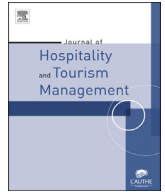




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Aspirations and progression of event management graduates: A study of career development

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ABSTRACT

The provision of event management education in the higher education sector has grown significantly in recent years, yet little is known of the circumstances of the increasing number of graduates from these programmes. This paper examines the motivations, the expectations and the career aspirations of festival and event management graduates from a post-92 university in Scotland. Adopting a mixed methods approach, a quantitative on line survey was used to contact festival and event management alumni who had graduated during the period 2007 to 2012. This was followed by in depth interviews with 15 students. This study found that graduates felt academically prepared for working life in the industry, but lacked the practical skills required. In general, graduates held a positive view and could foresee long-term careers in the festival and event industry.

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1. Introduction

It has been suggested that career choices in general are a “complex and multifaceted phenomenon” (Sibson, 2011, p. 50), which, in turn, complicates understanding and prediction. However, when discussing the career choices of graduates, most studies (for example DeWitt, Curtis, & Burke, 1998; Weisman, Levine, Steinwachs and Chase, 1980) have tended to focus on the more vocational disciplines such as nursing, teaching, dentistry or business where there has been found evidence of a connection between a students' choice of university programme and their subsequent career. However, Sibson (2011:51) states that the most common approach to predicting career choice upon graduation is an interplay between two elements: “individual agency (personality, disposition, interest, attitude) and contextual factors of structure and culture which enhance or construct one's social world” (2011:50). This combination is based on the understanding that individuals actively construct their careers but are also strongly influenced by the world that surrounds them.

According to Weerts and Vidal (2005), studies that examine the initial job destinations and subsequent careers of graduates have developed and evolved over the last 70 years with a range of studies

undertaken in the USA, Europe and the UK (see also Brennan, Williams, & Woodley, 2005; Johnston, 2003; Brennan & Woodley, 2000). The earliest studies were conducted in the United States in the 1930s, since when the foci have largely changed (Cabrera, Weerts, & Zulick, 2005; Weerts & Vidal, 2005) and take into account contemporary issues, such as globalisation and internationalisation, in general and their impacts on education in particular.

Career destination studies play an important role in contemporary Higher Education (HE) through providing information to both internal and external audiences regarding initial career destinations, the subsequent career trajectories of graduates and also indicate the level of preparedness of graduates for the labour market (Cabrera et al., 2005; Weerts & Vidal, 2005; Rowley & Purcel, 2001). Indeed, it has been found that these studies are vital to Higher Education institutions (HEI's) who are increasingly exposed to economic and political pressure to produce market-ready graduates (Cabrera et al., 2005), demonstrate economic and organisational accountability (Weerts & Vidal, 2005; Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Cabrera et al., 2005), and as a means of defending their teaching, research and services (Cabrera et al., 2005; Weerts & Vidal, 2005). These pressures are closely related to a mix of external forces that are currently identified as shaping the HE environment and include marketisation, consumerism, increased accountability of the HEI to the state as well as diversification of students, courses (Brennan et al., 2005; Nabi & Bagley, 1999) and, more recently, the introduction of fees in English universities (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2012). The results of studies that examine

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initial career choices of graduates and, more especially, those that identify career progression are predicted to become even more important, due to the desire of HEIs to maintain links with graduates as a means of increasing alumni-targeted fundraising initiatives, the desire to raise the profile of HEIs (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2012) as well as using graduates as a market for life-long learning, postgraduate and other available courses (Brennan et al., 2005). Focussing on the emerging and popular event management field, this study aims to provide an evaluation of initial positions and subsequent career trajectories of a group of graduates from a masters programme in International Festival and Event Management. It further identifies motivations to study this area, evaluates how prepared graduates felt they were for working life in the industry and elicits long term aspirations. This research contributes to the discourse that surrounds graduate careers in this important subject area and will provide educators with an overview of drivers that contribute to successful graduate careers.

1.1. Event management studies

Rutherford Silvers, Bowdin, O'Toole, and Beard Nelson (2006:187) identify that the majority of event studies in academia are in the Australian context and it is also remarkable that most of them are exploratory. Robinson, Barron, and Solnet (2008) conducted an exploratory study in Australia, identifying how the course objectives were met and how HE can better prepare students for event management careers in regards to the industry's complexities and idiosyncrasies. This involved identifying career challenges in the tourism and events industry. Data were gathered from, at the time, current event management students. This involved asking survey questions about professional development course objectives and career management and within a focus group of six to determine the satisfaction of practical course elements. The study was based on the findings that there was no model of industry engagement or career development in the events sector and that despite the presumption that many students enter graduate level studies in order to enter the labour market in higher positions in the events industry, managerial positions were mostly gained after 10 years (Getz, 2002). The findings confirmed past studies from the Hospitality, Tourism, Leisure and Events industries (HTLE) indicating an industry dominance by females at an entry level, and that in order to be successful, it is crucial to be mobile and flexible, accept "sideway step", be able to network and the need of several post degree experience. Furthermore, students discovered that there were only few available posts, of which many were administrative roles, with long working hours and little pay, while the creative jobs were mainly taken by specialists.

In 2008 Sibson (2011:50) conducted an exploratory study on important factors in career choices of 62 (91% of course) event, sport and recreation management undergraduate students at Edith Cowan University, Australia. The study aimed to fill a gap in the academic literature and to inform the public on course and career specifics, especially in connection with the growing popularity of the courses and often reported career misconceptions (Sibson, 2011). The main findings indicate that enjoyable work in areas of personal interest, good and various career opportunities and pleasant working conditions are most important, followed by working with, helping and influencing others, creativity, variety and originality. Least important were professional prestige/high status, hours of work and salary (Sibson, 2011).

Junek, Lockstone, and Mair (2009:120) combined two exploratory studies in order to compare student evaluation of their skill sets and the importance of specific skills within the industry and employer assessments of students' skills. The samples were taken from undergraduate students in Business in Event Management at

Victoria University (VU), Melbourne and aggregated appraisal data from employers who had hosted VU students on placements before. The aim was to show educators the need to align students' perceptions of skill areas with standards expected in the industry, so that these gaps could be addressed in the curriculum. This in consequence can lead to a higher quality of event management education and enhance the students' employability. Students' skill rankings differed depending on if they had undertaken a period of work experience which aligns with Barron and Maxwell (1993) early study in hospitality in that pre-placement students have higher expectations of the course. Junek et al. (2009) relate this to the need to recognise and reflect the reality of the industry. Further, placements offer the chance to complete lacking skills and give students a clear insight into the realities of working in the industry. Communication skills were generally ranked highly. While post-placement students highlighted the importance of problem solving and stress handling abilities, pre-placement students focused on more generic skills such as management, time management or team working (Junek et al., 2009, p. 124). In general employers' impressions varied largely from the students' and focused more on core skills. Employers also mentioned that they would like to have students that are more confident, proactive and have more knowledge and experience in the events industry (Junek et al., 2009).

In an attempt to determine the important skills and knowledge that future event managers should possess, Rutherford Silvers et al. (2006) gathered international data and produced a framework that presents event management from a practical, project management perspective. This Events Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK) as determined by Rutherford Silvers et al. (2006) categorises the content of event management programmes into five domains which are administration, design, marketing, operations and risk. Each of these domains is broken down into component parts and provides educators with an indication of the areas under each domain that might be addressed in an event management programme (for example, administration includes areas such as finance, human resources, procurement etc). Whilst there is an understanding and recognition of the use of the EMBOK (2016) as providing an overview of the important elements of event management, it has, however, been criticised as not focussing sufficiently on the management function (for example categorising finance as an administrative element) and thus placing event management in an operational, rather than managerial, sphere. However, whilst the EMBOK's (2016) rather vocational approach has been criticised by academics, it has been found to be a useful framework on which to develop academic programmes.

1.2. The growth of the events industry

Overall growth in the tourism industry has led to its diversification into sub-sectors, such as the events industry, which increasingly have been found to offer a variety of unique career opportunities (Bowdin, 2007b; Robinson et al., 2008; Sibson, 2011). The events industry has become widely recognised (Finkel, 2007; People 1st, 2010; Robinson, 2007; Rutherford Silver et al., 2006), increasingly professional (Finkel, 2007, p. 4), diverse (People 1st 2010:20) and economically beneficial industry (Rutherford Silver et al., 2006) in both domestic and international markets (Robinson et al., 2008; Harris & Jago, 1999). This increasing profile has been mirrored by a rapid increase of events being organised, an expanding presence within the media and communities as well as growing demand for professional management structures within the industry (Getz, 2007). A majority of this growth has been fuelled by the successful hosting of key mega events such as the London Olympics 2012 and the Glasgow Commonwealth Games,

2014, offering a more attractive view of working within the events industry and creating a larger, more mobile professional skills pool, providing an international competitive advantage for exporting the creative and production skills of the UK's events industry (BVEP, 2014).

Whilst identifying the precise size of the events industry in the UK has proved difficult, *People 1st* (2010) indicated that the sector, both directly and indirectly employs approximately 530,000 people with 15,500 working in a management capacity. A recent report by the Business Visits and Events Partnership BVEP (2014) highlighted that the UK events industry is worth £39.1 billion and events account for 39% of the UK's visitor economy. Due to the issues identified above it has been suggested that there is a sustained and increasing demand for appropriately qualified event managers. Indeed, it has been suggested by Robertson (2007: preface) that there is an increasing "recognition that the successful management of events [...] requires particular professional skills, knowledge and understanding". Scotland's National Event Strategy 'The Perfect Stage' reaffirms this highlighting that 'Development of the industry through further higher, postgraduate and continuing professional development courses is an important aspect of this strategy' (EventScotland, 2015).

Consequently, a major manifestation of the event industry's growth has been an increase of event related HE courses (Bowdin, 2007a, 2007b; Finkel, 2007; Crowther & Beard, 2007; Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006; Getz, 2002). Recent studies have provided evidence that both the supply of and demand for events-related HE courses has dramatically increased over the last decade (Barron & Leask, 2011; Abraham, 2007; Crowther & Beard, 2007; Junek et al., 2009; Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006). Indeed, such is the development of this area that it has been identified as a trend moving from "niche to mainstream" education (Bowdin, 2007a, p. 22). When discussing the case of event management education in the UK, Jackson, Beeston, and Darkins (2007:6) concluded that "the growth sector-specific subject in HE appears to be event management. Nationally, there has been an increase in students of more than 70% over three years". This point is reinforced by Barron and Leask (2011) who found 64 HE providers offering 369 event management programmes in the UK. This trend appears to be international with 17 Australian Universities also offering 86 undergraduate and postgraduate event management programmes (Barron & Leask, 2011).

Research has been undertaken that examines graduate destinations. Such studies tend to be conducted from a general perspective by organisations such as UCAS as well as events industry specific organisations, such as *People 1st* (2010). The *People First* report based on a survey on the workforce of the UK's business events industry, and provides valuable data recruitment, retention, skills gaps and the three main job roles - account director, account manager and event executive. Whilst this report identifies the difficulty of providing information on the complete events industry, it does however indicate a workforce profile for the business event sector. In addition to evaluating the age and gender range, business event managers were classified as appropriate entry level/junior management jobs for graduates from the increasingly popular events management degrees (*People 1st*, 2010:40). However, it was also mentioned that relevant experience is as important as qualifications for entry into the industry and that there exists a large skills and knowledge gap between entry level positions and more senior management roles.

1.3. Preparedness for industry

It has been argued that the importance of more theoretical, classroom based elements of HTL programmes not be

underestimated as it has been suggested that whilst many entry level jobs for graduates are operational, and that theoretical knowledge may not be viewed as initially important, this will become increasingly relevant as ones' career progresses (McKercher, Williams, & Coghlan, 1995). Whilst a number of studies (see for example, Barron & Maxwell, 1993; Purcell & Quinn, 1996) concluded that industrial experience had a negative impact on career aspirations, it is generally considered that work experience is a vital element of an HE qualification in vocational programmes such as Event Management (see for example Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2010; Major, 2006). The provision of work experience within such programmes has been widely covered within events management education research (see Beer, 2008; Berridge, 2007; Lockstone, Junek, & Mair, 2008; Beaven & Wright, 2006; Williamson, 2005; Burley, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; McDonald & McDonald, 2000.) and a common theme evident from the above studies is the benefit to the student that accrues from the opportunity to work within the event industry. This, it is argued, is an appropriate and accurate method of introducing students to the reality of their chosen field and some element of work experience within an event management programme has been found to be beneficial to both industry and students (Williamson (2005; Robinson et al., 2008; McDonald & McDonald, 2000) through highlighting potential career opportunities and providing accurate perceptions of available career paths (Robinson et al., 2008).

Thus, Ladkin (2000:379) commented that experience as a part of any higher education programme is seen as vital and gaining operational and (if possible) management experience whilst studying is crucial in developing a variety of transferable skills (Hughes, Mylonas, & Benckendorff, 2013; Wakelin, 2013). Indeed, when evaluating event management programmes, Lamb (2015) found that the experience of organising an actual event was valuable for helping students understand the daily responsibilities, challenges and opportunities involved in event management. It has also been stressed that learning through these experiences was crucial to the development of key skills required by future event managers (Lamb, 2015). Such skills have been identified as communication, problem solving, leadership and computer skills (Junek et al., 2009, p. 122; Harris & Jago, 1999; Arcodia & Barker, 2003); operational skills, (Jackson et al. (2007); and, Health and Safety, project management (Bowdin, 2007a; Jackson et al., 2007) and event specific evaluation skills, crowd management, risk management and licensing (Bowdin, 2007a, 2007b). Overall capabilities in the events industry around event production, marketing, project and financial management also need to be identified and developed (EventScotland, 2015).

1.4. Employment after graduation

However, these programmes have been received with mixed reviews (for example see *People 1st*, 2010) and there remains an uncertainty regarding career aspirations and destinations of such graduates (Sibson, 2011).

Purcell and Quinn (1996) argued that industry preferences at graduation can be seen as indicators for long term career orientations and found that in comparison to other vocational course graduates (e.g. 1982: 71% law students, 65% engineers prefer career in their vocational industry) approximately 50% of HTLE graduates entered the HTLE industry. An early study (McKercher et al., 1995) that examined Tourism graduate career progression (between 1986 and 1994) provided a valuable insight of the employment patterns, income level and salary development of this group of graduates. Confirming anecdotal information and unpublished studies, this study found that many graduates enter the industry at operational level, which may have an impact on graduates leaving the industry

as a consequence of feeling unable to utilise skills developed on their programme (McKercher et al., 1995). However, Maher and Nield (2005) conclude that many H&T graduates are employed in SMEs, which allows them to quickly gain responsibility.

The common consensus is that only a minority of hospitality graduates enter the industry on graduation. This concept has long been argued with Barron and Maxwell (1993) considering that a third of students graduating with an H&T degree have no desire to enter the industry and a further third not foreseeing long term careers in the industry; a finding confirmed by Purcell and Quinn (1996) who found just over half of H&T graduates still employed in the industry three years after graduation. Further, McKercher et al. (1995) conclude that an attrition rate of 50% amongst H&T graduates is normal and Robinson et al. (2008) state that 70% of final year tourism students cannot imagine a long-term career in the industry.

1.5. Graduate employment in HTLE

Recent employability studies (see for example: Richardson, 2009; Sibson, 2011; Wang, Ayres, & Huton, 2009) have tended to focus on employability and skills required in the industry and it has been found that few concentrate on graduate career choices. It might therefore be suggested that whilst there has been a certain level of research focus placed on developing an understanding of the link between the skills possessed by HTLE graduates on leaving HE and the skills required by industry, it has been argued that there is a lack of research that examines how graduates' careers develop in both the short and medium terms (Wang et al., 2009).

Events education has been criticised as a relatively young HE area with only a few available studies on graduate employment (Robinson et al., 2008; Sibson, 2011; Junek et al., 2009; Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006). Sibson (2011:53) specifically identifies a lack of research in regards to career choice of students in event, sport and recreation management. Further criticisms of studies in this area concern the lack of longitudinal studies, small student populations and few studies on cross-cultural or demographic differences (Junek et al., 2009, p. 127; Sibson, 2011, p. 58). However, there have been a number of studies in related areas (e.g. hospitality and tourism as career choice Sibson, 2011) or in combination with other subject studies (e.g. event, sport and recreation management – Sibson, 2011). Many of these studies examine employability, skills development and importance of these skills in the industry from students/graduate, institutional and employers' perspectives (e.g. Junek et al., 2009).

A number of authors have recently commented on the need for reflective writing in helping students gain a clearer image of the big picture in terms of the industry and their career-readiness (for example, Lamb, 2015; Hughes et al., 2013; Bladen & Kennell, 2014). For example it has been suggested that more reflective assessments encourages students to move away from description. Bladen and Kennell (2014) conclude that reflection skills are difficult to both develop and measure, however, giving students the opportunity to develop such skills through practice (for example, through reflecting on their experience of planning and organising an event) is an effective method where such skills can successfully be transferred to future careers. Specifically, it has been found that academic programmes utilising experiential learning methods have the potential to bridge the learning-theory gap that exist in many vocational fields of study, including event management (Moscardo and Norris, 2005).

There does, however, appear to be a gap between the required skills of event graduates and the skills being developed by HE providers and a number of studies have identified a lack of these skills, especially in combination with relevant work experience (eg.

Wilton, 2011; Junek et al., 2009; Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006). Consequently, industry experience is frequently mentioned as being an essential component of event management education and key to successful initial and subsequent careers in the industry (Fox & Morrison, 2010; Mason et al., 2006; Junek et al., 2009). In response to the lack of preparedness for the industry, there is evidence of many universities including formal and controlled period of supervised work experience or industrial placements along with some practical course elements such as site visits; consultancy projects, simulated exercises and industry guest lectures in their curriculum (e.g. Beer, 2007; Crowther & Beard, 2007; Finkel, 2007; Robinson, 2007).

Consequently, it might be suggested that the increasing popularity of event management programmes, and the consequent professionalising of the subject area in general has prompted institutions providing event education, academic staff teaching on such programmes and researchers in the field to call for studies that focus on the career aspirations and destinations of graduates (see for example, Robinson et al., 2008; Sibson, 2011; Junek et al., 2009; Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006). Indeed, Sibson (2011:53) specifically highlights the lack of research in regards to career choice of students and graduates of event, sport and recreation management programmes and Getz (2002) links the success of the events education arena with graduate employment and opines that the very existence of the plethora of event management programmes will be defined by their graduate career outcomes. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to address calls for research in this area through undertaking an evaluation of initial positions, career trajectories, preparedness for industry and the long term career aspirations of a group of Event Management graduates.

2. Methodology

The setting for this study was a Post-92 university in Scotland. This institute was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, this institution was identified as being the first to develop programmes in Festival and/or Event management in Scotland (and amongst the first to develop programmes in this subject area in the UK) which resulted in an undergraduate programme in Festival and Leisure Management being offered in 2004 and the first graduates being produced in 2007. Secondly, programme provision at this institution has both developed and expanded over the previous decade and this institution currently provides international festival and event management programmes at both undergraduate and post-graduate (including research degree) levels both in Scotland and Hong Kong. Finally, whilst this institution is one of the largest provider of graduates in this area, little is known of their initial career destinations or subsequent career progression and it was felt that graduates from this programme would provide an overview of not only initial career choices, but also how individual graduate careers have developed. Consequently, it was felt appropriate to undertake a study that developed an understanding of initial destinations, subsequent careers and preparedness for industry. The sample for this study was all graduates from programmes in the field of festival and/or leisure and/or events from the Scottish programmes.

A mixed methodological position was taken as the use of multiple methods in the study of a single problem area can provide credibility to the research (Pansiri, 2009). Initially a thorough review of literature regarding graduate preparedness and careers was undertaken and a three part questionnaire was developed. The first section concerned students expectations and experiences of their programme and elicited an indication of how effective the programme was in preparation for careers in the industry. Secondly, respondents were asked to detail their initial career destination and

their subsequent career progression. Finally, respondents were asked demographic information that included personal details and programme information. A list of email addresses for all Masters Graduates of the above programmes was compiled with the assistance of the Alumni Office of the university and an online version of the questionnaire was forwarded to each graduate. Respondents were also asked if they would be interested in providing further insights and information on their experiences through participation in an in depth interview. Of the 150 graduates contacted, 48 responses were received. The respondents comprised a majority of females (88%) and on graduation, some 25 respondents (54%) were aged 24–30; 18 (37%) were less than 23; and the remaining 5 (8%) were over 30. Completed questionnaires were processed using SPSS and a range of descriptive statistics were developed.

Secondly, a series of interview questions were developed and the initial respondents to the survey were contacted and invited to take part in an in depth semi-structured interview. Each semi-structured interview comprised 18 questions and asked respondents a series of questions regarding initial careers, career progression, how prepared they felt for working life in the industry, career progression since graduation and their future aspirations. Undertaking these semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to gather rich, deep data that provided subjective view to the quantitative data gathered via the survey. This allowed the researchers to more fully understand personal experiences and allowed an element of triangulation of data. A total of 15 interviews were conducted, either in person or electronically via Skype. Interviews were transcribed and subject to thematic analysis.

3. Results - survey

3.1. Motivations and expectations

Respondents were initially asked to identify their motivations of embarking on their chosen festival and event management programme and Table 1, below, provides a summary of responses to this question. Respondents were encouraged to indicate a range of motivations and, not surprisingly, it can be seen that the majority (47) indicated their general interest in the industry as a prime motivator. Prior experience of the industry as both an employee and consumer appeared to have influenced their decision to embark on a qualification in the field and results suggested that, in accordance with findings highlighted by Barron and Maxwell (1993), approximately half considered that their previous

experience of working in the industry and attending events as a consumer had been enjoyable and influenced their further study in the area. The table below also indicates that respondents appeared to have a positive view of potential careers in the industry with a majority of respondents considering festivals and events to be a growing area with many opportunities. It was also felt that the programme itself would be interesting and contain a mix of both practical and academic elements. These findings accord well with previous research and it would appear that the vocational nature of the programme in conjunction with a general interest in, and experience of, the industry prompted these graduates to choose festival and event management.

However, more than half of this group of graduates did not have a specific career in mind on commencing their programme; the remainder had thought about eventual careers and were aiming to work in the festival and events (F&E) industry. When asked about career expectations, the respondents who took part in this study were evenly split between those who had a specific career in mind upon graduation (28) and those who desired to embark on a career in the industry but had no specific career in mind (29). Respondents did however indicate a range of feelings regarding what they considered would be working life in the industry – these responses are summarised in Table 2 below. A majority were looking forward to enjoyable and challenging work with a high level of responsibility and opportunities to be creative. Approximately half of respondents considered there to be a strong relationship between the academic programme and subsequent careers in the industry with opportunities to put elements of their programme into use and a similar number were looking forward to working closely with people. Less positive aspects included heavy workload; a requirement to be flexible regarding task and location and a concern regarding security of employment in the industry. It might therefore be concluded that this group of respondents had a reasonably realistic view of working life in the festival and event industry. This, is in contrast with the conclusions posited by Robinson et al. (2008); however, it is recognised that these respondents do have the benefit of hindsight (see Table 3).

3.2. Preparation

Respondents were then asked to reflect upon their time at university and consider how their studies had prepared them for careers in the F&E industry. Some 41 respondents considered that their festival and events programme, through industry engagement

Table 1
Motivations to embark on a festival and event management programme.

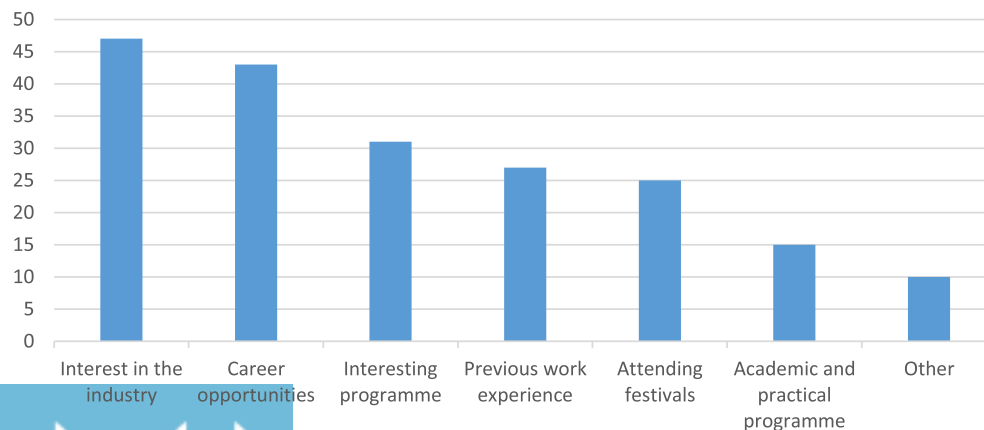
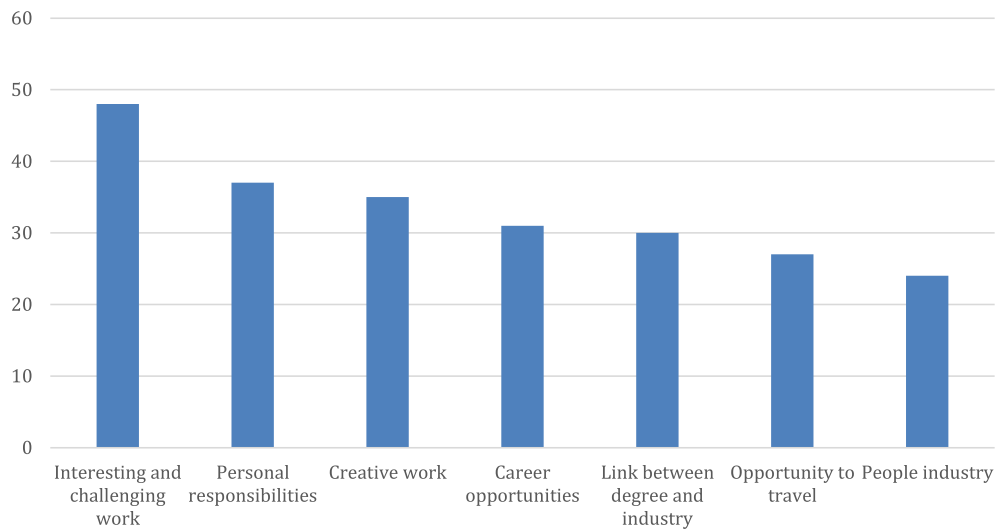


Table 2
Respondents image of working life in the festival and event industry.

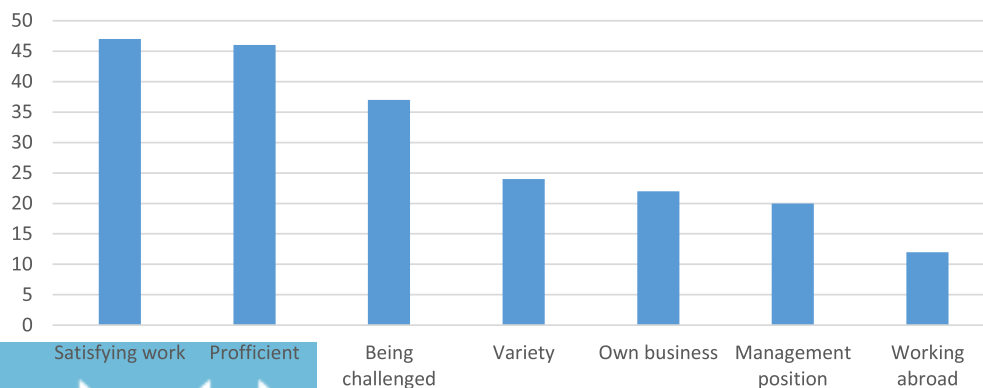


and exposure, had a positive effect on securing not only initial employment in the industry, but also in their subsequent career progression. However, this study also found that a significant minority of respondents considered that the academic programme itself had not really prepared respondents for careers in the industry and 26 respondents considered the programme to have been inadequate preparation for working life in the industry. Such respondents considered that more practical experience was necessary as a means of effectively preparing graduates. This was especially the case for Masters Graduates who complete a programme with very little practical opportunities. Previous studies (see for example Junek et al., 2009; Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006) have concluded that event management higher education programmes do not provide graduates with the appropriate skills and experience for careers in the industry. Whilst this sentiment still appears true for some respondents to this study, these results do seem to contradict these earlier findings with a majority of respondents considering at least adequate preparation for working life in the industry.

3.3. Initial careers and progression

This study found that the majority (31) of respondents

Table 3
Future career goals.



commenced full time employment within 3 months of the conclusion of their programme. The majority of respondents (32) securing full-time employment in Scotland with 8 in the rest of the UK and the remaining 17 going overseas, often back to their country of origin.

With regards to current employment status, it was found that 46 respondents were still in full-time employment and 7 in part-time employment. The remainder were either continuing their education or undertaking voluntary work. Respondents were then asked if they were still employed in the F&E industry and whilst almost all of the respondents who took part in this study were currently employed it was found that 23 were no longer directly employed in the industry. Closer analysis of the data revealed that almost half of those no longer in the industry had experienced difficulty securing initial positions in F&E and that this had resulted in exploring alternative career opportunities. Of the remainder of those respondents who indicated that they were not directly working in the industry, it was found that one had returned to full-time education, ten were working in industries associated with the F&E industry, but perhaps employed in a (for example) marketing role. Only one respondent indicated that they had commenced employment in the industry, but had then decided to change industrial sector completely. These results are in contrast with findings from studies

undertaken in the wider hospitality and tourism area that have indicated a poor initial conversion rate (King, 2003) and an attrition of graduates from the industry over the initial 5 years (Barron & Maxwell, 1993).

All respondents were asked to consider future career goals and the results of this study would indicate that responses fell into two broad categories. Firstly it was found that a majority of respondents were committed to continued skills and knowledge development with the aim of becoming effective managers in the industry. Of almost equal importance was the desire to be involved in varied, challenging and satisfying work. Less important career goals involved wealth creation, working overseas and working with people. When asked what had influenced these current career goals, respondents indicated that practical issues such as the experience gained in industry since graduation and the current job market had required a reflection and re-evaluation of initial career aspirations and goals. Finally, respondents were asked what assistance they considered they might require as a means of progressing their career. The results clearly indicate the perceived importance of more industry experience and the vital aspect that networking appears to play in career development and advancement.

Respondents were finally asked to indicate their future career aspirations and consider if they were considering a long-term career in the festival and event industry. It was found that the majority (80%) of respondents were positive regarding long term career in the industry and still expected to be employed in the industry five years hence.

4. Results – interviews

4.1. Initial and current positions

Interviewees were initially asked about their first position after graduation. Whilst all respondents were currently in full-time positions in the events industry, only 8 of the 15 graduates moved into full-time employment immediately after completing the programme and it was found that those who had previous industry experience before the course were more likely to enter the industry in a full-time capacity.

There seemed to be a significant difference in graduates' experiences and it was found that those who gained full-time (FT) positions did so relatively easily and commenced employment immediately after the programme concluded. Those who did not secure full-time positions found that they had to work in a variety of part-time (PT), freelance and voluntary positions as a means of developing additional experience to gain their first full-time position.

Regardless of respondents' initial position, this study found that initial jobs after graduating were nearly always part-time and/or entry level but then either escalated quickly or developed into a full-time position. There was, however, a general feeling that these initial positions were not 'appropriate' given the recently gained qualification. Indeed it was found that many participants felt over qualified for the role and that the financial remuneration was not what had been expected. However one interviewee stressed that this was appropriate and expected and stated that,

"it would be unreasonable to expect an organisation to offer a senior role to MSc students as they aren't always ready for a management position straight after graduation" (Nicola)

Indeed, most respondents recognised the value of undertaking relatively low level roles as a means of securing a better job in the future. Respondents explained that being willing to take a lower level position was mentioned as key to getting a senior manager

events position due to the fact that you developed operational skills and knowledge and consequently developed a better understanding of all levels of the industry. This confirms industry's position in terms of the need to have more 'event ready' graduates with strong operational and production skills (BVEP 2014; EventScotland, 2015)

"Students should not expect to finish the course and just assume they will get a great job." (Lottie)

"Students need to move away from the 'I've been to University, I should get a job that pays me £25-30k a year' because it's not like that in the industry" (Maria)

Many respondents raised concepts of gaining experience whilst studying. Whilst there is no formal industrial experience element of the MSc programme, many graduates secured experience independently. In particular, respondents identified the value of volunteering and unpaid internships as providing a means of securing a post-graduation job. In addition it was identified that often respondents who had undertaken unpaid employment were offered paid FT or PT work by the organisation. Crucially, it was found that these opportunities for volunteering and unpaid internships were made available through networking events or contacts made through the programme and this opportunity was vital in providing students with more understanding of the events management industry.

"My volunteering experience was essential in not only helping me secure my first interview, but also gave me some real life examples to discuss with potential employers and relate what I had been doing in the classroom." (Justine)

Respondents were then asked to reflect on their career progression to date and consider how their career had developed. It was found that all respondents were currently holding management positions, often with direct line management responsibilities and significant budgets. The majority of respondents were employed in the corporate conferences sector and several had an international dimension to their position. All participants expressed that there had been a clear career progression since they graduated, with each role developing their knowledge base and skills that had allowed them to move on to more senior and responsible roles. Responsibilities varied amongst respondents but generally included all tenets of event management including client relations, planning, logistics, marketing, event design and delivery and business development.

A high level of satisfaction was determined from respondents responses to current positions and in their current role, the most cited element they enjoy is a mixture of autonomy and self-direction, opportunities to be creative, keeping busy, being organised and the act of managing and controlling various element of events for which they are responsible. However, some respondents did allude to less enjoyable elements of their current positions citing significant levels of stress; unsociable hours and an over-abundance of administrative tasks.

4.2. Preparedness for working life

Respondents were then asked to consider how their MSc programme had prepared them for initial and subsequent positions in the events industry and respondents held a variety of views regarding this issue. From a positive perspective, the most commonly cited element of the programme that help in preparing graduates for the industry did not concern any element of programme content, rather respondents felt that the industry

networking and volunteering opportunities that were made available during the programme had been most valuable. From a programme content perspective, it was felt that the more practical-based modules and assignments coupled with modules which focused on techniques and skills development were considered the most valuable. Specific mention was made of the New Venture Planning module by most interviewees as providing a very useful foundation for understanding the basics of event planning and management. In addition, modules that focussed on marketing were specifically mentioned as having implications in aspect of current and previous positions. Interestingly, it was found that respondents did not appreciate the importance of this module whilst studying, rather appreciating the content once in the industry. The quotes detailed below are typical of the thoughts and feeling of these respondents,

“The MSc course gave me a lot of insight into what the industry would be like” (Jill)

“Learning about project management and doing group presentations were particularly useful exercises and gave me leadership experience which helped me to learn that I wanted to do a management role” (Olivia).

“The university provided me with networking opportunities, but it requires students to really try and take advantage of these opportunities.” (Ruth)

Other positive elements of the programme included the opportunity to work in groups and make presentations (i.e. pitching an idea), learning how to launch a marketing campaign and developing knowledge of the general area of business event management. Overall, it was found that the more practical elements were considered to have been the most useful to date whilst the more theoretical elements have yet to fully contribute to individual careers. This accords well with the [EMBOK \(2016\)](#) model that suggests a more practical and operational perspective when considering the development of event management education programmes.

From a less positive perspective it was considered that a significant disadvantage of the programme was the lack of programme organised practical knowledge and work experience. It was generally felt that the lack of practical work experience restricted the development of ‘soft’ or ‘core’ skills and would result in making graduates more employable. The course was criticised for being too theoretical and academic, which doesn’t reflect the ‘real world’. For example, an in line with the more practical approach espoused by [EMBOK \(2016\)](#) there was a need for more material on floor plans, health and safety, risk assessments, etc. For those who already had the practical experience by working the industry, they didn’t necessarily feel more prepared by the course, but felt that it widened their understanding of the various facets within the industry; it was the events degree which has helped them in giving them an edge in interviews.

Whilst participants understood the difficulty of including practical skill development via, for example, a period of work experience, due to the limited time frame of the one year course, a theme that was common across all interviews was the requirement to increase practical elements of the programme. It was generally felt that these aspects could be incorporated throughout the programme and several respondents stressed the need to further build industry relationships. This could be further achieved through increased site visits, meeting with industry stakeholders and developing a deeper understanding of the practical elements of event management. It was considered that this would enable

students to better understand the link between the classroom and the realities of working in the event industry ([Lockstone et al., 2008](#)). However, these comments were often followed by statements that the degree provided graduates with an advantage when applying for jobs and that it was a combination of practical real world experience and the degree that enabled them to be successful in the job market.

“The classroom based element is important but it would have been useful to get directly involved in planning an event and possibly work with industry partners. This way we can put what we have learned into practice” (James)

The thoughts expressed by these participants are a keen reminder of the importance of work experience as part of an academic programme and further reinforce the thoughts of researchers who have identified the benefits of this element of a programme ([Robinson et al., 2008](#)).

4.3. The future

Respondents were asked to consider their career aspirations and it was found that all except one (who wished to specialise in Marketing) desired to continue working in events. It was also found that respondents were happy with their current employer and wished to continue working with their current company for two or three years before moving on to a more senior management role. Several respondents felt that the significant stress levels being currently experienced were unsustainable and indicated that desire to progress from the practical, more operational position of event management to working in a more senior role with more strategic responsibility. Respondents were asked to consider which elements of the programme they considered would be most useful in their future career and modules associated with planning were identified as providing the knowledge and skills that would be most important as their careers progressed.

Respondents were also asked to consider what future skills and knowledge will be required for successful careers in the industry. It was universally felt that the growing trend of technology and the use of digital content at events (especially the use of social media), will continue to evolve and affect the way events are marketed, provided and managed. It was considered that technology will assist venues to differentiate their product and elements such as live streaming will increasingly provide a new platform for events.

“Everything is going digital, technology has a big influence on events. Students need to have a good knowledge of social media.” (Raquel)

Respondents also identified the concept of funding for the events industry, indicating that funding sources are evolving whilst diminishing and the relationships between funders and event organisers is an emerging issue. In addition, the ability to develop multiple connections is increasingly important for successful careers in the industry.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to develop a greater understanding of the study motivations, the preparedness of graduates for working life in the industry, the initial career destinations and the career progression of Festival and Event Management graduates at a post 92 Scottish university and thus contribute to the limited body of research and knowledge in this area. As such it has provided an

overview of the thoughts of masters' graduates from an increasingly popular discipline and whilst respondents who took part in this study did not necessarily have particular careers in mind, it was found that the choice of this programme was reflective of a genuine interest in the industry. Evident from this study was respondents' realistic expectations of working life and the ability to foresee long-term careers in the industry. This group of respondents did not, however, feel that their programme had given them the appropriate practical skills required for working life and called for an increase in the opportunities for developing practical experience, perhaps through university organised industrial placements and enhanced industry engagement. From the educators' perspective, this finding raises previously identified practical (such as scheduling) and academic (such as credit) issues regarding work experience that are essential to consider when planning programmes. There is also a requirement for the industry to contribute to this issue and the availability of experience opportunities and willingness to welcome, develop and train students by organisations is essential for the future success of the industry. The findings are useful therefore for both events educators and the industry and point to a maturing of the subject area and emphasise the joint responsibilities held by both parties. The insights into the programme needs of event students will be useful in informing future curriculum design, justifying the introduction of work based experience into postgraduate programmes and encouraging further industry involvement and research informed teaching.

Events industry trade associations have discussed better collaboration with education and have identified education-related activities such as cross-industry internships, structured training programmes for students, and increased communication between the industry, academics and students through the creation of an online hub (BVEP, 2014). Again this reaffirms some of the key research findings and participation on these activities would be of value to events students to further develop their careers.

In a manner similar to all research, this study has several limitations; key amongst these is that the results of this study can in no way be generalised across graduates from other institutions. Indeed it is recognised that due to the relatively small response rate, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from graduates from this one institution. Similarly, it is also recognised that the majority of responses were from graduates of Master's programmes and that this may have had an influence on the results. It can, however, be concluded that this study goes some way to developing an understanding of career aspirations and patterns of festival and event management graduates. Significantly, it could be suggested that the findings from this study are in contrast to the generally more negative findings from similar studies undertaken in the wider hospitality and tourism industry: festival and event management graduates were more likely to embark on initial careers, and could foresee rewarding long-term opportunities in the festival and events industry. Whilst questions remain regarding the unprecedented growth of festival and event management programmes in higher education, the focussed nature of festival and event management graduates bodes well for both educators and industry alike.

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