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## Student experiences of facilitating knowledge exchange: Developing an understanding of responsible events through blog writing



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### ABSTRACT

To encourage greater awareness of responsible events, a group of final year Events Management students based in a UK Higher Education institution researched a range of contemporary issues affecting the events industry. The results were presented as an interactive online blog to facilitate an exchange of knowledge with peers and event professionals. Although limitations to the approach are identified and discussed, the evidence suggests that this is an effective learning strategy that encourages debate beyond the university classroom and enables a greater awareness of the need to create and manage events responsibly.

### 1. Introduction

Academic studies in events management at undergraduate level have tended to focus on the importance, diversity, planning and operation of events with little consideration for responsible or sustainable issues (Getz, 2010; Holmes, Hughes, Mair, & Carlsen, 2015). This article explores the experiences of a group of final year undergraduate Events Management students who created, promoted and managed an online blog to facilitate an exchange of knowledge between peers and events professionals on the theme of responsible events. The contribution to knowledge of this paper is a critical reflection of the use of blog writing as an effective pedagogy to facilitate an exchange of knowledge on the theme of responsible events and sustainability. The paper is presented as a case study to demonstrate the effective use of student-led knowledge exchange through discussion of responsible events.

### 2. The importance of responsible events

Event managers and festival organisers create a range of experiences that can educate and inspire as well as entertain. The industry is skilled at engaging with audiences and communicating a range of messages and ideas in innovative ways. Not only do event managers and festival organisers have the tools and the skill set to communicate effectively with others, but by their very nature should be seen to be leading the way in terms of promoting a range of sustainable and responsible practices.

Sustainability is a concept that suggests a balance between the consumption of resources and their renewal (Holmes et al., 2015; Jones, 2009; Raj & Musgrave, 2009). Sustainability has multiple meanings reflecting how various stakeholders have promoted their own understanding of its contributions to the environment, economy, society, management, wellbeing and social justice. This makes sustainability a difficult concept to define and as such it often conceals as much as it reveals (Orr, 1992). At its heart is the recognition that it is about meeting the needs of the present population whilst ensuring that future generations can meet their own needs without depleting or degrading the stock of resources upon which we all depend (Brundtland, 1987).

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Sustainability may largely be an aspiration and the need for its inclusion in daily working practices may not be fully realised (Musgrave, 2011). Within event management it is unlikely that an entire event can be considered sustainable as there is likely to be some degree of waste produced, even if this waste is then recycled or reused. Goodwin (2017) highlights this concept, albeit from a tourism perspective. By replacing the word ‘tourism’ with ‘events’, the relevance of responsible events in helping to achieve a sustainable future becomes clearer:

“Responsible events is not the same thing as sustainable events. Sustainability is the goal, a goal which can only be achieved by people taking responsibility, together with others, to achieve it. Responsible events is about taking responsibility for making events sustainable, it is about what people do to address the many specific challenges we face” (adapted from Goodwin, 2017).

Responsible events can therefore be regarded as a subset of sustainable events that extend beyond concern for the environment, society and economy to include greater acknowledgement of social justice, ethics and global citizenship. It requires a change in mindset from one of unlimited resources, from ‘plentitude to limitation, efficiency to equity’ (Musgrave, 2011, p. 259). It can also be argued that there is a ‘duty of care’ towards an event, its performers and staff, the audience, the suppliers, the immediate community, the environment and the business. This means that events do not just operate following sustainable guidelines or policies but actively take responsibility for their creation and implementation. The key values that inform the framework for this discussion are the three values of sustainability: environmental, social and economic (Cavagnaro & Curiel, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015). These are also referred to as the ‘triple bottom line’ approach where organisations, including events, evaluate their impacts and account for their actions (Getz, 2009). The three key areas of sustainability place the individual at the centre of responsible thinking as “societies consist of organisations which in turn are made up of individuals, and sustainability is about a better quality of life for all these individuals” (Cavagnaro & Curiel, 2012, p. 236).

Event managers have the potential to better manage their own use of resources as well as educating and inspiring others. Events can help broker an exchange of knowledge by facilitating meetings, conferences and exchanges of ideas that potentially bring key stakeholders together (Lightowler & Knight, 2013; Ward, House, & Hamer, 2009). This may help to create new multi-disciplinary or even trans-disciplinary approaches that strive for a collective understanding of issues and problems by adopting various approaches to create new insights, knowledge and decision-making (Brown, Harris, & Russell, 2010).

The experience economy, which includes events management, both consumes resources and generates negative impacts on the environment and communities in the processes of production and consumption of services. There is a moral obligation on behalf of event managers, festival organisers and their audiences to reduce negative impacts and promote the positive benefits that are derived from products and services (Adema & Roehl, 2010; Laing & Frost, 2010). This coincides with a growing consumer preference for ethical and sustainable products and services (Devinney, Auger, & Eckhardt, 2010).

As event businesses adopt sustainable operating practices, policies and procedures they will require staff who are familiar with the management systems, the reasons why they are put in place and an understanding of their benefits. Evidence suggests that event management companies increasingly require students who are literate in sustainability to demonstrate good practice and deliver sustainable products and services to enable them to compete in the market place (Carnicelli, 2014; Holtum, 2014). Without a working knowledge of sustainable practices future graduates may be left behind. The role of a university is to both challenge and inform society’s social and political norms, and ultimately help to make its communities a better place in which to live. Graduates are a key part in achieving this ambition and our role as educators is to expose students to ideas and debate enabling them to decide for themselves their own course of action and how they may lead their lives (Hales & Jennings, 2017; Hartman, DeMars, Griscom, & Butner, 2017; Sterling, 2012). Graduates should possess critical minds and confidence, equipped with: their own ideas of a good society; an awareness of their respective place within the world order; and a knowledge and skill set to forge their own careers and influence the lives of others; and through their actions they have the potential to shape the future (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

### 3. A call to action

In 2016 the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject benchmarks for Events Management were reviewed, which emphasised the importance of sustainability with a need to equip UK graduates with the necessary skills to manage events responsibly to, “recognise and respond to moral, ethical, sustainability and safety issues which directly pertain to the context of study including relevant legislation and professional codes of conduct” (QAA, 2016, 5.2 ix). The subject benchmarks further articulate that students should “demonstrate a critical awareness and understanding of how core values, for example, ethics, sustainability, creativity, strategy, and continuous improvement, relate to, and are reflected in, events (QAA, 2016, 6.2 iv) as well as, “appreciate the ethical and sustainability issues associated with the financial support, operation and development of events (QAA, 2016, 6.5 iii).

These statements coincided with the production of a report by Powerful Thinking, *The Show Must Go On*, which provided an environmental impact statement and vision for the UK festival industry (Powerful Thinking, 2015) and was produced in response to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris in 2015 (UNFCCC, 2017). The report contains a series of startling facts that are based on environmental impacts from 279 UK summer music festivals which attracted 3.17 million festival goers in 2012 and as a result created 23,500 tonnes of waste with only 32% being recycled. UK summer music festivals use 5 million litres of fuel to power the events of which only 15% is biodiesel, the remaining 85% is diesel produced from non-renewable sources. Most visitors arrive at the festivals by car accounting for 80% of a festival’s total Co2e emissions, not including travel by artists, staff and crew. Co2e is an abbreviation of ‘carbon dioxide equivalent’, an international measure of greenhouse emissions that includes other gases that contribute towards global warming. The carbon emission alone generated by the UK festival industry, excluding travel, is estimated at 19,778 tonnes of Co2 per year (Powerful Thinking, 2015).

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