# GRADUATES' PERSPECTIVES OF EVENT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides insights from graduates' perspectives on event management education curriculum design as well as on how relevant event management education is to graduates' career development. In-depth interviews were conducted with alumni holding a bachelor degree in event management from a tertiary education institute. These graduates are currently engaged in industries related to event management. Qualitative analysis with the assistance of NVivo software was conducted. Insights of career challenges faced by recent graduates in the event discipline, relevance of degree obtained to career development, perceptions on skills and knowledge obtained from the degree program were revealed and discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Event Management, Education, Graduates' Perspectives

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## INTRODUCTION

The Event industry is wide and dynamic; consequently it is challenging for educators to develop a perfect curriculum to suit all. The blue ocean strategy, in which industry stakeholders are involved in curriculum design, was adopted by Hong Kong Polytechnic University in generating the curriculum for Convention and Event Management (D. L. Jones, 2010). Nevertheless, tracking the success of a curriculum is equally important, which provides valuable feedback to educators for future improvement and development of the curriculum. This study attempts to explore the relevance of a degree in event management to graduates' career development in the event industry; and to possibly enrich and enhance curriculum development for event management at the tertiary education level. The paper is divided into four sections. The literature review plays the role of informing the research context on event education, graduates' attributes and early career challenges. The research method and data collection are discussed in the second section. Research findings are revealed in the third section along with discussion. Insights and future research path are discussed at last in the conclusion section.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It is generally agreed that the real working environment deviates from the well-protected college atmosphere. Much of such arguments have been documented in the general as well as the business education fields and that discussion on the integration of school learning with workplace requirements remain a hot topic in education and program development, both at the tertiary as well as at the vocational training levels (Slotte & Tynjälä, 2003; Tynjälä, Välimaa, & Sarja, 2003). Following this line of thought, such deviations possibly exist in the event industry as well. However, not much has been written about the comparison and/or gaps between what can be learned from tertiary event management programs vis-à-vis what is required in the reality of event industry. As such, insights of career challenges faced by recent graduates in the event discipline, relevance of degree obtained to career development, perception on skills and knowledge obtained from the degree program are focal points of this study. Literatures are reviewed in three main areas, namely the event industry and education, graduate attributes and early career challenges faced. They are interwoven to inform the study and provide the context of this research.

### The Event Industry and Education

Event Management has slowly become a discipline in itself in the last decade (Getz, 2012), though it has always been closely connected to tourism and leisure studies. Getz (2012) proposed discourse in event management and discussed that the knowledge base of event management was largely originated from business or managerial literature. During the last decade, universities either inaugurated a degree programme in event management or integrated event management as a course component in a degree programme. Meanwhile, textbooks related to different aspects of event management have been published, for example, from the management of specific types of event (e.g. sport event) to a specific element of event management (e.g. project management) (Getz, 2012). Nevertheless, different textbooks written by different authors (e.g. Getz, 2008; Goldblatt, 2007; Silvers, 2012) define event industry differently. The event industry is indeed wide and dynamic. It is challenging to provide a concrete definition of the industry (Cecil, Reed, & Reed, 2011). According to the Convention Industry Council's (CIC) Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) Industry Glossary (CIC, 2011), event is defined as:

An organized occasion such as a meeting, convention, exhibition, special event, gala dinner, etc. An event is often composed of several different yet related FUNCTIONS.

Meanwhile, an event organizer is defined as (CIC, 2011):

Person whose job is to oversee and arrange every aspect of an event. Person can be an employee or hired ad hoc to plan, organize, implement, and control meetings, conventions, and other events. In this study, the context of investigation is a higher educational institute offering a bachelor degree program on event management and the authors adopt the definition of event organizer from the Convention Industry Council (CIC) on which the investigation of relevance of a degree in event management to graduates' career development is based.

### Graduate Attributes

Educators attempted to understand the career choice of students from an event related discipline (Sibson, 2011) in order to provide insights to future employers for recruitment and retention. However, the understanding of graduates' attributes related to the world of work is equally important to prepare graduates with good employability. The knowledge, skills and

abilities (KSAs) which should be embedded in graduates through tertiary education have been researched extensively in the area of higher education (Bridgstock, 2009; de la Harpe & David, 2011; Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009; Harvey, 2005; Yorke & Harvey, 2005). A "perfect" curriculum to prepare graduates with universally accepted attributes is never an easy task. The process of curriculum design and re-design are constantly racing with the ever changing needs of workplace and the corresponding needs of graduates' possession of KSAs (Green et al., 2009). Universities worldwide are constantly wrestling with graduates' attributes in order to keep up with the graduates' standard and prepare them to start venturing into the world of work upon graduation (Barrie, 2006). Event management as a discipline of study by itself is at its early stage of establishment in comparison to other disciplines, e.g. business management. Educators of the event management related discipline probably face similar challenges in developing a suitable curriculum that can reflect the actual requirements of the industry as it lacks prior references. As discussed earlier the complexity of defining event as an industry, educators engaging in event education have no easy task to equip graduates with well suited attributes. This study is shaped as an exploratory study to first investigate the relevance of a degree in event management from graduates' perspectives, and attempt to investigate the applicability of skills and knowledge learned from degree programme in the industry world of work.

**Early career challenge**
Event Management is a relatively new area of study as discussed in early sections. Graduates often engage in industries which are directly or indirectly related to events, such as the, entertainment industry, hospitality industry, culture related industry, and etc. Similar to other disciplines, graduates face early career challenges, for example, MBA graduates faced early career challenges before they become leaders (Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011). In addition, career challenges are also researched in the context of service industry, for example emotional challenge (Kidd, 2004), gender (Kattara, 2005) and generation Y (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge, & Ogden, 2007). Career challenges faced by the event management graduates in particular are rarely researched. Thus, the authors attempt to recognize the types of career challenges faced by the graduates in this study and endeavour to shed lights on reflections of potential shortage of relevant industrial knowledge, skills and abilities experienced by graduates.
Inspired by the literature review, the two research objectives are concluded and stated:

1. To explore the relevance of a degree in event management to graduate's career development in the event industry.
2. To enrich and enhance curriculum development for event management at the tertiary education level.

### METHODOLOGY
The context of study is graduates of the Event Management degree program at the Institute for Tourism Studies, Macao (IFT). Established in 1995, IFT is a public institution of higher education in Macao which is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. It offers four-year bachelor degree programmes in six majors, including Culinary Arts Management, Tourism Business Management, Heritage Management, Hotel Management, Tourism Event Management as well as Tourism Retail and Marketing Management. In addition, IFT is, by far, the only tertiary education institute that offers bachelor degree programme in Event Management in Macao. Therefore the use of IFT as context of study is well justified. IFT introduced its first bachelor

degree in Tourism Event Management in the scholastic year 2005/2006 and with its first batch of graduates in 2008/2009. So far there are seven batches of graduates in this major (from 2008/2009 to 2014/2015). In order to understand the career placement of IFT bachelor degree programme graduates (across all 6 specialisations), IFT launches an online employment survey from around mid-March to mid-April every year. This annual survey asks graduates for their current employment/study status as well as monthly salary. From this annual survey, the information depicted in Table 1 can be tabulated to describe better the status of graduates at IFT and their employability in the industry.

Table 1: Status of Graduates and their Employability

| Scholastic Year | Number of Graduates in Tourism Event Management Bachelor Degree Programme | Overall Employment in Tourism & Hospitality Section (Across all majors) |
|---|---|---|
| 2008/2009 | 38 | 67% |
| 2009/2010 | 39 | 68% |
| 2010/2011 | 35 | 64% |
| 2011/2012 | 43 | 78% |
| 2012/2013 | 59 | 76% |
| 2013/2014 | 79 | (Data available in the Annual Report of 2014/2015 which has not been published at the time of writing yet) |
| Total | 293 | |

Source: Institute for Tourism Studies, 2015

A qualitative method was selected in this research because of its explorative nature and there are scarce empirical studies in the subject area to be based upon. Exploratory study involves a broad agenda mapping issues to be explored across samples. It also attempts to understand underlying values, concepts and norms (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). As a result qualitative interview is deemed to be more appropriate in unearthing un-predefined attributes and constructs related to the study topic. A list of interview questions is carefully drafted based on the literature review (Bridgstock, 2009; de la Harpe & David, 2011; Green et al., 2009; Harvey, 2005; Sibson, 2011; Yorke & Harvey, 2005) as well as the content of the degree programme that the alumni had finished. Fifteen in-depth interviews with graduates with a bachelor degree in event management obtained from Institute for Tourism Studies, Macao were conducted. These graduates are currently engaged in industries related directly to event management; for example convention and exhibition organizing company and entertainment. The interviewees were selected via purposive sampling

since the authors had specific targets and were able to access these alumni because of their teaching positions held at IFT. These alumni play the role of key informants in the research process and information was collected via conducting in-depth interviews and data analysis was carried out with the software of NVivo. The interviews were between 35 to 70 minutes. In most cases the interview stopped when the interviewers felt that the theoretical saturation had been reached, that is, when no useful information could be collected further even by lengthening the interview time.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese (Cantonese) which is the mother-language of both the interviewers and the interviewees. These interviews were then translated into English during the transcription process. Scholars often debate about how researchers should handle translation of interview in order to avoid bias. One of the most widely employed methods for translation equivalence is by the "back translation" technique introduced by Werner and Campbell (1970) and Brislin (1970, 1986). Much of the discussion on the importance of back translation method is centered on cross-cultural researches using quantitative methods (Brislin, 1970, 1986; Chapman & Carter, 1979; P. S. Jones, Lee, Phillips, Zhang, & Jaceldo, 2001; Sperber, 2004; Werner & Campbell, 1970). The literature has not yet affirmed the significance and necessity of the back translation technique in other research. In particular, in the case of qualitative research in the non-cross-cultural research field (such as this research), researchers and interviewers often must have direct association and interaction with the data in order to be able to clarify meaning and bring the interviewers' own interpretation of the informants' views, behaviours and attitudes to the research topic (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008). In addition, the problem of time and resource constraints prevails in many funded researches. Even if time and money are not an issue, finding competent bilingual translators who are sensitive to and aware of the implicit meaning conveyed by the interview questions and the informants' views is often very difficult. Therefore, in view of the potential bias arising from external translators and to balance time and resource efficiency, the authors consider that a direct translation approach by the interviewers is more appropriate in this study.

All interviews' transcriptions were analysed by software Nvivo 10 which is a popular software for the qualitative data analysis. Coding scheme was developed based on the relevant literature reviewed by the two authors (Barrie, 2006; Bedeian, Cavazos, Hunt, & Jauch, 2010; Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011; Bridgstock, 2009; Cecil et al., 2011; Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004; de la Harpe & David, 2011; Fenich & Hashimoto, 2010). The coding scheme consists of four main themes. Two individual assistants were trained to use the software for coding. The two assistants first did a trial coding for three interview transcriptions individually. Codes were compared afterwards. Similarity of codes usage was around 50% during this first round of trial coding. Codes usage was discussed among the two assistants together with the authors with the aim to align understanding of the coding scheme. Two more interview transcriptions were code individually in the second trial round and similarity of codes usage has improved from 50% to 85%. Thereafter, transcriptions were coded individually and altogether fifteen interview transcriptions were coded for analysis in this paper. To control for robustness, validity and quality of the transcription process, the authors have restricted the assistants to coding a maximum of two transcriptions per day.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The 15 interview transcriptions resulting from the interviews with the graduates engaging directly in event industry, e.g. convention and event, show business, activities coordination, marketing of music performance returned a total of four major themes , which are Career Content, Career Process, Degree Relevance and Difference between internship and full time job. Under each theme, there are altogether 22 sub-themes emerging from the data based on the coding scheme through data analysis. However not all results from these 4 major themes and 22 sub-themes will be reported here. Only the ones that are most relevant to the topic of this paper are selected for discussion

**Career Content**

Career content was the most prominent theme evolved from the interviews. When talking about the content of their career, most informants referred to the challenges they encountered in the workplace. Tourism and hospitality industry (where event industry is commonly embedded) is known to be of very irregular working schedule and with heaviest work load on weekends and holiday season. This is echoed by the graduates too. On top of the tough working schedule which was a generic challenge faced by most employees working in the tourism and hospitality industry, many graduates reflected some more event-specific challenges such as the high level of attention required to details for being an event coordinator. The tasks of overseeing an event since planning to closing can be trivial, tough and error-prone. The quest for defect-free event coordination may put many graduates in high pressure, coupled with the emotional stress brought to them when dealing with customers' complaints; they found that working in the event field was really a challenging career. Another challenge that evolved from the interviews was about how to market and sell an event. This marketing management knowledge, along with other types of knowledge such as event management and public relations, were acknowledged by the graduates as some of the most useful knowledge set required by the workplace. Following this thread of concern regarding knowledge and skills required by the workplace, the graduates also enumerated several useful insights which could be classified into different level. Departing from the standpoint of a workplace, there are three levels, namely internal and external to an organisation and personal to a graduate. Possession of internal knowledge, such as event coordination, logistic management, venue and facility management, and the background understanding of convention and exhibition industry could be paramount for the employee competency within the organisation. Externally, networking skills and media-handling skills were considered to be essential in establishing good relationship with the outside world, particularly with press. Lastly personal possession and further development of presentation skills, proper tone and manner, grooming and appearance was perceived as important attributes to succeeding in the workplace.

**Degree Relevance**

A second important theme unearthed by this study was related to how relevant the graduates considered their degree education to their workplace requirement. In particular, many of them agreed that the degree education had helped a lot in equipping them with general understanding of the event industry through the strong association between the college (IFT) and the hospitality industry in Macao. Practicum and internship opportunities enabled the application of knowledge into practice which eventually assisted them in the process of gaining real experience when joining the work force.

Under this theme was another investigation on knowledge and skills learned from the event management degree programme. This part was designed specifically to identify if the knowledge and skills learnt from college (mis)matched with the knowledge and skills required at workplace as discussed in the previous section of "Career Content". To this end, indeed some interesting insights were revealed. There were some very general knowledge and skills that were identified such as the overall usefulness of subjects and practical knowledge acquired. These, although were not highlighted explicitly as required by the workplace in the previous section, could be understood as important underlying attributes which were generally covered by the internal aspects of knowledge and skills required by the workplace. In addition, the graduates pointed out that "language and communication skills" and "professional grooming (etiquette class)" learnt from their degree curriculum matched exactly with the "presentation skills", "tone and manner" and "grooming and appearance" which were classified as the personal development described in the previous section of Career Content. External skill related to handling media as required by the workplace was also well-matched with the public relations subjects covered by the curriculum. The results highlight that a significant part of the knowledge and skills required by the work environment was matched well by the current curriculum design at IFT. However there was one part of the external skills that called for further enrichment in the curriculum, that was, the networking skill that was essential in the workplace but not matched (not mentioned by the graduates) with the curriculum content.

**Career Process**
Career Process as a main theme here refers to the ability of a graduate to plan, to vision and grasp knowledge and skills at work, which are relevant to their career development. It is sometime referred as career building skills (Bridgstock, 2009). As our key informants are all graduates holding a Tourism Event Management degree, thus, the career process being investigated is mainly focus on graduates' career development in the event related industry. The data revealed that all graduates generally expressed very positive views about their career development in the event industry. It could possibly be contributed by the rapid economic growth in Macau during the last decade. Though economic growth is a less-promoted effect of well-developed career management skills, it does offer enhanced employability in the world of work (Gillie & Gillie Isenhour, 2003). The graduates were mostly enthusiastic in their aspiration to management position particularly in areas such as art management and marketing management. They believed that the event business would continue to flourish and therefore they saw good prospect for this industry in the near future. This is definitely a good sign as highly motivated and forward-looking employees are essential to the continuous growth and development of any industries. The fact that the event graduates hold positive outlook for the industry that they are working in should be much treasured and cultivated. In addition, graduates generally agreed that the degree that they attained was relevant to their current career. . Indeed, it is an encouraging finding from the perspective of educators. As discussed earlier, event industry is wide and dynamic, offering a perfect curriculum is mission impossible. However, the current curriculum which the study was based seems very well received and recognised by graduates. This gives good motivation for event management educators to further investigate on how they can strengthen the curriculum to meet the ever-changing needs of the industry.

**Difference between internship and full time job**

A last theme revealed the differences between being an intern and working as a full-time long-term employee in the event industry. The graduates were asked to recall their internship experience and compare that with their current status as a full-time employee in the field. The authors considered that a comparison table could be most suitable in achieving this purpose as below.

Table 2: A Comparison between Engaging in the Industry as an Intern versus as a Full-Time Employee

|  | Intern | Full time |
|---|---|---|
| Job nature | Elementary | Advance and complex |
| Mistakes | Expected and Accepted | Avoid |
| Work Pressure | Low | High |
| Expectation | Low from employer | High from employer |
| What to do mostly (Role) | Observe more (Observer) | Hands on (Operator) |

Source: Authors' Own Compilation

As can be glimpsed from the table above, internship generally requires students to take the role as observers and (when permissible) carry out tasks that are of elementary nature. In this quasi-work environment mistakes are accepted or even expected mainly due to the relatively low expectation from the employers. As a result interns generally face less pressure as their full-time counterparts. On the contrary, working as full-time employee in the field reflects a different reality. Staff members receive much higher expectation from employers as they are now expected to carry out more complex and hands-on operations independently and mistakes should be avoided as much as possible. Therefore, respondents generally perceived much higher pressure than when they worked as interns. Acknowledging such a deviation between the two situations helps curriculum developers to address to these gaps more effectively in order to prepare the students mentally at an earlier stage so that they can cope better with the working life upon graduation. The earlier the graduates can fully adapt to the world of work, the better for them in their quest for success in the field.

## CONCLUSION

A thorough understanding of the relationship between career development and graduates' education background is paramount in providing insights for educators to enhance curriculum design and development and equip graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to develop their career in the industry. To achieve this, the results illustrated in this paper are multi-faceted. For schools which are currently providing degree programmes of the event discipline, this paper attempts to provide insights of graduates' perspectives on event management education and more importantly to shed lights on how relevant event management education is to graduates' career development.

This paper also provides useful information to educators and more importantly it highlights the importance of the embedment of the graduate attributes into curriculum design and development in order to produce work-ready graduate which eventually can enhance graduates' employability.  Last but not least, this paper allows the understanding of the career challenges faced by recent graduates through their current career content and career development process in order to inform and shape future curriculum development in a direction more acceptable by both graduates and employers.

Due to the ever-changing environment of the industry and demand from graduates, event management curriculum developers must be versatile and vigilant in changing trends and requirements from the work place. It is essential to acknowledge the fact that no one curriculum can be deemed perfect and universally suitable in all situations and therefore the results of the paper should be interpreted with caution and sensitivity to the culture and industry situation. Due to the explorative nature of the study, future research path could be steered toward a throughout understanding of, for example, career building process, personal discovery in terms of further education, skills needed for career development.

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