

EXPERIENCE! EXPERIENCE! EXPERIENCE! EMPLOYER ATTITUDES TO ARTS & EVENT MANAGEMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

There has been a proliferation of higher education courses in arts and event management in the UK in recent years. These specialist vocationally-orientated courses exist to provide students with training in preparation for management work. Education providers use a range of approaches to support student employability, including work placements, professional development and opportunities to gain experience of running events. The rationale for these programmes is that this vocational experience is an effective route into graduate employment, and this paper explores the value of that assumption. Using the results of a postal questionnaire, the paper examines attitudes of graduate employers. There is a particular focus on opinions of the use of direct vocational embedded experiential learning opportunities in degree s and this is contrasted with attitudes to the efficacy of transferable skills. Comparison is made between the opinions of employers who report having had experience of assessing applications and employing graduates from arts and event management degrees and those who have not so far had contact with this group.

KEYWORDS

Employability, Vocational Education, Arts Management, Event Management

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the interim findings of an ongoing exploratory project investigating the attitudes of UK employers and potential employers of graduates of arts management and event management (AEM) degree s to the curriculum content of those, with particular reference to elements of experiential learning and their impact upon graduate employability. These results are drawn from a postal questionnaire administered to employers of graduates during 2005.

There has been a proliferation of higher education courses in both arts management and event management in the UK in recent years. Courses apply management theory to the leisure context, with some emphasis on the development of events such as conferences, festivals or performances. Arts management courses also examine

the policy context for companies in receipt of public subsidy. These specialist vocational courses exist to provide students with training in preparation for management work in the arts and events sectors, and therefore student employability is a key concern. Employability is about graduates being ready to secure work of a suitable level within a reasonable time of graduation and being equipped to keep the post and develop within their chosen career (Harvey & Knight, 2003).

Empirical research for this study has demonstrated that education providers use a range of approaches to support student employability including work placements and experience, professional development training and opportunities to gain experience of running live events. The organisation, delivery and supervision of placements

and event projects require a considerable staff input and therefore represent a significant resource allocation by the institutions concerned.

The rationale for the existence of these AEM programmes is that the training, contextual framework and direct vocational experience they provide or facilitate is an effective route into graduate employment in the sector and, now that a number of s have reached the stage of having produced graduates, an investigation of the efficacy of this approach is pertinent. The authors acknowledge an involvement, as they are responsible for the curriculum development and delivery of an AEM course at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth (AIB) which places a great emphasis on major experiential learning opportunities. Like many AEM courses, the AIB includes an assessed work placement with an arts or event management organisation, and also requires students to manage the conceptualisation, planning, funding and delivery of at least three live event projects during their degree, culminating in a sophisticated and complex final major project undertaken by a pair of students that might involve an international exhibition, a festival or an extended me of community arts activity. By way of illustration, Figure 1 shows the catwalk at the Fashion Garden showcase of 18 designers presented in the summer of 2005 by AIB graduating students Sarah Cox and Hayley Baynard in London's famous Carnaby Street.



Figure1: An example of an AEM student project work
Source: Hayley Baynard

Extensive employability literature exists, including recent contributions from the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) from Alison et al (2002), Harvey and Knight (2003), Yorke (2004), Yorke and Knight (2004a

and b) in the form of accessible guides for the educator. With employability defined as a potential to gain and be successful in the students' chosen field, emphasis is placed here on practical measures that higher education institutions (HEIs) may take to support students in acquiring employability. The USEM approach (Yorke & Knight, 2004b), whereby employability is determined by the impact of the following elements on the student, is advocated as a way of understanding what leads to its achievement:

- Understanding (subject specialism)
- Skills (key skills, skilful practice)
- Efficacy beliefs (personal qualities that determine students' beliefs that they can make a difference)
- Meta-cognition (learning how to learn, reflection on learning).

Clearly, there is an emphasis on learning and this is argued from the perspective of the need still to persuade many academics of the importance of employability within the context of a shift in the nature of UK higher education to place a greater emphasis on vocationally-orientated subjects. The LTSN set out the approach of embedding employability within the curriculum, a development on considering this the remit of an institution's careers service, to remain separate from the work of the academic. For those, like the authors, providing courses with a significant vocational focus, this argument is largely unnecessary and perhaps of more interest is the discussion of evidence on how best to embed employability. Yorke and Knight (2004b, p.11-15) discuss five broad approaches:

- Employability through the whole curriculum (transferable skills)
- Employability in the core curriculum (transferable skills)
- Work-Based Learning (WBL) interspersed within the curriculum (sandwich courses, placements, work experience)
- Employability-related modules (discrete skills modules, career modules)
- WBL in parallel with the curriculum (part-time work as a learning opportunity)

They consider the need to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach and suggest that the size, context, student recruitment and envisaged labour markets influence embedding in the curriculum. Modularity and large institution sizes are considered to be a barrier to embedding employability within the whole curriculum,

however it is curious that there is no discussion of the nature of the programs, subjects or awards and implicit within this may be a notion that employability, as a state of self-development to be achieved by students, sits outside the vocational focus of the programme.

Vocational programs and the way in which employers perceive their value is the subject of a study by Little et al (2000), for the UK Learning and Skills Council. Their research focussed on companies buying in or providing training for employees, and on sub-degree qualifications, but some of the conclusions are pertinent for this study. They found that HEIs were not engaging sufficiently with employers or researching their needs and that employers are confused about levels of HE qualifications, so that in areas where employers place emphasis on experience, sub-degree qualifications appear to be equated with degrees. The area of experience is acknowledged by Yorke and Knight (2004b) where they state that there is a consistent correlation between labour market success and good work experience, embedded in the curriculum, as well as job-seeking skills.

This study, therefore, built on the literature but focussed down on a specific issue for AEM education providers: the attitudes of potential employers of our graduates with respect to graduate employability.

METHODOLOGY

The project, which began in the summer of 2004 and is expected to continue into 2006, used two reference frames when devising and designing research instruments: a previous study conducted by Wright in 1989 for which all data has been preserved in a form available for secondary analysis and comparative study, and the body of literature on employability and transferable skills in the UK higher education sector (introduced above), including reference to key primary research projects such as Harvey and Green (1994).

The complete project falls into three distinct sections: mapping of education provision in UK HEIs, an exploration of employer attitudes to curricula and employer evaluation of graduate applicants. This paper deals only with the section of the study exploring attitudes to the content of arts management and event management (AEM) degree courses, including embedded major experiential learning opportunities. The gathering of

data for this aspect of the study has been designed to include two approaches, a postal questionnaire to 123 potential employers of AEM graduates and semi-structured interviews with a self-selecting group of those already surveyed. The postal questionnaire was completed in the spring of 2005 and a selection of the findings, relating to employment, is discussed below.

The sample was obtained from two sources: a database of work experience providers and employers of graduates from the Arts and Event Production degree at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth (AIB), who were therefore known to the authors, and from employers advertising jobs suitable for graduates in two of the primary publications used for AEM job searches in the UK: Arts Professional magazine and The Guardian newspaper. The use of paid adverts may have introduced some bias towards larger and publicly-funded organisations into the study, whilst some small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in the sector may eschew this in favour of cheaper or more interpersonal recruitment approaches. In order to develop the group of employers advertising for jobs suitable for graduates, two mature undergraduates with previous sectoral work experience were recruited to search the publications for jobs for which they felt graduates might apply. Whilst some guidance was given about selection criteria, the students were encouraged to rely upon their own judgement to inform their selection. They filled out a self-completion questionnaire on each job and provided a copy of the advert to the researchers. A filter was then made by the researchers and a very small number of jobs not suitable for AEM graduates were removed, along with some de-duping of employers already on the first list.

Once the sample of 123 potential employers was in place, a four page questionnaire was administered by post, with questions covering their attitudes to employing graduates and to hosting student work placements. The response was 51 (41.5%) with two non-valid responses, so that n=49. Respondents were asked if they had employed graduates with specialist higher education arts or event management qualifications (Higher National Diploma, BA or MA) and the results are presented in Figure 2. Of the respondents, 28 (57%) were found to have employed graduates from AEM programs, and this 'BA group' has been used to test variance in attitude between employers with direct experience of graduates from AEM degree programs against the overall responses.

This is a relatively small survey population and indicative results will be used to inform the design of semi-structured in-depth interviews for the later stage of the study. Statistical analysis of the results including examination of correlation has been employed and whilst full findings and conclusions from that survey cannot be presented here, a selection of findings relating to the issue of skills and competencies are discussed in the next section.

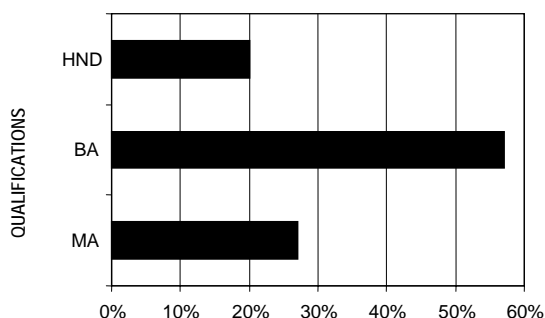


Figure 2: Employers' contact with graduates.

RESULTS

The following section sets out the results of the questionnaire that relate to the respondents' attitudes to employing graduates.

Relative Importance of Qualifications and Experience

Respondents were asked how important they thought it was for new graduates seeking to enter their employment to have any of the following: an arts or event management qualification, any other qualification, experience of working on or assisting with events or arts projects, and direct personal experience of organising events or arts projects.

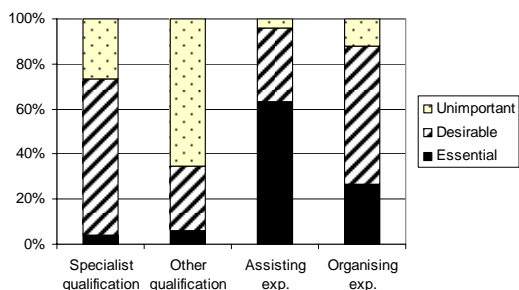


Figure 3: Relative importance of qualifications and experience.

If 'essential' and 'desirable' are considered together, great emphasis is put on the value of experience, both 'working on and assisting' and 'direct personal experience of organising' events or projects. This is especially evident for the BA-group, with 100% of respondents in this sub-group indicating the importance of experience of assisting with and organising events as either desirable or essential for those seeking employment with their company. 75% of all respondents (and 89% of the BA-group) consider an arts or event management qualification essential or desirable, and the results suggest that gaining a specialist qualification is the single most important step that someone wishing to enhance their employability in this sector might take.

Employer attitudes to experience

In order to test attitudes to direct vocational experience and transferable skills, and to be able to survey both those who had employed graduates from AEM programs (the BA group) and those who had not yet, employers were asked to imagine a situation where they are comparing graduate applicants of similar profile in all respects except that only one has any event experience. They were then asked to choose which of the following statements would most closely reflect their attitude:

'Experience is important to us, so I would strongly favour the graduate with direct vocational experience'

'Experience is important to us, and I would be inclined to be more interested in the graduate with direct vocational experience'

'We expect to train our graduate employees, so previous experience is less important than the ability to learn'

'For us, transferable skills are just as valuable in a graduate as direct vocational experience, so we wouldn't tend to favour the applicant with event experience'

The results are set out in Figure 4. Clearly, experience is highly valued by a large majority of employers. Analysis of the response from the BA group indicates that significantly more of them would 'strongly favour' the graduate with direct vocational experience (35%, compared with 26% overall).

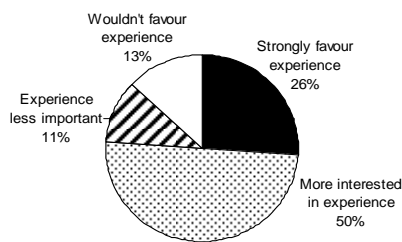


Figure 4: Employer attitudes to direct vocational experience and transferable skills.

For new graduates, employers' opinion of the validity of the experience they claim on their CVs is a critical element of their employability. The survey probed attitudes to this, including perceptions of the efficacy of the major experiential learning opportunities, such as work placements and projects that are embedded in many AEM programs. Asked to judge the validity of different ways of gaining experience, employers indicated the responses in Figure 5.

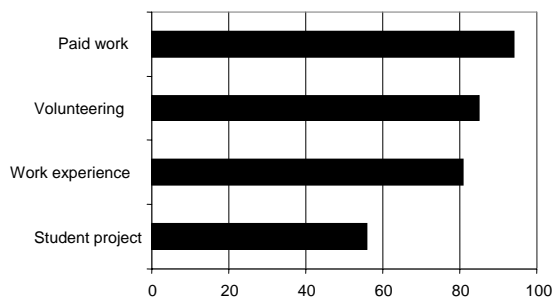


Figure 5: Attitudes to the validity of methods of gaining

For vocational courses with significant elements of practical live project work, there would seem to be an issue about how students present their project work to employers. There may also be a case for encouragement of students to find relevant paid employment alongside their studies and in vacations.

Vocational skills and experience

To test attitudes to the importance of subject knowledge, employers were asked to rate as 'essential', 'desirable' or 'unimportant' a set of 14 given areas of vocationally-specific knowledge, skills and experience, and the most commonly selected are set out in Figure 6.

Securing licensing was the only area seen as unimportant by more than half the respondents. Clearly there are useful pointers to curriculum content for vocational courses to be drawn from these results.

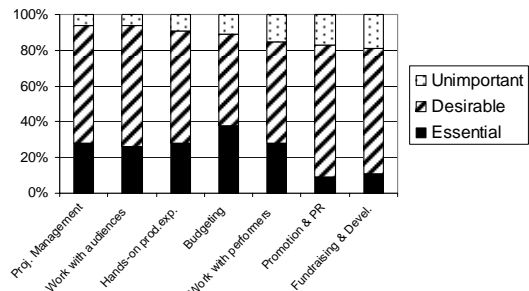


Figure 6: Importance to employers that applicants have vocationally-specific knowledge or experience

Information was sought about how important employers think it is for new graduates seeking employment to be competent users of various software applications, including some, such as project management or design programs, that may have a specific vocational application, and results are presented in Figure 7. Results are not surprising, but may serve to confirm the importances of ensuring graduates are adequately prepared.

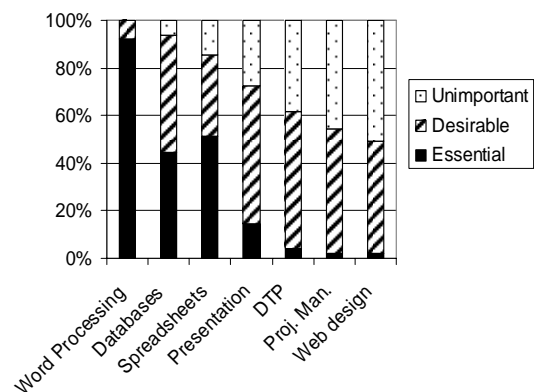


Figure 7: Importance to employers that applicants have vocationally-specific knowledge or experience.

Attributes employers look for in new graduates

Drawing on the study by Harvey and Green (1994, cited in Lees, 2002) a list of 16 transferable skills was

presented to employers, who were asked which attributes they would look for in a graduate. Those most consistently selected are set out in Figure 8. Only one attribute (research skills) was mentioned by fewer than half the respondents.

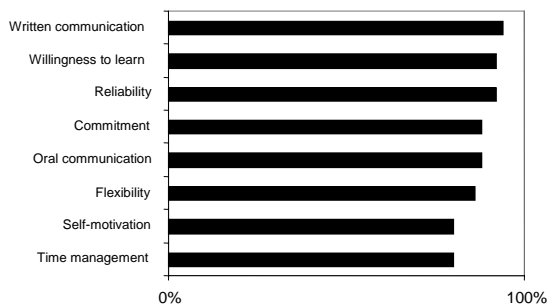


Figure 8: Transferable skills that employers expect in graduate applicants.

Asked to consider three attributes (either from the Harvey and Green (1994) list, or of their own choosing thought to be most important for new graduates seeking employment in their organisations, respondents gave a wide range of responses, including some areas of vocationally-specific knowledge, skills or experience. The most popular responses are given in Figure 9.

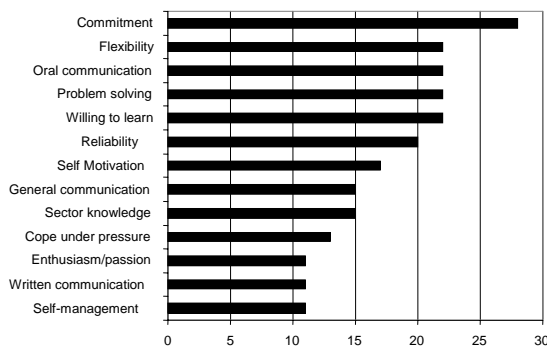


Figure 9: Skills employers consider to be most important for new graduates

It should be noted that there is a problem with interpreting the data in relation to communication skills. If the responses 'general communication skills' are taken to mean both written and verbal communication skills and therefore amalgamated with the totals for these responses, oral communication skills becomes easily the most significant indicator, rated as within the top three by

37% of all respondents, and written communication skills also move up to a top three place.

Attributes employers find – or don't find – in new graduates

Having established which attributes respondents expected from graduates, and identified which of them are most important, they were next asked which attributes they found most evident in new graduate applicants. The top five responses are set out in Figure 10. Only one attribute (research skills) was mentioned by fewer than half the respondents.

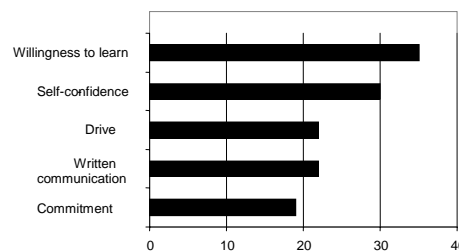


Figure 10: Skills employers consider most evident in new graduates

Next, respondents were asked if there were attributes they required but found to be commonly lacking in new graduates. 75% said yes and 25% no. The attributes most commonly lacking are set out in Figure 11. Clearly, and perhaps not surprisingly, there is disappointment at the lack of written communication skills, which respondents expect from a graduate but are not finding. This observation needs to be tempered, however, by the previous finding that 22% of employers do find written communication skills evident and these responses underline the importance attached to this skill.

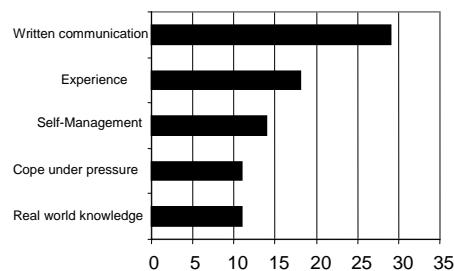


Figure 11: Skills employers consider most lacking in new graduates.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst this study is still being undertaken, conclusions are by necessity interim and the authors acknowledge that the limited size of the sample and scope of the project makes the findings presented here indicative. It is believed, however, that the results so far will be of interest to arts and event management educators working with students to develop their employability.

The results show clearly that the employers surveyed place considerable emphasis on experience, and have relatively high expectations that new graduates will have gained experience. A suggestion here for AEM educators is that curricula must go beyond Mantz and Yorke's (2003) advocacy of 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' content to include elements of 'doing that' or perhaps 'done that and reflected upon it' if our graduates are to most effectively promote their employability. Relatively good news for courses with work placement or sandwich elements is that 81% of respondents suggest they would value work-based learning as a valid way of gaining acceptable experience, and encouragingly, this figure is higher for those employers who have had contact with AEM students, including as placement hosts. Of concern, however, is the relatively poor consideration of the validity of experience gained through student projects which, despite the rich range of challenging and successful projects being undertaken by students on many AEM programmes (for example the festival at London's Marquee Club and Shepherds Bush Empire produced by two students on the AIB course in 2005), would apparently be discounted by more than one in three potential employers. This suggests a significant challenge both for education providers and students, including the need for greater dialogue with the sector and careful consideration of how to 'package' project work to potential employers.

The value that employers give to direct vocational experience, with over three quarters agreeing that the following are essential or desirable: project management, work with audiences or customers, hands-on production experience, budgeting, work with performers or artists, promotion and PR, fundraising and development and marketing planning, is entirely in line with the USEM approach and is an endorsement of the approach of embedding experiential learning opportunities, such as the production of live events and WBL, into the curriculum. Open responses to questions about most

important, evident and lacking skills (Figures 9-11) suggest employers choose to make little distinction between the importance of direct vocational and transferable skills within the 'basket' of competencies they look for in graduates – however, when asked to compare vocational experience with transferable skills, the former was strongly favoured. Less emphasis is placed on subject specific IT applications, but the need to be self-supporting through use of word processing applications is clearly, and unsurprisingly, entrenched.

Considering transferable skills, employers expect graduates to have good written communication skills, but reported these as most frequently lacking. They also expect and value commitment, reliability, willingness to learn and oral communication skills, and demonstrate less disappointment with graduates' ability to provide these. Good practice would suggest that educators are able to use major experiential learning opportunities to promote this area of employability within the curriculum, and must support this by communicating its importance to students.

To conclude, a finding that over three quarters of those who have employed graduates straight from BA courses report that the graduates have met or exceeded their expectations is an encouraging one for AEM educators and their students, but when taken with the findings as a whole does not detract from the continued need to work with the sector to improve graduate employability.

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