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Innovative Approaches to Event Management Education in Career Development: A Study of Student Experiences

Richard Robinson (richard.robinson@uq.ed.au)
School of Tourism, The University of Queensland,
11 Salisbury Road, Ipswich 4305, QLD, Australia

Paul Barron (p.barron@napier.ac.uk)
School of Marketing, Tourism and Languages, Napier University,
Craiglockhart Campus, Edinburgh EH14 1DJ, UK

David Solnet (d.solnet@uq.edu.au)
School of Tourism, The University of Queensland,
11 Salisbury Road, Ipswich 4305, QLD, Australia

Abstract

As the tourism industry matures, so too do career opportunities in its various sectors. This paper reports on a study of graduands preparing for tourism and event management careers. A two-stage sequential research design, using survey and focus group methods respectively, explored the perceptions of a final-year professional development class at an Australian university regarding the meeting of course objectives and these objectives' adaptability to a particular tourism sector – event management. This paper contributes to an understanding of how higher education may better prepare its students for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of event management careers.

Keywords: Event management; Tourism education; Career development

Richard Robinson spent 18 years in the hospitality industry as a chef and is currently a doctoral candidate, associate lecturer and industry partnerships manager in The University of Queensland's School of Tourism. He teaches in professional development and food and beverage management. His research interests include hospitality labour turnover, academe-industry relationships and a range of food and beverage studies.

David Solnet is an academic at the University of Queensland, Australia. Prior to entering academia, David had a successful 18-year career in the restaurant and country club industries where he held senior management roles in both the United States and Australia. David is now a highly sought-after consultant, specialising in service quality initiatives and innovative performance-based remuneration programs. David also has authored numerous peer-reviewed academic journal and conference papers.

Paul Barron is Reader in Tourism and Hospitality Management in the School of Marketing, Tourism and Languages. Paul completed his PhD in 2004 which examined international students' educational experiences in Australian universities. The overall education and living experiences of students studying hospitality and tourism at university continues to be a research interest. Paul has authored over 50 articles in the fields of hospitality and tourism; is currently on the editorial board of three hospitality and tourism journals.

Introduction

Tourism and its associated sectors, including event management, employ an estimated 10 per cent of the global workforce (Ibrahim and Wason, 2002). Clearly, much of this demand is for semi-skilled and moderately remunerated positions. However, there is an increasing demand for well-qualified graduates with a range of attributes and skills. A number of challenges are encountered, especially by graduates of degree programmes that have business management rather than operational foci. Among these are the ability to reconcile graduates' skills with industry needs at entry level, the ability to articulate career path options, and an understanding of the underpinnings of career path development, both in tourism and its related sectors. However, little research has been conducted in these areas (Ayres, 2006a).

In recognition of these challenges, The University of Queensland's School of Tourism (UQST) developed an industry partnerships strategy. Pivotal to this strategy was a three-part plan. The plan included: the establishment of a dedicated industry partnerships team of academics; the introduction of a 'professional development' class for final-year students; and an executive shadow placement (ESP) programme, which could be accessed by the school's highest achievers (Solnet *et al.*, 2007).

This paper first summarises some of the career challenges that tourism and event management students face, particularly in light of the newness of event education (Getz, 2002). Next, UQST's industry partnerships strategy is introduced and explained – in particular, the professional development class and ESP programme – and the paper describes how the strategy sought to address the aforementioned challenges. The paper also reports on a study that critically assesses students; perceptions of the career management aspects of UQST's industry partnerships professional development class. Data were gathered from then-current event management students in order to determine if the professional development course objectives associated with career management were achieved and, further, via a focus group aimed at gauging event management students' satisfaction with the ESP element of the course.

Tourism careers

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a thorough analysis of tourism careers and their inherent challenges, previous studies show that up to 70 per cent of final-year students cannot foresee a long-term career in the industry (Barron and Maxwell, 1993) and 50 per cent of tourism and hospitality graduates work outside the industry within five years (McKercher *et al.*, 1995). A lack of alignment between graduate and industry expectations; often ill-defined careers, especially in the context of progression to senior management; and a lack of awareness of various self-development and professional opportunities, can hinder the realisation of tourism career ambitions.

Much generic research into career paradigms suggests that traditional career path models are characterised by the predictability of intra-organisational, linear and hierarchical progression (Ayres, 2006b), which are often grounded in the accumulation of formal qualifications (Donkin, 2002). This model presents a number of challenges for the tourism industry, which is dominated by small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and is often located in sectors and destinations not readily identifiable as 'tourism'. In career terms, tourism is still in its infancy, and its workforce is distinguished by dynamism, seasonality, mobility and, often, entrepreneurialism (Donkin, 2002). As Ladkin and Riley (1996) argue, tourism and its workforce does not easily lend itself to the old career paradigm.

An alternative career paradigm has been suggested. This is characterised by individual rather than organisational responsibility for career development, which manifests itself in 'boundaryless' careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Consequently, careers can take lateral and diagonal turns which are rather more chequered than the traditional vertical and linear model. Moreover, the new career paradigm accommodates a raft of personal, social and cultural factors; hence, it has been argued, it is far more commensurate with the complexities of tourism careers (Ayres, 2006a). In the context of tourism career development, Ayres

(2006b) argues that this results in opportunism and mobility, sometimes facilitated by mentoring and strategic networking. In addition, modes of career advancement research have shown that recruiters in tourism are seeking specific skill sets and attributes from graduates. Leadership (Ehlers, 2005), communication, employee skills and human resource management, and planning and technical skills (Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert, 2005) are some of the generic attributes sought. Clearly, educators can play a role in preparing graduates for both the challenges of managing their careers and the acquisition of industry-required skills and attributes.

A sector of tourism currently experiencing rapid growth globally (Mules, 2004) is the events industry. As an emerging destination for tourism graduates, the events industry perhaps amplifies the challenges faced by educators in preparing its students for future careers.

Event management careers

The events industry has become a remarkable global phenomenon over the past decade or so, and has a number of defining features relating to careers. Previous activities associated with the corporate tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors have been re-badged to accommodate the more cosmopolitan and marketable image that the name 'events' attracts. Yet there is recognition that events as a field of study, and indeed as a career, is "quite young and immature" (Getz, 2002:12). The higher education sector has found an increased role in supplying this emerging global industry with high quality graduates (Harris and Jago, 1999), but this is confused by a number of factors. This overview transcends the range of contemporary debates relating to the transaction between educational providers and the events industry.

Within the events management industry specifically, models of industry engagement and career development have not received close attention, but there are a number of themes that warrant discussion. The literature reveals three ways in which event management students might get closer to industry. In essence, this engagement would enable students, through some medium, to link classroom-based theoretical concepts to practitioner views or real-life scenarios.

First, either managing or facilitating opportunities for volunteering at events seems the most common approach. The nature of events is such that their delivery often depends on volunteer participation (Elstad, 1996). Structured programmes can provide opportunities to contextualise learning experiences in the field (Digance *et al.*, 2001), yet managing these projects can be resource-intensive for the host educational institution. Moreover, managing volunteer expectations (Ralston *et al.*, 2004) and poor volunteer motivation can potentially negatively impact on planners' ability to manage an event effectively and increase costs associated with its delivery (Cuskelly, *et al.*, 2004). Second, bringing event management professionals into the classroom, as guest lecturers, has had documented success. Indeed, Barron and Whitford (2004) found that specific event management courses that utilised guest lecturers for at least one-third of the delivery were well received by students, who stated that such an approach provided 'real life' examples, and contacts for part-time and future careers. Finally, there are the various forms of work experience, work placements and the traditional internships commonly offered within tourism degree programmes (Busby, 2005). These appear to be the most common educator-facilitated contact between students and industry, given their success in augmenting classroom-based learning. Moreover, they often act as recruitment opportunities for event managers when selecting graduates for employment (Wills, 2004).

As with careers in tourism and hospitality, event career paths are often not well defined. Mobility is a key feature of the events sector, and leaving a position is generally a prerequisite for a promotional opportunity (McCabe, 2001; 2008). Moreover, the time lapse between entry and the attainment of a managerial position in events typically starts from ten years (McCabe, 2001). This does not neatly accord with the presumption that the justification for providing graduate-level studies is so that candidates can enter the industry on a more advanced rung of the career ladder (Getz, 2002). Moreover, there is evidence that many

current event managers began their careers in the hotel sector (McCabe, 2001), while more recent research suggests that networking is recognised as a prerequisite for career advancement (McCabe, in press).

The previous sections of this paper summarise, albeit briefly, some of the career challenges faced by tourism and event management graduates. The remainder of the paper outlines UQST's innovative approach to addressing these challenges and details the findings of a study to evaluate the success of these approaches.

Industry partnerships strategy

Underpinned by stakeholder theory and relationship management approaches (Solnet *et al.,* 2007), UQST implemented an innovative industry partnerships strategy to refresh and redefine academe-industry engagement. Key to this strategy was the implementation of a final-year course, entitled 'Professional Development', to prepare graduands better for future careers in tourism. The primary objectives of the course include:

- helping students align their career interests with their skills
- practical resume-building advice (via industry experts)
- interview preparation
- understanding how to manage career expectations
- personal development
- assessing career path options in various tourism-related fields

These objectives are specifically designed to reflect the industrial and social challenges for careers, both generally and in the context of the tourism industry and its sectors, as summarised earlier. A distinctive feature of the course is the invitation of senior industry representatives from various tourism industry sectors to present guest lectures on a weekly basis. This distinctiveness relates not just to their participation, but more to the focus of their presentations. The focus is on career path reflection in the context of the course's curriculum modules, as guided by the objectives above, rather than the specific operational-related contexts in which industry is traditionally engaged.

Within this course, selected students compete for a chance to participate in the ESP programme. The ESP facilitates an opportunity for the school's highest achievers to represent themselves and the school while being mentored by senior industry executives. A rigorous selection process is involved. While the opportunity to participate is publicised to all students on their entry to the degree programme, eligibility is awarded according to academic achievement on completion of the student's penultimate year of study. Beyond academic performance, the eligibility process assesses the student's work and life history, communication and interview skills. To ensure student equity a 'self-placement' option is provided, but this has rarely been exploited. The key objectives of the ESP are to:

- allow the School's highest achievers to undertake an exclusive placement in an industry sector of their choice
- work alongside, and be mentored by, a senior industry figure
- view organisations from a senior manager's viewpoint
- engage industry and inter-organisational functioning at a strategic level.

A clear departure from the traditional, compulsory, high maintenance and often inconsistent internship model (Busby, 2005), the ESP allows key industry partners access to the school's elite before graduation. While all students enrol in the professional development course discussed above, and complete the same coursework, those selected for the ESP spend a period of 60 to 80 hours shadowing senior industry executives, and their course assessment is slightly altered to accommodate their placement experiences. ESP students complete a diary and reflective journal as part of their course's major independent report, and their hosts award 10 per cent of their grade according to criteria such as communication skills, initiative, eagerness, job knowledge and career prospects. The students negotiate directly with their

industry hosts on how the required hours are to be configured. Some placements have been undertaken intensively over the mid-semester vacation so as not to interrupt other coursework, others in several concurrent blocks of two or more days per week, but most typically students and hosts elect for the one-day-a-week model.

The ESP programme's key aim is to offer candidates "a unique opportunity to work with a senior industry figure and to observe organizational functioning at a more strategic level" (The University of Queensland, 2007). This opportunity allows participants to view their future careers from above, to observe and participate in organisational strategy and policy-making, which is aimed at enhancing rapid career progression opportunities for the student. Furthermore, UQST benefits by further consolidating its links with key industry players. The UQST's *Guide for Industry Hosts* and *Student Information Pack* provide further insights to the ESP's administration (www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources).

UQST has been providing tourism education since the mid 1970s. Event management education was added as a discrete study area at undergraduate level in 2002 and student demand for courses in this area has grown steadily. Consequently, students wishing to pursue careers in these sectors have enrolled in increased numbers on the professional development course, while UQST has responded with the development of a range of ESP opportunities. The inaugural 2004 ESP cohort numbered 18, which rose to 42 students in 2006. This paper seeks to critically assess student perceptions of the career management aspects of the professional development course. Specifically, the research aimed to determine whether the course objectives associated with career management were achieved, and also aimed to gauge event management students' satisfaction with the ESP element of the course in light of the infancy of this area of study.

Methods

The sample and setting for this research were all undergraduate students enrolled on the professional development course offered by UQST. The research employed mixed methods to gather data. The questionnaire was developed specifically to investigate student satisfaction with the course. The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section asked respondents to answer demographic questions concerning age, gender, nationality and degree programme major. It also solicited responses regarding students' involvement in part-time employment during study and career aspirations upon graduation. The second section consisted of a variety of questions regarding satisfaction with the classroom-based element of the course. Specifically, students were asked if these courses had assisted in the development of skills, knowledge and attributes that would be useful in the workplace on graduation. Students were also asked to comment on the usefulness of guest lectures and indicate their satisfaction with the management and administration of the course. This section then asked students to reflect on the appropriateness of using this course in the final year of their degree and to consider the impact it had on their career motivations. The third section was aimed at those students who had undertaken the ESP element of the course. It contained questions that specifically examined students' satisfaction with the management, administration and execution of their placement experience.

The majority of questions required an agree/disagree response although, in order to gauge satisfaction, several questions required students to indicate strength of feeling via a six-point Likert scale. In many cases, respondents were also presented with the opportunity to provide qualitative comments as a means of elaboration. In order to achieve a maximum response rate, and to answer questions students may have had during its completion, the questionnaire was administered in the controlled environment of formal class time and under the supervision of the researchers.

A total of 145 students were enrolled on the course and the controlled nature of the questionnaire administration resulted in a total of 101 usable responses – a response rate of 70 per cent. From these 101 completed questionnaires, it was determined that 37 respondents took part in the ESP element of the course. This represented an 86 per cent rate from ESP participants.

The questionnaire could be described as normative in that it enabled typical views to be identified. However, it is acknowledged that the sample population represents a cluster sample in a geographical sense. Despite this methodological limitation, the scale of the survey clearly achieves the threshold of 'generalisability' (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002:41), at least in terms of students undertaking the ESP element of this course at The University of Queensland.

Of the 37 respondents who took part in the ESP element of the course, it was determined that 11 students had identified event management as their major area of study and undertaken the ESP with an event management organisation. As a means of evaluating how successfully the course objectives were adaptable to the event management sector, a focus group was conducted with a selection of these students. Of these 11, six students volunteered to take part in the focus group and were posed discussion questions that attempted to solicit their individual experiences of the placement element of their course. The focus group interview lasted for 80 minutes with a note-taker present. Respondents were coded according to gender, age and whether they were international or domestic students. This coding is detailed in Table 1.

Focus Group Respondent	Allocated Code
Female, 22, Domestic	FD1
Female, 23, International	FI2
Female, 21, Domestic	FD3
Female, 22, Domestic	FD4
Female, 21, Domestic	FD5
Female, 23, International	FI6

Table 1: Coding of Focus Group Respondents

The focus group discussion notes were transcribed and the data were analysed via content analysis. Subsequently, this resulted in the data being manifest coded, which identified the number of times a phrase was used or topic was raised, or latent coded, which identified the underlying meaning of the phrase or topic. Therefore, the coding of the data allowed the researchers to probe into and discover content in a meaningful way. The following section reports the findings of the two sequential studies then, in the discussion, offers an integrated explanation.

Results – questionnaire

All students who had undertaken the professional development course were first asked to consider their satisfaction with the information provided in the course in assisting them to identify career path options. It was found that the majority of respondents (79 per cent) were at least satisfied that the course had provided information concerning a range of career path options, and more than half indicated that they were either very satisfied or extremely satisfied. This suggests that the course presented a rounded view of career path opportunities for students and that those taking the course appeared to receive an overview of alternative career opportunities. However, a minority of respondents indicated their dissatisfaction with the opportunities provided by the course for identifying various career path options. Indeed, when asked to indicate the level of satisfaction with the identification of career path options, 22 per cent of respondents felt either moderately or very dissatisfied with this element of the course.

One of the objectives of the professional development course is to raise student awareness of personal development including personal transferable skills, such as networking and continuous learning skills, that might be useful when planning and managing careers upon graduation, and indeed throughout their working lives. Students were asked to reflect on whether the course had achieved this objective and provided them with career management tools. Again, the majority (70 per cent) of respondents indicated their satisfaction with this

element of the course. However, while there appears to be general satisfaction, it was found that 30 per cent of respondents were either moderately or very dissatisfied with the provision of such skills. In addition, it is worth noting that a further 38 per cent of respondents were only moderately satisfied with this element of the course. These results suggest that the area of personal transferable skills development might benefit from being examined and developed for future course delivery. Finally, students were asked to rank their satisfaction in terms of whether the course had adequately identified and discussed a variety of career path challenges, such as gender and work-life balance issues. Of the three questions asked, students demonstrated the strongest feeling of satisfaction with this element, with only 13 per cent of respondents feeling an element of dissatisfaction with this aspect of the course.

Results – focus group

During the focus group, participants were guided through a number of themes. The primary questions were aimed at exploring the students' satisfaction with their ESP, particularly in respect to its stated objectives, and to determine how this shaped their understanding of the events sector and their individual prospective career opportunities. The secondary aim of the focus group discussion was to identify underlying themes regarding the nature of the events industry and how academe may position itself to develop further mutually beneficial relationships with this industry sector.

The focus group participants experienced a diversity of placement experiences. Host event companies included a Queensland-based national professional conference organiser (PCO); the organisation tasked with delivering Brisbane's major annual community and environmental festival; an event design and management firm with offices along Australia's eastern seaboard and Shanghai; and the events unit of the Queensland government's Premier and Cabinet Department. Students had been delegated to shadow the owner or senior executive in each of these organisations. Regular travel on the part of some of the senior managers necessitated the students shadowing and working alongside other senior staff in some instances. The placement experience of the event management students included shadowing and observing key personnel such as managing directors, event managers and the symposium manager. Hands-on activities involved working alongside other senior professionals on project management, and collaborating in teams on event design or event delivery, but they most often involved a combination of all these experiences.

It was found that, despite the ESP objectives being outlined to the student participants on entering the placement, they generally had few expectations beyond involvement 'just for the experience'. The desire for the experience was shaped by a late realisation by participants that they needed experience to complement their academic studies. Typical of such comments was one participant who stated:

> The most important thing you can do is get experience – the piece of paper [degree] is not that important – certainly not the marks! (FD3).

Nonetheless, student experiences were overwhelmingly positive. Satisfaction was driven by access to industry networks – their industry hosts, various stakeholders, including suppliers, other event companies, and even clients. Students were repeatedly grateful for the direct industry contact.

Indeed, one participant appeared to have developed strong links with their ESP provider and stated:

> Getting to know people in the industry as people – they gave me presents, found me interviews – we are still emailing back and forth… (FD4).

The non-verbal cues and elaborating comments from several focus group participants suggested that this was a shared experience and that potential employment upon graduation evolved as a key expectation. Indeed, the importance of developing links and networks in a

developing industry such as event management was highlighted by one participant who stated:

> There are so few jobs going in this field – they're not advertised. All jobs are filled internally… without advertising (FD5).

An opportunity to gain a realistic perspective of their prospective industry was enhanced by a high degree of acceptance by their hosts during the placements, which included devolution of responsibilities and the chance to work progressively on 'live' projects. This enabled the placement students to learn the idiosyncrasies and jargon of the event industry.

The negative aspects of the placements centred on the realisation that the nature of event management work was overwhelmingly administratively based, with one respondent considering that the industry was almost entirely office based. Nonetheless, the group consensus was that the ESP was a unique and rare opportunity and yielded better outcomes than other forms of industry engagement, such as volunteering.

Discussion with the focus group also aimed to probe some of the administrative aspects of the placement, in terms of how the ESP objectives were realised. Opinion was divided on accessibility to senior personnel, although it was acknowledged that most organisations had flat management structures and that the most senior staff member was often unavailable, sometimes travelling interstate or overseas. In addition, it was noted that several participants made comments regarding the practical nature of the event industry, with one student stating:

> Executive shadowing does not really work in small business as everyone does everything… and it will be the same upon graduation (FD5).

Nonetheless, the project-based work and the willingness of the hosts to welcome students did facilitate access for some of the placement students to view the organisation from a senior perspective and to have some insight into organisational strategy.

The group generally agreed, however, that the limited timeframe of the placement and the structure, which was typically on a one-day-a-week basis, restricted the achievement of the objective to engage industry and inter-organisational functioning at a strategic level. This thought was typified by one respondent who opined:

> Because of very long lead in time [for projects], the two-month window was not enough to see the whole process from start to finish – for example, the groundwork [for an event] was done last year so we are not really getting a chance to 'executively' work on projects (FD4).

Students also agreed that those employees within the organisation delegated with responsibility for supervising the ESP students were not always fully conversant with the objectives of the programme. This was most apparent during the initial student-host interview, which the students felt lacked the intensity they had both expected and hoped for.

One student felt there was an imbalance between the perceived importance of the ESP between the student and the organisation and stated:

> I did so much research to prepare for the interview but didn't have a chance to use it (FI6).

However, overall it was found that participant satisfaction with the placement experience depended on the motivation of the individual student, their ability and willingness to communicate with their hosts and a realisation that the experience may not be as exciting as they expected.

Participants revealed that their placement had impacted significantly on their career aspirations. While it reinforced their resolve to pursue event management careers, the placements provided an opportunity to review career goals from a more realistic perspective. Key among these realisations were the challenge of long hours; administrative-focused work; modest pay at entry level; the competitiveness of finding work in the events sector; and the perception that creative jobs were held by specialists who moved from other fields. Indeed, it was agreed that the events industry recruits at all levels from other industries (for example, public relations and marketing). During the focus group discussions there were suggestions that the industry is not yet fully aware of the benefits of recruiting event management graduates. This feeling was typified by one participant who stated:

> The events industry does not yet understand the value of core skill sets in management [delivered at university] (FD3).

Other observations regarding participants' future careers included comment on the necessity for flexibility and mobility, both on gaining entry and for career progression, and an understanding of the value of gaining experience from a range of organisations. One respondent felt that:

> It's harder to work up in one company because companies are so small. We'll have to make a lot of sideways steps (FI6).

The concept of gender roles in the wider tourism industry was raised by participants. It was interesting to note that the group observed and considered the events industry to be dominated by females. Participants mooted gender traits including creativity, time-management skills, enthusiastic personalities and organisational abilities, as being particularly suited to this industry. However, there was also a suggestion that the instability of the events industry and the perception that much of the work is contract-based might also account for the predominance of females. This point was further probed and participants were asked to compare working in the event industry with working in hotels. It was determined that this particular group of students considered hotels to be more male-oriented, which they found unattractive. It should be noted, however, that all focus group participants were female, which might skew the data recorded.

Finally, the placement appeared to facilitate thought processes developing specific ideas introduced in the course lectures and seminars. For instance, the period of ESP highlighted work-life balance issues, with one participant concluding:

> It's really hard to get a balance. You want a job out of university but eventually I want a family. There's such a conflict between having kids and having a career (FD4).

Small business ownership and working from home were put forward as strategies to negotiate these challenges.

Discussion

The objectives of this paper were twofold. The first was to outline some of the challenges faced by graduates and educators in tourism and events management. The second was to report the findings of a questionnaire and a focus group used to evaluate the success of UQST's approach designed to counter these challenges. The questionnaire was administered to tourism, hospitality, event and leisure management students, all undertaking the new professional development course. The subsequent focus group consisted of event management students who undertook the ESP.

This section, where possible, integrates the findings of the data collection phases with the literature on career issues. The focus group in particular reveals rich information which can be used to evaluate the success of the ESP and to gain insights into the nature of the events sector. Key to this discussion is the satisfaction of students with the course and with the ESP

objectives respectively, and also how the ESP compares with traditional student industry placements. Also of interest is the manner in which these initiatives enhance the UQST industry partnerships strategy. Overall, the demographic nature of the samples reinforces past research findings that both tourism and hospitality degree programmes (Gillet and Whitelaw, 2003) and the events industry (Beaulieu and Love, 2004) are dominated by females.

Insights can be gained, at least with respect to event management student perceptions, by discussing the questionnaire and focus group results in conjunction. The questionnaire reveals high overall student satisfaction rates for identifying career paths (79 per cent), development tools for career management (70 per cent) and identification of career path challenges (87 per cent). This suggests that the incorporation of transitional skills and personal development tools into the course, as informed by Lorsch and Tierney (2002), and the integration of career guidance into curricula facilitated by industry stakeholder involvement, as recommended by Crispin and Robinson (2001), have contributed to a preponderance of student satisfaction. There was ample evidence in focus group discussion that various course objectives were developed further by ESP participants.

A distinctive aspect of the course was the strong focus on guest speakers sourced from industry. It is suggested that this had a positive impact on the students' satisfaction with career path development, and therefore may be perceived as a course strength. The focus group data give further insights as to student satisfaction with career aspirations. Clearly, the ESP programme facilitated the provision of out-of-classroom material on career issues, which reportedly firmed student resolve to pursue careers in event management. Career path options discussed by the events students suggested that they gained insights into the reality that entry level may be in administrative roles. In addition, the diversity of the events sector dictated that, while career path options were diverse, compromise might be needed to reach end goals by, for example, beginning a career in an international hotel – a theme apparent in the literature (McCabe, 2001). While not necessarily aligning with student expectations, the programme allowed students to experience realistic industry career development prospects. The literature has reported that industry is enthusiastic about accessing students for industry placements with a view to employment (Wills, 2004). However, despite several of the ESP students receiving offers to continue a relationship with their placement hosts, it was generally on a volunteer basis, a characteristic of the events sector (Elstad, 1996).

Satisfaction with the course regarding career management tools was the lowest of the scored objectives. While no comparative information is available, there is evidence that the focus group participants may have had a better level of understanding of this construct than the larger sample. The focus group responses nicely reconciled the course objective of career management tools, especially in the context of networking. There were implied suggestions that success could be achieved with specialist (upgraded) skills. However, it was noted that there was still some ambivalence about the benefits to industry of employing event management graduates. It is suggested that the placement experience augments coursework career management tool material, which highlights the need to review delivery of this module in the future. Consideration could be given to applied classroom examples, congruent with the placement student experience, rather than the generic theoretical and abstract content, or at least a more focused use of guest presenters which has proved to be successful previously (Barron and Whitford, 2004).

Identifying career path challenges recorded the highest level of satisfaction among the survey respondents. Again, this may be affected by the regime of guest speakers, whose views are perhaps more credible to students than those of their educators, and students being informed of their respective career path journeys. While students accessed generic career path challenges in the coursework, from gender and generation gap issues to life-work balance, the focus groups revealed more sector-specific challenges which they accessed during their placement experiences. As has been discussed in the literature (McCabe, 2001; McCabe, in press), key among the focus group findings was the need for mobility, particularly to achieve career progression.

The dissatisfaction rates from the survey, though outweighed by positive responses, warrant further discussion. While the results from the questionnaire do not provide reasons, respondent dissatisfaction may be a consequence of the presentation of a more realistic view of employment opportunities upon graduation. Additionally, the predominance of tourism and hospitality students, and hence the focus of the course material on these industry sectors, might have alienated event management students. Moreover, student exposure during the course to literature identifying that event management careers were ill-defined (Beaulieu and Love, 2004; Getz, 2002), required mobility, and that attainment of managerial positions may require several years of post-degree experience (McCabe, 2001) may have combined to have a negative effect on the survey responses.

The event management focus group participants reported that the programme objectives of giving students access to senior management and a strategic organisational perspective were generally met. Clearly, this differs from the traditional hospitality/tourism industrial placement experience (Busby, 2005). However, the students did report that the team- and project-based nature of the work, perhaps manifest in flat management structures and the high degree of administrative work, compromised the ESP objectives. On the other hand, the high degree of assimilation (noted in the focus group) facilitated better learning experiences than the traditional, often high maintenance, placement experience. Nonetheless, consideration should be given to tailoring the programme to individual sectors under the tourism and hospitality umbrella, which have structural differences possibly affecting the successful delivery of the programme.

From a global perspective, the results of this study indicated that the real strength of the ESP programme was that it helped bridge the gap between academe and industry, a chasm often littered with cultural obstacles. Simply by acknowledging event organisations as integral to the education process, and by UQST reciprocating interest in industry, a stakeholder relationship management approach emerges. Various imperatives of the events sector e.g. professionalisation (Harris, 2004); credibility, supply of graduates (Wills, 2004); building networks (Arcodia and Reid, 2003); and the desire to participate in curriculum design (Silvers *et al.*, 2006); are all facilitated by student contact with industry. But two factors which differ from the traditional model of industry relationships are distinctive. First, via the ESP, UQST's finest students are engaging with industry at a strategic level. And second, the process of student placement was facilitated by a dedicated industry partnerships team of academics with recent and relevant industry experience, whose job description committed them to managing an industry portfolio. As well as providing positive outcomes for students' learning experiences and their career aspirations, the ESP programme is also a key component of the UQST industry partnerships strategy.

Conclusion and future research

This paper aimed to outline a new approach to preparing tourism and event management graduates for careers in their respective sectors, and to critically assess student perceptions of the career management aspects of the UQST industry partnerships strategy. Further, the research aimed to determine whether the course objective associated with career management was achieved, and to gauge event management student satisfaction with the ESP.

While there are a number of acknowledged limitations to the empirical components of this paper, we suggest that several useful and interesting conclusions can be drawn. These might be considered by university departments contemplating developing a similar student professional development course and/or placement experience for their curriculum. For example, it can be concluded that respondents were generally satisfied with the career management element of the new course, with the majority of respondents demonstrating at least moderate satisfaction. However, the research has highlighted areas that might be improved. Specifically, the concept of career path options should be examined, not only within the confines of this course, but also throughout the three-year programme of study. That students expressed an element of dissatisfaction when informed about career path options during the professional development course might suggest they have been in

possession of unrealistic expectations of career opportunities throughout their degree programme and, indeed, prior to commencing university.

Another reason for dissatisfaction could be the challenging nature of the class, particularly in relation to more conventional university classes where textbooks, journal articles and lectures often make up the majority of learning modes and where the assignments, papers and examination material are often drawn from these more conventional sources. In the professional development class, students are required to think outside these more conventional means and reflect on and plan for their own futures, an often daunting task that might have led to some of the dissatisfaction. It is quite possible that this dissatisfaction will be short-lived, as students may become more appreciative after they have graduated and had time to reflect on the experience. Future research could meaningfully track student career progress longitudinally to further develop an understanding of these issues.

University educators might also be guided by the student outcomes of those who undertook the new executive-level placement programme in the event industry, for the students in the study reported positive experiences that did not reflect all the problems associated with other forms of industrial placement. These students were generally very positive, notably with respect to how their placement experience firmed their career ambitions, focused on event industry-specific information, and how placement experiences could be developed and provided. The students' reflections on the shortcomings of the programme generally related to the unpredictability of a programme designed to be less structured, rather than to lost opportunities. So, while the students lacked the clear expectations that the traditional internship with measurable objectives might provide, their placement experiences provided flexibility and the excitement associated with a new experience.

Finally, it might be suggested that the satisfying period of ESP placement experienced by these students will lead to an improvement in the quality and quantity of opportunities for event management students. First, previous success will encourage existing ESP providers to remain involved with the programme and their experience will assist in achieving the aims of the programme. Second, the students who have just undertaken the ESP, and who will be the employers of the near future, will view the programme positively and will require little encouragement to become involved. Thus, university departments considering developing such a programme might expect to see its benefits strengthen over several articulations.

A number of challenges and decisions are faced by the existing ESP model, and how it impacts on career expectations and career development could be grounds for future research. For example, should the programme grow beyond simply catering for the 'stars' and high achievers to be more inclusive? Or would this dilute the experience, particularly from industry's point of view? Does the exclusivity of the programme raise questions of equity in relation to those students unable, or unwilling, to participate in the programme? In addition, significant resources are required to maintain the depth of industry partners' involvement with the ESP. Thus, future decisions might need to take this expenditure into account. A not insignificant challenge to the organisation and success of the ESP lies within the structure of the events industry itself. Participants, especially from the focus group, indicated limited access to executives on occasion and appeared surprised at the administrative and practical nature of the industry. The reasons for this may be that the industry is still developing and comprises a number of small operators where there is little demarcation of tasks and all levels of employees are involved in all aspects of the business. However, this finding also suggests that university education might better prepare students for the realities of working in the event industry.

This approach to providing industrial experience aims to give selected students high-level exposure to the industry and appears to transcend the staid and traditional model of industrial experience. It is argued that, while extensive resources have been invested in this programme, UQST has approached the issue from a strategic perspective: a position from which the major stakeholders of education, industry and students are already reaping benefits.

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