THE EMPLOYABILITY PROSPECTS OF GRADUATES IN EVENT MANAGEMENT: USING DATA FROM JOB ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

As the higher education environment becomes increasingly competitive, prospective students are more likely to compare graduate employability prospects of different universities and different courses. Consequently, the viability of courses is being increasingly challenged with market viability based predominately on student demand, which is often based on their perceptions of workplace requirements.

Event management has emerged to become a key sector of the Australian tourism industry and this has given some impetus to the need for tertiary educated event managers and for an evaluation of educational curriculum. To provide an indication of current employer requirements, a nationwide study of web-based job advertisements is being currently conducted. This paper reports the results from a content analysis of 105 job advertisements. The results reveal the range of industries that require event management specialists or skills, and a series of required skills and key attributes of event managers. The results of this study establish a platform from which to develop a classification of event management skills required by the industry. More importantly however, it can be used as the basis for curriculum evaluation and training needs, and create a better understanding and compatibility between event management education and industry practice.

INTRODUCTION

With the internationalisation of the market place, ongoing technological changes and the replacement of long-term job prospects with short-term based project positions (Le Heron & Hathaway, 1999) it is increasingly becoming more important to equip students with the skills and attributes to face these new challenges. Simultaneously, in an ever more competitive higher education provisional environment, prospective students are more likely to compare graduate employability prospects of different universities and different courses (Nunan, 1999; Symes, 1999). Being able to provide graduate employment figures and showcasing examples of successful graduates, and how they have utilised skills they have gained during a course of study has become an important marketing strategy for higher education institutions (Le Heron & Hathaway, 2000). Most universities, for example, have statements that identify graduate attributes and their link with workplace skills. Viability of courses based on the pursuit for knowledge's sake alone is being increasingly challenged by market viability factors (Symes, 1999). These are based predominantly on student demand, which in turn are often based on their perceptions of workplace requirements and career opportunities.

Tourism education is especially prone to the above market forces given that high market demands was a major contributing factor to the rapid expansion of this sector during the late 1980s to early 1990s (McKercher, 2000). As tertiary tourism education matures however, leading academics in the field are forecasting a period of instability with a decline in demand and a consolidation of programs (McKercher, 2000). These factors have led to the need for innovative and progressive curriculum development in order for courses to remain commercially viable. As Nunan (1999) notes:

> There are market advantages for those institutions that understand that the 'rules of the game have changed'. The new rule, it seems, is to make sure that the potential employers, and the market in general, understand that the degree from a particular institution provides graduates with essential skills for employment.

The extent to which 'market forces' and what Le Heron & Hathaway (1999: 272) have termed the "demand-for-jobs perspective (from those in or seeking to be part of the labour force)" should dominate university curriculum reform has been hotly debated (Laurell, 2001; Symes, 1999). From an industry perspective, some sectors of the tourism industry (the world's largest industry) have noted that graduates may be ill equipped with the skills needed for the workplace (e.g. Goodman & Sprague, 1991; Harris & Jago, 1999; Partlow & Gregoire, 1994). The authors of this paper have taken the position that while a balance should be maintained between learning for learning's sake and learning for workplace employability, keeping abreast with employment changes allowes courses to maintain relevance with current industry trends.

Event management has emerged to become a dynamic sector of the tourism industry over the past decade. The number, diversity and popularity of events has also grown throughout this period and can be categorised into three basic groupings: business events (e.g. conferences, trade fairs), cultural events (e.g. festivals, art exhibitions) and sporting events (e.g. football games, car racing). Recent mega-events such as the Olympic Games, the Goodwill Games and CHOGM, together with other major Australian events such as the Bi-Centenary of Federation, have, and continue to promote Australia as a unique setting for international events and showcase Australian expertise in organising successful meetings of various kinds.

As the number of events increase and the field of event management matures, there is a growing realisation about the continuing need to develop event management professionals who are able to create, organise and manage events (Arcodia & Reid, 2002a). Employing high-quality individuals who are trained and qualified in the field may satisfy several objectives. It will help to ensure professionalism in the field; equip managers with the necessary skills to deal with the specific challenges of the industry (McCabe, 2001) and new challenges as they arise (Neale, 2000); and will ultimately help to sustain the delivery of high quality events (Harris & Jago, 1999). This paper provides an overview of the literature on employment skill and attribute requirements of event managers, outlines job advertisements as an source of workplace related skills and attributes and describes the methodology, preliminary results and implications of a web-based job advertisement study of event managers.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS & ATTRIBUTES OF EVENT MANAGERS

Skills are tangible and measurable and have been referred to as the visible competency component (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). As Perry *et al.,* (1996) infer, knowledge and skills can be taught and through training and experience can be learned and developed. Personal attributes on the other hand are synonymous to the personal characteristics of an individual. They represent hidden and innate qualities such as personal attitudes, traits and values that are more difficult to develop and have been referred to as the invisible competency competent (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). However, while attributes are comparatively harder to develop and influence than skills, certain attitudes such as "rigour in project design and understanding of ethical issues" are believed to be fostered in academia (Atkins, 1999: 269). Yet, discerning the employability skills and attributes of event managers, may be as hotly debated within and between academia and in practice, as (Snyman, 2001) reported for information managers. Nevertheless, there is growing demand for greater collaboration between academia and event practitioners to increase the uptake of research findings (Getz, 2000b; Neale, 2000) and to develop graduates that are able to handle the challenges of the industry (McCabe, 2001).

As Arcodia & Barker (2002), have noted previously, a small but increasing number of Australian studies have responded to the above calls and have included the perspectives of practioners to ascertain the skills and personal attribute requirements of event managers for

development of educational and training needs. Harris & Jago (1999) provide a succinct overview of three survey-based studies that have been conducted in Australia. Included in their review were Perry, Foley and Rumpf's (1996) survey of 53 event managers that attended the Australian Events Conference in Canberra that year. These managers were asked to rank 19 pre-defined requisite knowledge and attributes and they identified the following 10 as being of importance to event managers: project management, budgeting, time management, relating to the media, business planning, human resource management, contingency management, marketing, sponsorship and networking. Perry *et al.,* (1996) further reduced these knowledge and skill requirements into five main knowledge domains of an event manager. Listed in order of importance, these are: legal/ financial knowledge, management knowledge, public relations / marketing knowledge, economic / analytical knowledge and ethical / contextual knowledge. When managers were asked however, to list the essential attributes of good event managers, Perry *et al.,* (1996) found the following in order of importance: vision, leadership, adaptability, high organisational skills, good communication skills, marketing skills and people management skills.

Royal & Jago's (1999) study of 42 special event practioners in Victoria rated all their eight listed skills as being very important to their profession. They included in order of importance: planning, organisational, sponsorship knowledge, marketing, human resource management, administration, public relations and finance skills. More than half the respondents also listed additional skills, the most common being: time management, leadership, flexibility, communication and people management skills (Royal & Jago, 1999).

Harris and Griffin's (1997) study of 84 event organisers in New South Wales found that most respondents classified their 11 pre-defined knowledge and skill categories to be of either significant or moderate importance to event organisers. These included: general management, planning and organisation of events; event development and programming; finance; marketing; event operations; understanding of community expectations and support; event monitoring and evaluation; professional knowledge and event bidding and feasibility analysis. Respondents did not mention additional skills (Harris & Griffin, 1997).

The above studies therefore show a level of consistency with the appearance of several skills in all studies. However, there has not yet been a nation-wide study of the event management job market and employability requirements and this is critical given that Australian occupational standards for event management positions have yet to be established. This is despite the existence of Canadian, American and British occupational standards for several event management related positions such as 'special event manager' and the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) having covered about 78% of Australian industries with competency standards by 1997 (Smith & Keating, 1997).

It is hoped that a nationwide study of event management job requirements will help provide further support to the current literature, contribute towards a broader scale understanding of the event management job market, employability skills and thus provide further leverage for the development of Australian occupational standards for event managers.

To gain an indication of current employer requirements, a nationwide, on-going study of job advertisements in event management has commenced. This paper specifically reports the main trends that have emerged from the preliminary findings of 105 web-based job advertisements.

METHODOLOGY

As a popular, yet research neglected recruitment medium, job advertisements provide current and accessible data to gain insight into industry demands and changes (Mathews & Redman,

2001). It is during the initial recruitment phase that companies are able to specify the required skills and personality attributes of event managers. Not only do job advertisements contain information to attract appropriate individuals, they can also represent occupational, organisational, industry and societal artefacts and can therefore contain rich and insightful information (Rafaeli & Oliver, 1998).

Yet only a few job advertisement studies in tourism and leisure have been identified. Crossley (1992) analysed recreation and tourism related job advertisements of a major U.S newspaper for a year to guide course development at the University of Utah. Whilst Keung & Pine (2000) provided a longitudinal study of hotel job advertisements listed in a major Hong Kong newspaper to indicate changes in hotel recruitment over a 10 year period.

A possible reason why a nation-wide study of job advertisement has not been attempted until recently has been the share time and amount of labour resources needed to process newspaper advertisements. The advent of on-line recruitment advertising or 'cybercruiting' allows for considerably easier and faster access to job advertisements over a much broader area (Jarnis, 1996). While still fairly new, there is growing usage of the Internet as a recruitment medium. A survey conducted by the Australian Graduate School of Management (University of New South Wales) and CCH Australia Limited in 1999 indicated that a third (33%) of the 344 Australian companies surveyed utilise the Internet or their Intranet for recruitment and selection purposes (Wallace et al., 2000).

The ANZ Bank has analysed the number of Internet job advertisements in major Australian cities on a monthly basis since July 1999 (ANZ, 2002). These figures are combined with the number of advertisements in major daily newspapers over the same time period to predict changes in national employment growth (ANZ, 2002). To provide a more in-depth analysis of event management job advertisements several steps had been taken. Email alert accounts were set up in August 2001 with several popular job search engines, including: CareerOne, TourismJobsnet and Employment.com as well as meta-search engines such as Monsterboard, Seek and Alljobs. However as TourismJobNet returned previous years and thus irrelevant results, it was excluded. The email alert accounts provided a very strong sample of relevant positions advertised via the Internet.

All email alert accounts were given the same keywords for which to search. These included: events, event management, conference, festivals, banquets and later the keywords of communications and public relations were added. A nation-wide search and jobs of any duration (full-time, part-time, temporary, casual) were other search criteria that were given. These broad sets of criteria were chosen, as the aim of the study was to provide a sample of event management related job advertisement at a particular point in time. Browsing of newspapers advertisements indicated that event management positions were also listed under the communications and public relations sections, hence the inclusion of these keywords at a later stage.

Advertisements were downloaded on a fortnightly basis when possible, only those containing the above keywords in the job title or in the opening paragraph of the advertisement were chosen. For those job advertisements that may not be directly applicable to event management (such as communication and public relations) those that included these keywords as well those directly applicable to event management (such as conference and festivals) were included. Upon review duplicate advertisements, overseas advertisements and advertisements that provided too little information were excluded.

During August to November, 105 of these advertisements have been collected and analysed using content analysis, a commonly used method in studies of advertisements (Crossley, 1992; Demets *et al.,* 1998; Headrick, 2001; Mathews & Redman, 2001).   For all

advertisements, general information was recorded when provided, including the job title, location and industry type. Job and candidate specifications were classified into skills and personal attributes respectively and were classified into more specific criteria's that emerged from the data. Pre-defined criteria were avoided, in order to allow employer requirements of event managers to emerge. The resulting categories were not mutually exclusive, for example marketing skills require communication skills. However, when a specific criterion was mentioned in an advertisement, it was thought to be important in its own right and was therefore recorded.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Industry Representativeness

More than a quarter of advertisements were advertised in the event sector, the main employment stronghold of the event management industry (Figure 1). Event management companies that advertised included conference and banqueting production companies, event coordinators, sporting event companies and corporate entertainment and functions companies. Thirteen percent of advertisements were contained in the hotel and resort industry and a similar percentage of advertisements did not specific the industry or name of an organisation. Non-profit organisations contained 8% of the job advertisements, representing charity organisations in general or specific non-profit organisations such as hospital foundations, youth networks, religious and environmental organisations. Financial and management companies such as insurance and fund management companies contained 6% of the advertisements and government agencies including regional and city councils and territory tourism promotion agencies 5%.
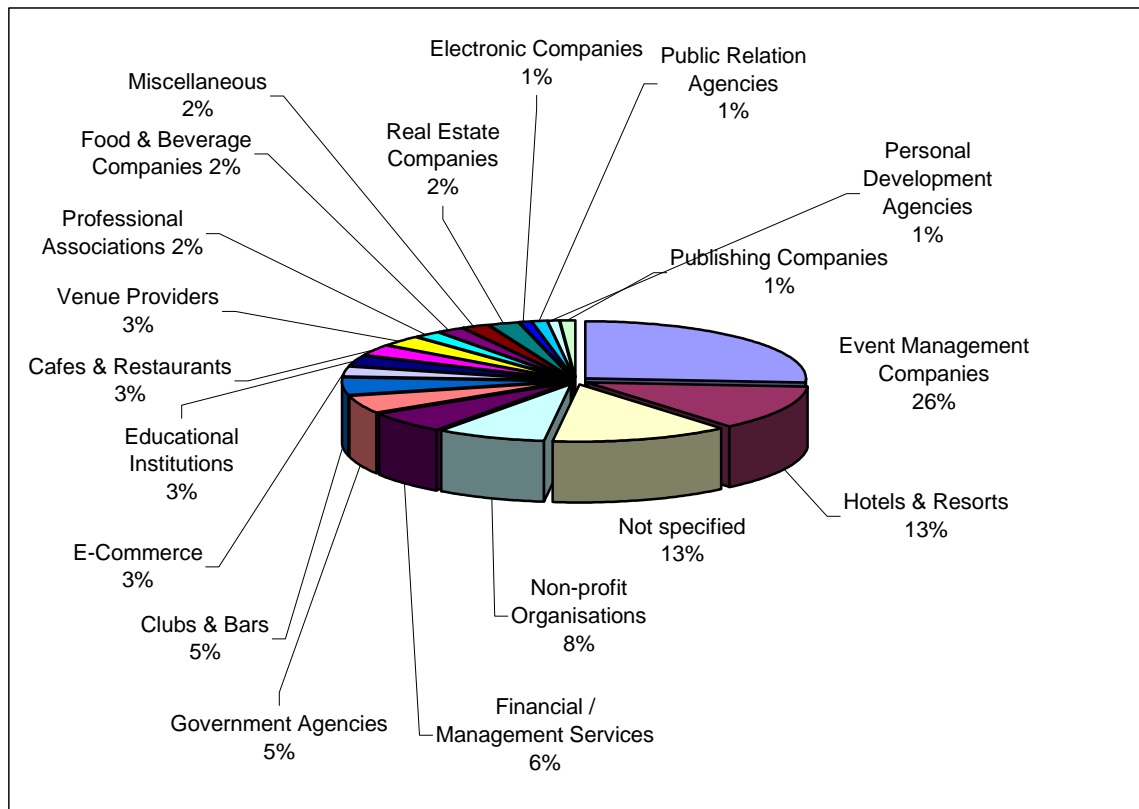
Skills

By far the most frequently cited skills required of event managers were organisational and planning skills (Table 1). Eighty-eight per cent of employers were looking for people who were highly organised, able to plan and coordinate events, manage multiple tasks and time or a combination of the above. Advertisements either stated the need for these skills explicitly or implicitly. For example, one advertisement stated that 'your ability to multi-task is extremely important as there will be various events to manage at one time' (Events and Sponsorship Manager, October 9, 2001). Whereas another advertisement stated that this is a role 'which will keep you on your toes!' (Public Relations Co-Ord. Event Co-Ordination, August 18, 2001).

Table 1. General Skill Specification in Event Management Job Advertisements

Event Management Skills	Percentage of Advertisements
Organisational and Planning	88
Communication	85
Leadership and Decision-making	38
Budget and Financial Management	31
Marketing	30
Team	29
Customer Service	26
Building Relationships	23
Problem Solving and Analytical	18
Funding and Sponsorship	17

The above results are a reflection of the importance of planning and organisation to event management. As Wanklin (2000: 98-99) states: "planning is essential to manage time, prevent waste and to achieve efficient economics in the development process. Without planning, there would be chaos and a breakdown in elementary systems and infrastructure".

Communication skills ranked a close second, with over four-fifths of job advertisements citing this as a requirement. Advertisements either specified the need for general communication skills, written communication skills, such as the 'preparation of invitations and flyers for functions' (Functions Coordinator, September 27, 2001); oral communication skills, such as being 'articulate and persuasive' (Junior PR Consultant, October 15, 2001) presentation skills or negotiation skills.

Thirty-eight per cent of job advertisements specified the need of leadership and decision making skills for event managers. Employers were looking for individuals that were able to 'assume overall leadership of this dynamic and important corporation' (CEO, Canberra Tourism & Events Corp., November 11, 2001), to 'supervise the banquet floor operations'

(Banquet Floor Operations, September 7, 2001) or whose 'leadership style ensures that the team achieves optimum outcomes' (Public Relations Manager, December 5, 2001).

Financial and budget management skills were cited in nearly a third of advertisements. The advertisements either specified that individuals were required to operate within their set budgets, for example: 'you will be responsible for meeting revenue targets' (Catering Sales Executive, September 7, 2001) and 'your primary focus will be on … cost effective delivery of a wide range of tourism promotion, marketing and event initiatives' (CEO, Canberra Tourism & Events Corp., November 11, 2001) or individuals were charged with the responsibility for financial management, for example: 'account management is encouraged as ongoing sponsorship will make your job easier' (Corporate Sponsorship Sales, November 8, 2001) or 'you need good budgeting skills for ordering supplies and arranging events' (Functions Coordinator, September 27, 2001).

Marketing skills is the fifth most frequently cited skill requirement. Depending on the type of position and organisation, advertisements either needed event managers who were solely responsible for their marketing campaign, for example: 'market the venue and make it number one in Brisbane' (Marketing / Events Manager, November 1, 2001) or individuals that formed part of a marketing team: 'form a critical part of the organisation's marketing program' (Events and Sponsorship Manager, October 9, 2001). Not surprisingly, team skills featured in event management job advertisements. Successful events are often dependent on the successful cooperation between individuals in and outside of an organisation. Advertisements either stated that individuals needed to have an understanding of the importance of a team, had prior experience working as an effective team member, or were able to lead and manage a team (Banquet Manager, November 1, 2001; Senior Accounts Manager, October 31, 2001).

Customer service skills were mentioned in over a quarter of advertisements. Advertisements mentioned such requirements as the need for 'exceptional people skills, including an appreciation of the customer service ethic' (Functions Coordinator, September 27, 2001) and the 'provision of quality service to both internal and external clients in terms of arranging catering and catering-related supplies, meeting and functions' (Functions Coordinator, September 27, 2001). The need to build effective relationships with clients and stakeholders was mentioned in 23% of the advertisements. The need to establish, nurture and build strong relationships is viewed as a key skill in these advertisements. For example, 'building strong relationships with the media, the community and key stakeholders' (Communication Manager, October 5, 2001) or the need to have a 'flair for networking' and to 'develop business networks' (Conference Producer, November 1, 2001).

Problem solving and analytical skills were mentioned in 18% of advertisements. For example, 'your creative approach to problem solving is a must' (Sales Manager – Event Management, October 5, 2001) or the successful applicant will require 'well developed problem solving skills' and 'provide effective conflict resolution' (Conventions & Banquets Supervisor, September 25, 2001). Analytical skills were implied by the need for research skills in several advertised positions. For example, the need to 'research and produce legal conferences that will benefit the industry' (Conference Producer, November 1, 2001) or to 'conduct a thorough examination of the corporate / conference market and industry trends' (Meetings, Conference & Events Sales Manager, September 18, 2001).

Funding and sponsorship skills were mentioned in 17% of advertisements. The role and responsibilities section of the job advertisement either stated this as a requirement of the position, for example: 'you will be responsible for securing corporate sponsorship for conferences' (Corporate Sponsorship Sales, November 8, 2001) or potential candidates need to demonstrate prior experience in securing funding and sponsorship. For example

'demonstrated capacity to attract corporate sponsorship for communication programs' (Team Leader Cultural Development, September 27, 2001).

The most frequently cited practical skill requirement was computer knowledge and skills (Table. 2). These requirements ranged from working knowledge and experience with Microsoft office programs to 'web skills' (Event Manager, December 3, 2001) 'web strategies' (Communications Manager, October 5, 2001) and 'strong knowledge of computer hardware and software' skills (Events – On Site Project Manager, September 12, 2001). Bar and food serving, policy development and media relation skills also featured, but preliminary data provided small percentages for these categories.

Table 2. Practical Skill Specification in Event Management Job Advertisements

Practical skills	Percentage of Advertisements
Computer knowledge and skills	36
Bar and Food serving skills	8
Policy Development skills	7
Media Relation skills	5

Attributes

Twelve personal attribute categories also emerged from the data (Table. 3). The most frequently mentioned attribute was motivation, with 29% of all advertisements citing this as a requirement. Employers were seeking individuals who were 'self-motivated' (Public Relations Manager, October 31, 2001) who have a 'drive or desire to succeed' (Conference and Events Services Manager, September 5, 2001) and for senior management or supervisory positions, individuals that were 'able to motivate a team' (Banquet Manager, November 1, 2001). The need for a pro-active attitude may be indicative of the seniority and independency of event management positions.

The second highest ranked attribute was positiveness (16%). These job advertisements specified the need for 'high levels of enthusiasm' (Functions Assistant, September 27, 2001) the adoption of a 'positive approach to issues' (Conventions & Banquets Supervisor, September 25, 2001) and the need for a 'can do attitude' (Personal Assistant, August 18, 2001). Creativity, commitment and initiative attributes closely followed (12% each). 'Highly creative individual' (Personal Assistant, August 18, 2001) and 'creating original, engaging and successful functions and events' (Functions Coordinator, September 27, 2001) are indicative of the creative needs of event organisers. Whereas 'commitment to excellence' (Events Logistics - Events Coordinator, September 8, 2001) and 'a strong work ethic' (Functions & Banquets Manager, September 14, 2001) refer to the standards and level of work requirements. Possession of a 'forward thinking attitude' (Banquet Manager, November 1, 2001) and the 'ability to use your initiative' (Conventions & Banquets Supervisor, September 25, 2001) were also mentioned. Eleven per cent of job advertisements mentioned flexibility as a required personality attribute. This is likely a reflection of many events occurring after normal working hours. As stated in an (Events Coordinator / Personal Assistant, September 25, 2001) advertisement: 'naturally many functions occur in the evening and on weekends so you should be prepared to tailor this with your lifestyle'. The appearance of the 'flexibility' attribute corresponds with Perry *et al.,* (1996) survey of event management respondents who also nominated adaptability as an essential attribute for event managers.

Table 3. Personal Attributes Specification in Event Management Job Advertisements

Personality Attribute	Percentage of Advertisements
Motivation	29
Positiveness	16
Dynamism and Energy	13
Commitment	12
Creativity	12
Initiative	12
Flexibility	11
Accuracy	9
Respect / Maturity	8
Friendliness	8
Trustworthiness / Responsibility	5
Sensitiveness	3

Educational Qualifications & Level of Experience

Three quarters of all advertisements did not specify the need for training or educational qualifications. Only 19% required applicants to have a tertiary qualification and of these three-quarters were for middle to senior event management positions. Only 15% of all advertisements listed areas of qualification specialisation with half of these stating the need for a commerce degree. The low interest in qualifications may be due to several factors, but the most apposite one is likely to be the immaturity of the industry and its developing professionalism (Arcodia & Reid, 2002b)

However, nearly 70% of all vacancies required some level of experience, whether related to a particular skill such as 'experience with conference admin or hotel/ banqueting' (Conference Administrator, 18 August, 2001) or a prior occupation, for example, 'a minimum of 2 years previous experience as Banquet Operations Manager in a 4-5 star hotel/ resort environment need apply' (Banquet Manager, 1 November, 2001). This supports Royal & Jago's (1999) study of event practioners who recommend a balance between formal training and practical experience.

Overall, personal attributes featured less frequently in the advertisements than skills. This may indicate that relatively greater importance is given to the latter. However, the listing of such attributes as motivation and positiveness adds another important dimension to the employment requirements of event managers. Further data collection and analysis are needed to ascertain the significance of these results and the relative ranking of the skills and attributes.

Implications for Event Management Education

The study has a number of implications for education. Firstly, using web-based alert accounts is a useful way of keeping track of the skill and attribute requirements of industries. Our study concurs with Keung & Pine's (2000) findings in that content analysis of job advertisements is an excellent method of monitoring industry labour market trends of specific industries. The methodology allows educational institutions, and in particular, curriculum designers, the opportunity to dialogue with industry representatives about their needs, but to also temper their specific requirements, which may be motivated from purely idiosyncratic experiences. Analysis of the content of job advertisements may therefore mitigate assumptions based on an industry representative's individual preferences.

Secondly, while each of the advertisements that were analysed has sought skills and attributes in event management, they emerge from a diverse group of industries. Some of the advertised skills, such as communication, problem solving and leadership have previously been identified as being generic professional skills (Hearn *et al.,* 1994). Others however, support previous findings of event managers' requirements, such as the importance of planning and organisation, marketing and finance (Harris & Griffin, 1997; Royal & Jago, 1999) and the emergence of computer skills as the highest ranked practical skill requirements is a new but expected result. Graduates may need to be encouraged to explore the possibilities of applying their skills to a variety of workplace contexts rather than narrowly defined vocational outcomes. As supported by Steven & Fallows (1998) and McCabe (2001: 494) who state in relation to the meetings, incentive, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) sector of the event management industry that:

> … entrants to the industry often have generic skills and are recruited from outside the industry… [and] … there also is evidence and indication of movement of people predominantly between the sectors of the industry in order for the individual to achieve their overall career objectives.

Thirdly, these type of data provide information that assists in achieving a balance between key dichotomies in educational provision. These are for example, the balance between core skills and context specific skills; the congruence between industry requirements and universities' statements of graduate outcomes; and the tensions between conceptually based education and vocationally orientated education (Atkins, 1999; Symes, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Event management is emerging as a key sector of the tourism industry. As universities develop appropriate curriculum to respond to these needs, it is useful to investigate the skills and attributes that the industry requires. This is especially important as universities around the world are facing dynamic change and they need to seek creative solutions in response to a number of educational and structural issues. To be effective, educational methodologies need to be anchored to the diverse material circumstances characterising different groups of learners and industries. The challenge for universities offering programs of study in event management is to provide avenues for learning that are reflective of the needs of industry and yet still satisfy the need for higher learning.

This study has indicated that the tracking of web-based job advertisements provides a potentially useful means to gain timely insight into industry competency requirements, especially as the popularity of web-based advertising and recruitment rises. The employability skills and attributes results mirror previous findings for the Australian event management sector and provide additional information. This information can then be utilised in numerous ways by universities. For example, by adding to existing knowledge of industry competency

requirements; to track changes to job specifications and the number of job positions advertised over time. Feeding this back into course curriculum design and marketing strategies will help to attract potential students to courses by satisfying their vocational aspirations. In turn, by making courses more applicable to industry needs will likely result in industry increasing its understanding and value of tertiary education, mutually enforcing features that are important in this increasingly market dominated educational environment.

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