Students' Views of Retail Employment
- Key Findings from Generation Ys

ADELINA M. BROADBRIDGE*,
GILLIAN A. MAXWELL**, SUSAN. M. OGDEN**

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Structured abstract

Purpose: the aim of this article is to highlight some preliminary findings regarding students' perceptions of retail employment. It concentrates on those students who belong to Generation Y, those born between 1977 and 1994.

Methodology: the research instrument consisted of a questionnaire survey administered to business studies students at two Scottish universities – Glasgow Caledonian University and Stirling University. This article reports on responses to 340 of these questionnaires – those students who already have some experience of retail employment, mainly as their part-time employment experiences while studying for their degree.

Findings: retail employment experience is common with the majority of students. Their expectations for future retail employment after graduation is to enjoy their work, while they are also concerned with fairness, equality and tolerance from their future employment.

Practical implications: the results are of benefit to retail employers' as preliminary indications of how they can attract potential graduate entrants into the sector. They provide some areas that retail companies should be addressing in their recruitment literature. These factors include future career opportunities including opportunities for self development, training and development, as well as pay and job security. Other factors that are also important to highlight are responsibility and challenging work opportunities and the maintenance of a good work-life balance.

Originality/value: this is an under-researched topic in the area of retail employment and Generation Y.

Keywords: retail, employment, Generation Y, expectations, students

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Introduction

This article reports on the key findings of a recent survey of undergraduate students on their retail employment experiences and retail career expectations. The surveyed students were born in the period 1977 to 1994, so are part of the so-called Generation Y. This is a generation with distinct characteristics which have implications for their recruitment into, and career development in, full time work (Braid, 2007; Martin, 2005; Morton, 2002). As graduate recruitment and retention in retailing is an exigent issue (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007), the survey findings have particular import in the context of UK retailing.

Conducted in mid-2007 in the business schools of two universities in Scotland (Stirling University [SU] and Glasgow Caledonian University [GCU]), the purpose of the survey is to investigate how the theoretical characteristics of Generation Y are manifest among people of this generation before they embark on their full time careers. The characteristics span personal values, employment terms and conditions, management approach and organisational culture, and personal career development. These four categories were identified in an earlier, exploratory stage of the authors' study of Generation Y (*ibid;* Broadbridge et al., 2006). Appendix 1 details the characteristics in each of the categories.

In total 486 undergraduate students participated in the study. As Table 1 shows, students were sampled from across levels years one to four, with a response rate of 91 per cent, and representing approximately 42 per cent of the student population for the modules sampled in the survey. Of the 486 students completing the survey, nine students were over the age of 30 and so have been excluded from the analysis.

<Table 1 about here>

Seventy five per cent of the respondents indicated that they had experience of working in the retail sector and it is the responses of these 340 students that are the subject of this article. These students have an average age of 20 and 67 per cent are female, in keeping with the general profile of students in the business schools. They are registered on a range of courses with 27 per cent studying retail or marketing degrees, 28 per cent undertaking general business studies degrees, 20 per cent studying sector specific degrees such as tourism, hospitality or leisure, and the remaining 25 per cent studying a range of programmes relating to finance, IT, law or journalism. As Figure 1 shows, the response sample is reasonably evenly distributed by level of study, with 26 per cent of respondents in level one, 24 per cent in level two, 30 per cent in level three, and 21 per cent in level four (Scottish honours level).

<Figure 1 about here>

The key survey findings from these respondents are reported below in terms of employment experiences and employment expectations.

Employment Experiences

Just under two-thirds of students (64 per cent) who have worked in retail report that this is the sector where they have <u>most</u> employment experience. The remaining one-third (34 per cent) have more experience of working in other sectors and, therefore, have a source of comparison in their views on the attractiveness of the retail sector. As Table 2 shows, most of this experience comes from working in various parts of the hospitality sector (18 per cent), that is, bars, restaurants or cafes and hotels. This reflects the findings of a recent report that suggests that 'Generation Y adults are much more likely than adults in general to be working in service industries, especially distribution, hotels and restaurants' (Keynote, 2007: 20). The report suggests that almost 40 per cent of all Generation Y adults work in the services sector due to the plentiful supply of part-time jobs that are suitable for students, and to the availability in the retail sector of lower skilled, full-time jobs for younger workers with fewer qualifications or experience.

<Table 2 about here>

Students provided feedback on the quality of their work experiences, on a scale where 1= very negative and 5 = very positive. As Table 3 shows, almost half (49 per cent) of all students report having very positive or mostly positive experiences at work, with a further 45 per cent reporting a mix of positive and negative experiences. Only a small proportion, (6.2 per cent) report very or mostly negative experiences. These findings are important in that poor experiences of retailing can have a detrimental impact on views of retail careers (Broadbridge, 2003), whereas good experiences can have a positive impact (Retail Merchandiser, 2003).

Table 3 also shows that there is little difference between the mean scores in relation to measuring the perceptions of the quality of the work experience between students who have most experience of retail compared with those who have most experience of other sectors. However, a slight difference can be discerned in relation to the level of positive experiences. For those with most experience of retail, the number of students with mostly or very positive views drops to 45 per cent, compared to 56 per cent for those students with most experience in other sectors. In contrast, the difference between these two sub-categories for negative/very negative experiences is only two per cent (seven per cent for most experience of retail and five per cent for most experience of non-retail).

<Table 3 about here>

The students' opinions on their employment experience are likely to have a concomitant effect on their views of the attractiveness of working in the sector after graduation. Table 4 illustrates the findings on this. Of those students with work experience in retailing, 24 per cent consider retail is quite or very attractive, 28 per cent a little attractive and 28 per cent that the sector is totally unattractive. One interpretation of these figures is that just over half of all students who have worked in retail (52 per cent) could be potential recruits into the sector, an encouraging finding in

the light of earlier studies which point to difficulties in attracting good quality managers in retailing (Commins and Preston, 1997). Furthermore, while one-quarter of students with retail experience would actively seek retail jobs, it could be argued that the other quarter, the 'career floaters,' could be persuaded by the right job or the right conditions to work in retail. For Generation Ys, this may mean satisfying their drive for career success, security, opportunity and responsibility (Kerslake, 2005).

<Table 4 about here>

A deeper analysis of the attractiveness of retailing post-graduation was conducted in order to assess if there is a gendered aspect, as there is for example in prospects for females' career development to management (Maxwell and Ogden, 2006). The next table, Table 5, disaggregates the data on these lines. In addition, a chi-square test was run, yielding a 'p' value of 0.284, which indicates no statistical difference in perceptions by gender.

<Table 5 about here>

Employment Expectations

As with the survey questions on employment experiences, the questions on students' employment expectations were framed from the authors' earlier work on the characteristics of Generation Y (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007). In particular, the survey was designed to identify students' priorities as regards the importance they attach to their personal values in employment. Other studies have found that early career is a distinct stage of work needs (Sturges and Guest, 2004) and career management (Sturges *et al.*, 2002).

For personal values, students were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with ten statements wherein 1 = strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Table 6 shows the results in order of priority for all of the

respondents. Four characteristics are evident in the agree to strongly agree mean (4 – 5). Of these, above all, the respondents' want enjoyment from their work (mean of 4.76). Notably, the other three characteristics concern the interlinked areas of fairness, equality and tolerance. Although it has been noted that these are important, professionally and personally, to Generation Ys (Morton, 2002), this finding contradicts that of the authors in the earlier stage of their work when the areas were not raised at all by the informants (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007).

<Table 6 about here>

Moreover, the data were collapsed into a three by two table (where the two categories of agreement were collapsed into one, and similarly, the two categories of disagreement were collapsed into one) so that a more reliable chi-square test could be undertaken to see if there is a relationship between gender and employment expectations. This found four significant differences (i.e. where $p < 0.05$) of gendered responses, as highlighted in bold in Table 6. Further analysis of where differences lie between males and females shows that, perhaps surprisingly, proportionately more males than females disagree with the statement '*my career is as important as my home life'*, although overall only 24 per cent of all respondents disagreed/strongly disagree with the statement. Just over one-third (38 per cent) of all respondents agree/strongly agree that *'time-off is more important than financial reward'*, and, again, proportionally more males than females either strongly disagree or disagree with this statement, indicating their higher desire for financial rewards. In relation to the statement, *'I want to work with employers who are fair to all employees'*, more males than females expressed no strong view indicating their ambivalence. Whilst the vast majority of respondents (74 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *'I want to work with a diverse group of people in my career,'* a higher proportion of males than females disagree or have no strong views, perhaps indicating that women are more interested in diversity issues than men. Lastly, Table 6 provides further scrutiny in relation to overall level of agreement through standard deviations. What is evident here is that there is a high level of collective agreement across the top four priorities especially as it is in these that the standard deviations are lowest.

Moving on to the other Generation Y characteristics of employment terms and conditions, management approach and organisational culture, and personal career development (again as detailed in Appendix 1), students were surveyed on their views on these in the first stage of their careers following graduation. They were asked to rate a range of 37 factors in relation to their level of importance. Table 7 shows these factors listed in order of mean importance, as ranked by the mean score where 1= totally unimportant and 5 = very important. The ten factors with the highest means are highlighted.

As can be seen, the first two factors - determination to succeed (Kerslake, 2005) and meeting personal goals (Eisner, 2005) - concern personal career development. Indeed, personal career development factors are the most dominant in the 15 factors that have a mean over 4.0, with seven of the 15 relating to this category. That this is the case strongly suggests that students appear to accept that responsibility for their career success is primarily theirs, upholding a protean (Hall and Mirvis, 1996) attitude towards their career. At the same time, the employment terms and conditions of good pay (Morton, 2002), opportunities for training and development (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2006) together with the management approach and culture feature of supportive managers (Martin, 2005) are all included in the top 10 factors. These findings point to the importance the respondents attach to seeking appropriate rewards, development and treatment by managers in the pursuit of their careers.

At the bottom end of the table, of least importance to the respondents are working long hours (Broadbridge, 2002) with a mean of 2.87 and moving companies for career development (Baruch, 2004) with a mean of 2.9. The relative unimportance of moving companies combined with the relative importance of clear company goals and promotion path (both with means of 4.09) stands at odds with Baruch's (2004) contemporary model of career development by short-term, transactional relationships with employers. Instead it reflects the traditional career structure (Holbeche, 2003) and desire for internal promotion (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2006). However, the

finding that work-life and personal sacrifices are unimportant in early careers accords with other studies (Sturges *et al.*, 2002; Sturges and Guest, 2004).

<Table 7 about here>

That stated, as the standard deviations in Table 7 indicate, the respondents' views are among the widest as regards working long hours and sacrifice of work-life balance. The widest difference, with a standard deviation of 1.294, lies in the running own businesses factor (Martin, 2005). The narrowest difference in opinions is found in opportunities for training and development (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2006). Interestingly, this factor emerged as the only factor with a significant chi-square score (p= 0.03) when the factors in Table 7 were analysed by gender; proportionately more males consider this factor more important than females.

Conclusions

These initial survey findings provide insight into Generation Y students' views of retail employment, extending the development theory on this group of young people. They reinforce that student retail employment is common. Moreover, the Generation Y business student group is arguably a valuable labour market as about half of it may translate into graduate entrants embarking on careers in retailing. The survey suggests that such Generation Y recruits will bring with them not only retail experience but also expectations of enjoying their work, fairness, equal opportunities and tolerance of difference in people they work with. Though clearly important to both genders overall, evidently the personal values of fairness and diversity tend to more important to females than males. Also, the findings infer that there may be a tendency for females more than males to value their home life and time off. Further, a key implication of the survey findings is that Generation Ys embarking on their careers will assume personal responsibility for focusing on and driving their career success. At the same time, they have particular employer

expectations of good pay, training and development opportunities, and supportive managers. Training and development opportunities have a heightened importance for the male respondents.

These findings deepen understanding, so inform the management, of Generation Ys in retailing. Moreover, in the gendered differences that emerge in the findings, they indicate that there is diversity among Generation Ys. In short, Generation Y has distinction as a group and within its group.

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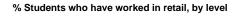
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Table 1   Student Survey Participation, by level

LEVEL/ YEAR	Student module numbers	Students sampled	No of Responses	Total participation
Level 1	200 (SU)	78	78	**160 (33%)**
	300 (GCU)	90	82	
Level 2	114 (SU)	71	71	**124 (26%)**
	200 (GCU)	55	53	
Level 3	90 (SU)	45	39	**117 (24%)**
	82 (GCU)	80	78	
Level 4	35 (SU)	35	8	**85 (17%)**
	127 (GCU)	80	77	
Totals	**1148**	**534**	**486**	**486 (42%)**

SU – Stirling University; GCU – Glasgow Caledonian University

Figure 1

% Students who have worked in retail, by level

Table 2   Sector in which Students have Most Work Experience

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Retail	216	63.5
	Bar	26	7.6
	Restaurant/Café	28	8.2
	Hotel	8	2.4
	Leisure	17	5.0
	Call Centre	17	5.0
	Other	28	8.2
	Total	340	100.0

Table 3   Quality of Work Experiences

Views of Sector Experience	All students who have worked in retail	Students with most experience of retail sector	Students with most experience of NON-retail sectors.
Very negative	1.2	1.4	.8
Mostly negative	5.0	5.6	4.0
Mix of positive & negative	45.0	48.1	39.5
Mostly positive	37.9	37.0	39.5
Very positive	10.9	7.9	16.1
Total number of students	**340**	**216**	**124**
Mean	3.52	3.44	3.66
Standard Deviation	0.8	0.776	0.825

Table 4   Attractiveness of Retail Sector Following Graduation

	Frequency	Percent	Male	Female
Totally unattractive	95	27.9	25	69
A little attractive	95	27.9	31	62
Neither attractive or unattractive	67	19.7	24	43
Quite attractive	62	18.2	26	36
Very attractive	21	6.2	5	16
Total	340	100.0	111	226

Table 5   Relationship between Gender and Perceptions of Retail Attractiveness

	Perception of Retail Attractiveness					Total
	Totally unattractive	A little attractive	Neither attractive or unattractive	Quite attractive	Very attractive	
Male	25 (23%)	31 (28%)	24 (22%)	26 (23%)	5 (4%)	111
Female	69 (31%)	62 (27%)	43 (19%)	36 (16%)	16 (7%)	226
Total	94 (28%)	93 (28%)	67 (20%)	62 (18%)	21 (6%)	337

Table 6   Priority Employment Expectations on Personal Values
(in order of importance by mean score)

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	significance
I want to enjoy my work.	338	4.76	.517	n.s
I want to work with employers who are fair to all employees.	334	4.64	.623	($\chi2$ 8.199; df=2; p=0.017)
I expect equal opportunities in my career progression.	338	4.52	.723	n.s
I will tolerate differences in people I work with.	336	4.04	.779	n.s
I work to live, rather than live to work.	337	3.98	1.052	n.s
I want to work with a diverse group of people in my career.	338	3.90	.838	($\chi2$ 12.697; df=2; p=0.002)
Personal sacrifices are necessary to build my career.	338	3.58	.912	n.s
My career is as important as my home life.	338	3.44	1.217	($\chi2$ 10.275; df=2; p=0.006)
Time off is more important than financial rewards.	338	3.30	1.003	($\chi2$ 6.445; df=2; p=0.04)
Money isn't everything in my career.	337	3.15	1.166	n.s

Table 7   Factors Important to Career Success after Graduation (ranked by mean scores)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Determined to Succeed	339	4.48	.786
2. Personal goals	338	4.39	.756
3. Good Pay	339	4.34	.807
4. Self-development	338	4.33	.764
5. Opportunities for Training and development	338	4.26	.741
6. Supportive Managers	338	4.25	.814
7. Job Security	337	4.20	.873
8. Positive Company Culture	337	4.19	.826
9. Clear Career Goals	338	4.09	.862
10. Clear Promotion Path	338	4.09	.866
11. Working Hard	336	4.06	.938
12. Good work/life balance	338	4.06	.947
13. Personal Responsibility	337	4.03	.914
14. Challenging Work	337	4.02	.785
15. Upwards promotion	338	4.01	.861
16. Make a difference	338	3.96	.823
17. Chance to be creative	338	3.92	.934
18. Using their degree	339	3.91	.978
19. Feedback from employers	337	3.83	.836
20. Networking Skills	338	3.80	.939
21. Flexible Hours	339	3.76	.954
22. Feedback on personal performance	335	3.76	.808
23. Good Pension Scheme	334	3.75	1.020
24. Gaining a higher entry point into organisation.	337	3.74	0.907
25. Gaining further qualifications	336	3.67	.998
26. Formal graduate training scheme	339	3.61	1.007
27. Willingness to work in different locations	338	3.58	1.114
28. Being fast-tracked for promotion	337	3.53	1.029.
29. Previous Sector Experience	336	3.52	.956
30. Company loyalty (i.e. length of service)	338	3.44	.958
31. Customer Facing Roles	338	3.39	1.020
32. Environment of Change	334	3.22	.987
33. Running Own Business	339	3.17	1.294
34. Sacrifice of work-life balance	338	3.15	1.008
35. Personal Sacrifices	338	3.12	.976
36. Moving companies	338	2.90	.904
37. Working long hours	337	2.87	1.038

Appendix 1: Characteristics of Generation Y

Employment Terms & Conditions	Management Approach & Culture	Personal Career Development	Personal Values
• Employment flexibility (Kerslake 2005; Martin 2005); Want job flexibility (Foreman 2006); Flexible hours (Anon 2006) • Fair compensation (Morton 2002) • Performance related salary and bonuses (Anon 2006) • Programs for career development (Anon 2006); professional development (Eisner 2005) • Fast tracked and higher entry level(Broadbridge *et al* 2006); internal promotion (Broadbridge et al.) • Good working environment (Eisner 2005) • Willingness to	• Values teamwork (Martin 2005; Eisner 2005); Work with committed co-workers with shared values (Eisner 2005) • Work on parallel tasks (Eisner 2005) • Comfortable working alone (Martin 2005) • Freedom/ flexibility (Martin 2005); Being empowered (Morton 2002); Hates micro-management (Martin 2005) • Acknowledgement (Eisner, 2005; Martin 2005); Desires immediate feedback (Francis-Smith 2004); instant gratification (Eisner 2005) • Open and positive bosses (Morton 2002); clear directions and managerial support (Martin 2005) • Favours inclusive style of management (Francis-Smith 2004; Eisner 2005); Contribute to decisions in employment (Eisner 2005) • Positive company culture (Morton 2002) • Have high expectations of	• Interest in self development & improvement (Eisner 2005, Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Seeks training opportunities & professional development (Eisner 2005) • Drive for career success & security (Kerslake 2005, Broadbridge et al, 2006); Needs to succeed (Eisner 2005) • Desire for linear promotion (Broadbridge et al, 2006, Holbeche, 2003); less respect for rank (Eisner, 2005) • Reap their employer's benefits (Foreman 2006) • Needs to meet personal goals (Eisner 2005) • Crave opportunity and responsibility (Kerslake 2005) • Challenging work (Martin 2005; Eisner 2005); Creative expression (Morton 2005); intellectual challenge &	• Personal integrity (Retail Merchandiser 2003) • Balanced lifestyle (Morton 2002; Allan, 2004; Kerslake 2005; Anon 2006); Values home and family (Eisner 2005); Wants work-life balance (Eisner 2005); Work to live (Eisner, 2005) • Money isn't everything (Broadbridge et al 2006) • Diversity, equality & tolerance (Morton 2002); Values fairness (Eisner 2005) • Strong sense of morality (Eisner 2005); Fight for freedom (Eisner 2005); Socially conscious (Anon 2006; Eisner 2005); Volunteer minded (Eisner 2005) • Strives to make a difference (Eisner 2005) • Performing meaningful work (Eisner 2005) • Strong sense of company loyalty (Kerslake 2005) • Embrace change (Foreman

sacrifice work-life balance in short-term for career gain (Kerslake, 2005; Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Provision of training opportunities (Morton, 2002, Broadbridge et al, 2006) • career goals in organisation (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006) • clear promotion path (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006) • working long hours (Broadbridge, 2002)	employers (Foreman 2006) • Thrive on change and uncertainty (Harris 2006)	freedom to perform (Eisner 2005) • Strives to make a difference (Eisner 2005) • Having own business (Martin 2005) • Desire to use knowledge gained in degree (Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Prefer Head-office to customer-facing jobs (Broadbridge et al, 2006). • Individual responsibility for career (Hall & Mirvis, 1996, Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Achievement oriented (Eisner, 2005) • Taking personal responsibility for career (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006) • Less satisfied with jobs and employers and more open to leave for something better (Eisner, 2005) • Wants instant gratification (Southard and Lewis, 2004) • Work experience (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006) • willingness to work in different locations (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006)	2006) • Contributing to society (Allen, 2004) • Enjoyment of work. (Broadbridge et al 2006) • Goal oriented (Southard & Lewis, 2004; Foreman, 2006) • Meeting personal goals (Eisner, 2005, Broadbridge, et al, 2006).