



# What are the prospects for professionalizing event management in the UK?

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## ABSTRACT

The staging of planned events has emerged as a distinctive sector of the UK economy. This paper examines the nature and degree of professionalization of event management. Three models of professionalism are critically evaluated. It is argued that the model of corporate professionalization appears to hold out most promise for understanding the dynamics of professionalization in event management. This is tested through an empirical research study of four organisations which have a professionalizing mission. The paper concludes that professionalization of the occupation has not succeeded to date, whether professionalism is understood as corporate professionalism or in more traditional terms. It suggests that there is currently little prospect of professionalizing event management in the UK.

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## 1. Introduction

Events emerged as a distinctive sector of the British economy and event management as a related occupation during the latter part of the twentieth century (AEME, 2006). Three mutually reinforcing factors probably account for this development: the increasingly co-ordinated activities of representative associations that became more vocal in promoting the importance of sports and cultural events to the economy; a rapid expansion from the late 1990s in event management degree programmes that resulted in graduates entering a labour market that had hitherto been ill-defined; and there was a shift in policy discourse whereby public expenditure on events became routinely justified in terms of employment creation, urban regeneration or other positive socio-economic outcomes (AEME, 2006; Richards & Palmer, 2010; Rogers, 2008). More recently, the study of events has enjoyed growing academic credence (Getz, 2009) and events have become a policy domain worthy of separate analysis (Foley, McGillivray, & McPherson, 2011; Smith, 2012; Ziakas, 2010).

Estimating the size of the event sector in the UK is problematic, not least because of the lack of consensus on its scope or parameters. Declarations about its value and contribution to employment must, therefore, be treated with caution (see AEME, 2006). Nevertheless, considering some recent estimates is useful as a means of contextualising the discussion that follows. According to Oxford Economics (2012), the 'exhibition sector' alone is responsible for some £11 billion of spending and approximately 148,500 jobs. Others have suggested that the event sector in total is worth in excess of £36 billion to the British economy (BVEP, 2010). When disaggregated, the suggestion is that festivals and

cultural events account for approximately £2.5 billion and sports events contribute a further of £2.3 billion. The remainder is comprised of events that are in a wide variety of ways related to commercial activity (conferences, meetings, exhibitions, incentive travel, corporate hospitality and outdoor events) (BVEP, 2010: 9). At 530,000, employment estimates are also comparably higher than for the exhibition sector alone (BVEP, undated). The vast majority of these jobs are in the private sector. Employment in non-commercial organisations is often on a temporary or voluntary basis (AEME, 2006). Expectations are that the sector will continue to grow in the short- to medium-term (MPI, 2011).

Almost twenty years ago Getz and Wicks (1994) proposed that event management was emerging as a 'quasi-profession'. Since then, the term 'event professional' has been used widely (e.g. AEME, 2006; Rogers, 2008) and there has been some conjecture on the extent to which event management has been professionalised (e.g. Harris, 2004). To date, however, there has been no systematic assessment of this issue. With very few notable exceptions (e.g. Formadi & Raffai, 2009), empirical evaluation has been particularly sparse. This contribution responds, albeit belatedly, to Getz and Wicks' invitation to engage in robust research and theorising on professionalism in events.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on the professionalizing of occupations. Three inter-related ways of understanding professionalism are discussed. This is followed by an empirical assessment of the goals and strategies of the three main professional associations that operate in the UK and one that is emerging. These data are complemented by the perspectives of other stakeholders, notably public and private sector employers – via their representative associations – and those involved in advanced level event management education.

Baum, Deery, Hanlon, Lockstone, and Smith's (2009) collection of papers on employment in events illustrates that event management is now widely accepted as occupationally distinct from tourism and hospitality management, even though there are areas of overlap. It

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is inappropriate, therefore, to presume that studies of professionalism undertaken in these contexts (e.g. Burgess, 2011; Sheldon, 1989) might be perfectly applicable to events. In what follows, a broad definition of event management is adopted. In common with others, it is taken to mean work that involves planning, design, implementation and evaluation of planned events which may be undertaken for a variety of stakeholders. The sector, therefore, encompasses events that not only take a variety of forms – such as sports, conferences, meetings or festivals – but may also vary significantly in scale (Silvers, Bowdin, O'Toole, & Nelson, 2006).

## 2. Perspectives on professionalism and professionalization

### 2.1. The trait approach

The sociological literature contains three broad approaches to understanding professionalization. Perhaps the most common way of examining the extent to which occupations have become professionalized is via an assessment of their characteristics or traits. This approach sets out to identify, and usually list, the core characteristics of professions and test the extent to which they exist in certain occupations. The following elements have been typical of most lists: the requirement to demonstrate expert knowledge that has been validated by existing members of the profession; ethical behaviour is safeguarded and regulated by the professional association; and the skills of members of the profession are deployed in the public interest. Membership of the profession usually results in higher social status and greater material rewards than had the occupation not been professionalized (Johnson, 1972; Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997).

Academics studying professionalism in events (e.g. Harris, 2004), tourism (e.g. Sheldon, 1989), hospitality (e.g. Burgess, 2011) and leisure (e.g. McNamee, Sheridan, & Buswell, 2000) all provide syntheses of the characteristics that have been used to 'test' professionalism in those sectors. In a recent study, Burgess (2011) explained the approach as follows:

(The aim) is to consider whether the traits that define a professional can be applied in hotels... (the findings of) a recent research project will be used to determine whether the traits can be applied...and hence whether they can be considered as a profession (Burgess, 2011: 682).

Her conclusion was that hotel financial controllers did not display enough of the required traits to be classified as professionals. Amongst other things, the relevant professional association, the British Association of Hospitality Accountants (BAHA), was not sufficiently exacting in its requirements for membership and did not enjoy widespread recognition amongst commercial organisations or the public sector.

Formadi and Raffai (2009) are more sanguine about the professionalization of event management in Hungary. Adopting a similar approach to Burgess, they suggest that professional associations have enhanced the status of the occupation by emphasising the specialist knowledge required to stage events. In particular, issues such as public safety have been used as part of their narration of the event professional.

The trait approach is undoubtedly helpful for understanding some of the working practices commonly found in particular occupations. It has deficiencies, however, as a conceptual framework for assessing professionalization. As Thomas and Thomas (in press) argue:

Perhaps most notably, the traits referred to are often assumed to exist rather than demonstrated. Generally, empirical research has emphasised the perspectives of those with an interest in promoting the process of professionalizing particular occupations. There is a danger, therefore, of sociological analysis simply repeating, and legitimising, professions' own self-serving self-images... examinations of the actual work of professionals has shown that

the degree of specialised knowledge and expertise deployed – a key trait of professionalism in all accounts of this kind – is often negligible... this raises questions about the social benefits of professional work and how such work comes to be regarded as professional...

In addition, although the approach might highlight those things that are commonly held to be what occupations need to demonstrate if they are to show their 'professional worth', it says little about the process of professionalization. It would not, therefore, explain the social dynamic involved in the professionalization of event management.

### 2.2. Conceptualising the process

An alternative approach to understanding professionalization concentrates on assessing levels of occupational closure and control and represents a shift in focus to the process, rather than the outcome, of attempts at professionalizing occupations. Occupational closure is the ability to control access to a particular kind of work. Typically, this has been achieved by the creation of professional associations that set barriers to entry, usually via technical exams and the achievement of particular qualifications (Watkins, 1999). The study of tour guides in Hong Kong undertaken by Ap and Wong (2001: 557) illustrates how those engaged in particular jobs might benefit from occupational closure. As they point out, many tour guides 'were very much in favour of the licensing system because they can use it to have greater bargaining power with employers (travel agents/tour operators) if they are licensed'.

Occupational control refers to the ability of those within an occupation to police standards by using a mix of methods such as insisting on specified professional updating, monitoring of practices or governing how particular kinds of jobs are undertaken. These mechanisms of control are usually achieved via the creation of professional associations governed by their members (Larson, 1977).

Evidently, the major challenge for associations seeking to professionalise occupations is to convince other stakeholders of their legitimacy. Governments, employers, clients and entrants potentially all need to be convinced of the (social) benefits of such arrangements. Strategies to achieve these goals were pursued successfully by the 'classic professions' during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Johnson, 1972). One important effect of success is the simultaneous reduction in the influence of other groups with an interest in that area of work. For example, as the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) became the British professional association for planning, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) – a group of individuals interested in planning issues – became marginalised in official policy terms (Cherry, 1974; Shepley, 2003).

### 2.3. Corporate professionalization

Recent sociological theorising, the third approach to be discussed, has emphasised the role of private sector organisations in the professionalization of occupations and the benefits they can derive from such an engagement (e.g. Kipping, Kirkpatrick, & Muzio, 2006; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). Questions of control remain central but more attention is paid to the commercial context within which most professional work is now undertaken, and notably within larger firms. This approach offers the prospect of a more appropriate framework to understand the professionalization of newer occupations (Thomas & Thomas, in press).

Although Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011) draw attention to the role of a professional association in enhancing the status and pay of those working within the museums sector in the United States, most scholarly work highlights how businesses influence the values and practices of new professions. The implication is that the independence of professionals is reduced or there is a failure to professionalise. Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, and Hall (2011) interrogate the value of a 'corporate professionalization' framework by drawing

on case studies of project management, management consultancy and executive recruitment. In spite of differences in occupational structures, they identify several common features of the professionalization process. They begin by arguing that occupations seeking to professionalise must demonstrate that there is an associated body of knowledge which needs to be understood if service providers are to be effective. As Kipping (2011) points out, professionalism thus becomes a resource which can be sold for a higher price than would otherwise be the case. To stake their claim to professionalism, occupations must initially create a collective identity with a shared sense of what constitutes an appropriate knowledge base. This is challenging for occupations where services are provided commercially – where there is a disincentive to share knowledge built up over many years – by a multitude of suppliers. In addition, there may be contested interpretations of what constitutes knowledge (as opposed to routine rule-following, for example) in any given episode of work which can inhibit the development of professionalism (Suchman, 2000).

Muzio et al. (2011) suggest that four elements combine to provide the conditions whereby occupations are able to professionalise. These represent components of modern strategies that take heed of the values of corporations and their markets. The first is to overcome fragmentation by 'developing alternative types of credentials which emphasise competences, transferable skills and industry knowledge and experience' (Muzio et al., 2011: 451). This enables professional associations to 'recognise' the tacit knowledge of existing practitioners while simultaneously developing their own more formal bodies of knowledge. Secondly, and allied to the first, associations create tiers of membership so as to allow flexibility of entry. The most important development according to Muzio et al. (2011), however, is to allow companies to become members. Like all members, they must subscribe to the association's professional standards and codes of conduct. However, larger employers who 'buy in to the project', are likely to enjoy a disproportionate influence on the orientation and practices of the association (Muzio et al., 2011).

The third element of the model relates to the legitimacy of the association to make claims about the professional status of the occupation. These are founded on the commercial benefits that might be gained by companies (and the public sector) from working with its members rather than from any regulatory privileges; members will adopt best practices and use the latest techniques resulting in competitive advantage. This orientation towards what Evetts (2011) calls a 'new' professionalism places a conspicuous emphasis on the need for professionals to reflect organisational values and goals (see also Noordegraaf, 2011).

Finally, Muzio et al. (2011) argue that successful professionalization strategies tend to be international rather than national in orientation. This offers opportunities to engage with those operating in global markets. Table 1 provides a summary of corporate professionalization compared with older ways of understanding the phenomenon. The shift from public interest or public service to commercialism is the major difference. Based on the occupations they studied, Muzio et al. (2011: 458) thus argue that:

...these associations set out to build a critical mass of consensus around their project and activities by persuading a sufficiently large number of employing organisations and consumers of the commercial merits and safeguards associated with professional membership, accreditation and regulation. The idea being that once a sufficiently large share of the market has been won over and professional qualifications become embedded in corporate tendering processes, professional affiliation would be routinely expected and indeed requested by both clients and employers in their procurement and recruitment strategies; thus, de facto, delivering a market form of occupational closure.

Corporate professionalization appears to provide a promising prism through which to understand attempts at the professionalization of

**Table 1**

Key characteristics of corporate professionalization compare more traditional models.

	Old 'collegial professionalization'	New 'corporate professionalization'
Knowledge-base	Reliance on an abstract body of knowledge	Co-production of knowledge with industry, situated knowledge, focus on competences
Market	Statutory closure via royal charter	Market closure via corporate practices ('embedding professional membership' in tendering and procurement processes)
Legitimacy	Legitimized by public benefit	Legitimized by market value
Composition of association	Individual membership Single-tier membership structure	Individual and organisation membership Multi-level membership structure
Relation to state	Licensed/regulated by state	Not licensed/regulated, state acts as (significant) stakeholder/consumer of services
Relation with clients and employers	Arms length	Close engagement
Jurisdictions	National	International

Source: Muzio et al. (2011: 457).

event management and this structures the presentation and analysis of empirical material which follows. The remainder of the paper examines the strategies of event professional associations in the UK, utilising the perspectives of the associations themselves and those of other stakeholders. It thus examines the role of professionalism in contemporary event management as well as evaluating the utility of the model of corporate professionalism in understanding what is taking place.

### 3. Research design and methods

Data gathering for this project involved semi-structured interviews with very senior key informants from the two main professional associations operating in the UK – the Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (ABPCO) and the British chapter of Meeting Professionals International (MPI) – and two senior figures associated with the emerging Institute of Event Management (IEM). Secondary sources, notably web sites, reports published by the associations and official documents such as company records that are in the public domain, were also examined. Combined, these provided insights into the history and current priorities of the associations, their strategies and the kinds of debates that were taking place with regard to professionalization. It was not possible to secure the participation of the International Special Events Society (ISES) so, in that case, the research relied on websites and other published material.

The perspectives of other stakeholders were also garnered via semi-structured interviews. These included senior officials from employer (or trade) associations representing different parts of the sector. These were Eventia – which emerged from a merger of the Corporate Events Association (CEA) and the Incentive Travel and Meetings Association (ITMA) in 2006 and incorporated the British Association of Conference Destinations (BACD) in 2009 – and the two main organisations relating to festivals: the Association of Festival Organisers (AFO) and the British Arts Festivals Association (BAFA). In spite of the name of the former, its membership is comprised of festivals rather than individuals. Senior officials from the Association for Events Management Education (AEME) and the Local Authorities Events Organisers Group (LAEOG) were also interviewed (the latter was via an email exchange rather than face-to-face or by telephone). Those interviewed do not represent all of the event associations currently in existence in the UK (see Rogers (2008) for an interesting historical discussion of the range of associations) but they do provide

access to sufficient numbers of key informants to illuminate the critical dimensions of professionalization. All interviews were transcribed and the framework of corporate professionalization was used to guide the analysis.

#### 4. Creating and promoting a collective identity

The emergence of event management as a recognised occupation in the UK is relatively new. As one key informant noted while providing an historical sketch of the development of the various representative associations:

I mean the earliest one (trade or employer association) I think was about 1914...when we focus particularly on professional associations with an individual membership...you could probably say really it's since 1970ish is when the first of these professional bodies and societies was formed (Interviewee 2).

Although the coherence of the sector remains contested, the term 'event management' as a signifier of a broadly congruent set of occupational activities has gained currency with officials and practitioners in recent decades (see, for example, *People 1st*, 2010; [www.eventsindustryalliance.com](http://www.eventsindustryalliance.com); [www.eventsindustryforum.co.uk](http://www.eventsindustryforum.co.uk)). The acceptance of a discourse that emphasises the distinctiveness of event management, a prerequisite for professionalization, has been bolstered by two principal factors; the growth of event management education and, to some extent stimulated by this and public sector tourism agencies, the collaboration of various representative associations.

For several of those interviewed, the most significant contributor to creating an occupational identity was the conception and subsequent proliferation of degree level courses in event management. From a modest start in the mid 1990s, aggregate enrolments on undergraduate event management programmes in the UK have come to exceed those for the more established fields of tourism management and hospitality management (Walmsley, 2011). The perceived need for academic recognition by those universities at the vanguard of this new wave of educational provision precipitated the creation of a subject association – the Association for Events Management Education or AEME – in 2004. It adopted the following purposes:

- (a) To advance the education of the public in the subject of events and event management.
- (b) To support and raise the profile of the event discipline through the sharing of education and best practice.
- (c) To provide a discussion forum for issues affecting (sic) event education and industry.
- (d) To establish communication opportunities between event stakeholders.
- (e) To encourage the development and dissemination of the event management body of knowledge.
- (f) To support, undertake and disseminate event research.
- (g) To encourage international exchange of ideas and best practice in events.

(AEME Constitution, 2004: 1).

Over the decade or so since its inception, these aspirations have been advanced by a variety of activities. Its contribution to scholarship has been pursued via an annual conference and other ad hoc events. These have provided academics with opportunities to present research, debate and engage in network-building on matters relating to knowledge construction and pedagogy in this field (for a discussion of the status of the subject, see Getz, 2012; Thomas & Bowdin, 2012).

In the context of debates on professionalization, AEME also fulfilled a more significant role by promoting the new field and its interests with policy-makers in higher education. Following the lead of hospitality,

leisure, sport and tourism scholars some decades earlier, AEME successfully lobbied for official recognition:

Yes, we've achieved it in terms of we got the HLST (Higher Education Academy, Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism) network to talk about events as a subject and to recognise it and to start putting categories for events within the things that they were doing...We managed to get the event strand within the subject benchmarks for QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) (Interviewee 8).

AEME sought to legitimise their field further by emphasising vocational relevance and, therefore, the employability of its graduates: '...again we've done very well in terms of being at the top table with the industry associations' (Interviewee 8). Arguably, this deflected attention from its somewhat underdeveloped research base and limited investment in supporting that activity (there are no new journals supported by AEME, for example, or access to research grants or awards).

Working to develop links with practitioners can be seen as part of a process of establishing a knowledge base and validating the utility of their courses. It achieved the former by transferring the often tacit knowledge of practitioners to scholars who were then able to formalise it in textbooks or simply via lectures. Further, utilising industry speakers simultaneously compensated for a deficiency of research on, for example, operational practice in events, while also offering a conspicuous demonstration of the usefulness of what was being taught.

The relationships between academics and practitioners, and especially those leading trade or professional associations, also served the interests of practitioners by helping them to establish a coherent identity, and perhaps especially, a linguistic clarity by promoting the term 'event management'. The following quotations highlight the symbiotic relationship:

Well I think that the first degree programme in event management was what brought even the terminology 'event management' to people's awareness (Interviewee 2).

...at that stage (mid 1990s when courses in event management were beginning to emerge)...most of the associations we've mentioned already did exist, so that was fine, they didn't necessarily recognise an event industry at that stage and wouldn't necessarily have been referring to the event industry; they'd be referring to events but not as an industry in its own right...so they've gone from the industry not existing to trying to get...accreditation (Interviewee 8).

'Events' in terms of the word, the usage, I resisted at first...(but) it acts as a holding word, because underneath it are conferences, congresses, meetings, exhibitions, special events, corporate hospitality, product launches, festivals, the Olympic Games, the outdoor business – a whole range of different event categories that need a whole range of skill sets...(Interviewee 4).

Nevertheless, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, with the exception of the emerging Institute of Event Management (IEM), almost all existing trade and professional associations still emphasise a specialised interest. By way of illustration, The Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (ABPCO) has a membership constituency which is quite distinct from, for example, the Association of Festival Organisers (AFO) (despite its name this is a trade association; there are no professional associations in the UK that relate to sports or cultural events). It is also striking that almost all key informants were very clear that they could speak authoritatively about only one aspect of the sector. The following is typical:

Let me try to answer the question...this is particularly relevant to the business event sector rather than cultural events and sporting

and leisure events. I wouldn't claim any great expertise in those areas (Interviewee 2).

The second factor that has contributed to promoting a sense of collective identity is the **Business Visits and Events Partnership (BVEP)**. Set up with the assistance of the national tourism marketing organisation *Visit Britain*, it aims to provide 'one voice' on matters relating to planned events by incorporating the views of suppliers, trade and professional associations and national tourism marketing organisations. It has promoted the value of events to the British economy via the publication of high profile research reports and offered (non-financial) support for the creation of the Institute of Event Management (IEM). The backdrop of significant local, regional and national public policy interventions that has emphasised the positive contribution of events to tourism (Foley et al., 2011; Smith, 2009) – ranging from support for local food festivals to the Olympic and Commonwealth games – has been a fertile ground for the promotion of event management as a discrete occupational category.

### 5. Current strategies: A case of corporate professionalization?

Low membership rates amongst the three professional associations suggest that strategies for professionalization have largely failed in events. According to those interviewed, the Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (APBCO), the International Special Events Society (ISES) and Meeting Professionals International (MPI) have fewer than one thousand members between them; a tiny proportion of those employed in the British event sector. On the basis of this evidence, the creation of associations does not inevitably result in the professionalization of occupations. Such a conclusion is ineluctable when it is also noted that all three existing professional associations are closely associated with business-related events and there are none concerned with other prominent parts of the event sector such as sports events and cultural events.

A preliminary assessment of the strategies of these associations shows that classic conceptions of professionalized occupations have been modernised in a manner that resonates with models of corporate professionalization. Each association is flexible in its approach to membership and seem prepared to accept a demonstration of knowledge and competence that is situated rather than universal and demonstrated via experience rather than qualification, though the latter are seen as making a valuable contribution to the process of professionalization. Each association is international in orientation, an important dimension of the model, with two being part of much larger international associations. MPI, for example, claims a worldwide membership of some 21,000 in 86 countries and ISES has some 7000 members globally. APBCO is affiliated to a European federation of related organisations.

Yet the *prima facie* analysis outlined above exaggerates the fit between current theoretical explanations of successful professionalization strategies and the outlook and practices of the event associations. The claims to legitimacy for the aspirant profession, for example, are rooted in market values but not as explicitly – or as forcefully – as might initially be expected. ISES, for example, when advocating the use of its members rather than other suppliers emphasises their knowledge and ethical stance rather than any resulting commercial benefits:

ISES members are constantly learning about new trends, new ideas, and new technologies. This happens both at the chapter level through monthly chapter meetings, and at the international level through the Conference for Professional Development, ISES publications, industry research, and more....(and) all members of ISES subscribe, in writing, to the ISES Principles of Professional Conduct and Ethics ([www.isesuk.org/page.cfm/Link=53/t=m/goSection=4](http://www.isesuk.org/page.cfm/Link=53/t=m/goSection=4)).

Market values do form part of the discourse but there is little evidence of having strategies in place to convince potential employers or

clients of the need to employ or engage members for commercial benefit. Indeed, responses to questions on current strategies for professionalizing the occupation tended to elicit answers that suggested little certainty on future direction; germane questions on the nature of professionalism were often seen as difficult even though they related to the central claims of each organisation. One interviewee, for example, noted that 'I haven't got an off-pat answer about this (a definition of professionalism) and this conversation is making me realise I should' (Interviewee 7). For others,

...professionalism really means being able to deliver the desired product on time, on budget, and with the desired outcome, I would guess so, you know, if the desired outcome is a profit of 'x' amount, a professional organisation will be able to say, this is what the outcome will be and deliver that outcome. (Interviewee 3).

...so (professionalism is about) those people come away thinking – 'Well, that was nice' – so not coming away just thinking – 'Well, that was nice' – but actually – 'That was completely and absolutely worthwhile and that's what – and I can apply to my business' (Interviewee 1).

Examples of the construction and sharing of knowledge as a resource that is made available to commercial organisations via the profession (Kipping, 2011) is equally sparse. Most of those interviewed could not, for example, articulate instances where processes were developed by the association that had then become 'best practice'. Instead, most of the examples of knowledge transfer that were cited were somewhat nebulous and centred on networking events. Only one interviewee pointed to a planning tool that was adopted widely and several discussed the availability of accredited courses, though noting that take-up was very low. A typical response to a line of questioning on knowledge creation and transfer was:

I couldn't put my finger on anything in particular...so in real terms we do have as an association, we do have an influence over the way the events industry is governed and monitored, but I couldn't directly say that we've had specific influence over anyone in particular (Interviewee 5).

Unlike existing associations, the newly formed Institute of Event Management (IEM) has what appears to be a more classic conception of a professionalized sector and adopts more traditional approaches to its professionalization. It anticipates, therefore, admitting only those who are qualified (though there is likely to be flexibility over how that term is interpreted) and will insist that members undertake regular continuous professional development and subscribe to a code of ethics. Some recognition of the work of existing associations may be given – such as accreditation for their courses – but the anticipation is that the Institute becomes the professional association. The IEM may grant 'recognition' status to those universities who provide 'appropriate' event management education and work with them to offer continuous professional development programmes for practitioners. Such programmes would draw on universities' contribution to the profession's body of knowledge.

An interesting aspect of the IEM's strategy is to lobby public sector agencies at a British and European level so that when contractors are sought, opportunities should only be available to professional event managers:

I've already had this discussion at a European level because when the European Commission goes out with RFPs (Request for Proposals) for event organisers it puts down that a PCO (professional conference organiser) has to have this and this and this. I said 'Well, if you don't recognise a PCO professionally, legally, then how on earth can you put that a PCO must be this, that and the

other?' So this is what is so important, actually, is that legal and professional recognitions at both national and European...because that is the key thing. I mean one of the things, and I'm very fortunate to have lots of inroads now to government (Interviewee 4).

The likely outcome of these approaches has not been tested at the elevated policy-making circles referred to above as part of this research but evidence from those at the level of British local government do not suggest that a high degree of optimism on the part of IEM is appropriate at the moment. Indeed, relationships with associations are 'developing slowly and we have made some connections with...(a list of trade associations; professional associations do not feature at all) (Interviewee 9).

Moreover, employer support seems equivocal:

We're very supportive of it (IEM) but at the moment it's a mission of one person who's got a...I mean, I don't know where she gets the energy to actually keep this alive but if all the universities got together in a room and formed an institute and supported an institute and all the various organisations in our industry supported the institute then it would happen, just like the CIM (Chartered Institute of Marketing) or the Marketing Institute or, you know, other institutes, Chartered Institute of Accountants or whatever they are, then it would happen. The problem is that there are too many...(Interviewee 3).

(Do you find the case for the IEM particularly persuasive?) No. Not particularly, no. Because you've actually given me another individually based organisation so I've now got MPI, ISIS, and the Institute of Event Management and personally I want fewer, better. I keep saying that. That to me, I personally, this is (name of interviewee deleted), you need to check but I think probably that's the feeling of (deleted name of the association). Without breaking confidences I mean, of course, around the (deleted name of the association) board table we've talked about the Institute of Events Management...and we just don't know what it is. We're saying well it has been mooted for ages. Why not use...what's wrong with the Chartered Institute of Marketing for example? We're part of marketing. Why not graft us in as part of that? (Interviewee 6).

## 6. Conclusion: prospects of a professionalised events sector

The strategies of the existing professional (or would-be professional) associations related to event management in the UK have largely failed to deliver the obvious outcomes of professionalization. Membership rates are low and there are a few reasons to suppose that there will be significant growth in the foreseeable future. Indeed, even though there has been a transformation in the number of graduates in event management over the past decade, there is little evidence to suggest that they are turning to event professional associations as a means of advancing their careers.

Current models of corporate professionalization that appear to explain the successful professionalization of other occupations do not seem to have been adopted by those in events. While it is possible to detect elements, such as a concern with commercial practice and the need to demonstrate opportunities for knowledge creation and sharing, even these are underdeveloped and represent a proposition to potential members which is, arguably, somewhat vague or imperceptible. As a result of relatively weak co-production of knowledge and market legitimation, employers do not seem to be convinced of the value of appointing 'professionals' (members of the associations) and there are few strategies in place to convince them to re-assess.

Unlike those who have succeeded in professionalizing other commercial service occupations, the associations in this sector have failed to create a unified sense of what an event manager is; indeed, their

discourse often emphasises differences rather than similarity and does not provide convincing mechanisms for overcoming fragmentation of supply. The newly emerging IEM is attempting to adopt much of the classic approach to professionalization rather than modern approaches. The Institute is forthright in claiming that entry modes will be challenging, codes of practice will be robust, the requirement for continuing professional development will be prominent, and licensing for public sector events will be promoted. In neo-liberalised economies such as the UK, it seems unlikely that the classic approach will lead to a regulated sector associated with occupational closure. In the IEM's case, there is also little sense of how to engage the private sector in a manner that is different from existing associations (whom it expects to complement and replace). Indeed, the indications are that the IEM will not be seen as having significant market value by commercial event organisations. In light of these findings, it is hard to imagine a professionalised event management sector in the UK in any meaningful sense.

Those theorising professionalism have long emphasised that there is nothing inevitable about the way in which occupations become professionalised. Even in established professions, the location of occupational boundaries and the power-relations between professional, user/client and employer are only two key factors which are constantly being struggled over and re-negotiated. Such struggle is predicated upon enough shared identity amongst those working in an occupation to allow them to at least begin to mobilise the resources which have been shown to be critical to securing benefits for major professions. In the case of British event management, there appears to be no widespread sense of a shared identity and, consequently, there is little basis for even beginning to mobilise resources in support of professionalization.

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