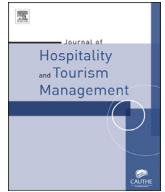


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Aspirations and progression of event management graduates: A study of career development

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ABSTRACT

The provision of event management education in the higher education sector has grown significantly in recent years, yet little is known of the circumstances of the increasing number of graduates from these programmes. This paper examines the motivations, the expectations and the career aspirations of festival and event management graduates from a post-92 university in Scotland. Adopting a mixed methods approach, a quantitative on line survey was used to contact festival and event management alumni who had graduated during the period 2007 to 2012. This was followed by in depth interviews with 15 students. This study found that graduates felt academically prepared for working life in the industry, but lacked the practical skills required. In general, graduates held a positive view and could foresee long-term careers in the festival and event industry.

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1. Introduction

It has been suggested that career choices in general are a “complex and multifaceted phenomenon” (Sibson, 2011, p. 50), which, in turn, complicates understanding and prediction. However, when discussing the career choices of graduates, most studies (for example DeWitt, Curtis, & Burke, 1998; Weisman, Levine, Steinwachs and Chase, 1980) have tended to focus on the more vocational disciplines such as nursing, teaching, dentistry or business where there has been found evidence of a connection between a students' choice of university programme and their subsequent career. However, Sibson (2011:51) states that the most common approach to predicting career choice upon graduation is an interplay between two elements: “individual agency (personality, disposition, interest, attitude) and contextual factors of structure and culture which enhance or construct one's social world” (2011:50). This combination is based on the understanding that individuals actively construct their careers but are also strongly influenced by the world that surrounds them.

According to Weerts and Vidal (2005), studies that examine the initial job destinations and subsequent careers of graduates have developed and evolved over the last 70 years with a range of studies

undertaken in the USA, Europe and the UK (see also Brennan, Williams, & Woodley, 2005; Johnston, 2003; Brennan & Woodley, 2000). The earliest studies were conducted in the United States in the 1930s, since when the foci have largely changed (Cabrera, Weerts, & Zulick, 2005; Weerts & Vidal, 2005) and take into account contemporary issues, such as globalisation and internationalisation, in general and their impacts on education in particular.

Career destination studies play an important role in contemporary Higher Education (HE) through providing information to both internal and external audiences regarding initial career destinations, the subsequent career trajectories of graduates and also indicate the level of preparedness of graduates for the labour market (Cabrera et al., 2005; Weerts & Vidal, 2005; Rowley & Purcel, 2001). Indeed, it has been found that these studies are vital to Higher Education institutions (HEI's) who are increasingly exposed to economic and political pressure to produce market-ready graduates (Cabrera et al., 2005), demonstrate economic and organisational accountability (Weerts & Vidal, 2005; Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Cabrera et al., 2005), and as a means of defending their teaching, research and services (Cabrera et al., 2005; Weerts & Vidal, 2005). These pressures are closely related to a mix of external forces that are currently identified as shaping the HE environment and include marketisation, consumerism, increased accountability of the HEI to the state as well as diversification of students, courses (Brennan et al., 2005; Nabi & Bagley, 1999) and, more recently, the introduction of fees in English universities (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2012). The results of studies that examine

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initial career choices of graduates and, more especially, those that identify career progression are predicted to become even more important, due to the desire of HEIs to maintain links with graduates as a means of increasing alumni-targeted fundraising initiatives, the desire to raise the profile of HEIs (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2012) as well as using graduates as a market for life-long learning, postgraduate and other available courses (Brennan et al., 2005). Focussing on the emerging and popular event management field, this study aims to provide an evaluation of initial positions and subsequent career trajectories of a group of graduates from a masters programme in International Festival and Event Management. It further identifies motivations to study this area, evaluates how prepared graduates felt they were for working life in the industry and elicits long term aspirations. This research contributes to the discourse that surrounds graduate careers in this important subject area and will provide educators with an overview of drivers that contribute to successful graduate careers.

1.1. Event management studies

Rutherford Silvers, Bowdin, O'Toole, and Beard Nelson (2006:187) identify that the majority of event studies in academia are in the Australian context and it is also remarkable that most of them are exploratory. Robinson, Barron, and Solnet (2008) conducted an exploratory study in Australia, identifying how the course objectives were met and how HE can better prepare students for event management careers in regards to the industry's complexities and idiosyncrasies. This involved identifying career challenges in the tourism and events industry. Data were gathered from, at the time, current event management students. This involved asking survey questions about professional development course objectives and career management and within a focus group of six to determine the satisfaction of practical course elements. The study was based on the findings that there was no model of industry engagement or career development in the events sector and that despite the presumption that many students enter graduate level studies in order to enter the labour market in higher positions in the events industry, managerial positions were mostly gained after 10 years (Getz, 2002). The findings confirmed past studies from the Hospitality, Tourism, Leisure and Events industries (HTLE) indicating an industry dominance by females at an entry level, and that in order to be successful, it is crucial to be mobile and flexible, accept "sideway step", be able to network and the need of several post degree experience. Furthermore, students discovered that there were only few available posts, of which many were administrative roles, with long working hours and little pay, while the creative jobs were mainly taken by specialists.

In 2008 Sibson (2011:50) conducted an exploratory study on important factors in career choices of 62 (91% of course) event, sport and recreation management undergraduate students at Edith Cowan University, Australia. The study aimed to fill a gap in the academic literature and to inform the public on course and career specifics, especially in connection with the growing popularity of the courses and often reported career misconceptions (Sibson, 2011). The main findings indicate that enjoyable work in areas of personal interest, good and various career opportunities and pleasant working conditions are most important, followed by working with, helping and influencing others, creativity, variety and originality. Least important were professional prestige/high status, hours of work and salary (Sibson, 2011).

Junek, Lockstone, and Mair (2009:120) combined two exploratory studies in order to compare student evaluation of their skill sets and the importance of specific skills within the industry and employer assessments of students' skills. The samples were taken from undergraduate students in Business in Event Management at

Victoria University (VU), Melbourne and aggregated appraisal data from employers who had hosted VU students on placements before. The aim was to show educators the need to align students' perceptions of skill areas with standards expected in the industry, so that these gaps could be addressed in the curriculum. This in consequence can lead to a higher quality of event management education and enhance the students' employability. Students' skill rankings differed depending on if they had undertaken a period of work experience which aligns with Barron and Maxwell (1993) early study in hospitality in that pre-placement students have higher expectations of the course. Junek et al. (2009) relate this to the need to recognise and reflect the reality of the industry. Further, placements offer the chance to complete lacking skills and give students a clear insight into the realities of working in the industry. Communication skills were generally ranked highly. While post-placement students highlighted the importance of problem solving and stress handling abilities, pre-placement students focused on more generic skills such as management, time management or team working (Junek et al., 2009, p. 124). In general employers' impressions varied largely from the students' and focused more on core skills. Employers also mentioned that they would like to have students that are more confident, proactive and have more knowledge and experience in the events industry (Junek et al., 2009).

In an attempt to determine the important skills and knowledge that future event managers should possess, Rutherford Silvers et al. (2006) gathered international data and produced a framework that presents event management from a practical, project management perspective. This Events Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK) as determined by Rutherford Silvers et al. (2006) categorises the content of event management programmes into five domains which are administration, design, marketing, operations and risk. Each of these domains is broken down into component parts and provides educators with an indication of the areas under each domain that might be addressed in an event management programme (for example, administration includes areas such as finance, human resources, procurement etc). Whilst there is an understanding and recognition of the use of the EMBOK (2016) as providing an overview of the important elements of event management, it has, however, been criticised as not focussing sufficiently on the management function (for example categorising finance as an administrative element) and thus placing event management in an operational, rather than managerial, sphere. However, whilst the EMBOK's (2016) rather vocational approach has been criticised by academics, it has been found to be a useful framework on which to develop academic programmes.

1.2. The growth of the events industry

Overall growth in the tourism industry has led to its diversification into sub-sectors, such as the events industry, which increasingly have been found to offer a variety of unique career opportunities (Bowdin, 2007b; Robinson et al., 2008; Sibson, 2011). The events industry has become widely recognised (Finkel, 2007; People 1st, 2010; Robinson, 2007; Rutherford Silver et al., 2006), increasingly professional (Finkel, 2007, p. 4), diverse (People 1st 2010:20) and economically beneficial industry (Rutherford Silver et al., 2006) in both domestic and international markets (Robinson et al., 2008; Harris & Jago, 1999). This increasing profile has been mirrored by a rapid increase of events being organised, an expanding presence within the media and communities as well as growing demand for professional management structures within the industry (Getz, 2007). A majority of this growth has been fuelled by the successful hosting of key mega events such as the London Olympics 2012 and the Glasgow Commonwealth Games,

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