"It's not just parties, it's so much more": Student perceptions of the credibility of UK Events Management degrees

Abstract

Purpose: This article explores: 1) student perceptions and understanding of Events Management; 2) how Events Management is positioned by different UK higher education providers through their online marketing; and 3) the perceived value of an Events Management degree among students.

Design/Method/Approach: A mixed-methods approach, combining an online student questionnaire (n=524), semi-structured interviews with current first year Events Management students (n=24) at two UK universities, and website analysis of all Events Management degrees offered in the UK.

Findings: Students demonstrate a lack of knowledge about what Events Management is, what a career in Events Management might entail and the perceived value of an Events Management degree. This suggests the need to re-position Events Management degrees within a broader applied management base. Current course marketing presents a narrow view of Events Management degrees and the narrow vocationally-laden narrative undersells and 'over-vocationalises' the subject.

Practical implications: Understanding student perceptions better will help universities market Events Management degrees more effectively and will benefit broader efforts to illustrate the value and credibility of it as a degree subject choice and career. More balanced presentation between the practical and non-practical aspects of the courses in university marketing may help reposition Events Management alongside more readily understood vocational subjects.

Originality: This is the first study to examine student perceptions over the credibility of Events Management degrees. It also addresses Park and Park's (2017) observation that reviews of Events Management education and curricula are conspicuously absent from Hospitality and Tourism journals.

Keywords: Degree credibility; Events Management; Higher Education; Students; Vocational degrees

Introduction

Events Management is increasingly recognised as a degree-level subject in service led economies (Park and Park, 2017) and has proven popular with students over the last 25 years (Dolasinki *et al*., 2020). Nevertheless, the value, appropriateness and credibility of these higher education programmes have been questioned by academics and event professionals alike (Jiang and Schmader, 2014; Dashper and Fletcher, 2019; Dashper *et al.,* 2020). Kashef (2015) and Ledger (2013) have shown that event professionals perceive Events Management graduates to lack key knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to enter the industry. These gaps have been attributed to "fundamental difference[s] between what should be delivered and what is actually delivered in current event management education" (Lee *et al.*, 2009, p.69). In the United Kingdom (UK) there has also been a notable neo-liberal shift in higher education policy, with increasing emphasis on metrics such as league tables and proposals to assess the economic 'value' of degree courses and their outcomes in terms of graduate-level employment and salaries (Fletcher *et al.,* 2017). In this environment, ambiguity about the purpose, content and economic value of Events Management degrees risks them being perceived as low value and therefore, an uncredible route for students.

This article adds to this debate by exploring student perceptions of Events Management degrees at the nexus between educational and external legitimacy. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine student perceptions over the credibility of Events Management degrees.

A range of studies have documented the development of Events Management (and Event Studies) as a field of enquiry (Baum *et al.,* 2013; Dolasinki *et al*., 2020; Getz *et al.,* 2010; Getz and Page, 2016; Mair and Whitford, 2013; Park and Park, 2017). While useful for tracing its history and geographic spread, they have largely failed to examine its academic credibility. Indeed, when questions concerning credibility have been addressed (e.g., Jiang and Schmader, 2014; Bouchon *et al.,* 2017) they have focused on the views of event professionals, not students. Student motivations, expectations, and notions of perceived value across Events Management programmes are less well examined and the student voice has been largely absent from debates regarding legitimacy. This is despite the perceived value of degrees directly affecting students' employment and economic futures. Limited understanding of student perceptions also restricts universities' ability to market Events Management degrees effectively and thus may undermine broader efforts to illustrate the value and credibility of it as a subject choice and career pathway.

Taking this context as our point of departure, this paper explores four areas from a UK perspective:

1. Understanding students' perceptions and understanding of Events Management.

2. Examining student expectations of Events Management (including their early experiences of studying the subject).

3. Exploring the perceived value of an Events Management degree among students.

4. Assess how Events Management is positioned and marketed by different UK higher education providers through their online marketing.

Literature review

Events Management and external legitimacy

There has been substantial growth in the field of Events Management education over the last 25 years (Park and Park, 2017). For the 2021/22 study year, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) lists 400 Events Management courses from 105 UK providers at undergraduate level, and 48 courses from 27 providers at postgraduate level (UCAS, 2021). This expansion stems from early beginnings in 1996 when the first UK Events Management degree was launched at Leeds Metropolitan University (now Leeds Beckett University), following in the footsteps of the pioneering introduction in 1994 of graduate-level Events Management provision in the United States by The George Washington University (Bowdin *et al.,* 2011). In addition to these standalone Events Management courses, many Hospitality, Tourism, Leisure and Sport courses include modules/units relating to Events Management.

The market is now well established, underpinned by developments such as the formation of a learned society - the Association for Events Management Education (AEME) - in 2004 with the remit of further developing events education and good practice. Its members include many of the UK providers of events education. Events Management education is also a recognised strand within revised Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements (QAA, 2019), which set the scope for degree level events education in the UK. However, prior to 2008, Events Management was not considered a distinct entity, rather a sub-division of its parent subjects such as Business, Tourism and Hospitality by the QAA, despite widely differing educational requirements.

Recent times have seen the development of a number of specific 'events' academic journals, such as *International Journal of Event and Festival Management, Events Management: An International Journal, Journal of Convention and Event Tourism* and *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events.* Moreover, event-focused special issues

have featured in journals from a number aligned fields, such as Hospitality (Van Niekerk, 2017) and Leisure (Caudwell and McGee, 2018), not to mention the growing number of event-related papers featuring in aligned fields (Dolasinki *et al*., 2020; Getz and Page, 2016; Yeung and Thomas, 2021). Each of these developments is a strong indicator of the growing maturity and diversity of this subject field (Fletcher *et al.,* 2017; Dashper *et al.,* 2020).

The large number of Events Management-related courses and the variety of providers offering educational provision illustrate the breadth of Events Management education in the UK, despite challenges in the broader HE environment (Dashper *et al.,* 2014, 2020; Fletcher *et al.,* 2015, 2017; Dashper and Fletcher, 2019). However, the field of Events Management is entering a critical moment as questions surround UK higher education, and the credibility of vocational degrees especially. It will become increasingly important for such courses to demonstrate their 'value' on the basis of externally imposed metrics like entry tariffs, attainment, student satisfaction and graduate outcomes such as salary levels. Allied to this is the continuing debate of value to an industry that does not readily accept such qualifications (Kashef, 2015). Writing 20 years ago, Goldblatt (2000) surmised that, "the rapid growth of the event management profession has produced a climate that is confusing, lacking in credibility as compared to other professions, and perhaps detrimental to its future long term health" (cited in Silvers *et al.,* 2006, p.186). The extent to which these issues have been tackled is debatable and there remains ambiguity over its external value to employers (Jian and Schmader, 2014; Kashef, 2015), particularly within the context of increasing student numbers within higher education more broadly (Burnes *et al.,* 2014). Consequently, these wider political and policy debates about higher education place vocational degrees like Events Management in a potentially vulnerable position.

In May 2019, the UK government commissioned a review of post-18 education and funding, the *Augar Review* (Augar, 2019). Augar argued that "There is a misalignment at the margin between England's otherwise outstanding system of higher education and the country's economic requirements" (p.10). He warned how a 20-year market in lightly regulated higher education has greatly expanded the number of skilled graduates bringing considerable social and economic benefits and wider participation for students from lower socio-economic groups, however, "for a small but significant minority of degree students doing certain courses at certain institutions, the university experience leads to disappointment" (p.10). Augar goes on to recommend that universities "bear down on low value degrees and to incentivise them to increase the provision of courses better aligned with the economy's needs" (p.10). The implications of this statement for vocational programmes should not be underestimated.

Declarations about 'low quality' and 'low value' degrees have created a hostile environment that has facilitated a feeding frenzy in the popular press, where the quality and credibility of degrees like Events Management (and aligned degrees such as Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure) are regularly questioned. Reflecting on figures showing that 50.2% of 17-20-year olds in England have experienced higher education, Simon Heffer of the Telegraph, laments how:

> Sadly, many have studied courses of little intellectual value at institutions undeserving of public subsidy. Many who can obtain a degree only by studying a substandard course are wasting their own and the state's money… (Heffer, 2020, no page)

Heffer goes on to say that many jobs require "aptitudes far better learnt on the job or apprenticeships". We are certainly not suggesting that Events Management is a 'low quality' or 'low value' degree, but suggest that demonstrable value to external stakeholders, including government, students and parents/guardians, remains unclear.

Events Management and educational legitimacy

A significant part of the 'problem' facing Events Management concerns its identity: what is it and, what is it *not*? Moreover, what skills and competencies are Events Management students equipped with that graduates in associated fields like Hospitality, Tourism or Leisure are not? Within the literature, much of the attention has focused on the value of Events Management degrees in providing vocational/experiential training opportunities which connect students with employers (Jiang and Schmader, 2014; Kashef, 2015; Lamb, 2015). However, in his formulation of the field of event studies, Getz (2007) advocates for moving beyond praxis, i.e., planning and management, towards a more holistic appreciation of the roles, meanings and experiences of events. Getz made the distinction between event studies, which he defined as "the academic field devoted to creating knowledge and theory about planned events", and Events Management, which he described as "the applied field of study and area of professional practice that draws upon knowledge and theory from Event Studies" (p.2). These arguments build on his earlier assessment that to avoid a "trade school trap" Events Management degrees should engage with theoretical, methodological and ethical debates (Getz 2002, p.13). In so doing, it should be acknowledged that Events Management is an interdisciplinary subject that draws on insights from a wide base, including business studies, management, marketing, sociology, economics and many more. This interdisciplinarity could be perceived as a strength – demonstrating the subject's diversity and vibrancy – but it could also be perceived as being

indicative of an incoherent and fragmented subject area (Fletcher *et al.,* 2017; Dashper *et al.,* 2010). This aspect was previously identified by Bouchon *et al.* (2017) and Bladen and Kennell (2014) who contend that the close relationship between Events Management and its parent fields has limited the ability of Events Management to form a distinct identity. Furthermore, it is argued that Events Management may require a different mode of delivery focused on 'reflective practicum' with closer industry links which is not typically suited to traditional UK university modes of delivery and cost structures. However, as Getz (2000) argues, for relatively immature fields and professions, "widely divergent approaches can be expected until (and if) a common base is recognized" (p.17). This is not to suggest a narrowing of the field is necessarily desirable or inevitable. Indeed, Getz warns against those who would seek to specialise in particular areas of Events Management too early (e.g., in corporate hospitality, festivals, sport, arts etc.). Rather, what he suggests is that before specialisation is possible, students of Events Management must attain core knowledge and competencies, which traverse all aligned subject fields. Similarly, according to Jago (2012, p.220), "One of the criticisms levelled at event researchers is that they make little effort to add to knowledge per se and tend to focus on the very mundane operational dimensions of events." He cautions that this issue must be addressed if the field is to obtain external credibility. Rojek (2013, p.18) argues similarly that:

> in focusing on the operational, technical aspects of event design, publicity and management, event professionals unwittingly obscure the relationship of events to deeper, wider questions of history, power, personal gratification, control and resistance.

Critiques such as these justify the (emerging) belief that there is an argument for supplementing the predominant management-based approach with a broader social science view.

The field of Events Management has grown, and its aligned journals have greater credibility beyond the immediate subject area. Yet, it continues to be mocked by portions of the academy as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject, frequently misunderstood as teaching students how to erect tents and form orderly queues (Dashper *et al.,* 2014; Dashper and Fletcher, 2019). This derision for a 'new' academic field is nothing new; as Dev (2021, p.1205) remarks, "It was not so long ago that business management programs were considered an illegitimate (nonscholarly) enterprise, not fit to be part of any reputable academic institution," and the best universities in the world now offer Business Management programmes. Nevertheless, such negative perceptions of courses like Events Management have consequences on both the students who study them and academics who teach and research in the field. Indeed, in a previous study of academic identities it was often perceived by Events Management academics that their

academic legitimacy required the downplaying of their course's vocationalism (Dashper and Fletcher, 2019), despite it gaining academic respectability in terms of research outputs (Yeung and Thomas, 2021).

FIGURE I ABOUT HERE

Events Management education is thus at a crossroads as there are clearly tensions between educational and external legitimacy of Events Management degrees (see Figure I). On the one-hand it is an established degree subject supported by a body of knowledge, industry associations and employer links, on the other the current narrative does not present a "unifying discourse that articulates with other stakeholders, usually employers, which is then used to persuade policy makers"; attributes that are said to be required for vocational fields to gain legitimacy (Yeung and Thomas, 2021, p.1). From an educational perspective, a theory-practice divide remains between those such as Getz (2007) that advocate that Events Management is far more than the sum of its practical parts and those such as Kashef (2015) who argue it is insufficiently aligned to industry needs and practice.

Significantly, much of the focus on educational and external legitimacy has been on educators, curriculum content, employability, professionalisation, and development of the field. Far less attention has been given to student perceptions of legitimacy, with significant gaps surrounding how Events Management is marketed to students, student understanding and experiences of Events Management degrees, and the perceived value of the degree to students. Understanding legitimacy from the student perspective is critical to informing the current debate between educational and external legitimacy of Events Management degrees.

Methods

Research approach

Data were collected using a mixed methods approach, combining an online student questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews with current first year Events Management students at two UK universities, and website analysis of all Events Management degrees currently offered in the UK. Specifically, the research combined an online questionnaire (n =524) with in-depth interviews (n=24) conducted in an explanatory sequential, 'qualitative follows quantitative' research framework (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Within this framework, question topics were aligned between the two instruments to strengthen

ecological validity, with the questionnaire capturing overview data from the population and informing the content of the interviews.

Student questionnaire survey

A census approach to quantitative sampling was taken as the questionnaire was sent to all new undergraduate Events Management students at the two institutions. Questionnaire data collection involved emailing a survey link to every student commencing their studies at both universities during their respective inductions in September/October 2017, 2018 and 2019. Participation was voluntary and the email informed students of the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw and consent details.

The questionnaire comprised 14 questions split between nine closed and five open questions. The survey content was initially developed and trialled by Institution One as an internal exercise to understand more about the background of the Events Management student intake. The instrument was then reviewed and revised in conjunction with Institution Two to ensure it was 'institutionally neutral' before being implemented for the 2017, 2018 and 2019 combined cohorts. Information gathered covered: subjects studied prior to attending university, perceptions of what Events Management is, and career expectations. For the purposes of this paper, data integration of survey results   with interview data is illustrative, with the sole purpose of informing the development of our interview schedule. As such,   our quantitative data were not   analysed for inferential or convergent validation purposes.

Student interviews

Students were recruited via email in the same manner as the questionnaire. This was conducted independently, i.e. not via an opt-in choice within the survey. This approach was taken for reasons of ethics and confirmability. Reminders were sent to encourage students to participate, but no incentives were offered. The interviews were conducted once participants had started their course and, at the point of interview, many had completed up to one full semester of their studies. Whilst this represents a limitation in some respects, the interviews were scheduled as close as possible to the induction period to minimise the influence of an increased knowledge base. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to provide rich, detailed, and nuanced accounts of the qualitative dataset. Initially, Author A read and re-read interview transcripts, noting interesting features (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Next, initial codes were generated through systematically coding the entire dataset and subsequently organising

codes into themes. These were reviewed by all authors to ensure they were a good reflection of the larger dataset.

Institutional website analysis

Finally, we analysed the landing pages of all Events Management degree programmes in UK universities. We employed a constant comparison process as outlined by Hancock *et al.*(2009). Our curriculum analysis was determined from a keyword search of the UCAS website. Given that degrees in Events Management have diversified and dovetailed into more specific programmes, only full honours undergraduate Events were analysed. Taken together, this meant that of the 400 Events Management courses from 105 UK providers currently offered, 30 courses from 30 providers were analysed. Initial coding was conducted by two authors. Original higher order themes derived from the degree course structures, followed by a more gradual process that gathered data on a preliminary set of websites, course content, student and staff testimonies, industry links, placement opportunities, specific accreditations, metrics pertaining to student satisfaction and research quality/intensity. Eight high level codes were identified, equally separated by course structure and course description. This coding frame was applied across each institutional website.

Findings

How Events Management is marketed to students

We have previously identified that University websites are the primary method by which would-be students research degree choice (Dashper *et al.,* 2020). Given this, we began by examining how Events Management is presented and marketed by universities. This acts as an important marker for how the subject is understood and presented, with clear implications for student understanding and expectations.

Events Management is a subject not typically offered by schools at pre-university level. Consequently, students, their families and teachers have little/no educational reference point of what constitutes Events Management to base their decision upon (Dashper *et al.,* 2020). Without this reference point, 'value' becomes harder to discern for those unfamiliar with the subject. Events Management online marketing diverges considerably from the literature narrative around credibility and the drive to make vocational degrees more academic (Jago, 2012; Rojek, 2013). As our website analysis shows, the non-practical learning aspects of Events Management are largely hidden from applicants; Events Management is presented as a

'doing' degree. In all cases courses were presented from a narrow operational/practical perspective, with particular emphasis on how courses offer students practical experiences through, for example, live event organisation and industry placements. Webpages stressed links between the university, course teams and industry partners.

The focus on 'doing' is somewhat predictable as Events Management is positioned as a vocational degree, however, with the exception of the setting, this narrow focus does little to distinguish university Events Management learning from other forms of job-based learning, such as apprenticeships. Analysis showed that, although course content was disaggregated to module level, individual module specifications were rarely provided. Indeed, the breadth and diversity of courses were rarely acknowledged. Table I illustrates the themes identified in relation to website representations of 'core' content of Events Management degrees, and thus contribute to shaping student expectations about the degree .

TABLE I ABOUT HERE

General Business Studies (GBS) refers to modules/units articulated by its business function without reference to an events context. GBS can be separated into five distinct areas: economics/finance; marketing; organisational behaviour; operations; and strategy.

Event Specific Studies (ESS) can be characterised as contextual learning. This can be split into five areas: sector-related, operational/vocational, experiential based theory, student-led and event studies. Webpage analysis positions ESS more prominently than GBS. This may help create a distinct identity for Events Management, but may also contribute to the perception that Events Management lacks the academic credibility of more easily recognised subjects related to GBS.

The penultimate theme, 'ETHM combined', categorises hospitality-oriented, tourism-oriented and hybrid modules offered within Events Management degrees. The hybrid modules are generally 'introductions to' modules/units that bring together the triadic relationship between events, tourism and hospitality.

Finally, 'Academic Development' characterises independent research projects, which are prevalent in Events Management degrees. This category also reflects professional development and work-based learning modules/units embedded at different stages of the event degree programmes.

The core content of Events Management degrees is thus diverse, but arguably too broad and generalised to encourage differentiation from other allied courses. Having detailed the core

content of these programmes, we then considered how Events Management degrees are articulated within course descriptions (Table II).

TABLE II ABOUT HERE

'Career orientation' was predominant in all course descriptors. 'Increasing opportunities' is characterised as describing an attractive career market, emphasising an expanding events industry, multidisciplinary careers and economic worth. The terms 'dynamic' and 'exciting' are often used. 'Skills and career development' statements articulate how each course supports the attainment of an aspirational career in Events Management. Skills such as 'teamwork', 'professionalism' and 'confidence' frequently appear. There is a strong discourse towards employment/employability.

'Events Management phrasing' represents the terms associated with course content. The sub-level themes underline the course titles in this sample and the modules delivered. 'Events Management functions' themes are context specific, articulate operational strands and position Events Management as a legitimate 'management' entity. 'General management functions' includes generic business terms in the course descriptors and articulates that Events Management provides the 'best of both worlds' where students attain both applied and general management/business knowledge. However, positioning this within the course content rather than more prominently within the course descriptors or the landing page does little to dispel perceptions that Events Management is less credible than other strands of management and business as a degree subject.

'Positive industry expression' reflects the vocational orientation of the degrees and connections with the broader industry. Within 'industry partnerships' descriptors consistently refer to practitioners acting as guest lecturers and providing work experience opportunities. Here, descriptors also highlight how course teams are well connected with industry, how many used to work in industry, and how courses will lead to placement and employment opportunities. 'Industry boasting' refers to how course descriptors 'sell' their local venues, regional attractions, and national event connections. This reinforces the perception that each course is ingrained with(in) industry.

Finally, the 'events education framework' illustrates the overarching philosophy of teaching articulated in course descriptors. All descriptors referred to there being a blend in 'vocational' and 'academic' approaches. The 'vocational approach' is categorised by volunteering, work-based learning, internships, and the term 'practice', often linking this to

career networking. Phrases such as 'critical thinking', 'analytical thinking' and 'theoretical concepts' characterise the 'academic approach'. The convergence of knowledge and skills, such as cultural understanding, critical reasoning, creative and strategic mind-set is at the forefront of these course descriptors. The course descriptors associate these skills with leadership positions; often referring to the development of future industry leaders.

Webpage analysis thus reveals the ambiguity with which Events Management degrees are presented to would-be students. The degrees are represented as primarily practical, covering a broad range of applied and general management topics. It is on the basis of such general information that many potential students usually (begin to) learn about Events Management degrees (Dashper *et al.,* 2020) and this shapes their expectations of the course and its value to them.

Wider perceptions of Events Management

As alluded to already in the website analysis students lack a prior educational reference point for Events Management it is often an unknown entity, requiring explanation to prospective students, their families, and teachers. This was discussed by several interview participants who noted that their parents had initially struggled with the concept of Events Management as a degree and/or career, compared to other, more easily recognisable, pathways:

> [My dad] was like, "accounting and finance, everyone does it; it's a good solid thing, you will make money from it" and then, "Events Management, a degree I didn't even hear of ... So then it took him travelling to [University] to convince him it's a real thing, it's a real growing industry… so he's not thinking, "oh god, what is she doing up there?"... It did take a while, but I think now he's actually like, "she actually can make money from this". (U1-6)

Students still expressed strength in their convictions over the 'value' of Events Management as a subject and career path, even when their choice of subject was challenged by others. This participant for instance, referred to the existence of stigma among their peers and teachers around vocational education broadly, and Events Management in particular:

> The general feeling at my school is anything vocational is almost looked down upon ... I felt there is just a stigma around vocational courses being like, worthless. I've been told by people, "oh, you're not doing a real degree anyway". (U2-7)

Attitudes such as these represent barriers for participants who were themselves trying to grasp what Events Management is, but also felt they had to educate their families about the field and indeed, in some cases, convince them that it is a legitimate subject that will lead to a successful career. The following participant recognised the lack of clarity surrounding Events Management, especially by people who have not studied it, or worked in the industry:

> It's a really hard thing to define … And I think that's why people don't truly understand the industry. Because as someone who's so passionate about it… you know what you mean but you can't always get your words out to describe it to other people. So, they don't truly understand. (U2-1)

This raises questions for how Events Management is marketed to schools/colleges, applicants and families who have no educational reference point. It also suggests that the 'management' or 'business' aspects of Events Management, despite being vocationally focused, are not viewed as having an equivalent standing to a general Business and Management or Business Studies degree. Here, Events Management is perceived as something that is fun rather than a serious choice, lacking credibility.

Student understanding of Events Management

Given the uncertainty and ambiguity that surrounds Events Management as a field, we wanted to know how students perceived it as a degree subject and what they thought it was.

Participants were drawn to Events Management because it was new and because they had not studied it before:

> It's just a different, interesting subject to do. And you don't study it in school. A lot of my friends are doing English, History. I've come here not knowing anything about it, and it's had an impact on me and it's an amazing subject, very different to what I did in school. (U2-8)

They were keen to study something they felt they would enjoy, was creative, people-centric and exciting. This participant referred to being drawn to the creative and experiential aspects of the subject:

I am quite a creative person. And it's (Events Management) very practical as well. Obviously, it is a lot of paperwork, but the outcome of all the paperwork is events for all different people. I love going to different events. I think it's all about making memories, going with friends and family, I just want to create all that so someone else can have all that. (U2-3)

Other participants felt they would enjoy the tangible vocational focus of Events Management more than they would 'traditional' degrees, which were frequently described as 'boring'; involving too much reading and writing, as this participant articulated:

It's a bit different. And I was thinking, "I don't know what job I could get with an English degree". I knew I liked it, but I'd been doing it for two years at A-level and I thought "it doesn't really excite me that much". And then Events Management just seemed a bit different and a bit more me, because it's practical… there are lots of different bits. It's not just like reading and writing. (U1-3)

These accounts highlight that, whilst parents and teachers were sometimes put off by Events Management and struggled to understand what it is, prospective students were excited by the fact that it was new and often more tangible as a career than subjects they already knew. Given their lack of prior experience, it was not surprising that their understanding of Events Management was vague. Participants struggled to articulate what they thought Events Management is with any surety. Generally, they referred to creating, organising and managing spectator experiences, focusing on fun and enjoyment:

That's really hard, it's the organisation of different groups of people to put on, I don't want to use the word event, but put on something for the entertainment of others, I think that's probably how I would describe it. (U2-13)

It's a hard question is that. I just feel like organising occasions for people where they can enjoy themselves, just like making people happy. You don't need to put on events, it's not a need, it's a want isn't it? You don't need to go to events, it's just like entertainment really, providing entertainment for people. (U1-8)

These limited and applied views of Events Management align with students' participatory experiences of attending events and reflect the way Events Management is marketed online as an industry-focused 'doing' degree. However, although participants overwhelmingly discussed practical aspects, they did note the need for underlying capabilities such as creativity, flexibility, problem solving and soft skills, such as social interaction.

Expectations and early experiences of Events Management degrees

As we have previously argued, students are not completely uninformed about their university choices, although their understanding of Events Management is limited (Dashper *et al.,* 2020). As Table III shows, students' initial expectations focus on the practical aspects of Events Management such as: opportunities for hands-on and industry experience, understanding event planning and also the 'fun' side of events. Aspects that are perceived as less practical, such as learning about business and theoretical/academic learning, were at the bottom of student expectations. These expectations reflect the largely practical focus of university websites which downplay more academic aspects of Events Management. University open and applicant days also reflect this narrow focus on 'doing' (Dashper *et al.,* 2020), reinforcing the vocational narrative at the expense of highlighting opportunities for broader learning.

TABLE III ABOUT HERE

Students were open-minded about what their degree would entail. However, when pressed, many struggled to articulate what studying a degree in Events Management would involve:

A lot of learning. A lot of paperwork, knowledge, a lot of processing, and a lot of practical as well to know about the set-up of events. And just attending events, I guess. It's kind of like... obviously it's a people-person role. A lot of organising … I'd say it's very creative. It's different. (U2-3)

Despite difficulties in articulating what a degree in Events Management would entail, all participants anticipated a strong practical underpinning, espoused by the perception that "it's just organising events" (U1-5):

I expected it to be knowledge of planning events, obviously, and then maybe practical experience of putting on an event. That's the best way to learn, really, actually doing it, because there's only so much you can learn from just theory. (U2-9)

When we interviewed students, they had been studying for between 6-12 weeks. During this relatively short amount of time, their perceptions of the course had changed, in two main ways. Firstly, they had been surprised by the scale and diversity of the events industry, and the choices this afforded them in terms of specialisation and careers:

It's a lot broader than I kind of first expected because I'd always just thought it was like party planning, but it's not. It's like celebrations, business, music, sports.... Like one of my friends is like, "oh, you're doing a degree in party planning" and I was like, "no, it's not just parties, it's so much more". (U2-12)

Secondly, there was a perception that the course is harder, more academic and, crucially, less practical than they had anticipated:

I did think it was going to be like a lot more practical - just planning events - but I've realised that there's a lot of theory. It's important stuff, but a lot of people just expect it to be just planning events, as simple as that, just like planning a party or something. (U2-12)

I expected it to be field trips every day, we'd go straight in to do an event… They (tutors) have given us opportunities… But I think we're all a bit nervous at the moment… We're realising that it's not just fun and games. (U2-8)

Despite their early experiences being different to their expectations, all participants stated they were enjoying their course, and were confident they had made the right decision to study Events Management. Moreover, although participants had discovered that their initial experiences differed from their expectations, which had been shaped by online marketing that downplays the academic and promotes the practical aspects of the course, they had not been overwhelmed by the breadth and complexity of their degree. This suggests that online marketing undersells the scope and depth of Events Management degrees, which may

contribute to negative external perceptions of course credibility often held by families, teachers and peers.

The economic value of Events Management degrees to students

Evidently, the wider context of neoliberal, marketised Higher Education encourages students to think of their degree in terms of its contribution to their future employability (Fletcher *et al.,* 2017; Dashper and Fletcher, 2019; Dashper *et al.,* 2020). Participants regularly discussed the value of a degree in terms of industry utility. They were acutely aware that they also needed work experience. In some instances, participants referred to a degree 'opening doors', while in other cases, there was a view that on-the-job experience was more valuable than 'a piece of paper'. Participants would often refer to conversations they had had with family, friends and colleagues about the benefits of studying at university. These participants believed strongly that possessing a degree would benefit their professional development:

> These days you really need a degree to do anything. My dad works in the Events Management sector. He's an event manager in an arena, and he said last time that they were hiring, the first way to cut the pile in half was to just look at those who had a degree and those that didn't. (U1-1)

> A lot of people said to me "you can just walk into a job, you don't need a degree unless you're doing, like medicine or law." I could not disagree more … unless you want a very, very basic sort of job ... people are looking for skills that you can only really, I feel, do successfully if you have this degree. (U2-7)

The following participant had personal experience of being denied a job because they did not have a degree in Events Management:

> When I was working at the nightclub [before I came to University] a job popped up that I was interested in. I knew I could easily do it … And I was told I wasn't capable of doing it because I don't have the degree. I thought "OK, what has someone with a degree got that I haven't?" I thought "If they want a degree, I'll get a degree." So here I am. (U2-2)

When asked about what a university degree says about the graduate and what it offers employers, participants referred to certification as a stamp of quality:

> It shows that we've done our research and we know a lot about the industry: we know the legislations, we have done some IT training, so we've got the basics and then from that they can work on it with you. And it shows that you're committed. (U2-1)

For others, having a degree was an endorsement of their skills. However, participants often pointed out that a degree is worthless without the skillset to back it up:

> You could have all the knowledge, but then you can't put it in practice, I feel like as a degree you need to be able to have the transferable skills from knowledge to doing and not just to be able to like say, "I can do this" and not actually able to show it. (U2-5)

Indeed, participants tended to favour the importance of articulating their skills and experience over their degree classification. Though there was a clear appreciation for gaining a high-level degree, participants were optimistic that employers would see beyond that alone:

> The most important thing for this industry... would be the experience and what you gain, because I think that the best way to learn to do events is to have the experience. The more experience you have, the more you know. (U2-9)

Clearly, participants perceived a degree in Events Management to have value in relation to their future careers, whilst also acknowledging the importance of combining academic with practical work experience. This reflects the subject's positionality and the tendency within the UK to 'sell' courses on their vocational aspects. It supports students' convictions that Events Management was the right choice, despite having no educational reference point, and provides a sense of vindication over their choice in the face of external doubts. This dispels, at least from a student perspective, the idea that Events Management lacks credibility, or could be considered a low-value degree. Participants certainly did not consider their experience to be sub-standard or that they are wasting their own and the state's money, as suggested by Heffer (2020) in his lament of vocationally-focused degrees.

Discussion

Events Management is at a critical juncture, reflecting multiple tensions. Courses are likely to come under increasing scrutiny in the context of expanding marketisation of Higher Education and imposed externally orientated metrics. Demonstrating the academic and economic value of vocational courses, such as Events Management, at degree level will be of even greater importance.

In this paper we have demonstrated that such neoliberal marketisation has encouraged universities to position Events Management degrees according to their economic utility. Allied to this, our study has found that current course marketing (which was the primary source of information for the students) presents a narrow view of Events Management degrees as highly practical, fun and career defining. While this may be attractive to some potential students, it does a disservice to Events Management degrees as the narrow vocationally-laden narrative undersells and 'over-vocationalises' the subject, making it harder to justify specialising in Events Management at degree level versus other business or management focused courses. Clearly, there is a tension between those who wish to maintain Events Management as a distinct subject field and the demands of an ever-increasingly neoliberal higher education sector, which pressures universities to incorporate an increasing number of generic units of study from 'related' fields in order to gain economies of scale. This tension further reinforces the ambiguity and lack of clarity about what an Events Management degree is, and therefore, the credibility of it as a degree subject.

Whilst the subject of Events Management struggles with academic legitimacy, so does Events Management as a career, as it is not widely recognised by current school and career support systems. A more balanced presentation between the practical and non-practical aspects of the courses in university marketing may help address this ambiguity and reposition Events Management alongside more readily understood degrees such as Business Studies or Management. Whilst this is unlikely to change perceptions quickly, it would at least assist applicants in their own understanding and help them to explain to others that Events Management is "not just parties, it's so much more".

In terms of perceived value, participants expressed that they were not overwhelmed by the more academic content they encountered and were pleasantly surprised by the variety and depth of Events Management education. They appreciated the broader academic and transferable skills developed at university, whilst acknowledging the need for practical experience. These broader benefits highlight students' potential acceptance of re-positioning Events Management degrees within a broader applied management base, supporting both Getz

(2007) and Kashef's (2015) otherwise contrasting viewpoints. Such repositioning may increase academic validity and increase credibility within student support networks.

Conclusion

Returning to the tensions between the external and educational legitimacy of Events Management degrees illustrated previously in Figure I, Figure II transposes the external and educational legitimacy actions that are required to address these tensions. This study has shown that the inclusion of the student voice within debates surrounding Events Management legitimacy is necessary to not only address a missing knowledge component, but to illuminate previously unknown legitimacy challenges facing students considering an Events Management degree. Understanding these challenges provides new opportunities for strengthening and justifying the external and educational legitimacy of Events Management degrees, although fundamental change will not be quick or easy to achieve.

FIGURE II ABOUT HERE

An exploratory study such as this offers avenues for future research. We propose a comparison of how Events Management is presented across institutions globally; enhancing subject coherence and helping refine educational legitimacy. Extending our sample will enable a broader consideration of external stakeholders and a deeper exploration of perceived 'value' towards Events Management degrees. An ongoing assessment of the determinants of value metrics (e.g., recruitment, retention, progression, career outcomes), and how we balance perceptions of value between industry, government, academics and students, will help subjects like Events Management navigate amorphous changes in UK (and perhaps global) educational policy. Cumulatively there is scope for exploring policy change between leading academic and industry related associations, via increased presentation and/or professional bodies. In this sense we return to an attempt at clarifying Events Management as a profession and legitimate educational journey, and the events industry as a credible career choice.
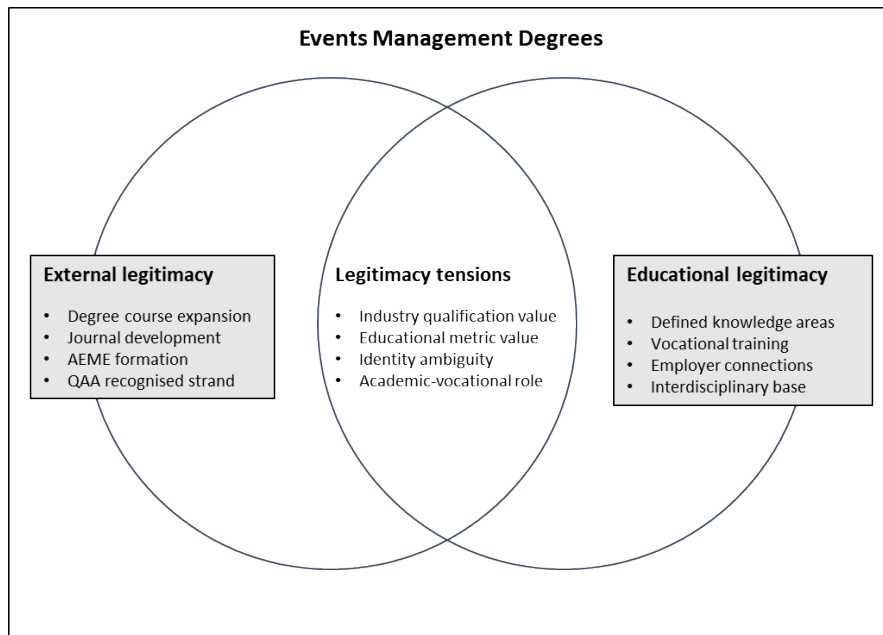
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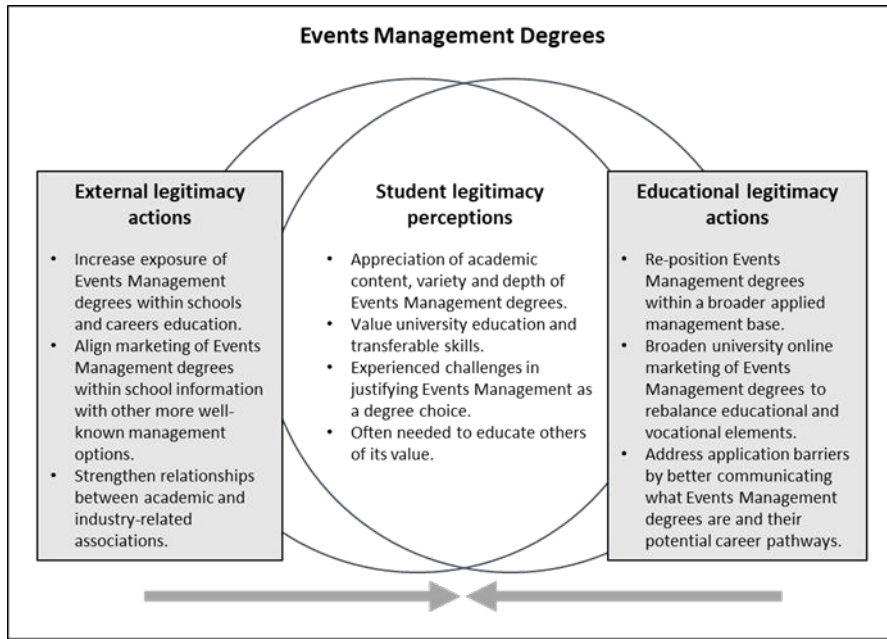
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Events Management Degrees

External legitimacy

- Degree course expansion
- Journal development
- AEME formation
- QAA recognised strand

Legitimacy tensions

- Industry qualification value
- Educational metric value
- Identity ambiguity
- Academic-vocational role

Educational legitimacy

- Defined knowledge areas
- Vocational training
- Employer connections
- Interdisciplinary base

Figure II. Transposed external and educational Events Management legitimacy actions

Events Management Degrees

External legitimacy actions

- Increase exposure of Events Management degrees within schools and careers education.
- Align marketing of Events Management degrees within school information with other more well-known management options.
- Strengthen relationships between academic and industry-related associations.

Student legitimacy perceptions

- Appreciation of academic content, variety and depth of Events Management degrees.
- Value university education and transferable skills.
- Experienced challenges in justifying Events Management as a degree choice.
- Often needed to educate others of its value.

Educational legitimacy actions

- Re-position Events Management degrees within a broader applied management base.
- Broaden university online marketing of Events Management degrees to rebalance educational and vocational elements.
- Address application barriers by better communicating what Events Management degrees are and their potential career pathways.

Table I: Overarching themes of core modules/units in each programme across institutions

First Level themes	Second level themes
General Business Studies	Economics/Finance related Marketing based Organisational Behaviour Operations Strategy
Event Specific Studies	Sector related Operational/vocational Experiential based theory Student Led Event Studies
ETHM Combined	Hospitality Tourism Hybrid
Academic Development	Independent extended research Academic and Professional Development

Table II: Events Management education course description

Level One theme	Level Two theme
Career orientation	Increasing Opportunities Skills and Career Development Sector related careers
Events Management Phrasing	Events Management Functions General Management Functions
Positive Industry Expression	Industry Partnerships Industry Boasting
Events Education Framework	Vocational Approach Academic Approach

Table III: Student expectations of Events Management degrees

Combined cohorts (n = 356)	Case %*
Lots of volunteering / work experience / placement opportunities	67
	56
Getting hands-on experience of planning an event	53
Fun	50
Understanding event planning	48
Creative	47
Challenging	47
Practical	46
Group work	42
Attending events	40
Lots of interaction with industry professionals	39
Working at big events	32
Business focused	19
Theoretical/academic	18
Broad / allowing for specialisation	9
Cutting edge	

Percentages rounded to nearest integer