

Ivory Tower Events

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Abstract

For over a decade the discipline of events management and the awareness of an events and festival industry has grown significantly worldwide (Bowdin, G, McDonnell, I et al.,2001). One of the first events management courses in the UK was established in Yorkshire at Leeds Metropolitan University in 1996. For that first course, 35 students enrolled. Now the Centre has grown ten fold, recruiting between 300-400 students each year. This trend is reflected nationally, where students have more choice than ever with nearly 70 institutions offering events and festival courses from Foundation degrees, HNDs to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In 2005, Event Magazine (28/2/05) noted that ‘Last year for the first time, a Guardian job ad insisted applicants have an event management qualification’ In 2005, the number of institutions offering courses was 35. Just four years later the number has almost doubled.

The perceived ‘professionalisation’ of the sector has been noted in the national media and criticised by some in industry. Most notably Trevor Foley who was highly critical of events management courses in 2007 (Thornton,2007). His comments were rebuked by event organisations and media calling for industry to “skip the school of hard knocks’ approach and applaud the “next generation of graduates keen to work in the industry’ (Razak, 2008). The vast growth in courses, the increase in applications for courses and the growth of professional associations and bodies representing the industry support the principles that underpinned many of the reports that emerged in the educational debate. These organisations include the merger between two complementary trade associations: the Corporate Events Association (CEA) and the Incentive Travel & Meetings Association (ITMA) to create EVENTIA which subsumed the British Association of Conference Destinations (BACD) in January 2009 and is recognised as the official trading body representing the events and live marketing industry, International Festivals and Events Association (IFEA), Meetings Professionals International (MPI) would suggest that rather than lacking interest in skills and educational development, that this sector is keen to share knowledge and engage in professionalisation.

The paper will draw on the findings from a regional research project which provided an insight into both the demands of the sector and the educational provision within Yorkshire. The paper will use this as a basis alongside other literature and the recently published People 1st Labour Market Review of the Events Industry to investigate whether Higher Education Institutions are focusing degree courses on school leavers without considering the needs of those already working in industry – raising the question whether the type of CPD support and professionalisation industry is seeking is actually possible to achieve within traditional academic settings. Furthermore the paper raises questions on whether the lack of industry engagement as students on courses could be resulting in misconceptions about the quality and value of events management qualifications in Higher Education.

Key words: events management, professionalisation, CPD, training

Introduction

In 2009, the UK Centre for Events Management at Leeds Metropolitan University gained funding from the West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network (WYLLN) to produce a report to identify progression routes for event and festival practitioners and potential practitioners in Yorkshire. The research aimed to review the provision and availability of courses to those working or wishing to work in the events and festival sector as well as examine the expectations of organisations employing personnel on a paid and unpaid basis.

As the research progressed, it became clear that the provision for the sector in the region was fragmented for CPD provision and primarily focused on school leavers or full time students for its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Moreover it raised questions as to whether the lack of provision could well be interpreted as a lack of relevance and appropriateness for industry.

Events – An Emerging Profession?

For over a decade the discipline of events management and the awareness of an events and festival industry has grown significantly worldwide (Bowdin, G, McDonnell, I et al.,2001). One of the first events management courses in the UK was established in Yorkshire at Leeds Metropolitan University in 1996. For that first course, 35 students enrolled. Now the Centre has grown ten fold, recruiting between 300-400 students each year. This trend is reflected nationally, where students have more choice than ever with nearly 70 institutions offering events and festival courses from Foundation degrees, HNDs to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In 2005, Event Magazine (28/2/05) noted that ‘Last year for the first time, a Guardian job ad insisted applicants have an event management qualification’ In 2005, the number of institutions offering courses was 35. Just four years later the number has almost doubled.

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The increase in interest in skills development is further supported by the strengthening of partnerships between the educational institutions and the industry which has been demonstrated in industry involvement in Higher Education establishments, the number of companies offering placement opportunities to students and the establishment of education committees and groups within the associations mentioned previously. Alongside these initiatives towards a more professional approach within the sectors and more recognition for the impact of the sector in social, economic and environmental terms, the external environment in particular regional, national and international political and legislative frameworks could also arguably be creating some impetus to develop and strengthen these sectors.

Professionalisation of the sector was raised in 2004 by Vicky Harris, who considered how a profession is identified and what stage the events industry had reached. In her study she compared trait, functionalist and commercial approaches (Quicke, 2000; Salaman 1980; Caplow 1964 cited in Harris, 2004) to current practices and determined that the events industry was indeed on its way to becoming a recognised profession. However a key barrier to its progression appears to have been the fragmented nature of the industry in its approach. There appeared to be no agreed framework for events professionalisation within such a diverse sector. However there were linking factors between the three diverse theoretical approaches to professionalisation regarding personal development in the forms of skills, training, knowledge development, competence and rewards.

Trait approach	Functionalist approach	Business approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Skill based on professional knowledge •Full-time occupation •Provision of training •Competence tests •Organisation •Code of conduct •Altruistic service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Systematic knowledge •Common interest •Recognition by society •Control of behaviour •Work socialisation •System of rewards •Community of spirit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Commercial vision •Effective response to market and client demands •Managerial skills •Entrepreneurial skills •Success through profit

Harris (2004)

Harris (2004) concluded that the differing frameworks above offered

“potential for developing a new understanding of professionalism. These characteristics would include a claim to have a mastery over practice within a particular discipline, an advanced level of qualifications, and high-level intellectual skills, which would demonstrate an ability to understand problems, respond quickly and effectively, act independently, and apply discretion within the working context.”

(Harris, 2004)

If knowledge development and education has a role to play in the quest for professionalizing the sector then this would be clear to see in the events related qualifications and continuing professional development made available. However

provision of this kind of professional development still appears to be some distance away and as indicated by People 1st (2010) is still regarded very much as a future milestone:

“Continuing professional development – introducing CPD would help professionalise the industry as well as facilitate progression routes and up-skill the workforce.”

Training and Education Overview

Within the regional study, which frames this paper, training information in events management proved challenging to locate outside institutional information. The majority of the skills development specific to the sector was within HE and FE colleges and institutions. Training provision in the region as a part-time mode of study within Higher Education was not geographically spread across the region, most of the part time provision was within three institutions which indicated a potential gap in the type of provision for potential participants across Yorkshire and only one institution offered a distance learning package. In addition none of the institutions identified short courses or workshops as a type of delivery offered to attain HE qualifications.

According to the UCAS website accessed in September 2009, there were over 415 courses delivered by 69 institutions specifically on events and/or festival management (where events and/or festival management appears in the course title).

Regional Breakdown of Event and Festival Courses

Region	No of event / festival courses
Eastern	33
East Midlands	60
Greater London	39
North East	5
Northern Ireland	1
North West	92
Scotland	19
South East	92
South West	18
Wales	11
West Midlands	16
Yorkshire and the Humber	29
UK Total	415
England Total	384

Mean average number of courses per English region 42

Skills and Subject Knowledge Development

In Higher Education, courses within the Yorkshire region cover most of the knowledge domains identified by EMBOK in most cases.

ADMINISTRATION	DESIGN	MARKETING	OPERATIONS	RISK
Financial	Content	Marketing Plan	Attendees	Compliance
Human Resources	Theme	Materials	Communications	Decisions
Information	Program	Merchandise	Infrastructure	Emergency
Procurement	Environment	Promotion	Logistics	Health & Safety
Stakeholders	Production	Public Relations	Participants	Insurance
Systems	Entertainment	Sales	Site	Legal
Time	Catering	Sponsorship	Technical	Security

(Silvers, J., Bowdin, G., O'Toole, W et al, 2006)

Subject knowledge in the area of Administration in particular retains the highest proportion of course content and unlike the short course providers the qualifications do cover much material on operations for events. Fewer courses within qualification programmes are available covering design and risk in Higher Education.

Course activities are more evenly spread across the HE sector within the region, enabling students to gain experience of a number of critical activities that reflect the needs of regional employers. To achieve the qualifications, students must undertake a variety of activities as part of their course work which form the basis of formative and summative assessments. The activities are designed to help students to acquire the skills necessary to be more employable. Being able to work as a team and act on your own initiative are frequent requirements in recruitment advertising in the sector.

All courses require the students to work as individuals and undertake group presentations as part of the courses. In addition over two thirds of courses require students to write reports and undertake work based learning. The latter two demonstrate a response to employer demands for professional report writing skills and experience within the sector, which students generally acquire through placements within the events industry as volunteers or paid employees.

The provision type which is not at odds with UK wide provision was primarily focused on full time students reflecting that

“The goal of event management education is to educate and train future generations of industry professionals” (Lee, 2008)

However whilst educators may wish to focus attention on school leavers, surely that learning should consider the needs of the present generation and in particular assist the current generation to professionalise. In particular when entering into dialogue and exchange with industry is seen as a key success factor to the delivery of courses and graduate employability and indeed the relevance of the courses. The blending of theory and practice and responding to and leading industry remains a significant challenge where

“institutions and educators must address the issues derived from the students and the industry, while maintaining the traditional academic structure of college curriculum” (Johns & Teare, 1995 cited in Lee, 2008).

Responding to industry needs

In Yorkshire at least, in the current generation of event organisers and managers there appears to be a clear demand for skill sets which are not necessarily provided by Higher Educational Institutions or indeed other training providers either in content or in the format required to meet the demands of a dynamic, often seasonal and complex workforce (Hanlon & Jago, 2004).

As part of the research, content analysis was undertaken on recruitment advertising for positions in the regional event and festival sector over two months (May and June 2009). The recruitment advertising was taken from the Guardian website which is a popular recruitment site with targeted sectors published daily including creative / media, public sector, education and IT. The jobs were identified by using key search terms event, events, festival and festivals and selecting Yorkshire. The content analysis identified qualifications, subject knowledge and skills as well as level and salary of appointments and these were noted on an excel sheet. For the purposes of this research, the top three words were noted in order of appearance under each subject heading Qualifications, Subject Knowledge, Skills and Experience.

To support the analysis and identify more in-depth employer needs and training provision a questionnaire survey was undertaken of event companies and festival organisations as well as education and training providers in Yorkshire from April until September 2009.

A key focus of the questionnaire survey was to identify the subject knowledge and skills developed by the educators and training organisations and required by the events and festival sector. The parameters of the areas identified in the surveys were based on the knowledge domains identified in the international Events Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK)

Subject Knowledge Requirements

In the questionnaire survey, an open question requested event organisations to identify skills or qualifications they considered essential and desirable, responses varied widely from very specialist skills such as 'knowledge of puppet theatre' to wider knowledge bases such as 'marketing', 'financial management', 'website design'. Eight organisations responded to identify qualifications, but the majority of responses related to passion and knowledge on subject areas and broadly based business skills. One identified 'too many to mention!' For desirable qualifications and subject knowledge, five organisations identified qualifications, the remaining elements once again fell into categories of specialist knowledge in particular relating to music, artists and specialist software.

To develop a more structured understanding, organisations were asked to select subject knowledge that they sought when recruiting paid and unpaid staff using the EMBOK domains identified earlier

Over 50% of the organisations identified subject knowledge on Event Management, Festival Management, Health & Safety, Risk Assessments, Creative Thinking, Database Management, Marketing, Fundraising and Sponsorship. Notably Events Management (83.9%) and Marketing (74.3%) appeared to be of the highest priority in the range. In the content analysis on recruitment advertising of the advertisements

which mentioned subject knowledge specifically – marketing was identified by nearly 60% which corresponds with the subject knowledge identified in the survey by the event organisations.

In the analysis of training providers covering topics in their festival and events management qualifications, the following three topics were covered by all of the HE Institutions – Marketing, Human Resources and Events Management. Over half the courses also covered Conferencing, Festival management, Funding & income, Fundraising, Health & safety, Hospitality & catering, Legal issues, Legislation, Personal & professional development, Public relations, Resource management, Risk management, Sustainable practices, Creative thinking, Sports events, Theming and Business strategy.

Skills and Experience

In order to identify skills and experience, organisations completed surveys and content analysis was undertaken. However to correspond provision against these areas, training providers were asked to identify activities they undertook in their courses to see whether these activities corresponded to the development of the skills and experiences required by the sector. This was regarded as a way of capturing information on how skills development would manifest itself, rather than requesting training providers to identify key skills as described in their course materials.

Organisations identified event management experience as a high priority. However a higher priority appeared to be team working and dealing with the public. Over 50% of organisations identified marketing, dealing with clients, project management and health & safety as key areas. Presentations / public speaking and financial management was identified by over 45% of the organisations. This identification of skills gaps also supports findings

“Skills gaps include understanding the client’s industry/needs, managing suppliers, customer service, crowd management and an understanding of legislation/standards such as health and safety and sustainability.”

(People 1st, 2010)

Clearly the responses would signify that acquiring practical experience through courses would need to be a key priority for education and training providers. A view apparently shared UK wide by events organisations who according to the People 1st Labour Market Review of the events industry 2010 ..

“have mixed views regarding event management courses. The research findings show that employers were pleased to see that event management courses are popular and increasingly available which is helping professionalise the industry and equip learners for entry level, however concerns were expressed over a perceived lack of practical/industry experience and the extent to which some lecturers may lack practical experience.”

(People 1st, 2010)

The People 1st report highlights an apparent dislocation between the reality of what courses deliver and the amount of practical components within them and the preception of courses by industry as ‘impractical’. Such a misapprehension could

emerge from traditional distrust of universities as ivory towers and academics as divorced from 'reality'. A misapprehension arguably reinforced by the real mismatch between the needs of industry for short, accessible courses that will meet their current rather than their future needs.

The content analysis revealed a similar range of skills identified. However communication skills and marketing experience was identified in over 60% of the recruitment advertisements. Just under a third of the employers identified relationship building as a skill and/or experience that they desired from applicants. The content analysis also revealed an interest in candidates with confidence, enthusiasm, persistence, drive, judgement and creativity, revealing attitudes and behaviours which could be developed through training provision. All training providers undertook both individual and group work. Over 50% of the courses also undertake activities which include placements, presentations as well as event management. This would indicate that courses do cover activities which would enable students to develop skills and acquire some experience in the areas identified by the event and festival organisations, in particular work based learning.

However whilst all of the above results appear to be good news for the future generation of event managers over the next decade, there is a potential loss of an opportunity for current event managers. There appears to be a disconnection between mostly appropriate content delivered in a highly inappropriate format for those currently working in the sector.

The lost generation of events professionals

In the survey, two thirds of the organisations stated that they did undertake training. Approximately 75% of organisations took advantage of short courses, one day workshops and conferences as a method of developing employee skills. Over 40% of the organisations undertook mentoring, coaching and on-the-job training. Supporting employees to undertake qualifications full time was a low 10% and in contrast to the results of the Labour Market Review which identified a much higher percentage of business event companies enabling staff to gain qualifications. Part time study and evening courses as methods of supporting skills development were supported by nearly a third of employees in the region.

However as stated earlier in the paper, the provision of this kind of training within event management specialist centres in the region is practically non-existent. Training and professional development work could present significant opportunities to enhance current practices for both academics and industry by increasing interaction between the current and future events workforce and encouraging engagement between academics and industry.

“The mission of the event management academia is to develop highly skilled and competent future industry professionals. In order to achieve this mission, educators and institutions must continually adapt to changes in the needs of both students and industry partners. Particularly, it is highly encouraged for the event management academia and educators to actively work to reduce the gap in the practical side of courses by incorporating opinions of industry professionals into the curriculum”

(Kang et al., 2005 cited in Lee 2008)

The current lack of events management specialist training could lead to more event organisations selecting more generic business training practices. In addition the lack of engagement and recruitment of aspiring event professionals could result in scepticism on the values of Higher Education provision and qualifications as exemplified earlier in this paper. A key area in professionalizing the sector is to develop specialist knowledge development. People 1st researchers identified that

“Employers perceive that there is a lack of professional qualifications for those working in the events industry. Many employers would like to see some formalisation around continuing professional development (CPD).”

(People 1st, 2010)

In addition with a poor range of courses from which to choose, the lack of investment in personal development could reduce the ability of organisations to effectively retain and nurture their existing staff. For event companies in particular, this has been identified as a key factor in maintaining successful events and business practice (Hanlon & Jago, 2004)

The People 1st Labour Market Review of the events industry 2010 would appear to support this notion of development being a key factor in retention and progression.

The review notes that

“Vacancies are relatively easy to fill and labour turnover is low, especially where employers offer training and progression routes.”

And furthermore that

“Most people start at the bottom and progress to senior roles and positions and tend to be recruited from within. The leap between events executive and account manager is very high. It is therefore pertinent that the person who progresses into this position is completely ready.”

(People 1st, 2010)

As most of the companies identified some form of short course / workshop attendance, research was undertaken into the regional short course offerings within events.

For short course training in Yorkshire, there are a number of specialist courses covering specific areas that relate to events such as marketing and communications (identified by employers and in recruitment advertising as a key skill). Audiences Yorkshire provide a range of courses targeted at marketing including short courses on Marketing, Press & PR, Research, website development and eMarketing. The majority of courses are focused on the marketing domain. Only seven out of the 27 training providers cover risk and most of these are specialist certificated programmes.

The Operations and Design domains are conspicuous in their absence in short course and workshop provision.. This could indicate that the content of courses is too vast for

workshop / short course delivery or that there is less demand to make this commercially viable. Alternatively it could be that there are few specialists for events and festival organisations and that these subjects do not arise in generic training relating to the business contexts, of which many of the training courses emerge. However it could indicate a missed opportunity for development by Higher Education Institutions and event organisations alike.

This is supported by the People 1st (2010) Labour Market Review of the events industry which states that

“Research suggests that employers are usually looking for a specific qualification or training programme that could be delivered in a short period of time. Currently, competence-based qualifications are large, but the way in which they are structured means that they would be offered in much smaller packages, which could help support continuing professional development. Alternatively, niche training packages could be developed to address very specific skill needs. These could be stand alone training programmes or be accredited by a higher education institution or awarding organisation.”

Conclusions

This audit of event and festival organizations and training and educational providers funded by the West Yorkshire Life Long Learning Network has provided an insight into both the demands of the sector and the provision within the region. It is clear from this study that skills and subject knowledge development needs within industry are being largely met through short courses and workshops.

The provision of short courses and workshops within the region is dominated by business management, communications and health & safety as subject areas which fall under the Administration, Marketing and Risk knowledge domains identified by EMBOK. This could indicate a need for more specialist short course provision relating to event planning and production (Operations) and event creation (Design). Furthermore a number of the courses covering other knowledge domains such as Marketing and Administration are not specifically targeted at events and festival organisers. Risk is covered by a small number of training providers, these courses are often certificated programmes enabling participants to acquire a practical and specialist training in the area that they can then use to evidence this specific knowledge and skill to event and festival employers.

Events and Festival Management Higher education from the survey results and the desk-based research appears to offer the more holistic approach to the sector, covering all (or the majority) of the knowledge domains identified in EMBOK and in the survey. However a key weakness in the delivery is that the courses require a higher commitment of time than potential industry participants are able to offer and the delivery style is not in the preferred format for the event and festival organizations. As indicated in the study, event and festival organizations have a strong preference for workshops and short courses. Most FE and HE provision is fulltime, and the part time provision is located within three institutions and still demands a longer term commitment. This indicates a gap in the type of delivery for potential participants across Yorkshire at least. The low availability of part time and short courses in FE and

HE is not unique to the region, with most course provision being in this form of delivery UK wide.

Recommendations

FE and HE Educational Providers develop a wider range of delivery models that more adequately meet the needs for the current events industry workforce. Course delivery UK wide is dominated by fulltime and some part time provision. In Yorkshire there are not any courses that have opportunities for students to undertake evening classes, or intensive workshops and only one course offers a distance learning mode. Institutions should review provision and develop more flexible learning packages that combine intensive workshops with distance learning, block teaching models in consultation with the sector.

Training Providers consider developing topic areas to provide more events / festival management specific content. Whilst there is training undertaken under the EMBOK domains, very few of the training providers have a focus on festivals and events. This means that participants may be receiving more general information which they will need to apply to a very different context. There is a vast difference in marketing a product or service, to marketing a one-off event for example. As a result, training providers may need to explore the potential needs of the sector and work to develop more specialist content so that materials and information are fit for purpose.

Educational and training providers collaborate with training providers to deliver specialist certificate programmes for students. This would add value to FE and HE courses enabling graduates to be more competitive in the sector bringing more practical demonstrations of skill acquisition. This could be applied particularly to the area of Risk. However there could also be potential to expand this specialist training in the Design area (ie performing arts training, AV, media and technology, music, catering, first aid, specialist software). This could enable graduates to emerge with a degree and a range of specialist skills to meet a much wider variety of employer requirements.

HE and FE institutions explore accreditation routes for training providers. As an encouragement to enhance training for the sector and to enable festival and event organizers to create their own progression routes, institutions should explore opportunities to accredit existing training provision. This would ensure quality of training provision and add value for participants. The accreditation could also encourage participants to consider more formal qualifications and widen access to the FE and HE sectors. It could also help to form a framework for the fragmented industry CPD.

Future research is undertaken to identify barriers to the sector in undertaking formal qualifications and work is undertaken to identify ways of reducing these barriers. This could emerge from the collaborative work undertaken by the training and educational providers and would enhance understanding of the sector to strengthen support and potential for skills development. It would also build on the existing findings of the People 1st Labour market Review of the Events Industry.

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