

## WHAT IS THE VALUE OF EVENT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION? THE VIEWS OF SIX INDUSTRY PRACTITIONERS

TARIQ EL KASHEF

MA Event & Exhibition Management, London, UK

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The field of event management has expanded rapidly in recent years. The growth of the industry has led to an increase in demand for professionals and in turn a massive increase in the opportunities for education and training. A multitude of institutions across the UK now offer hundreds of event-related courses to aspiring practitioners including postgraduate diplomas, degrees, and master's degrees. What is the awareness of the scope, range, and nature of these courses? How useful are they in gaining entry level employment? What are their strengths and what are their shortcomings? In order to answer these questions in depth, a cross-sectional study collected data through semistructured interviews with a largely purposeful sample of six industry practitioners. The findings indicate a general lack of awareness for the scope, range, and nature of event management education among the sample. In addition, the research implied that holding an event management qualification was unlikely to secure job interviews and that recruiters for the events industry place little value on candidates having industry qualifications. However, courses can help secure employment through the contacts and work placements they provide students. This research also found that the greatest strength an event management graduate was perceived to have was an overall knowledge of the industry and that practitioners felt that courses should strive to be more vocational in nature. Finally, the study indicated overwhelmingly that when recruiting, employers placed the greatest emphasis on experience and that the single most important step an individual with no experience could take to increase their chances of employment was to gain experience through volunteering and work placements.

Key words: Event management education; Event management; Event courses; Event qualifications

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### Introduction

It has been argued that the field of event management has expanded rapidly in recent years (Junek, Lockstone, & Mair, 2008). This growth has led to an increase in demand for suitable professionals

and, in turn, an increase in the number of opportunities for education and training (Junek et al., 2008). Although no comprehensive research has been conducted to establish how many courses exist (Bowdin & McPherson, 2006; Rogers, 2003), observations indicate that each passing year educational



institutions in the UK are offering more. For example, in 1996 Goldblatt (cited in Bowdin & McPherson, 2006) identified 30–40 universities and colleges offering event-related qualifications. In a later study in 1999 this number had risen to over 140 education institutions.

In the preliminary research undertaken by this study it was found that the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (2009) detailed 287 event-related courses (compared to just 211 in Berridge, 2007) at 69 universities and colleges with event-related courses set to start in September 2013. This figure does not include courses undertaken at private training schools, through industrial bodies, or via distance learning. Nor does it include courses pertaining to event management without the word “event” in the course title, such as conference management or festival management. But do recruiters really look favorably on candidates with event qualifications? Human Resources (HR) Manager for Jack Morton Worldwide, Fiona Lawler, commented that, “a dedicated qualification will not necessarily give candidates an advantage,” and that, “we do not have the history to prove that people with them are any more employable” (Willis, 2005).

Former head of the Event Industry Alliance, Trevor Foley, actually went so far as to say of event courses that “most of them are crap,” accusing them of being good at teaching “table decorations, but not so good at sales and marketing” (Thornton, 2007).

So what is the value of an event education to an aspiring event professional? The area of education in event management still remains underresearched [Bowdin & McPherson, 2006; Junek, Lockstone, & Osti, 2007 (cited in Junek et al., 2008), Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2009]. A content analysis of bibliographies found that research in education, training, accreditation, and professionalism comprised just 1% of international event research. The largest areas for research were “impact of events” (14.4%), “sponsorship and event marketing” (17.5%), and “fund-raising” (10.3%) (Allen, Harris, Huyskens, & Lago, 2000, p. 25).

This article discusses attitudes towards event management education from six practicing professionals in the UK, the usefulness in said education in acquiring employment, and the perceived strengths and

shortcomings of specific event-related courses. This study presents the following research questions:

1. How aware is the industry of the scope, range, and nature of event management qualifications in the UK?
2. How useful are academic qualifications in gaining entry-level employment?
3. What are their strengths and what are their shortcomings?

## Literature Review

### *Growth of Event Management Education*

The growth of the events industry has led to an increase in demand for suitable professionals and, in turn, an increase in the number of opportunities for education and training (Junek et al., 2008). Although no comprehensive research has been conducted to establish how many courses exist (Bowdin & McPherson, 2006; Rogers, 2003), their appearance and expansion was rapid, bursting, “into higher education almost overnight” (Berridge, 2007, p. 56).

This rapid expansion is further represented by demographic studies of the industry. Willis (2005, cited in Berridge, 2007) calculated that 50% of staff in the event industry were highly qualified compared to just 30% of their employers, only 1% of whom possessed a degree in event management.

The first competency qualifications in event management were developed in the 1990s. Canada was the first to develop the National Occupational Standards for Special Event Managers, followed by the UK introducing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the same subject (Rutherford Silvers, 2005).

In 1998 David Watt concluded that, “Comprehensive education and training for event managers is still difficult to get, but the picture is beginning to look brighter” having “gone through years of virtually no opportunity to gain this sort of education and training” (p. 17). Watt then goes on to list a number of 1-day courses and GNVQs in leisure and hospitality of which event management make up a single module or two.

Leeds Metropolitan university pioneered one of the first degree programs in event management in



1996 (Willis, 2005). Just 55 students enrolled. Also in 1996 Goldblatt (cited in Bowdin and McPherson, 2006) identified 30–40 universities and colleges offering event related qualifications, which had increased to over 140 education institutions in a 1999 study.

New primary data were gathered by the author during the course of this study to illustrate the speed with which event education had grown. A search of courses available through UCAS detailed 287 event-related courses (compared to just 211 in Berridge, 2007) at 69 universities and colleges set to start in September 2013. This figure does not include courses undertaken at private training schools, through industrial bodies, and via distance learning. Nor does it include courses pertaining to event management without the word “event” in the course title such as conference management or festival management.

In addition to undergraduate programs, many institutions now offer postgraduate qualifications including MA, MSc, Pg Cert and Pg Dip. There is an increasing range of self-study and training courses (Bowdin & McPherson, 2006), and several competing professional bodies have developed professional certifications “through comparative research and job analysis” (Rutherford Silvers, 2005, p. 4).

These include the International Special Events Society (ISES), Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), Certified Special Events Professional (CSEP), the International Festival and Events Association (IFEA), and the Certified Festival and Events Executive (CFEE).

The international Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK) (2006) has endeavored to evaluate current postgraduate qualifications in order to establish a Global Certifications and Recognitions of Qualification (Robson, 2008). However, until now the realization of this endeavor remains elusive.

#### *The Nature of Event Management Courses*

The rationale for the existence of event management education is that: “the training, contextual framework, and direct vocational experience they provide or facilitate is an effective route into graduate employment in this sector” (Beaven & Wright, 2006, p. 18). Indeed, the vast majority of these courses are of a practical nature (Getz, 2002)

or contain a strong vocational element and many require a period of work in events or sandwich placements (Berridge, 2007).

In their review of the literature, Robinson, Barron, and Solnet (2008) suggest that event management courses help student to get closer to the industry by facilitating volunteer opportunities at events, introducing practitioners to the classroom as guest lecturers, and by organizing work placements in relevant organizations.

Indeed, this vocational/experiential emphasis is supported by research into the subject of early career learning conducted by Professor Michael Eraut, who has dominated the research in this area since the 1980s. In his longitudinal study of learning in the workplace, Eraut (1998) conducted two interviews (each 6 to 12 months apart) with 120 managers from 12 organizations. Eraut concluded that: “formal education and training provide only a small part of what is learned at work” and that most learning “arose naturally out of the demands and challenges of work—solving problems, improving quality and/or productivity, or coping with change—and out of social interactions in the workplace with colleagues, customers or clients” (p. 1).

In 2007, Eraut revisited this topic with a longitudinal study of the early career learning at work of newly qualified nurses, graduate engineers, and trainee chartered accountants. The study suggested that this transformation from theory to practice best took place in a practice environment, although higher education professionals could aid it by specifically identifying when and where a student might expect to use the theory. Eraut also identified one of the main differences between a higher education setting and a practical setting being the “action-based emphasis of practice based thinking, which required rapid responses informed by prior experience wherever possible” (Eraut, 2007, p. 132).

It is these rapid responses acquired through prior experience that several industry commentators argue event management courses are simply unable to provide.

#### *Perceptions of Event Management Education*

Despite the number and diversity of event-related education, the courses, and the students



that graduate from them are subject to some criticism from academics and the industry at large. For example, HR Manager for Jack Morton Worldwide, Fiona Lawler commented that, “a dedicated qualification will not necessarily give candidates an advantage,” and that, “we do not have the history to prove that people with them are any more employable” (Willis, 2005). Perhaps this is why it was only in 2004 that the *Guardian* newspaper published the first job vacancy which insisted that applicants hold an event management qualification (Willis, 2005).

Former head of the Event Industry Alliance, Trevor Foley, actually went so far as to say of event courses that “most of them are crap” (Thornton, 2007), accusing them of being good at teaching “table decorations, but not so good at sales and marketing.”

Grafton (2004, cited in Junek et al., 2008) argues that criticism is derived from the high expectations of graduates, and their lack of knowledge in “areas such as exhibitions and risk management” (p. 2). By contrast, leading thinker and researcher Donald Getz (2002) has warned that although “how to” courses maybe what employers and students want, they can “easily fall into the ‘trade school trap’ of avoiding difficult theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues” (Getz, 2002, p. 13).

Beaven and Wright (2006) addressed some of these issues with their study, which explored the assumption that vocational experience is an effective route into graduate employment. They measured employers’ perceptions via a postal questionnaire. Two sample groups were used. One group consisted of employers known to Bournemouth University who provide work experience to students and to employers currently advertising for grad-level jobs. Of this group, 100% indicated the importance of experience through assisting with or organizing events as either desirable or essential. However, 75% of all respondents considered an art or event management qualification essential or desirable, and the results suggest that gaining a specialist qualification is the single most important step that someone wishing to enhance their employability in this sector might take.

Results showed that employers place great emphasis on experience, and have “relatively high expectations that new graduates will have gained experience” (Beaven & Wright, 2006, p. 23). Additionally, 81%

of respondents suggested they would value work-based learning as a valid way of gaining acceptable experience and, encouragingly, this figure is higher for those employers who have had contact with event students previously. However, experience gained through student projects “would apparently be discounted by more than 1 in 3 potential employers” (Beaven & Wright, 2006, p. 23). Vocational experience was strongly favored over transferable skills; however, more than 75% of employers of graduates from the BA course reported that the graduates had at least met their expectations.

Despite these seemingly contradictory comments from industry and academia and the rapid expansion of event management education, this area still remains largely underresearched [Bowdin & McPherson, 2006; Junek et al., 2007 (cited in Junek et al., 2008); Lee et al., 2009].

A content analysis of bibliographies found that research in education, training, accreditation, and professionalism comprised just 1% of international event research. A larger proportion of the research that does exist is conducted in Australia, where education comprised 3.5% of events industry research (Allen et al., 2000). Specifically, limited research has been undertaken in the UK to assess the usefulness of an event management qualification in finding employment or furthering one’s career. However we can gain insight by examining similar research in related fields.

### *The Value of Tourism Education*

Hospitality, leisure, and tourism management have all been described as closely related professional fields to event management (Getz, 2007). As “professional fields tend to evolve along similar lines” (Getz, 2007, p. 128), it stands to reason that by reviewing literature from alike disciplines one can gain insight where there is a dearth in the research.

Little et al. (2003) sought to explore employers’ perceptions on the value of vocational higher education across five broadly defined sectors. These included IT, construction, engineering, business, and hospitality management. The results found that in industry sectors where recruiters usually place more (or at least equal) weight on previous experience (e.g., hospitality and certainly in events), it seems



that employers equate vocational higher education qualifications at sub-degree level with those at degree level. Obviously, this would cause the potential student to ask the question why invest the additional time, money, and effort in undertaking a degree over an NVQ when employers fail to attribute value to it. The study also indicated that small businesses failed to understand what practical skills and knowledge a qualification signified, and that small businesses tended to recruit people with similar qualifications as the current owner/manager.

Rowley et al. (2000, cited in Little et al., 2003) found that the hospitality industry was dubious of college graduates and employers had a clear preference for work based training and relevant experience over qualifications. However, Little et al.'s (2003) study found some evidence that this view might be changing and that there was a "realisation that some graduate recruitment is essential for longer-term success" (p. 22).

Petrova and Mason (2004) examined the value of tourism degrees to the tourism industry in a series of semistructured interviews. They found that employers expected the benefits from a tourism degree to be "greater all-round knowledge, perhaps a rounded knowledge of the industry" (p. 102). Tourism graduates are also expected to have "good potential" and "good career prospects." Also, "dedication, commitment, and interest in the industry" were other qualities deemed of tourism graduates. Employers felt that studying the industry, "demonstrated you have got a passion for it, a commitment to it," and were more likely, "to have a career in this area" (p. 102). Less encouragingly, however, the respondents felt that, "the actual content of tourism degrees seemed of little value" (p. 104). Paradoxically, employers felt that degrees were either not "academic enough or not sufficiently vocational" (p. 104).

Results also indicated that employer's perceptions were influenced by their own experience of education. For example, managers who themselves did not have higher education tended not to value an education background (Peacock & Ladkin, 2002, cited in Petrova & Mason, 2004). Findings also suggested that vocational degrees were favored less than highly recognized traditional degrees. Petrova and Mason (2004) concluded that, "despite these trends there is still a strong demand for tourism degrees and commitment among students to pursue

a job in their related industry, compiling further the possible problems tourism graduates face upon graduation" (p. 105).

Similar findings were reported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2001) in one of the most comprehensive studies of the UK hospitality industry. As in the findings from Petrova and Mason (2004), the HEFCE research team also reported that the value attributed to a qualification by a manager was influenced by "whether or not a manager was a graduate" (HEFCE, 2001, p. 22).

Similarly, they noted that those managers that, "had worked their way up . . . did not really value graduates" (HEFCE, 2001, p. 22). Nongraduates were more likely to think that graduates would have unreasonable aspirations, only wanting, "high level jobs" and unwilling to, "get their hands dirty." Interviews with graduates on the other hand suggested that they "were perfectly realistic about what was required" (p. 22). More positively, it was recorded that employers felt that graduates had more commitment to the industry, and were more likely, "to stay the course" (p. 5). The study concluded that although it has been previously possible to progress in the industry without formal qualifications, this situation was likely to change due to the, "increasing complexity and sophistication of the industry and managerial jobs within it" (p. 23).

Conrad Lashley (2004) reflected on several recent higher education reports and research to identify what he coined as "the tyranny of relevance" (Lashley, 2004, p. 1). Lashley highlighted that the majority of tourism and hospitality courses were "predominantly influenced by the industry" (Airey & Tribe, 2000, cited in Lashley, 2004, p. 61) and employed mostly "activist learning styles" (Honey & Mumford, 1986, cited in Lashley 2004, p. 61) that were vocational in nature and "reinforce students tendencies to avoid reflection and theorising" (Lashley, 2004, p. 66). Lashley argued that this preoccupation with being industry relevant is an intellectual "cul de sac" (p. 65) or "closed expert system in which experts speak to experts in ever decreasing circle, defending conventional ways of gaining knowledge" (Botterill, 2000, cited in Lashley, 2004, p. 65).

As industry, "do not always know what it is they do not know" (Lashley, 2004, p. 67), he highlighted





the need to develop the reflective practitioner through theory with a mindset, “that is capable of reading and responding quickly to change in the environment” (p. 66). He suggested achieving this by employing a change in title, from “hospitality management” to “hospitality studies,” thereby allowing a “more rounded study of hospitality,” which “better informs the study for hospitality” through social science disciplines (p. 68).

This draws interesting parallels with developments in event-related academia. Donald Getz (2002) has also warned of the danger of courses being too practical in nature and the need for anyone studying events to, “understand some fundamental knowledge and theories” (p. 22). This development of theory can, “in turn, lead to a more extensive knowledge base and greater accreditation of academic programs, and therefore a higher professional status for practitioners” (p. 22).

In 2007, Getz published, *Event Studies: Theory, Research and Policy for Planned Events*, which he defined as a subject that, “draws mainly from the social sciences, management, the arts, humanities, and a number of closely related professional fields” (p. 2). The title of this book and its contents are a significant move away from the vocational, practical guides to event management and event planning that fill the bookshelves (Berridge, 2007).

### Methodology

This study was largely exploratory as little research has been conducted into the value of event management education. For that reason a qualitative study design was selected as “qualitative research can be a source of ideas, insights and new perspectives upon a problem which is required to gain a better understanding of an issue that is not widely researched” (Ryan, 1995, cited in Petrova & Mason, 2004, p.100).

More specifically, this research employed a non-experimental, cross-sectional study design. As this design is best suited “to studies aimed at finding out the prevalence of a phenomenon, situation problem, attitude or issue” (Kumar, 2005, p. 93), it was the most appropriate design with which to explore attitudes into event management education. As this study was primarily interested in attitudes *currently* held by event practitioners, the major

shortcoming of this design that it “cannot measure change” (Kumar, 2005, p. 95) was overcome and obsolete.

### Data Collection

This study focused on the complex relationship between industry and academia, and explored the often sensitive educational and career background of its participants. Therefore, the author selected interviews as the most appropriate means for collecting qualitative data.

Specifically, this study employed semistructured interviews as the means of collecting primary data. Each interview began with a series of open, unstructured questions to ascertain the participant’s career and educational background. It was here also that participants could talk about how they started their career in event management and the drivers—if any—that existed for them to do so. Semistructured techniques allowed the interviewer to “formulate questions and raise issues on the spur of the moment” depending on what had occurred “in the context of the discussion” (Kumar, 2005, p. 123). This allowed the study to benefit from the major advantage of unstructured interviews, which “offer maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate” (Patton, 2002, p. 370).

The author then used a series of fixed questions to ensure that certain themes were addressed. The questions were ordered logically in order to “gradually lead participants into themes of the study, starting with simple themes and progressing to more complex ones” (Kumar, 2005, p. 140).

Questions were predominantly short and open ended to allow for longer answers and therefore more detail from participants (Kvale, 2007). As explained by Kvale, “the qualitative research interview is particularly well suited to employing leading questions to repeatedly check the reliability of the participant’s answers, as well as to verify the interviewer’s interpretations” (p. 88). Therefore, leading questions were used strategically throughout the interviews to confirm and check the longer answers of more open-ended questions.

Table 1 shows the process identified by Kumar (2005) for selecting interview questions that best suit the purpose of study and how this process has



Table 1  
Interview Questions

Step I: Objective of Research	Step II: Main and Associated Research Questions	Step III: Information Required	Step IV: Questions
To assess industry views on the value of event management education	What is the perceived value of event courses?	Value placed on education within the industry	What do you think you would learn on an event management course? What do you look for on a CV when recruiting? What makes a good event organizer?
	How useful are they in gaining entry level employment?	Experience of participants in seeking work and recruiting	What advice would you offer a young person that wanted to work in the events industry? When recruiting what do you look for? What effect has your course had on your search for employment?
	What are their strengths and their shortcomings?	Assumed strengths and weaknesses of graduates  Actual experience of graduates in work	What strengths and weaknesses would you expect an event graduate to have? What strengths and weaknesses would you expect a non-event graduate to have? What effect had your course had on your day to day work?

been applied to this research. Not all questions are shown here, and some questions help to provide insight on multiple themes. However, the basic premise that the objective of the study guides the methodology is clearly evident.

*Sampling*

This research employed a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling involved selecting and identifying key informants who possess information and insight that can not necessarily be obtained from others (Maxwell, 2005). In this study, where little research exists, purposeful sample is highly useful as it allows the researcher to study people “who in his/her opinion are likely to have the required information and be willing to share it” (Kumar, 2005, p. 179).

After several of the initial participants had been selected, they themselves proposed other contacts and colleagues who were also equally and in some cases more qualified to participate in this research. This method of snowball sampling where individuals “then direct you to other members of the group” (Kumar, 2005, p. 179) is particularly useful for this research as senior event practitioners with

experience of recruiting within the events industry are not always easily accessible.

Six interviews were conducted during the course of this study. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and produced large amounts of relevant data. The participants selected were all working event practitioners at the time that the study was undertaken. In order to obtain contrasting viewpoints, half the participants had themselves graduated from an event management course while the other half had not. Four of the participants were at the early stage of their career each with between 6 months and 2 years of experience. Two other participants were more senior line managers with 5 or more years of event experience and with a significant experience recruiting for the event industry. Furthermore, the sample represented a good cross section of event industry subsectors including organizers of conferences, festivals, incentive travel, and charity fundraising events (Table 2).

Findings

Five of the six respondents conveyed a lack of awareness for the scope, range, and nature of event



Table 2  
The Participants

Name	Position	Type of Organization	Organization Name
Ian Hayne	Operations Manager	Challenge events company	Action Challenge
Ayesha Kur	Conference Sales	Commercial conference organizer	Venture Marketing Group
Rachel Watts	Fundraising and Events Manager	Charity	VSO
Hannah Keates	Researcher	Venue	ICC
Richard Smith	Senior Account Director	Venue	ICC
Magda Nieto	Festival Coordinator	Agency	Numerous (freelance)

management education. Furthermore, Magda and Hannah, themselves graduates of an event management masters course, grossly underestimated the number of available courses in the UK.

All participants were able to use their professional experience to speculate on what an event management course should teach in order to be useful. Almost unanimously participants felt that courses should be “vocational” in nature. For example, Ayesha suggested “that instead of doing a single, vocational project after the course I would like to see a course that did these sort of the things all the way.” Similarly, Hannah stressed the need “to focus on how to apply what you learn academically to the industry.” This support for vocational courses was echoed by Magda, Ayesha, Richard, and Rachel, with only Ian suggesting a course would be more useful to him if it was “theory driven.”

Participants were asked what they would look for if recruiting somebody for an event manager role. It is worth noting here that none of the participants initially volunteered that they would look for people with event management qualifications. The question was further narrowed to “What would you look for on a CV?” and again none of the participants suggested event management qualifications. When lead to an extent by the interviewer with “what educational background would you look for?” only Ayesha suggested the usefulness of somebody who “is trained in event management.” She qualified that they would “know all aspects of event management” and that “theoretical knowledge is really important.”

Similarly Magda only suggested the need for an event management background when further prompted “You haven’t mentioned event qualifications?” Prior to this she suggested that she would look first at people’s “experience” and that if they didn’t have direct events experience then she would

look for “someone with business or marketing experience.”

Rachel, Magda, Ian, Richard, and Hannah all said they would look for people with direct events experience. Rachel had recently recruited for an entry level, and stated that the only educational requirement was that “they have to have a degree.” Rachel explained that, “being an event organizer is such a personality thing, so it’s definitely personality that people look for.”

Ian again highlighted that event organizing is “a people job at the end of the day” and when interviewing people would ask himself the questions “Do I get on with this person? Can I see other people getting on with them?”

Similarly, Hannah said she would look for “someone that is personable and can get along with individuals at all levels.” Hannah also reemphasised that,

I’d say it was experience I would look for. If someone has the qualification that I have [MA Event & Exhibition Management], or came to me with five years of hands on experience I’d probably tend towards the experience more than the qualification.

Richard is involved in the recruitment of venue sales staff. When questioned on the things he looked for when recruiting he identified “the key thing which comes first is the sales expertise” as “the technical knowledge about selling an event, we can teach that.” Both Ian and Magda also stated that they would value people with similar backgrounds to themselves.

Participants were asked about what advice, if any, they had received prior to commencing their careers in the events industry, and what advice they would offer to people looking to commence a career of their own.



Of the participants who had not studied event management, only Ian had received specific career advice. Ian said,

I've got a friend's dad who is in events and hospitality quite high up. I had a chat with him. I spoke with recruitment companies who wouldn't really give me the time of day. Just told me to go and get more experience. It's what everybody says.

Of the participants who had decided to study event management as a means of developing their career, not one of them had ever been specifically advised to do so. Hannah explained that her "decision to work in events came from finding this course and reading about it and deciding that this was a really good fit to what I wanted to do."

When participants were asked what advice they would offer to people who were interested in starting a career in the events industry, the advice unanimously suggested building experience. The benefits of this it was suggested were twofold. It would help to enhance your CV while simultaneously help to develop your network of contacts. Richard said, "if you're interested in the industry, companies like us do work placements and things like that and I would say that is a really useful thing."

Volunteering was highlighted by several participants as a legitimate way of gaining valuable industry experience. Rachel advised people to

"go and volunteer in those different places just so that you're in that environment so you can see how it works and what it's like to be there. . . . you need to start building up contacts and experience and I think the only way to do that is to volunteer at different places"

Ayesha also suggested that given a choice between getting experience in a formal way such as an internship or studying an event related course, an aspiring events practitioner should

go and do the internship, get some experience and then study. If they are getting an opportunity to do an internship this is something that should not be missed. They can always study next year if it doesn't work out.

Ian's deliberate career in the event industry has begun with numerous unpaid work placements. He said

I saw people at IMG who had literally spent every summer doing some sort of volunteering. They had bags of experience that I didn't have. . . . And although you'll work for free the contacts you're going to get out of it will be great.

Hannah reinforced this,

Do as many event management positions as you can do on whatever level. As the more you do the better it looks on your CV and this industry is not about qualifications it's about experience.

Magda was the only participant who presented an alternative viewpoint stating that theory would make you a stronger candidate in the end. She said,

Studying events managements gives you the overall of the industry, and the knowledge of how the whole industry works, who is coming from where, and this will make you more competitive at the end.

Participants were asked what they would perceive as the likely strength and weaknesses of a graduate from an event management course and these perceptions varied between different levels of certification. All participants felt that having studied an event management course would give an individual a greater and more thorough knowledge of the industry.

Ian perceived an event management qualification to mean that, "you are dedicated to the industry, financially as well as educationally." He believed, "if you are good at your job it's a great thing to have behind you" but that it would not necessarily mean that somebody would be "good at their job."

Rachel felt that no qualification could "negate the need for experience" and that "she would be quite cynical of courses." She explains, "If I have learnt it on the job in a practical environment then it is more valid in some way than learning it in a classroom."

Both Magda and Hannah felt that a potential weakness of an event management graduate would be an unrealistic idea about the value of their qualifications. Magda advised that the "industry doesn't value these qualification and it doesn't approve them." Hannah explained,

When I did my degree I thought it was going to be a foot in the door. I knew I wouldn't step straight



into a senior event manager position but I didn't realize quite how little impact it would have on employers."

Those participants that had previously studied event management were asked to comment on what effect the qualification had had on their search for employment, and on their day to day work life. All three had felt that the contacts gained through completing the course were highly valuable, and in Magda's case this had led directly to her first paid job and to subsequent jobs thereafter. However, the overwhelming consensus was that the qualification itself did little in terms of securing interviews. Magda said,

Having the master's doesn't help too much in that [interviews]. I have not felt the master's has made a difference. It's more important to have experience on your CV.

Similarly, Ayesha remarked that

If I had a degree with no experience my CV would not have been looked at. . . . About six months ago when I was applying for a job with little experience and a degree I wasn't really getting interviews.

Hannah also felt that the having a qualification in event management didn't make "much difference." She said,

I am sure having a master's on my CV helped people think she's educated and clever, she can research, but I think it could have been a master's in business, or marketing.

## Discussion

### *How Aware Is the Industry of the Scope, Range, and Nature of Event Management Qualifications in the UK?*

Key to the new insight provided by this study is the realization that among the sample population there is a significant lack of awareness for the scope, range, and nature of event management qualifications in the UK. Even participants who held a master's degree in event management, and therefore could be expected to be relatively well informed in this area, greatly underestimated the range and number of courses available in the UK.

The literature has reported that the growth of courses in the UK in this subject has been rapid (Bowdin & McPherson, 2006; Rogers, 2003; Willis, 2005) and this has been further supported by this study, which looked comparatively at the number of UCAS courses presently available. What has not been highlighted in previous literature is the industry's apparent failure to keep up with this increase.

It is interesting to note here that one participant felt that the future success of events industry academia was reliant on the better promotion of courses. This research would suggest a failure in this endeavor. If a practitioner is unaware that something exists, they are therefore unable to attribute value to it.

### *How Useful Are Academic Qualifications in Gaining Entry-Level Employment?*

The study found that little desirability was attributed to Event Management qualifications when either recruiting or applying for an events industry role. In each of the cases the preferred alternative was "experience." Experience on a CV was highly desirable, and gaining experience was considered the best course of action an aspiring event manager could take. This finding supports the research of Beaven and Wright (2006), which concluded that employers in this field place great emphasis on experience. Similarly, it supports research from the related field of tourism where Rowley et al. (2000, cited in Little et al., 2003) found that employers had a clear preference for experience over qualifications.

However, participants did acknowledge in all cases that volunteering and unpaid work was a legitimate way of gaining event industry experience and the single most important thing an individual could do to enhance their CV. This has not been previously highlighted in the literature and is contrary to the findings of Beaven and Wright (2006), which concluded that gaining an event management qualification was the most important step an individual might take.

Benefits of studying event courses in terms of securing future employment were deemed to be a direct result of the contacts one developed through the course, and the experience gained through volunteer and student projects. This supports the work



of Robinson et al. (2008), who concluded that event management courses help students to get closer to the industry by facilitating volunteer opportunities at events, introducing practitioners to the classroom as guest lecturers, and by organizing work placement in relevant organizations.

Not previously documented, however, these participants overwhelmingly found that the qualification did little in terms of securing interviews with individuals or contacts not connected to their courses.

Although having a master's level qualification on one's CV was believed to show a certain academic ability, participants suggested that this was not enhanced, and if anything was less valued than a more traditional, nonspecific industry qualification at the same level.

Little et al. (2003) concluded that in sectors where employers have traditionally placed an emphasis on prior experience (such as the events industry) employers equated vocational higher education qualifications at sub-degree level with those at degree level. This was also highlighted in this study where participants were seemingly unable to differentiate between varying levels of certification.

One participant suggested that a lower level of certification would be preferable when recruiting. This participant stated that a person with a Pg Dip qualification "really wants to get into events, I would have to teach them less"; however, someone with a master's degree is "overqualified for an entry-level role." This is interesting when considered with the difficulty in securing interviews described by several of the participants who hold a master's degree.

The overwhelming priority given to prior experience would support the findings of educational studies conducted by Eraut (2007), which described the "action based emphasis of practice based thinking" (p. 132) that is present in the work environment. Eraut's studies showed that newly qualified nurses had to very quickly acquire "rapid responses informed by prior experience" (p. 132). It could be argued that these "rapid responses" are what practitioners feel is lacking in event management graduates with little experience, or experience gained only through student projects and placements.

However, Eraut argued that in later years nurses began to rediscover an interest and requirement for theory as they began to be allocated "sicker

patients with more complex conditions for which routine responses were less appropriate" (Eraut, 2007, p. 132).

Applied to the events industry, this finding could suggest that although graduates may have no advantage over nongraduates to grasp and acquire rapid routine responses, their real value would come into fruition much later in their career at a strategic level where routine responses are no longer suitable or appropriate.

#### *What Are Their Strengths and What Are Their Shortcomings?*

The study showed that the greatest perceived strength of a graduate in event management was an overall knowledge of the events industry and long-term commitment to it. These findings support studies of tourism degrees by Petrova and Mason (2004). They concluded that a tourism graduate, in addition to the above, could be expected to hold a greater passion for the industry. However, this was not implied by the findings of this study.

Participants who had not studied felt that graduating from an event management course would not necessarily make a good event manager, and that this could only come about from experience. The study also highlighted the most important attribute an event manager should possess are interpersonal skills. Graduates, however, felt that the courses had been very useful in their day-to-day responsibilities, including sales, marketing, operations, and research, and had allowed them to adapt to new roles and given them an edge over some of their colleagues.

This supports findings from Petrova and Mason (2004) and the HEFCE (2001) that employer's value people with similar backgrounds to themselves, and that managers "who had worked their way up . . . did not really value graduates" (HEFCE, 2001, p. 22).

This was further demonstrated by two of the participants who indicated that they would employ people with similar backgrounds to themselves. These backgrounds were quite different to one another (sales and industrial design) yet each participant believed in these industry skills being transferable to event management. As an increasing number of event graduates become practitioners,



this finding would indicate that the number of practitioners placing greater emphasis on qualifications (i.e., individuals with similar backgrounds to themselves) would also increase accordingly.

### Conclusion

Event management courses can help an individual find work in the events industry by introducing students to industry practitioners who will later go on to recommend them for roles or employ them directly. Event management courses can also facilitate volunteer placements and unpaid work postings. The experience gained during these is considered, in some cases, to be more important than the qualification itself.

Holding a specialized qualification in events management is unlikely to secure interviews by itself, and employers are unable to differentiate accurately between different levels of certification. This may or may not be due to the finding that there is a lack of awareness among industry practitioners for the range, number, and scope of courses available in the UK.

This research suggests the most important element an employer looks for on a CV is industry experience and that specialist qualifications are not a valued criteria. However, as practitioners place greater value on people with similar backgrounds to themselves, a course will be deemed more important should the recruiter hold a similar such qualification. Furthermore, this report also identified that the single most important step an individual can take to commence their career in event management is to build experience through voluntary placements and internships.

The greatest strength a graduate from an event management course is perceived to have is an overall knowledge of the events industry. This is thought to mean that graduates can be more quickly operational and have a better understanding of the career opportunities available to them. However, participants also felt that “people skills” were a prerequisite for an event-related role and that these could not be guaranteed by any level of certification.

Eraut’s (2007) finding that the real value of theory comes at a strategic level was only highlighted by one of the six interviewed for this study. If Eraut’s conclusions can be applied to the events industry, then this may suggest a certain myopic approach to

recruitment, where employers place heavy emphasis on the need for experience, yet fail to recognize the greater value that theory can play later at a more senior level.

The research suggests that this may change with time. Since recruiters value employees with similar experience and qualifications to themselves, there may be an organic shift as more students become practitioners at senior levels and hence look to employ graduates with their own backgrounds. Therefore, educators need to better engage and nurture the relationships with former students and vice versa, to improve industry awareness of education and to help shape a balanced curriculum that meets the functional needs of recruiters while evolving as an academic field that can contribute knowledge to industry practitioners.

### Limitations of This Research

The research was limited by the major disadvantages of the interview study design, “that it is time consuming and expensive” (Kumar, 2005, p. 131). In particular, gaining access to suitable participants was a challenging endeavor. The author would also have liked to conduct interviews with more senior events professionals to understand their perceptions and attitudes toward industry courses with regards to a more strategic viewpoint. Access in particular to senior professionals was especially difficult.

All graduates involved in this project had completed the MA Event and Exhibition Management at Birmingham City University. Participants with a greater variety of qualification from varying institutions may have offered greater insight into the value of all of these courses and students’ career experiences after graduating from them.

### Avenues for Further Research

The author would like to see this research conducted minus the limitations described above. In other words, this area of research could benefit from a greater sample of professionals, including several more senior individuals, and graduates with a greater variety of event industry certifications.

The discussion section of this report speculated on a potential “recruitment myopia” that may exist among recruiters who seek such staff with the rapid



responses acquired through previous experience as identified by Eraut (2007). Eraut found that nurses in the latter years of their career had to turn to theory when given patients with more complex conditions for whom a routine response was no longer appropriate.

It would be interesting to carry out a follow-up longitudinal study to determine if there is a greater emphasis on the importance of theory to event practitioners in the latter stages of their career, and if so, does this importance outweigh the initial lack of experience that forms the basis of many industry criticisms of event management graduates?

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