*We just pack and fly*”. How long it took to get a job within the tourism industry differed from each participant to the next and varied, for example, based on the time of the year that they had applied. One participant told that they had applied at the beginning of the year, not knowing that most hotels in Iceland are experiencing a low season at that time and are not hiring.

There was also a clear difference between those migrant workers who were flexible with regards to the location of their work and those who wanted to live in a particular region within Iceland. Naturally, those that were flexible were able to find a job quickly as they sent out multiple job applications. A few of the participants had moved to Iceland to join their spouses, who were either migrant workers themselves or Icelandic; those participants wanted to find work within a specific region of Iceland, close to their spouses’ workplace. All of them found that their employment options were quite limited. For instance, one said, “*The job pool is very small. So basically you cannot apply for what you want. You get whatever you can get*”. Another participant said that for them the only employment option in the area had been working in a hotel or a large factory, and that they had preferred to work in a hotel, where they could put some of the skills and experience to use. Even though it often took comparably longer to search for a job in a specific location, the workers still found that it did not take a long time for them to find employment and agreed that it was relatively easy to obtain a job in tourism.

Therefore, it is obvious that positions within Iceland’s tourism industry are readily available and that jobs in other industries are in fact limited in the Icelandic countryside. Regardless of whether employment within tourism was the only option for migrant workers, or if they explicitly wanted to work in tourism, the participants found that hotels in particular were an interesting workplace with a wide range of positions. As stated earlier, these positions did not often demand a certain expertise and migrant workers were able to find a job suitable to their background. Furthermore, those that especially moved to Iceland with a spouse thought that the variety within hotels was of advantage:

*We were thinking about something else [than the tourism industry] but then as we read a lot of forums about work in Iceland we thought it’s most common to find a normal job so that we can work together*



*in the same place and also, I think it was easier to find a job for a couple together in the tourism industry than anything else. And also, I think it's fun. It's better than working in you know some factory or whatever. Also like you can do many things, like you can do waitering, you can do house-keeping, you meet people and we just thought it's more convenient for us to do that instead of anything else.*

The variety of employment options within hotels was considered positive, both because it offered a fun element and increased the chances of finding suitable work for both parties if the migrant workers moved with their spouse or friend. In fact, it was very common that migrant workers moved either to join a spouse or moved with their spouse or friend. Out of the ten migrant workers who were interviewed, only three had moved to Iceland by themselves, one of which had moved through an agency where they met fellow migrant workers on the way to Iceland. Hence, it was uncommon that the migrant workers were on their own upon arrival to Iceland.

## **5.2 Risk reduction**

Moving to Iceland and working in the tourism industry entailed a risk factor for all participants as they were unsure what their life in Iceland was going to be like. Only a few had travelled to Iceland before moving and as mentioned before, had little knowledge about Iceland. By moving with a friend or spouse they were able to reduce or at least share this risk.

The majority of participants were uncertain how long they planned to stay in Iceland and most expressed that they had initially wanted to stay for a short time but had already stayed for a longer period of time than originally anticipated. At the time that they decided to come to Iceland they had reassured themselves that if they did not like it, then they could leave at any time. So they said, for example, *“Of course I didn't know what it was going to be like. [...] and if I don't like it I can always leave”*, thereby softening the risk of moving to Iceland.

Most participants also took other measures to reduce the risk of moving to Iceland and working in the tourism industry, such as doing what they often referred to as ‘research’ about Iceland. One participant told, *“The only information I knew about Iceland was that there is fifteen degrees all over the year”*, and that after getting the job *“I was looking for every information. Every”*.

Another important aspect to reducing potential risk and a clear advantage of working in hotels was that housing for the migrant workers was included. The majority of the participants referred to this as one of the main benefits that they received. The provided accommodation was a part of the hotel or in close proximity:

*I think that everybody who comes for the first time at least to Iceland, or seasonal workers, are looking more for places with accommodation provided. I think that's a very big plus because maybe you're staying here for three months, maybe longer like in my case, but you never know. And you don't want to have a fuss with*

*finding an apartment, doing paperwork and etc. and etc. [...] You know that you are going to sleep that night somewhere. Not on the road.*

Similarly, another participant stated the following:

*We were surprised that it's so easy, like accommodation was easy, because it's right here next to the job so that was a huge thing because if we'd go to England then we'd have to look by ourselves for something to live.*

Another aspect that softened the risk for migrant workers was the fact that most of them knew other workers who had been to Iceland or were currently still in Iceland, and had had a good experience working in the Icelandic tourism industry: *"We have a lot of friends that come here in the summer time to work over the summer in the hotels"*. Another participant described that they had originally planned to move to London to work, but were then advised by friends who had worked in Iceland's tourism industry that it was easy to obtain a job in this industry in Iceland. Yet another said, *"It was a friend that mentioned Iceland. She was working in Iceland. So that's how I like got an idea"*. The idea of moving to Iceland had not occurred, until they were told about the possibility of going to Iceland. The element of word-of-mouth clearly influenced some of the participants' decision of moving to Iceland, working in the tourism industry or both. The friends or acquaintances that had lived and worked in Iceland proved to be an important and reliable source in order to assess whether moving to Iceland would be a good choice for the research participants. It also helped to lower the overall risk associated with moving to a new country.

An added incentive of knowing someone who had worked in Iceland was that these friends and acquaintances were often able to provide better access to jobs. Some respondents said that they had found work at the same hotel as their friends because their friends had provided them with the contact:

*We had like a big plus because we had a friend. If we were like looking for a job elsewhere it would probably have been harder for me [to find a job]. So this was easy, very easy for us.*

All three hotel managers who were interviewed confirmed that having a friend working at the hotel was an advantage for migrant workers who were searching for work in Iceland. The managers each described that they received numerous applications through e-mail; one hotel even received frequent visits from migrant workers in person. One of the hotel managers said, *"The amount of people that come here applying for a job, it is completely unbelievable"*. Another commented, *"I receive ten applications a day. I am just, I am drowning"*. So although jobs in tourism are readily available, there appears to be a high interest from migrant workers. Mostly, the hotel managers had stopped advertising if they had vacant positions, and only advertised if they specifically wanted to hire Icelandic-speaking employees, for example in the reception. While the hotel managers valued job-specific experience, the applications often indicated that most had little or no experience working in a hotel. One of the hotel managers described that they were most often looking for *"people who had sometime in their lives worked in some hotel job"*, but the vast majority of applicants were inexperienced. Therefore, the hotel managers focused on applicants with social and communication skills. However, these skills are often difficult to evaluate,

especially when the applicant cannot present him- or herself in person. As one of the managers described, *“You cannot see it. Beforehand. You cannot see it beforehand. Some people that you hire will not have these qualities. But you cannot see it until afterwards”*. In evaluating whether migrant applicants had these skills, the hotel managers typically used Skype as a tool if the applicants were applying from abroad. Overall, hiring a migrant worker who the employer has not met in person, entailed a risk for the employers. Hence, the hotel managers often preferred to hire applicants who those already working at the hotel knew. This way of finding new employees was often referred to as ‘one-knows-another’, meaning that one employee would know a person who would become the next employee. One of the hotel managers described that they had, for example, hired almost all of their waiters by asking other waiters for recommendations, thereby reducing the risk both for employers and applicants. Applicants became more ‘real’ to employers if they were familiar to anyone who was working in the hotel, and for the migrant workers who applied it decreased the risk of moving to Iceland, if they knew someone who was working at the hotel and could tell them about their experiences.

In general, moving to Iceland and taking up work in the tourism industry was characterised by uncertainty and implied a risk factor for the migrant workers, which could be lowered by having friends who had lived in Iceland or by moving with a spouse or friend to Iceland. When asked about their expectation of Iceland, the participants expected little of their workplace and were more concerned about what living in Iceland would be like. As mentioned before, many had gathered information about Iceland before moving; however despite this research, the majority of the migrant workers were surprised about the reality of being in Iceland: *“I was doing research. I was reading a few articles. But nothing can prepare you for it. [...] It’s not worse and better. It’s just like different”*. Some of them were surprised by the lack of public transportation and the distances between towns, others by the weather and still others by the nature. But overall, they agreed that the reality was different from what they had imagined beforehand.



## 6 The experience of working in a hotel

This chapter will present the second part of this study's findings, which relate to the migrant workers' experiences after they moved to Iceland and started working at the hotels. It is important to note that hotels have various positions and not all hotels have the same positions. The migrant workers who were interviewed for this research project worked mainly in three different departments: restaurant, reception and house-keeping. Each of these departments had differing characteristics that influenced how migrant workers perceived their employment.

The first difference is whether the employees within each department had the same cultural background or different backgrounds. In the hotels of this study, there were differences with regards to employees' nationalities and their cultural background from one department to the other. Icelandic employees were commonly working in reception with a few also in the restaurant, whereas only migrant workers were employed in house-keeping.

The jobs also varied according to the level of guest communication. Whether employees had frequent interactions with hotel guests depended on their position at the hotel. Those working in reception had a high amount of guest interaction, whereas those in house-keeping had little or no contact.

A third differing characteristic was that employees working in reception thought that their responsibilities were diverse. They felt that they never experienced the same day twice and that time passed quickly: *"You are never bored at work, you simply don't have time for being bored"*. However, those in house-keeping considered their work highly routinised. Some of them described their work as boring and felt that time passed quite slowly, opposite to what those working in reception experienced.

Similarly, there were distinctions with respect to the level of difficulty each position encompassed. Those in reception experienced mental stress, which made their work often difficult. They frequently felt that everything was happening at the same time, making it hard to maintain a good overview. Their work environment was generally quite chaotic, and it was stressful to keep up with every phone call, e-mail and customer request. Those working in house-keeping often described their jobs as easy, saying that you would not need a lot of training or experience in order to complete the tasks. However, the nature of their work was physical and those working in house-keeping were often physically tired. One participant described house-keeping as cardio. While the tasks themselves were regarded as easy, the physical work and often stressful environment of the hotel resulted in fatigue from their jobs.

The last difference between the departments is related to the working hours. Those working in the reception and restaurant were working morning, day and evening shifts, whereas those working in house-keeping worked only day shifts. Whether the shifts were regarded as positive or negative by migrant workers varied greatly. Some of them preferred to work in house-keeping during the day as this was more family-friendly. Others preferred the shifts

in the reception and were happy to have free days between the shifts. However, a downside to working in the tourism industry was the seasonality. This meant that the workload greatly differed between months. Working hours were often unpredictable and employees would be asked to work extra hours when needed: *“Because if there is more job to do of course that requires more time so I’m coming a little bit earlier”*. Seasonality also meant that some jobs were only available for a limited time period, so one participant had worked in other tourism-related positions in Iceland, switching jobs, before receiving permanent work at the hotel. Also, some participants were unhappy about having to work during holidays (e.g. Christmas or summer holiday). In the end, many migrant workers felt they were working all the time and had little free time: *“Because I was working so I cannot take the orlof [vacation] or something. Or holidays or anything because I’m working and working and working”*.

These five differences created benefits and challenges associated with each position and were often also perceived differently by the participants. Some were happy that they had frequent contact with guests, others were content with minimal contact. Yet a few participants were pleased with a routine job, and others preferred more diverse tasks. However, all of these aspects can also be applied to Icelandic workers, thereby they do not highlight any benefits and challenges experienced specifically by migrant workers. The benefits and challenges that are experienced by migrant workers are presented below. It should be noted that some of these benefits and challenges are though directly influenced by some of the aforementioned differences between positions. Therefore, some of the five differences described earlier will reappear and be described in more detail in the following chapters.

## 6.1 Communication and teamwork

Communication and teamwork were viewed as a key aspect of hotel employment, both by migrant workers and the hotel managers. One hotel manager said that being able to communicate and work together was an important skill that employees needed:

*This is probably most important for me. That they can work together with others. That the group working together is good. I feel like that is probably most important. And of course, that they are professional and everything, but human interaction is very important. Because if there is one rotten apple in the hotel, everything gets affected.*

The most common answer to the question of what the migrant workers considered as good about their work was the fact that they had good relationships with their co-workers. For example, they would say, *“We have a nice atmosphere here. We have nice people”*. They valued that their work was based on teamwork and that they were not alone with their tasks and responsibilities: *“You always have somebody to watch your back”*. Instead, they had a group of fellow co-workers who could support them:

*I like contact with people. When you come to work and you have the guys and the team which make your day good and happy. [...] It’s the most important thing to have a very good team and people around you.*

Being able to talk to, establish trust and build friendships with co-workers was regarded as an essential advantage. One participant believed that the hotel employees often connected well because many of them had similar interests. Working in the tourism industry, most shared a common interest in travelling, for example. Since they frequently lived together with fellow migrant workers in the housing provided by the hotel, they also spent their spare time together. Many participants established friendships with their co-workers. Overall, social relations at the work place were viewed as one of the most important components to the job. Good rapport helped ease the negative aspects of the work, such as the sometimes mundane routine of house-keeping or the stressful environment in the reception: *“As far as the atmosphere at work is fine, then I don’t really have that much stuff that I would say is bad”*.

As teamwork was a characteristic element of their work, the migrant workers also valued that sometimes they would assist the workload of other departments within the hotel. This was seen as positive, especially by those migrant workers whose daily tasks were routine: *“Personally I like it because you learn more. It is a good experience. And you can take a good look at the hotel as a let’s say unit”*. However, one participant felt that when they were helping out on a regular basis, that their responsibilities were not so clear cut:

*Right now, I am doing everything. And it’s very bad because if you are doing everything you are doing nothing and you are responsible for nothing, because you are responsible for everything. [...] Because if you are thinking about everything you are losing your mind.*

In this case, the employee was working in different positions every day and therefore had no defined responsibilities. It was important that the employees would have clear responsibilities; if they did, then they would welcome the chance to occasionally help out in other departments and valued the multiple tasks that were given within the hotel.

Additionally, working in a team was a positive factor with regards to learning:

*It’s always nice working with others because from every person you pick something that you like in an organisation or how they are doing it. That didn’t cross your mind. Oh, this is a better way to do it! So that’s why I love working in a team because you always get some pointers from others.*

Most of the participants were trained by other co-workers when they started to work at the hotel, so co-workers had taught them job-specific skills. Some had also begun to teach other new co-workers.

The importance of teamwork within the hotel was also physically noticeable, as observed by one participant. Coming from a job with individual desks, working in a hotel was different since everyone works in a shared space together. They felt that the teamwork and sense of community was part of the Icelandic culture, particularly the Icelandic work culture. In this participant’s home country, there was an *“individual spirit”* at work, but in Iceland everyone is *“part of the team”*.

Although most participants were happy with regards to their interaction and communication with co-workers, some expressed that there was a division between departments. While they would have healthy professional and personal relationships with the co-workers within their department, it was apparent that these relationships did not always stretch across all departments of the hotels. A few participants described a barrier between departments, especially between house-keeping and reception. One participant working in house-keeping pointed out the following:

*When you have a hard day, supposed to be eight people at work and you're gonna have only four people at work and you're asking for help, nobody helps you. [...] Sometimes, it's not me, but sometimes the girls have a feeling like sometimes we are second category.*

Here, the migrant worker explained that while they sometimes helped out in other departments, the house-keeping department did not receive help in return. It was found especially frustrating that those working in the reception did not help with house-keeping, when the house-keeping team was understaffed. The participant also expresses that the team of 'girls' in house-keeping felt that they often were 'second category', thinking that their status within the workplace was lower compared to other workers.

As previously mentioned and with respect to the hotels that participated in this research, there was also a cultural barrier between the departments with the majority of employees in the reception being Icelandic and the majority of employees in the restaurants and house-keeping migrant workers. This further creates a division between departments and workers from different cultural backgrounds. One participant relayed the following:

*I was working with seven Icelandic people and I was the only one who was from abroad so if I were going for lunch, going with seven people from Iceland, I was always alone.*

Having groups of the same nationality working closely together was perceived as negative by this migrant worker and paved the way for excluding those, who did not belong to the same nationality.

From a managerial perspective, groups of the same nationality were also regarded as troublesome:

*When you have different nationalities then you need to be careful about the balance. It is, well, the different nationalities group themselves together. Against other nationalities. [...] If there is no balance, if one nationality is much bigger than the others, then it can be just horrible.*

Having different nationalities and a diverse workforce was not regarded as troublesome, but if there was one nationality that constituted the majority of workers, then this was considered destructive for the morale within the hotel. One manager stated that having a dominant nationality in the workplace often led to bullying of other co-workers who were not of the same nationality. The hotel manager also added that one dominant group could pose as a threat to the overall management of the hotel. This manager had experienced that sometimes these groups of workers from the same nationality would get a leader of their own, who



would ‘manage’ the workers. This leader would then also overrule the management of the hotel manager.

This dominance of one nationality was seen as problematic, regardless of which particular nationality it was that was dominant. If the majority of workers were, for instance, Polish, then Icelanders and other nationalities would be excluded. The same was the case if the majority of workers were Icelandic, as all other nationalities would potentially feel excluded or become victims of bullying. One of the managers said:

*Icelanders seek out places where they know that other Icelanders are as well. And this is the same for other nationalities as well. They group themselves together. [...] This is just how it is. This is just a fact and well, Icelanders are not better than others.*

The hotel manager described that having a balance of nationalities was the most important and at the same time most difficult managerial challenge. They would either have to hire all workers from different countries to have a diverse workforce, or they would have to hire all workers from the same nationality. The latter was often the case for house-keeping. For example, one manager said that they preferred to hire only Polish girls for house-keeping: *“I don’t try to hire workers with different nationalities. Would never work out”*.

## 6.2 Guest interaction

For those working in the reception of hotels, guest interaction was a main element of their perceived benefits and challenges in their work environment. Guest interaction was a prevalent positive factor, while at the same time being a key negative aspect. As outlined by one of the participants, *“I really enjoy communicating with them. But sometimes they don’t want to communicate”*.

In those cases where communication with the guests was enjoyable it was viewed as a big advantage of working in the reception. Sharing knowledge with the guests was a way of giving something to the guests and helping them, for example by pointing out places to travel:

*Most of the people are happy. And the customer service element is always really fun when you’re working with guests and they’re really happy and you know you’re making their day by you know telling them where to go, what to visit and they come back and tell you they had an amazing day.*

Often, the guests appreciated this assistance, which in turn was a beneficial reassurance for the employee. Some participants mentioned stories about how they provided special service to guests, such as when the guests were on their honeymoon, and how it was *“always fun when you are doing a job and can make other people happy”*.

Another positive side of guest interaction was that talking to guests from their home country became a source of *“that taste of home”*:

*I end up having a lot of conversations with [nationality] guests and we'll chat about you know where we're from and they'll always be like "Oh you're [nationality]" and then we'll start talking and it's kind of nice, like just to have that taste of home.*

Unsurprisingly, those working in the reception were also generally very tired from the interaction with guests. Most agreed that rude guests were the exception, but as pointed out by one of the participants, *"The bad ones stick in your memory"*. So while negative guest interaction was not too common, it would have a long-lasting impact. Adverse situations were hard to avoid, could not be fled and had to be endured. They workers sometimes felt as if they were taking part in a play where they would have to abide to the customers' every wish. The customers often had control over them and were quite demanding.

One participant noticed a difference between customers from different nationalities: *"Some countries, they are used to people doing everything for them. And they treat us like travel agents. We're not that"*. They also added, *"We're still human. We're not a computer"*. Most of the guests were international, but sometimes Icelandic guests would stay at the hotels and be frustrated that the particular employee was not Icelandic. In a few cases, they would then prefer to speak to the Icelandic reception staff rather than the migrant worker.

Whereas guest interaction was a major driver for how employees working in the reception felt, it only minimally affected migrant workers employed in house-keeping. They did not have the chance nor the time to speak with guests:

*I don't really have that much time to, and you know also because of my position I don't think I have that much opportunity to talk to them. Sometimes, but it's just "Hello" and that's pretty much it.*

Most of those working in house-keeping agreed that their conversations with guests, if they had any conversations at all, were quite shallow with guests asking short questions regarding house-keeping, such as where to get more towels. Sometimes, if guests would engage in conversations with those working in house-keeping, the guests would ask where the worker was from and showed an interest in their home country. Similarly to those working in the reception, guests' interest in their home country was regarded as positive. If guests would ask questions about Iceland, for example where to travel and what to see in Iceland, most working in house-keeping would refer them to the reception. Most often this was because those working in house-keeping did not possess the knowledge to answer the questions. One participant discussed that they felt that they were not allowed to answer these questions:

*They ask things about Iceland which I am not at authority to say anything about it. But then I have my colleagues [in the reception] and then I am like "Please go there" and they say nice things about Iceland.*

## 6.3 Acquisition of cultural knowledge and linguistic skills

### 6.3.1 International contacts and interaction

The tourism industry, including hotels, is an international environment, which most of the participants regarded as beneficial, chiefly because their employment at the hotel fostered the acquisition of various cultural knowledge. Being able to meet people from all over the world was positively viewed:

*It was fun because every day you had customers from all over the world. From Chile, from Peru, from Australia, from Poland, from France, everybody. [...] It was nice that you meet people from all over the world.*

Not only were the customers from various countries around the world, but also their fellow co-workers. By speaking with guests or other co-workers about their home countries, the participants would get to know other cultures. For instance, the staff members of the hotels would get together to cook food from their home country, which was very interesting to the participants. One participant said the following:

*It's good that we're such a variety of people so that you have people from many countries. And I think that's also why we chose tourism. Because you can meet people from many countries. You know, just learn and maybe have the opportunity to come to a different country in the future. So that's also nice.*

Adding that:

*It's just good to have the connections around the world. [...] We love travelling around so it's always good to know somebody that actually lives in a place where we want to go.*

In a previous chapter, it had been noted that a dominance of one nation was regarded as troublesome. This also applies here, namely that by having a diverse group of co-workers, rather than a group of co-workers from one nation, the participants were able to get to know and learn more about the different cultures:

*It's better if you've got something, I don't know from Poland, from England, Lithuania, Icelandic, everything. Cause you have different, I don't know how to say it, different ways of thinking.*

What they learned from either guests or co-workers was first-hand and trustworthy information about their native countries. This information and knowledge was valuable to most of the participants, considering that many had originally moved abroad in order to experience a new culture among other motivations. Working in the hotel provided them with the opportunity to establish international contacts and opened up the possibility of visiting another country in the future.

Some participants also valued the chance to hear or practice other languages than their mother tongue. One, for example, enjoyed having a German co-worker with whom they could practice German as they had learned German, but did not often have the opportunity to speak it. Other participants described that they appreciated hearing multiple languages and were often curious about certain words or accents.

### 6.3.2 Learning about Iceland

The participants also showed an interest in Iceland. By working in a hotel, some of the migrant workers were able to get a better understanding about Iceland, including geographical facts and cultural impressions. One participant thought that working in a hotel was a good way to get to know the host country:

*I think it's always a good start because you can understand the culture more, I think, if you live in a hotel because there is a lot of people coming in to experience Iceland so you need to know some stuff about it, at least. It's always good to start from that.*

Those working in reception needed to know certain things about Iceland and have the necessary knowledge in order to answer the guests' questions. Therefore, their responsibilities at work demanded that they would acquire knowledge about Iceland:

*Only I think the people who aren't from here need to learn you know this specific stuff about like "Oh where is this, you know, tourist destination". Icelanders know this.*

Being able to recommend places of interest and point out locations on a map were examples which the participants named as required knowledge. Not having this background about Iceland has the potential to give migrant workers a disadvantage when applying for jobs in the reception. Hence, this supports the fact that Icelandic employees were more commonly working in the reception. However, most of the migrant workers who worked in the reception explained that since their work environment required certain knowledge about Iceland, they would learn quite quickly.

While the knowledge that those working in the reception acquired was often first and foremost of interest to tourists, this information also proved to be very useful for the participants. One explained that they had inquired about certain services, such as taxis in the countryside, for a guest, which they then later needed themselves: *"So these are good things to know also for myself"*.

It was not only helpful to know where certain services were located, but general knowledge about places in Iceland was also valuable. Certain places in Iceland they learned about themselves and did not tell tourists about; instead they visited the places themselves. By working in a hotel and knowing what to recommend to tourists, those working in the reception also became a go-to person for friends and family from abroad who wanted to come to Iceland. Thus, the migrant workers had become certain 'experts' in Iceland who could give out travel tips.

Those working in the reception of the hotel had the added advantage of joining tours for free, thereby learning more about Iceland:

*This is a big advantage, it's for example if I would like to go on an ice cave tour, I can go for free, because of course we are at the front desk, we are selling tours [...] and then you know you can sell it much better. This is a big advantage that we have. I would say also you know it helps you to know more about things to see. You always learn. Of course, there are a lot of things I still have to learn about Iceland you know [...]. There are still so many things to see but you're always you know discovering new places.*

The work environment of those working in house-keeping did not require specific knowledge about Iceland due to the fact that the employees were not in frequent contact with guests. However, they still showed a genuine interest in learning about Iceland. In part, this enthusiasm had been there prior to moving to Iceland, as one of the factors to move to a new country and experience an unfamiliar culture. But this interest was further fuelled by working in the hotel, where they would occasionally be questioned by guests about Iceland and then be inspired to see more and learn about Iceland.

Regardless of the position they had within the hotel, most participants said that they had learned about Iceland from co-workers, both Icelandic co-workers and other migrant co-workers. They had learned “*definitely by talking with Icelandic people and with people that live here longer. They can always tell us some stuff about Iceland that I didn't know*”. Another participant was happy to tell that they had learned knitting and cooking Icelandic food from their Icelandic co-workers.

Apart from talking with co-workers who had lived in Iceland for a longer period of time, the migrant workers also took matters in their own hands in order to learn about Iceland:

*We try to you know read a lot, as much as you can cause that's our interest to know about the place we are in. And also, you know if we live here outside of society then we can you know take a car and drive a little bit around Iceland as well. Because you know sometimes you want to do something else than work.*

Here, they read about Iceland, but they also travelled in order to see and explore Iceland. Unsurprisingly, the interest in travelling around Iceland was present among all migrant workers. As part of their motivation for moving to Iceland, most of them had already been interested in travelling around Iceland before starting their work at the hotel. In the case of the participant who phrased the quote above, the fact that they were living in the countryside of Iceland rather than a larger city further drove their interest and chance to travel. However, how much they had actually been able to travel in Iceland since moving to Iceland varied greatly from one participant to the other. The amount of travelling that the participants had undertaken was determined by two key factors.

First, those who had a car or had access to a car had been able to travel more compared to those who did not have access to a car. This was unsurprising considering that public transportation is highly limited in Iceland. As one participant said, “*Before car, before we buy car, we can't go and you know, we are stuck here. Definitely stuck*”.

Second, the amount of spare time and holiday that migrant workers took, or were able to take, influenced how much time they had for travelling. As mentioned, many described that

they worked a lot and rarely had time off: *“It’s a lot of work so I’m almost every day in work. It’s like when they need me so I am here”*. Those, whose main priority was to earn money, often welcomed the chance to work extra hours, but at the same time many also wanted to travel in Iceland, which did not go well together. Thus, they felt that it was difficult to take time off as the hotel was a busy environment. One of the participants described that they had wanted to travel in Iceland, but had not had the time to do so in a while. As a response to when they thought it would be likely that they could travel next, they replied, somewhat sarcastically, *“I don’t know. Maybe next year”*. Due to limited spare time, the participants had mostly undertaken daytrips or trips that lasted no longer than three days. Another discussed that they were often very tired from the work, so they used their spare time to rest:

*We are sleeping. Sometimes we take a car from the workers and we go to [town] and to see something you know here, here, here. But most of the time we just rest.*

Most of the research participants had travelled a bit in Iceland, but they had to restrict their trips to the areas that were close to the hotel they worked at.

Learning about Iceland also meant learning about the working rights and labour regulations of Iceland. Most of the participants had tried to acquire knowledge about the rights and regulations by themselves or through Icelandic unions. One of the hotel managers had also actively helped and explained how Icelandic work contracts, hours, pay slips and taxes are regulated. The hotel manager recognised that this resulted in a larger workload:

*It is 100% more work to employ a migrant worker. Much more bureaucracy and much more that I need to do. The Icelander has a kennitala, he knows what he is going to do. He knows how the salaries are. He knows how the unions are. It is much easier to employ an Icelander than a migrant worker. Per se. Most of them at least know the laws of Iceland. While the migrant workers don’t. And after they come here, it often takes some time to discuss this. How the salaries work, the unions, what one can do. There is much more work when you employ a migrant worker than an Icelander. Per se.*

Another manager said that migrant workers should acquire this knowledge by themselves:

*They simply don’t understand how the labour market is set up. [...] I think, you know, that an adult person should know his or her rights. That is what I think.*

### **6.3.3 Learning Icelandic**

The participants were also asked about the Icelandic language and whether they had tried to learn Icelandic. Out of the ten migrant workers who were interviewed, only one participant was able to speak Icelandic fluently. The majority of participants had learned a few words and all shared an interest in learning the language. However, most also found that the Icelandic language was very hard and therefore some had given up on learning. Others were still determined to improve their Icelandic language skills and were planning to take an Icelandic course. Thus, Icelandic skills and the interest in learning the language greatly varied among the group of participants.

It became quite evident that the work environment was able to support migrant workers in their effort to learn Icelandic if they worked in the reception of the hotel. This resulted in, as pointed out earlier, a positive influence on the acquisition of knowledge about Iceland as well as the Icelandic language. Those working in the reception often were with Icelandic co-workers and were able to pick up words and sentences from them. As one participant described, they worked closely with mostly Icelandic co-workers who spoke in Icelandic to each other. Every so often this meant that the participant was “*not in on the joke*”; they were therefore highly motivated to learn Icelandic to be ‘in on the joke’.

The receptionists also discussed that they encountered Icelandic through job-specific tasks, such as receiving phone calls in Icelandic, replying to e-mails in Icelandic as well as speaking to Icelandic hotel guests. Regarding Icelandic hotel guests, one participant said the following:

*I just feel awkward cause I would like to speak to them in their language but. They are in Iceland so it makes sense they would want to speak Icelandic. That's fair.*

In part their work environment motivated them to learn Icelandic, but also required that they would learn Icelandic in order to be able to provide better service to Icelandic guests in addition to answering phone calls and writing e-mails in Icelandic.

This was different for participants who occupied house-keeping positions. Most of them did not encounter Icelandic in their everyday work environment. Their fellow house-keeping colleagues were also migrant workers, so they spoke English among themselves. As previously described, some perceived a barrier between the different departments of the hotel, in a way that the reception was often a more Icelandic-speaking environment with the majority of employees being Icelandic and house-keeping an English- or Polish-speaking environment with the majority of employees being migrant workers. The workers therefore often sought to interact with their fellow migrant workers in a language that they could understand and spoke English to Icelandic colleagues working in the reception. Those working in house-keeping also rarely had contact with guests, but when they did, the guests were most often not from Iceland, and thus spoke in English. With respect to learning Icelandic, one participant pointed out, “*Because everybody speaks English of course it's gonna take you a longer time*”. Apart from Icelandic communication between the employees of the reception, the hotel environment was mostly English-speaking. Consequently, the work environment did not help or encourage the house-keepers to learn Icelandic.

One participant also noted that the working hours of the hotel had made it difficult to enrol into an Icelandic course. Most of the migrant workers worked shifts, also in the evening, and had little free time. Therefore, they simply did not have the time to study Icelandic or go to an Icelandic course. One had completed the first level of Icelandic while working office hours and after starting at the hotel, they had difficulties taking the second course: “*I wanted to go to the second level of Icelandic but I changed the job. I changed the hours of working so it was hard to get it*”.

While those working in house-keeping often had problems learning Icelandic, they all agreed that it was important for them to know it if they wanted to stay in Iceland, regardless of which position they held. Many had not decided how long they wanted to stay in Iceland and were contemplating their future employment options in Iceland. What they determined was

that if they wanted to have a future in Iceland and develop their career, they would need to learn Icelandic:

*I'm trying [to be an engineer] but I don't know Icelandic and that's a problem so no way I can be an engineer in Iceland. [...] I was trying. I am here two years so I am trying every month to get a let's say normal job. Not house-keeping or something. But it's very hard because I'm from abroad. I don't know Icelandic, so it's a big problem.*

This participant had studied engineering and was searching for a job in that field in Iceland. They had found work in the Icelandic tourism industry to begin with, but eventually wanted to be employed in a position where they could make use of their education. Due to the fact that they did not know Icelandic, they had been unable to find employment outside of tourism: *"Because in tourism, it's not a problem. I speak English, Polish and Spanish, so I'm multi-language. But I don't speak Icelandic".* Another participant said, *"If we want better job, you know, we need Icelandic".* Many found themselves left with few employment options other than working in tourism because they lacked Icelandic skills.

The hotel managers confirmed the importance of speaking Icelandic. One manager said that they would be happy if employees would develop careers within the hotel, taking on new responsibilities. Yet they also described that migrant workers were often limited to certain positions within the hotel due to a lack of proficiency in Icelandic and/or English:

*We are very happy about this [moving between positions in the hotel] and yes, this happens quite often, especially for us Icelanders. But the foreigners that work here are too bad at languages. They usually don't even speak proper English. That is just an Achilles heel. That is to say, it is because of language difficulties that people cannot take on other positions. [...] But the Icelanders, we of course all speak English and Icelandic. And some of course speak many more. And therefore, we can work in all positions.*

With regards to Icelandic, the three hotel managers agreed that Icelandic was a skill that was beneficial, if not crucial, for those working in the reception of the hotel. They also explained that ideally they would prefer to employ Icelanders. One manager remarked, *"Yes, I mean in a perfect world I would like to have Icelanders. But that is simply not possible".* Another said, *"Of course I would want to only have Icelanders".* When asked about the reason why they preferred to employ Icelanders, the answer was the same, mainly that Icelanders speak Icelandic. As one of the managers explained, *"because it is just comfortable. This is our mother tongue".* Then they added that, *"Of course the danger with this is that we lose our mother tongue in this industry".* As Icelandic is a language spoken worldwide only by few and is often considered under threat, the hotel managers felt they could contribute to preserving the Icelandic language by employing Icelanders.

Another advantage of employing Icelanders was that Icelandic guests often demanded to speak in Icelandic. One of the hotel managers said:



*I always need to have one Icelander waiting. Because we get, even though only 7% of our guests are Icelandic, there are many that come and simply want to speak their own language.*

Essentially, employing Icelandic workers was also a means to ensure a certain level of service to Icelandic guests. One of the hotel managers also acknowledged that many e-mails were written in Icelandic, which those who work in the reception must be able to understand and reply to.

It was interesting to see that most of them spoke about Icelanders rather than Icelandic-speaking employees. This could be partly explained by the fact that the hotel managers often regarded migrant workers as a temporary workforce. One of the managers found that the migrant workers were always “*on the way to leave*” to somewhere else other than Iceland and had little intention of staying. Consequently, the hotel managers felt that the workers showed little interest in learning the language:

*I feel like there is a crazy movement of people here. There is not even the slightest interest in this. [...] They have so little interest in becoming a part of our culture. They are always on the way to leave.*

Another hotel manager said that there was little interest in attending Icelandic courses:

*They are just not interested in this. We have been encouraging this, but it is of course often in the evening and they are of course working in the evening. From four until twelve.*

They added that all of the workers speak English, therefore the incentive to learn Icelandic was quite low. In congruence to what the migrant workers also experienced, the hotel manager acknowledged that the working hours were in fact often hindering migrant workers from attending a language course in order to learn Icelandic.

#### **6.3.4 Learning English**

Being able to speak Icelandic was seen as an important factor to obtain certain employment options, either within the hotel, the general tourism industry or other industries in Iceland. Apart from Icelandic, English was also important and often described as the minimum language criteria that migrant workers needed to be able to fulfil. One participant said:

*English, I need it, because sometimes people or customers ask me about something. So, I need it. But of course, it will be plus for me if I know Icelandic language.*

Even though customer interaction was not very common for those working in house-keeping, English was required for all positions, so that the employees would all have a common language to communicate with regardless of their nationalities. However, not all of the migrant workers were able to speak English (fluently) at the time that they moved to Iceland, and they had no other option than to work in house-keeping: “*Because my English is very bad so yeah, housekeeping for me it was*”. Only in the house-keeping department did the managers make exceptions and employ those who could not speak English.

It has been noted that working in a hotel is characterised by teamwork, thereby making communication an essential part of all of the migrant workers' daily work life. It was then necessary for those migrant workers, who did not speak any English or not very well, to develop their English skills not only to communicate with co-workers, but also with guests. As one participant stated, *"You have to learn English. This is the first important thing when you are going to this brand like hotels or restaurants"*. Another participant described how they cried after their first day at work. At that time, they had not been able to speak English very well, so meeting a multitude of new co-workers whom they could not speak to in a common language had been very overwhelming and upsetting. They explained that it had been very difficult to talk to their co-workers and not being able to ask for help.

The three hotel managers also explained that English skills were necessary, but often lacking. One of the hotel managers said, *"I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of those who were able to speak English at least a little bit"*. Another manager described that they demanded English skills from their employees, but that the migrant workers applying would sometimes lie about their English skills:

*[English] is the only qualification I demand. [...] There are differences in how this actually plays out. But there is always someone working in the hotel who then knows this language. It has happened that applicants lied in their initial interview, but it has worked out so far.*

One hotel manager also discussed that some migrant workers had exaggerated their English skills, thus it had been difficult to communicate with the employee:

*You have to welcome and introduce them to the hotel in a different way. You have to, you know, they of course do not speak English. Don't understand what you are telling them. You think they understand what you are telling them because you speak English. And they say "Yes".*

Another manager also recounted how a migrant worker had come to the hotel with her sister. Since the migrant worker was not able to speak English fluently, the sister, who did, would come as well and speak for the worker. This indirect way of communication was negatively viewed by the hotel manager.

In order to be able to speak to their managers as well as their co-workers, migrant workers who spoke little to no English had to start learning the language upon arrival to Iceland. And so, while learning Icelandic in an international work environment proved to be a challenge for many of the participants, the majority agreed that their work environment had beneficially helped them to learn or improve their English language skills. Their work environment encouraged them to learn and speak English daily with co-workers, managers and also, to a varying degree, guests.

## **6.4 Physical and social isolation**

Earlier it was mentioned that some of the migrant workers perceived an advantage to move to the countryside and live in a rural area. For those that came from cities, it allowed them

to experience something different from what they were used to, as the countryside life was much calmer than they were used to. Many of them felt safer compared to their home countries or cities, and some noticed that there was less traffic.

Not everybody had anticipated the isolation that could stem from living in a rural area: “*I did not realise how some places were isolated from each other. It [Iceland] is definitely bigger than it looks on the map*”. Another participant described that they were now “*living in the middle of nowhere*”. This isolation had in itself positive as well as negative components. For example, one participant explained that they could use the time between shifts to relax:

*I have a lot of time to be with myself and time to maybe develop some stuff that I didn't have time to do. But also, it can be very you know boring sometimes. There is nothing to do because it's so outside of and there is not that much around. But it's very, for me, it's very pleasing that for this time I'm outside of crowded places and just can relax a little bit and slow down in life.*

Similarly, another said the following:

*I'm from a big city so you know I need things to do. Cinemas, bars, restaurants and bla bla bla bla bla. Here we don't have nothing to do so it's a little bit boring. But no, it's okay. It's a good time to rest.*

These two as well as other participants described that their lives and their work environment in their home countries had been more hectic than in Iceland. Most of them regarded the Icelandic work culture as more relaxed compared to their home countries, despite the often stressful work environment at the hotel. Living in the countryside allowed them to relax.

A crucial aspect with respect to living in the countryside was transportation. The majority of participants agreed that having a car was a necessity when living in Iceland, mostly due to the fact that there is a lack of public transportation:

*It's very hard without the car. Because if you don't have a car and you need to go to Reykjavik or you need to buy something, or you want to go for a gym or anything, you need to have a car. [...] It's a huge problem.*

Not all participants of this study had a car, and those who did not had borrowed a car from co-workers, from the hotel or rented a car when they needed to go to towns, to Reykjavik, or had wanted to travel around in Iceland.

Living in the countryside without public transportation limited the participants as to where they were able to go. Their options were limited both in their spare time as well as during their work hours. One participant, for example, described that during lunch the workers had no other option than to eat in the staffroom. In their former job that had not been the case: “*You could leave the building. You could go somewhere. Obviously, that's not an option here*”. Here, they had to stay in the hotel building during their breaks, as there were no other places to go.

For those who had been provided housing by the hotel, it became evident that they spent the majority of their time at the hotel, either at work or in their spare time. Due to the hotel's location, the lack of transportation options and the number of hours they worked, they spent not only their working time at the hotel but also their spare time. Being at work most of the time also meant that they spent most of their time with their colleagues and had made far fewer social connections outside of work. As one participant noted, *"And so you are always around your colleagues"*. Another said, regarding their co-workers, *"If we have off, so we are together"*. Some viewed this as negative:

*It's like just even being alone like in a room by yourself. I find that like sort of you can breathe and reset. And then get back to work. And here it's kind of like you're there. The whole day. You don't leave and I don't know, I don't love that honestly.*

Here, the participant described that they were working together with their colleagues all day in a shared space, without being able to have a moment on your own. There are no private offices to 'escape' to. When one is at work, one is bound to be at work without being able to leave or have a moment to oneself. On the contrary, another participant found it helpful that they were working and living together with their co-workers as this helped them form friendships and prevented a feeling of isolation. They said, *"I don't feel so isolated"*, adding that it was *"maybe because my co-workers are also my friends. I don't know, we hang a lot together and maybe because of that"*.

Many of the participants therefore created social ties mostly with their co-workers and were unable to create friendships with members of the local community outside of work. Making new friends was hard and as one participant pointed out, there were no bars or other places to meet up outside of work. This made making friends more difficult compared to where they were from: *"It's okay but it's a lot different than what I'm used to, just in terms of meeting people. The community is so much smaller here"*. They also commented that it was especially hard to meet young people as most members of the community were older than them. One said:

*I mean it's hard and whenever you move to a new place, it's hard in terms of creating like a social network and you know meeting friends and getting situated, where are you gonna like get your haircut or something, but when you live in such a small town there's limited choice so there's one grocery store, two gas stations. You don't really have to adjust. You just have to get used to that [...]. Your routine is kind of already set for you in a way.*

Overall, being employed at a hotel in rural Iceland made the migrant workers prone to social as well as physical isolation.

## 7 Work attitude and commitment

This chapter will present the third and final part of the findings, which relate to the work attitudes of migrant workers. The migrant workers who participated as well as the hotel managers described that it was possible to distinguish different work attitudes between Icelandic workers and migrant workers.

From the perspective of the migrant workers, some of them recognised that they were working in positions that were unpopular in Iceland. For example, one participant said, *“But fact is there are not a lot of Icelandic people who want to do that [working in restaurant] which I can understand”*. They described that Icelandic workers would prefer to work in a restaurant or hotel as part-time employees while they were studying, but not as a full-time job. Icelanders would tend to *“keep studying or do something you know that they really like”*. Based on this, one could argue that jobs within the Icelandic tourism industry would often not be the positions that people ‘really like’, but rather do for a certain purpose.

Some participants also found that Icelandic workers complained too much about the work and that they showed little interest in working:

*They [Icelanders] are lazy. [...] My first impression was that you don't like to work. You just like to sit, have a coffee and another coffee. And just everything will be okay. And you don't have to do anything. That was my first impression. And I think it's not changing after these two years.*

Another also found that Icelanders were lazy and not fast enough when working, particularly in house-keeping: *“Sometimes new Icelandic women came to work in house-keeping. But I know after two days they are gone. They quit. Because it was so hard for them”*.

While some of them criticised Icelanders' attitude towards working in a hotel, there were of course also elements of the work, which the migrant workers considered negative, most of which were discussed in the previous chapter. However, some participants were of the opinion that it was important to look past all or many of the aspects, which they regarded as negative about their work. For example, one participant remarked, *“You have to do your job and if you think too much and complain about this, this, this and this, it's never going to be a good place”*.

By talking to the hotel managers, it was confirmed that there is often a difference in work attitudes of Icelanders and migrant workers. The managers also believed that the migrants were more hard-working, showing dedication at their work, compared to Icelandic workers, and were generally more positive. One manager said, regarding migrant workers, *“They are hard-working. Very hard-working”*. Another mentioned, *“They value that they have work. More than the Icelandic worker does. The Icelandic worker takes everything for granted and gets work either way and behaves accordingly”*. Here, a reference is made to the fact that

unemployment in Iceland is low, so that Icelanders rarely have to worry about becoming unemployed long-term.

One hotel manager also found that this attitude of Icelanders with respect to working in a hotel manifested itself in the fact that Icelanders were not afraid to call in sick, even if they were not sick. Per union contract, all workers have the right to two sick days per month and the manager stated, *“Icelanders now take these two sick days per month, almost all the time”*.

The hotel managers also agreed that it was often easier to assign tasks to migrant workers than Icelandic workers. One manager said the following:

*If you tell an Icelandic: “Could you do this?” “No, I just don’t have the time to do this”. That is the Icelandic. [...] However the migrant worker right away. Does the job.*

Similarly, another hotel manager said, *“There is just something about Icelandic like pride maybe. [...] It is very difficult to tell Icelanders what to do”*.

As had been mentioned before, most of the hotel managers stated that they had preferred to employ Icelandic workers because of their Icelandic skills. When asked about whether Icelanders had certain skills that gave them an advantage over migrant workers other than being able to speak Icelandic, one of the hotel managers replied, *“Apart from Icelandic? No. It’s just Icelandic”*. Similarly, one manager stated that they would be willing to accept Icelandic’s often negative attitude towards working for the sake that they know Icelandic. So even though the hotel managers regarded migrant workers’ work attitudes as more positive compared to Icelandic workers’, Icelandic remained the most important factor in determining who they would prefer to hire.

Despite wanting to hire Icelandic workers, the hotel managers were not able to do so, especially since most Icelanders were uninterested in working in hotels. If they could hire Icelanders, everybody would be speaking Icelandic, and everybody would tag along as a part of the team:

*Then everybody is part of the team and then just, speaking Icelandic. But that is not an option. That is just not an option. Icelanders are not willing to clean. Icelanders are not willing to work as waiters unless they receive some sky-high salary, something bla bla bla. They somewhat have their nose up in the air. That is just a fact. Therefore, you are forced to hire other nationalities.*

Another manager described the following:

*There are just not enough Icelanders to work in these positions. And there is unemployment in [region where the hotel is located]. And I for example received the list of everyone who was registered as unemployed for three years or more, they hung up on me as soon as they knew what I was going to do. All of the phone calls I got. It’s just, Icelanders, many of them don’t bother to work these positions. There has of course been a negative discussion about this. It was not like this before.*

The hotel manager refers to the fact that Icelandic media has been reporting that the tourism industry is a low-salary industry and also covering stories and cases of exploitation of workers in tourism. Icelanders therefore have little interest in working in hotels.

The few Icelanders that show an interest working in hotels are often young Icelanders, or as one of the hotel managers put it “kids”. These young Icelanders aged between twenty and twenty-seven years, often work at the hotels during the summer or part-time while studying. Therefore, the choice of employees was commonly between hiring young Icelanders or migrant workers. Many of the migrant workers were of course also in their twenties, but one of the hotel managers described that there was quite a difference in that young Icelanders were not committed to working:

*You cannot trust in them [young Icelanders]. I mean the foreign kids who come here and work, their schools ends sooner, starts later and they are here to work. That is a simple as it is.*

So while the migrant workers showed a more positive attitude towards working, they were also available for a longer period of time. Schools in Iceland lasted longer and Icelandic students were then often only available during June, July and parts of August. Since the high season in tourism in Iceland was expanding into May and September as well, the hotel managers needed to hire seasonal employees who were able to work during May and September as well, which was more often the case with migrant workers. In addition, one of the hotel managers told that Icelandic ‘kids’ often asked for summer holiday, either to take time off during a bank holiday in early August or to go to Spain for two weeks.

In addition, the same manager had experienced that not only seasonal migrant workers, but also migrant workers who planned to stay indefinitely ended up being employed longer at the hotels compared to Icelandic employees:

*There is always a renewal [of employees]. But most of those, who are foreign workers here, have now moved here. They are going to stay here forever, or at least until they decide otherwise. And the majority of those who worked here during the summer are coming back now in January. That is great for me. It's simply the best for me when employees return.*

In contrast, another had the impression that migrant workers were only temporarily in Iceland. Previously, it was stated that this particular hotel manager felt employees were “on the way to leave” and did not show an interest in becoming a part of the Icelandic society.

The migrant workers themselves were most often unsure about the future and what they were planning to do long-term. Out of the ten participants, three were quite certain they were going to live in Iceland long-term and stay employed at the hotel. Two were planning on living in Iceland for several years, but did not want to rule out that they would someday return to their home country. Yet other two wanted to continue to live in Iceland long-term, but were hoping to develop other careers, either within tourism or in the field of their education. The remaining three did not want to live longer in Iceland, nor did they wish to be employed in tourism long-term. They considered the option of returning to Iceland for seasonal work in the tourism industry, mostly in order to earn more money. However, in the long run they wanted to find a more suitable job for themselves. Since they did not feel that

they could do that in Iceland, particularly because of the lack of Icelandic skills, they were looking into jobs outside of Iceland. To conclude, the majority of the participants expressed vague plans, without wanting to commit fully to one scenario of their future. Most of them had already stayed longer in Iceland than they originally had planned. It is obvious that positive experiences at the workplace were a factor that contributed to migrant workers extending their stay in Iceland and in some cases assisting migrant workers in settling down in Iceland.



## **8 Discussion and implications**

### **8.1 The migrant worker perspective**

This study has found that hotel employment creates various benefits and challenges for migrant workers in Iceland. The findings highlight that migrant workers do not constitute a uniform group of mobile people (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Instead, they are a group of individuals who are each driven by personal motivations, engage in diverse experiences and perceive the same aspects of the employment, such as the daily routine, guest communication or work hours, in different ways. Thereby, this study supports Baum's (2012) argument that it is difficult to generalise the migrant workers experiences.

The complexity of the migrant workers' experiences becomes apparent when considering the various motivations for moving to Iceland and pursuing employment in the tourism industry. The participants expressed that they were motivated by more than one factor, thus their decision to move was often facilitated by multiple intertwining motivations. This study confirms the results of other studies (Baum et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2016; Underthun & Jordhus-Lier, 2018), namely that many migrant workers are driven mainly by the pursuit to improve their economic status. In addition, they wish to combine work with travel, experience something new and/or enhance their skills (Baum et al., 2007; Janta et al., 2012; Uriely, 2001). Many of the motivations expressed by the workers could have been fulfilled by working in industries other than tourism. Yet, the majority of the participants directly sought work in the Icelandic tourism industry, mostly due to following four reasons.

First, much like in other countries, jobs within the tourism industry are readily available and demand for workers is high (Baum, 2007; Baum, 2012; Devine et al., 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012; Ladkin, 2011; Péchenart, 2003). Naturally, this increases the chances for migrant workers to find quickly employment in Iceland. Most participants had decided to move to Iceland with a few weeks' notice and had been eager to secure employment soon. For migrants seeking employment, it is a clear advantage that they can start working in tourism shortly after beginning their search (Ladkin, 2011). In addition, by working in a hotel the migrant workers received housing, which immensely decreased both the effort and the risk of moving to Iceland. They explained that in other countries and/or industries they might need to search for housing.

Second, the entry barrier for hospitality jobs within Iceland is very low, so migrant workers with no prior experience of working in a hotel can easily find employment. While studies point out that employment in the hospitality industry is generally easy to access in various countries (Baum, 2007; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011), this study has outlined that the same is true for Iceland and indicates that it is even easier to find tourism employment in Iceland compared to a number of other countries. In Iceland, no prior experience or education is required. As the only qualification demanded, one of the three hotel managers interviewed mentioned English language skills. Other qualifications were not or could not be demanded,

often despite the fact that hotel managers prefer to hire workers with at least the bare minimum of work experience. This may in part be explained with the fact that tourism education in Iceland is very limited with a severe lack of educational programs in tourism, particularly in rural areas of Iceland (Harðarson, Kristjánsdóttir, Árnadóttir, Magnúsdóttir & Aðalsteinsson, 2019).

Third, the migrant workers were interested in working in a hotel due to the variety of positions available, ranging from house-keeping and laundry, breakfast buffet and restaurant to reception. According to Ladkin (2011), the selection of tasks available within tourism is one of the industry's advantages. The positions at the hotels entailed diverse tasks and varied according to several factors, such as the amount of monotony, guest communication, the work hours and difficulty experienced. Therefore, most migrant workers were able to find a suitable position within the hotel. Similarly, the variety of positions within the hotel offers the chance to help out in other departments or switch between positions, if workers would like a change.

Fourth, while jobs within the hospitality industry are readily available, other employment options for migrant workers are often limited, as also pointed out by Janta, Brown et al. (2011). In the areas outside of the capital area of Iceland, the job pool is very small and thus the choice of employment is restricted. However, the number of available positions in rural Iceland is even smaller for migrant workers compared to Icelandic workers. The participants described that their choices were often between tourism or jobs related to fisheries or agriculture. This is due to the fact that many positions outside of these industries require proficiency in Icelandic. As stated by Skaptadóttir (2014), the prerequisite for speaking Icelandic became important after the financial crisis in 2008. It is also important to keep in mind that the majority of this study's participants were female. Iceland's labour market is gendered, and studies have shown that migrant women often become trapped in low-skilled and migrant-dominated sectors in Iceland (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013; Napierala & Wojtynska, 2017). Based on these limited employment options, many migrant workers are employed in tourism. Most of the participants of this study sought to work in the tourism industry, but whether this reflected an actual interest in the industry, rather than a lack of choice, varied. Janta, Ladkin et al. (2011) argue that tourism employment is often chosen because of its accessibility, rather than the desire to work in the industry. With respect to this study, the participants showed varying degrees of *wanting* to be employed versus *having* to be employed in the Icelandic tourism industry. Those workers that have to be employed rather than wanting to, may not consider tourism jobs something they really like. Still, they occupy these positions with a clear purpose, such as to improve their economic situation or experience something new.

Overall, the hotel employment of the migrant workers fulfilled their most prominent motivations, that is to improve their economic status, experience something new and learn about new cultures and to enhance their skills. They were able to earn more money in Iceland compared to their home country, also by working extra shifts, and the rural environment deterred them from spending their money. The workers were able to gain new work experience as well as cultural skills, by meeting and interacting with people from all over the world. However, their work often prohibited them from travelling in Iceland due to a lack of spare time and public transportation. So while most motivations were met, the wish to travel in Iceland was often not fulfilled. Therefore, while on the one hand, hotel employment in Iceland can foster economic and professional pursuits of what Uriely (2001)

defined as ‘travelling workers’, on the other hand hotel employment can hinder touristic pursuits of those migrant workers who are ‘working tourists’.

But can working in a hotel in Iceland be considered ‘a good first job’ in Iceland (Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011)? First, it must be stressed again that the results of this study are based on hotels who willingly participated in this study, and therefore are less likely to exploit their workers. While the exploitation of migrant workers in Iceland is certainly a reality and could hardly be considered ‘a good first job’, the findings of this study do not address the exploitation of migrant workers.

The great majority of participants were generally happy with their employment at the hotels. There were various benefits about their work, such as the flexible work hours, the range of tasks, the appreciation of guests, but first and foremost the positive communication and teamwork with co-workers, particularly from the same department, as well as the opportunity to interact and learn from people from different cultural backgrounds (Baum et al., 2007; Ladkin, 2011). Being able to learn from others was regarded as an important benefit, which does not come as a surprise, given the fact that many of the migrant workers moved to Iceland to experience a new country and expand their cultural knowledge. Naturally, they also had negative views of their employment, like the stressful work environment, long hours and a lack of holiday and appreciation from guests, managers or co-workers (Baum, 2007; Baum, 2012; Baum, Cheung et al., 2016; Janta, Ladkin et al., 2011; Ladkin, 2011). Due to limited public transportation and that many did not have access to a car, physical isolation is also a challenge from employment in a countryside hotel. A particularly negative aspect of this was that a lack of transportation together with a lack of spare time often meant that the migrant workers were unable to travel and thus unable to experience Iceland, which had been one of the motivations for most of the workers.

Unsurprisingly, the perceived benefits and challenges differed according to the position that the migrant workers held and the diverse nature of the tasks and positions. The greatest difference was found between house-keeping and reception. The work environment of the reception positively influenced the migrant workers’ acquisition of knowledge of Iceland and Icelandic skills. In order to provide service to guests, reception staff must learn about Iceland, its touristic attractions, culture and nature so that they can share this information with the guests. In their study on migrant workers in Northern Ireland, Devine et al. (2007) discussed that certain fundamental information, such as the attractions in the nearby area and understanding of cultural differences, was important for the integration of migrant workers into Irish life. A similar conclusion shall be drawn here, chiefly that the knowledge of Iceland that migrant workers acquired is not only useful at work, but has value for the migrant workers’ personal lives. By learning about their host country, the workers gain a better understanding of their new environment, which beneficially impacts their opportunity for participation in wider society and settling in.

The same conclusions can be made about the acquisition of the host country’s language, thereby verifying the study on Polish workers in the UK tourism industry by Janta et al. (2012), which stated that tourism employment can assist migrant workers in developing linguistic skills. The participants described that their English skills had improved since starting work at the Icelandic hotels because of the international work environment. In contrast to Janta et al.’ study (2012), migrant workers in Iceland need to learn the local language in addition to English for societal participation. While English skills could be improved regardless of the position in the hotel, Icelandic skills were mostly developed by

those working in the reception. They had more opportunities to learn and practice Icelandic, compared to those in house-keeping. This was mostly due to a segregation of departments with migrant workers occupying background work, like house-keeping, and Icelanders employed in positions with guest contact. Þórarinsdóttir's study (2019) supports that a segregation of departments is not limited to the three hotels of this case study, but that it is a reality in many Icelandic hotels. The majority of employees in the reception were Icelanders, so migrant workers who worked in the reception had fellow Icelandic co-workers to practice speaking Icelandic with. Certain tasks in the reception also required proficiency in Icelandic, such as being able to answer e-mails and phone calls; this further provided an incentive for migrant workers to learn Icelandic. Being able to understand and speak Icelandic helps migrant workers to settle in their new environment and increases their opportunities to engage in wider social settings (Janta et al., 2012).

However, those migrant workers who were employed in house-keeping did not learn about Iceland and its language in the same way as those in the reception. Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) observed that migrants in Iceland, who only work with other migrants, have a hard time learning Icelandic. This applies to migrant workers in house-keeping as well. They mostly worked with fellow migrant workers, and they communicated in English. The workers also had little interaction, if any, with guests.

In addition, the physical isolation of many migrant workers resulted in limited opportunities to contribute in wider society. Social isolation became evident where participants lived and worked together with their co-workers in housing provided by the employer. The little spare time that the migrant workers had was spent in the housing provided by the employer together with fellow migrant co-workers. It is apparent that spare time and transportation are essential to be able to partake in activities outside of work, including travelling in Iceland, and to assist migrant workers in settling in.

Spare time and transportation are two of many aspects which impact to what extent the participants could be 'on the move'. There are various aspects that influence a person's mobility (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006), and an understanding of migrant workers' (im)mobility provides further valuable insights into their experiences. Migrant workers make use of and perform mobility, right from the moment that they decide to move and seek employment abroad. One way was how they used their mobility to mitigate the risks associated with moving to and working in Iceland. The workers explained that they were unfamiliar with the host country and that they tried to learn about Iceland to reduce this uncertainty. A very effective way of lowering the risk was for the workers to assure themselves that if they did not like it in Iceland, they did not have to stay. This was similarly stated by Piso (2014, 12): "The risks therefore that might be associated with migration, such as homesickness, etc., may be reduced where migration is seen as short-term and experimental". Without a long-term commitment, the migrant workers have the freedom to move and change positions, should they want to do so. Hence, the migrant workers' power and control of their mobility is central to risk reduction and their resulting experiences (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

This study also demonstrated that the mobility of the participants prior to moving to Iceland varied. Similar to what Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir (2016) argued, it became apparent that the participants did not all have equal access to the 'mobility commodity' before moving to Iceland. Some experienced constraints to their mobility and needed to work in order to be able to move to Iceland, analogous to Uriely's (2001) 'working tourists'. Others experienced

no restrictions and had the power to move freely (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Most of the participants were engaged both in labour migration as well as tourism, verifying that it is difficult to distinguish between the various forms of mobility (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). Aspects of mobility also differ once the migrant workers live and work in Iceland. As discussed, migrant workers employed at Icelandic countryside hotel stand at risk of becoming physically and socially isolated. This isolation highlights migrant workers' immobility and how it can prevent them from settling in. Thus, it shall be argued that migrant workers would benefit from having (access to) a car and/or live in housing, which provides them with the chance to meet people other than their co-workers. This would increase their mobility in Iceland and consequently their involvement in wider society.

The findings of this study further outline that the occupational mobility of the migrant workers varies greatly. Overall, an acquisition of Icelandic skills in addition to knowledge of Iceland through working in a hotel has the potential to increase the occupational mobility of migrant workers. Speaking Icelandic is a clear advantage when searching for employment opportunities in Iceland. This is largely due to the prominent role that the national language plays in forming Iceland's identity (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016). Similarly, Baum (2012, 40) argued that "the acquisition of language skills by migrant workers in the hotel industry is seen as crucial to their progression beyond low skills and menial work". By working in a hotel reception migrant workers can improve their Icelandic skills and knowledge of Iceland, which can then in turn help them develop their careers in Iceland. Therefore, working in a hotel reception has the potential to increase migrant workers' occupational mobility. At the same time, working in house-keeping limits the opportunities of migrant workers to engage in Icelandic and improve their skills, thus maintaining their occupational mobility.

Regardless of what position the migrant workers occupy, the hotel environment offers migrant workers the chance to form transnational ties (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2004). Being able to form transnational ties stands out as one of the most beneficial aspects of tourism employment. Migrant workers engage with co-workers as well as guests from various countries, and through this interaction they acquire a better understanding of multiple cultures. They may also connect with people from places that the workers then travel to in the future. Migrant workers can then make use of this knowledge and the subsequent network of people they met from other countries to increase their transnational mobility. This provides them with the opportunity to travel or even move to a new country other than Iceland. In addition, migrant workers can develop their English skills by working in the hospitality industry (Janta et al, 2012), which are of value when travelling internationally and in increasing their transnational mobility.

Working in tourism can also offer migrant workers to perform the transnational ties that they have to their home countries. Various studies have addressed the importance of remittances and how they manifest in transnational ties to the migrant workers' home country (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Skaptadóttir & Wojtynska, 2016; Vertovec, 2004). The participants of this study explained that they were not working to send remittances to their home country, but their ties to the home country were manifested in a different way. By interacting with guests or co-workers from their home country, migrant workers get 'that taste of home' away from home. The ties to their home country were commonly addressed if guests from other countries showed an interest in the migrant workers' background. Connecting in this way to their home country was generally perceived as positive by the participants, supporting the importance of transnational ties, not only of newly created ties through the interaction with

co-workers and guests from various countries, but also of the ties back to the workers' home country. Migrant workers in the tourism industry thus create various transnational ties and engage with these relations. This may create a cosmopolitan feeling (Janta, Brown et al., 2011), but also a "being neither here nor there" feeling (IOM, 2010, 1). However, to what extent these feelings are created is a question that goes beyond the scope of this study and would require further investigation.

Transnational ties also play an important role in securing tourism employment. Migrant workers can stimulate the mobility of other potential migrant workers. The findings of this study supported that word-of-mouth is an important element in decreasing the risks of moving to Iceland and pursuing employment in the tourism industry (Piso, 2014). This word-of-mouth element facilitates further migration to Iceland.

Overall, this study has outlined that employment in the tourism industry highlights the (im)mobility of migrant workers; how they create and make use of their transnational ties, how the physical and social isolation of their work environment highlights their potential immobility, how their employment can impact their transnational and/or occupational mobility and how tourism employment fosters further migration to Iceland.

## **8.2 The managerial perspective**

This study addressed some of the benefits and challenges that arise for employers and managers in light of an increasingly diverse workforce. Overall, the hotel managers that participated valued the work attitude and dedication of migrant workers and described that migrants were often superior workers in comparison to Icelanders. This supports the findings of Alberti (2014) and Baum (2012). In spite of the migrant workers often showing a work attitude and commitment that exceeded Icelanders', the managers favoured Icelandic workers over migrant workers, simply because of their ability to speak Icelandic. An employee's language skills, English as well as Icelandic, were regarded as essential from a managerial perspective. However, since many Icelanders are not willing to work in tourism, "*you are forced to hire other nationalities*", as one of the hotel managers commented. Thereby, the results confirm various studies and the argument that migrant workers are often hired based on their nationality rather than their qualifications (Baum et al., 2007; Devine et al., 2007; García-Almeida & Hormiga, 2016). In addition, García-Almeida and Hormiga's (2016) findings indicated that hotel managers were often unaware of the positive impacts that a diverse workforce could bring about for their company's performance; the same can be applied for this case study. It is therefore evident that not all employers are hiring migrant workers on a voluntary basis. They feel like they do not have a choice, much like many migrant workers whose employment options in Iceland are often restricted to tourism jobs.

Comparably, employers cannot always hire based on the qualifications they would like their employees to have. The hotel managers described that they were looking for workers with a background in hospitality, but that they rarely had applicants who had such a background, in spite of the many applications that they received on a daily basis. Due to the high demand for workers and the dependency on migrant workers in particular, managers had to put aside their wish for certain qualifications. They hired workers not based on their professional experience, but instead only on their social and communication skills. These skills are important in the tourism industry (Baum, 2007), whether the hotel managers recognise this

or not. Moreover, hiring a migrant worker resulted in more work for the hotel managers as they often provided assistance to the migrant workers in the form of applying for a kennitala, the social security number in Iceland, as well as opening up a bank account.

It was also outlined that the employment of migrant workers in the tourism industry entails a risk factor, not only for the migrant workers, but also for the employers. Employers cannot hire migrant workers based on traditional in-person interviews, which makes it harder for employers to evaluate a migrant worker's application and whether the information put forward by the migrant worker, for example about his or her skills, is in fact true. In most cases, the employers meet the migrant worker for the first time on their first day of work.

Other challenges that employers faced were relating to communication. Migrant workers' competence in English varied, therefore the hotel managers had all faced problems where they were unable to communicate in a common language with an employee. In these situations, it proved useful to have a diversified workforce, as other employees of the hotel would often understand the native language of the employee and were thus able to translate. In addition, the employers encountered difficulties when their team or certain departments consisted mostly of workers of the same nationality. A grouping of one nationality could result in the bullying of other co-workers and undermine the management of the hotel manager. Therefore, employers need to ensure a balanced diversity of their team. The findings of this study, including the benefits and challenges associated with working in the tourism industry as a migrant worker, have several implications for how hotel managers can assist migrant workers in taking advantage of the benefits of their work environment, as described in detail below.

First, the migrant workers described that they valued the relaxed work culture in Iceland. Many commented that the work culture in their home country had been more stressful in comparison. Since hotels are a generally hectic environment, it is important that the morale within the hotel counteracts the often demanding tasks. Therefore, it is positive if hotel managers support employees with stressful responsibilities, so that the managers, together with employees, can boost morale and maintain a positive work environment.

Second, the migrant workers considered assisting other departments as positive because this provided them with the opportunity to break up their everyday routine. Hotel managers can maintain this 'culture of helping out', or provide opportunities for aiding other departments, where this is not the case already. Helping out other departments gives employees a better understanding of the hotel as a total unit and can improve the understanding and appreciation between the different departments of the hotel. It also provides learning opportunities and could contribute to breaking down cultural barriers between departments. However, while assisting other departments should be encouraged, it is also important to establish clear responsibilities for each employee.

Third, one of the aspects that was viewed as particularly beneficial to migrant workers was the fact that they were able to acquire various cultural knowledge. It is therefore important that hotel managers support a culture of learning within the hotel, so that cross-cultural learning is actively encouraged.

Fourth, many of the migrant workers came to Iceland to experience the country, its nature and culture, consequently many have a keen interest in learning about Iceland. A culture of learning across all departments can help migrant workers learn about Iceland. However,

experiencing Iceland is even more important than hearing about the country from co-workers. Therefore, it is beneficial if hotel managers provide the migrant workers with the option of borrowing a car from the work place. This could reduce their physical isolation and assist them with travelling in Iceland and taking part in wider society. Staff trips also provide the opportunity to travel and can also promote healthy relationships between co-workers of the hotel. Furthermore, migrant workers' increased knowledge about Iceland can also benefit the workplace as workers can share their knowledge and experience with hotel guests, rather than being "*not at authority to say anything about it*", as one participant put it. As discussed by García-Almeida and Hormiga (2016), knowledge of the tourist destination is essential for providing a quality service to tourists. Managers therefore need to educate their employees about the country or specific destination.

Fifth, migrant workers should be given the opportunity to learn the host language. By learning Icelandic they can move on to other positions in the hotel and contribute to a wider society (Janta et al., 2012), increasing the chances for employers to retain workers. The interviewed hotel managers reported that they felt most of the migrant workers did not have an interest in learning Icelandic. One manager believed that the workers did not have an interest in becoming a part of the Icelandic society, which supports the perspective that migrant workers are often a short-term solution to labour shortages (Devine et al., 2007). However, this view is in contrast to what the migrant workers described, many of whom were open to staying in Iceland long-term. Regardless of whether all or only few migrant workers would like to be proficient in Icelandic, they should be given the opportunity to hear or speak Icelandic in their workplace. Ideally, migrant workers should be able to work closely together with Icelanders or migrants who have already learnt Icelandic. In addition, they should have the option to attend Icelandic classes, altering their work schedule as needed. That migrant workers acquire Icelandic skills is also in the interest of hotel managers, as the findings of this study clearly highlight. Hotel managers expressed that the only advantage of Icelanders was their ability to speak Icelandic, otherwise migrant workers were often superior. Proficiency in Icelandic should thus also be accompanied with the possibility of career development within the hotel and the abandonment of the segregation of departments. If migrant workers develop Icelandic skills, they would be able to provide quality service to Icelandic guests in Icelandic and generally be more qualified to work in the hotel reception.

Overall, this study confirms the findings of Baum et al. (2007) and Devine et al. (2007) in that migrant workers need to be supported with good training and integration into the workplace. Since they require different training and assistance compared to local workers (Baum et al., 2007), hotel managers should recognise the importance of adaptive training.

### **8.3 The tourism industry perspective**

The findings of this study also have implications that go beyond the context of tourism businesses and employers, and instead relate to the overall tourism industry. A prerequisite for labour migration to Iceland is of course the demand for workers, which is high. The local workers are often not willing to work in hotels, a common labour market situation (Duncan et al., 2013; Janta, Brown et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012; PISO, 2014). In the Icelandic context, the negative media coverage that tourism employment received in recent times appears to have subsequently decreased the interest in tourism employment. Unemployment in Iceland is



low, resulting in competition for available workers, yet the hotel industry does not have the means to attract Icelanders as workers. As a service industry, tourism requires a great number of workers for the tourism ‘product’ to be delivered. In Iceland, tourism is one of the largest industries and a large dependency on migrant workers has pronounced consequences for Iceland’s economy in total. As stated by Baum (2007, 1383), the following must be kept in mind:

The story of successful tourism enterprises is one that is largely about people—how they are recruited, how they are managed, how they are trained and educated, how they are valued and rewarded, and how they are supported through a process of continuous learning and career development.

Keeping this in mind, it is necessary to move beyond thinking that migrant workers in the Icelandic tourism industry are merely a workforce (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). Employers and governmental bodies must recognise that migrant workers are not only motivated by economic pursuits and that their contribution to Icelandic society is also not purely economically. The results of this study demonstrate that their motivations for moving to Iceland are diverse and it must be recognised that their employment in Iceland is not always temporary. In fact, most of the participants of this study had not decided how long they wanted to stay in Iceland and were thus open to staying in Iceland on a long-term basis. Consequently, it is time that the tourism industry acknowledges the individuals that make up the workforce and offer them opportunities to learn and develop their careers to be able to retain them as workers. It is necessary to provide a positive environment so that migrant workers decide to stay in Iceland longer rather than shorter. That way the tourism industry can benefit from retaining those workers, who have already been trained and have work experience in the hospitality industry.

If migrant workers learn about Iceland and acquire Icelandic skills, this should be in the overall interest of the tourism industry. Having knowledge about Iceland puts migrant workers in a position where they are able to provide a better service to tourists, both to foreign and domestic tourists. In tourism, the ‘product’ that is being sold is Iceland, including the experience of its nature, culture and people (García-Almeida & Hormiga, 2016). If migrant workers gain an understanding about these cultural and natural qualities of the country that are being ‘sold’, this arguably beneficially increases the quality of service at the hotels, and thereby the overall tourist experience.

The fact that employers receive numerous e-mails and applications from migrant workers illustrates that a growing number of migrant workers are interested in moving to Iceland and working in tourism. That workers are readily available entails a risk, namely that workers become replaceable. One of the participating migrant workers who had lived and worked in Iceland for more than ten years said, *“Ten years ago they respect you. But not now. [...] If you don’t like it, you can go away. Because more workers can come and do your job”*. This participant had felt less replaceable ten years ago, when the growth of the tourism industry had been smaller. The emerging concern is that the exploitation of workers can easily increase if employers have the opportunity to hire instantly new workers due to the availability of migrant workers. In addition, many workers are not fully informed of their rights. The industry must take responsibility and ensure fair employment, recognising the value of each worker’s training and skills. The tourism industry’s success relies on the people

who provide the tourism 'product', therefore the industry should ensure that employment in the industry is desirable for Icelanders as well as migrant workers and retain its workers.

## 9 Conclusion

This study set out to explore some of the benefits and challenges associated with employment of migrant workers in the tourism industry from the perspective of the migrant workers themselves as well as the tourism employers. Many migrants' choice of working in tourism was influenced by the ease of job availability within Iceland's tourism industry, which requires no professional experience, compared to positions in other industries that are difficult to obtain without Icelandic language skills. Often, the migrant workers had few employment choices in Iceland outside of the tourism industry.

From the perception of migrant workers, it was found that employment in the tourism industry offers various benefits and challenges. The study outlines how employment in the tourism industry highlights and impacts a migrant worker's multiple mobilities. It addresses how migrant workers make use of and perform mobilities.

The findings of this study indicate that communication and learning about cultures are among the key benefits of tourism employment. By interacting with hotel co-workers and guests from various countries, migrant workers can improve their proficiency in English, increase their cultural knowledge and form transnational ties, which further enhances their transnational mobility. However, the English-speaking environment of the hotel has the potential to hinder migrant workers from settling in the host country and participating in wider society due to a lack of the host country's language skills. Without an understanding of the host country's language, migrant workers' occupational mobility is difficult to increase. Based on this research, there is a clear distinction between the occupational (im)mobility of employees in house-keeping and those that work in the reception of the hotel.

The implications for employers as well as the overall tourism industry are that it is necessary to establish a culture of learning within tourism businesses. It must be recognised that the diverse background of tourism employees offers the chance to learn from each other, which migrant workers, employers and the tourism industry can and should use to their advantage. A prerequisite for multi-cultural learning is that employers take active steps to prevent a segregation of workers according to nationality because this can lead to the ghettoization of migrant workers. In particular, migrant workers should be given opportunities to learn about the host country and its language. This does not only support the migrant workers in settling in, but also enhances the quality of the service provided by migrant workers and the tourism 'product'.

There is never 'one' migrant experience. Migrant workers have, perform and engage in different mobilities prior to their employment in tourism in addition to during and after their employment. Employment in the tourism industry highlights and affects migrants' mobility not in one way but in multiple varying ways.



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