

Collaborative Partnerships in Event Management Education: The Good, The Bad and the Ugly

By

Dr. Wendy Sealy

University of Chichester Business School

Senior Lecturer and Programme Coordinator in Event Management

W.Sealy@chi.ac.uk

Abstract

Sustainable events education requires a collaborative approach between higher education institutions (HEIs), the industry and students. This paper assesses graduating students' experiences with the BA (Hons) Event Management at a post 1992 university in the United Kingdom. The students design and deliver a major event on behalf of a 'client' as part of a collaborative partnership between the university and an external organisation from the events industry. The methodology was underpinned by an interpretivist philosophy with 3 graduating cohorts of 2012/13/14. The findings highlighted issues related to several operational challenges that affected the student experience. The majority of students were satisfied with the overall degree outcomes however anxiety and fear about the assessment objectives and client idiosyncrasies and demands; and, the fact that event management is hard work was perceived negatively by some students and as flaws with the university and client organisations. The findings precipitated changes to how students are supported on live event projects and to how the collaborative relationships between clients and the university are framed.

Keywords: Experiential learning, event management, live event assessments, vocational degrees

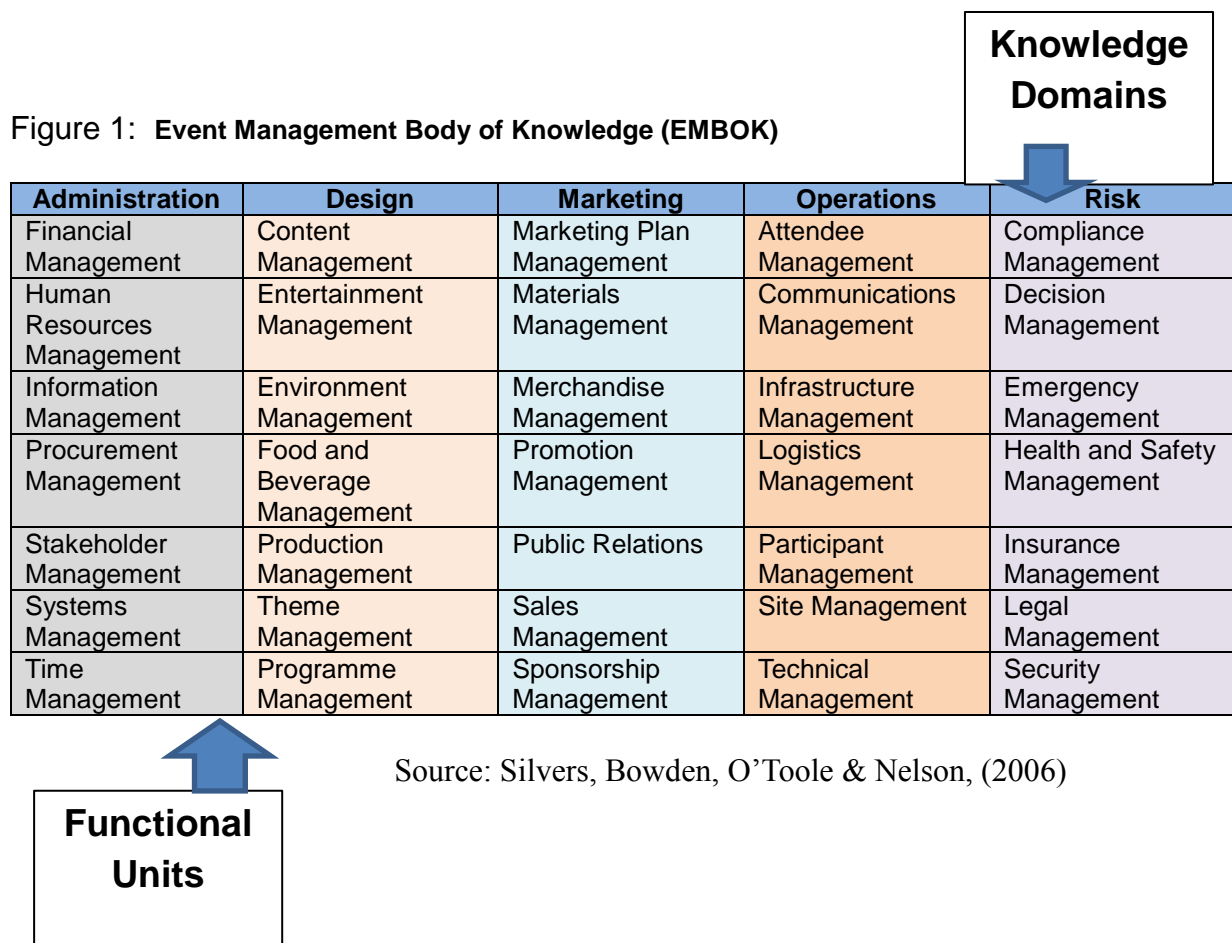
Introduction

The transformation of higher education from elite to mass provision in the UK has precipitated a cultural shift in the design of the curriculum towards more vocationally oriented subjects. This paper presents an ethnographic reflection on student and lecturer experiences with a semi-vocational degree in event management at a post 1992 university located in a very peripheral and insular region of the UK. The event management degree at this modern university represents a major innovation in higher education where an experiential approach to pedagogy has been adopted with students delivering 'live' event projects for 'real' clients instead of writing a thesis in their final year. Experiential approaches to learning and teaching, otherwise known as 'work integrated learning' (Jackson, 2013), aims to bridge the gap between classroom theoretically based concepts and professional practice by allowing students to apply their classroom acquired knowledge on real life cases. The experiential approach that is the focus of this study involves students collaborating with a local business/charity to deliver a complex event project aimed at achieving the corporate aims and objectives of the partner organisation.

The gravitation towards more experiential forms of education has emerged due to the integration of global economies, which has precipitated increasing competition among

industries. Such events have been the topic of much political discourse and rhetoric about the importance of the knowledge economy and the role that universities will play in economic reform (Wilton, 2008). Industrial shifts towards the service economy, technological change, computerisation, complex communication systems coupled with changes in managerial hierarchical structures in favour of teamwork and multi-tasking have increased the demand for workers with out-of-the-box thinking; human interaction skills and digital literacy (see Tsai, 2013; Garlick, 2014). Linking higher education to the world of work is essential in preparing graduates to function as engaged and responsible citizens in a world that is becoming more globalized, multi-cultural and heterogeneous. However, higher education has often been criticised as being divorced from practice, non-relevant and lacking in a real world orientation. Much of this criticism stems from the view that students entering the workforce lack basic skills. Researchers claim that employers are increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of graduates and are less likely to hire based on academic qualifications and more on the combination of skills and attributes that can be leveraged for competitive advantage in global economies. Employers are now more likely to select graduates based on skills and attributes developed through their studies; particularly the ‘transferable’ skills, otherwise called ‘core skills’, ‘generic skills’ or ‘soft skills’. Employers want graduates with well-developed generic skills (Pool & Sewell, 2007) that will enable them to transition into the very competitive commercial world.

Event Management knowledge domains are rooted in business management, encompassing administration, design, marketing, operations and risk management (Figure 1).



While EMBOK is very thorough in identifying a range of knowledge based disciplines to support the industry, event management is also a very applied ‘hands on’ profession requiring skills that cannot be taught by a transmission-reception model of learning and teaching. The problem with EMBOK is that it does not account for these transferable skills or soft skills that employers presumably want. Soft skills like attention to detail, listening, negotiation, personal selling, high-level cognitive skills, problem solving, emotional intelligence, pitching, time management and leadership are developed through practice and over time. Consequently, HEIs have responded by embedding experiential pedagogic initiatives including placements, internships and other practicums into the curriculum. Experiential learning moves the learner away from passive transmission-reception forms of learning to a more participative application and integration of knowledge and skills. Employers place significant value on vocational experience with project management, working with audiences and customers, hands-on production management, budgeting, fundraising and marketing planning being highly desirable (Beaven & Wright, 2006). However, the extent to which universities can produce employable graduates depends on the students’ willingness to engage in paid or unpaid work during their studies and the extent to which the corporate sector is willing or able to provide suitable projects and other opportunities through placements, internships and volunteer work. Along with adding value to a CV, graduates become more commercially aware and confident individuals because of their placement or internship within a professional organisation (Fox & Morrison, 2011; Fletcher-Brown, Knibbs & Middleton, 2015). Indeed, an internship/placement within a well-established organisation exposes students to industry professionals, etiquette, manners, maturity and best practices, which cannot be taught from a textbook. Exposure to organisational culture and a better understanding of how organisations function are some of the key benefits of working in collaboration with industry professionals. The recent popularity of event management degrees in the UK has seen the emergence of other forms of learning partnerships known as the ‘live event’ project involving students staging events in collaboration with a business. However, due to the embryonic stage of event management as an academic discipline live events as an innovative and authentic form of assessment still requires more research. This paper aims to address the dearth of research in this area of experiential learning.

Methodology

At this post 1992 university the live events occur in the final year when students take the module Applied Event Management 1, 2, and 3. The module requires students to deliver a sophisticated, yet complex, event at a venue outside the university, which replaces the traditional thesis. Clients present students with a business problem and clearly defined business objectives, which the students must achieve through the design and delivery of the ‘live’ event. Weekly tutorials with tutors provide guidance and support for the students for the duration of the project.

This ethnographic reflection is specifically directed towards the graduating classes of 2012/13 and 14 in event management. With ethnography and reflective practice, being the underlying principle behind this paper an eclectic approach to data collection was undertaken resulting in a triangulation of data from a purposive sample of three (3) graduating cohorts and the researcher’s observation log and literature review. Focus groups were held at the end of semester two (2) of 2012, 2013 and 2014 (Table 1), two weeks after the students had completed all of their course work as it was felt that students would have had time to reflect on their learning and achievements and would be in a more relaxed frame of mind to provide constructive feedback on their course of study (Hounsell, 2003).

Table 1 Schedule of Focus Groups

Year of Focus Groups	Total Responses	Total Enrolment	Number of Focus Groups
April 2012	22	36	4
May 2013	24	32	4
May 2014	12	14	2

The data was analysed using the coding procedures suggested by Strauss & Corbin's (1990) grounded theory. Open coding was used to identify categories, concepts and themes without making any prior assumptions about what might be discovered. The data was broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions asked about the phenomena being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After the preliminary coding process, a further coding system was employed where codes were related to each other through the identification of core code categories and sub-categories, which were then organised and collated into themes and sub themes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Robson, 1993). A synthesis of the major themes that emerged is presented below as findings.

Student Experiences with the Vocational Degree

Students were of the view that the degree delivered over and above their expectations in terms of the outcome - a successful event that met client specifications, objectives, learning outcomes and a job interview. Many appreciated that the level six (6) live projects gave them an opportunity to gain a realistic perspective of the industry and to experience the responsibilities and the challenges of working in a commercial environment, which equipped them with the confidence to foray in their chosen profession. As this student reiterates:

My University also gave me the opportunity to create, design and plan entire events and I believe the lessons I learned are invaluable. I have come to the end of my degree and feel completely confident about entering the events industry.

Some students felt that the business focus was a distinct advantage of the course as exemplified by the forthcoming comment:

I believe the skills and attributes I now possess could enable me to excel in corporate events, as this is where my strong business mind such as finance could shine through.

With linear career progression throughout one organisation becoming extinct (Bridgestock, 2009) it was important that students recognised that the 'added value' in their newfound skills is that they are transferable to industry sectors outside of event management. This was evident from the focus groups as exemplified by this student and was one of the learning outcomes on the module: *This degree has set me up to qualify for a multitude of different jobs in various industry sectors.* There is an increasing need for flexible, adaptive and industry mobile workers, who can integrate, adapt and utilise their skills to a multitude of different jobs, tasks, industries and cultures as their professional circumstances require and it was important that this experiential learning exercise bought students to this reality (Bridgestock, 2009; Harvey, 2005).

The introduction of the client provided an opportunity for students to understand the dynamics of inter-personal communications in a large organisation and to learn the terminology, parlance,

jargon and linguistic style of the industry. It is important for students to understand that organisations have different cultures and being employable relates to being able to adapt skills to cross professional, social and cultural environments (Fox & Morrison, 2010). Students were able to develop their communication skills and learn how to behave professionally through formal interactions with the client and suppliers in meetings or through written business communications; and, being able to adjust their communication techniques depending on the receiver. Through involvement and engagement with clients, students were able to appreciate the multiple, complex and strategic functions that events play in business and the community, which helped to dispel the earlier cognitive dissonance students, experienced at the beginning of the course in relation to the strong business subject focus. As this student pointed out: *I thought that we would just book a band and rent a tent and we would have an event. Now I know that this was naïve.*

Due to the different roles and responsibilities associated with delivering ‘live’ events, students used the opportunity to specialise and develop a particular area of expertise. Others thought that the degree helped them to identify personal strengths and weaknesses.

After organising the legal aspects ofand being the health and safety / legal.....I now feel that this is one of my main strengths and is something that I may consider focusing on when I graduate from university.

The live events were instrumental in helping students to enhance their employability portfolios and to discover and develop dormant skills. Some students took advantage of their client’s extensive network of contacts to learn more about the industry by shadowing someone from their organisation once a week to gain more insights into management and organisational culture.

The involvement of clients presented risks to the university and many challenges for these students. Students were keen to expound on this aspect of the project claiming that clients were not always supportive or good examples of best practices. Some clients had ideas about what constituted a well-managed event, which contradicted what students are taught on the course. Some clients had standard operating procedures that deviated from that of the university, particularly concerning health and safety management, which raised issues of corporate liability. The ‘student’ label meant that some clients had no faith in the students’ abilities and one group reported how a client made derogatory and demeaning comments to them in front of suppliers. Another group felt that their client lacked knowledge of event management and that their ideas for the event were unrealistic and illegal. Others complained that clients were verbally abusive and withheld information and resources that were vital to completing the projects and the associated assessments. Another client cancelled a project midway in the academic year claiming that they were no longer able to fund the event and took the venue with them. This left the students stranded without a project and venue for their gala fundraising ball midway in the academic year. Conflicts with clients regarding procedures and best practices were rife, probably due to the dearth of professional event organisations in the region. The event management profession is still an emerging one and many event organisers are self-taught freelancers. Such practitioners did not necessarily undertake theoretical studies in event management and at times could not relate to the models students used to plan their events. This sometimes caused confusion and conflict between students, tutors and the client organisation. The multiple and complex nature of events coupled with conflicting stakeholder agendas has prevented the introduction of standardised practices and methodologies that are universally

recognised (Goldblatt, 2000) resulting in differences in the standard operating procedures used by students, tutors and clients. These realities make it difficult to find professional clients who are good examples of professional practice instead of those who insist on unsystematic, archaic or unsophisticated ways of organising events. According to this group of graduates, something as simple as the decision to get qualified security, a legal requirement, at their event '*was one that we had to push for*'. The client, in this case, argued for someone '*big and strong*' who was the brother of one of the delegates rather than a qualified SIA agent in order to avoid the expense. Another group of students asked to change their client as they felt that the client was expecting them '*to plan the event in an unprofessional, illegal and unrealistic manner*'. The bigger and more professional companies in the area made it clear that having students organise an event for them would put their business at risk and thus declined to participate in the programme.

Some students commented about clients being demanding and treating them as though they were a hired labour force assigning them tasks that bore no relation to the live event project. As this student noted: *They are behaving as though they are paying us... We should be able to do things in our own time*. Some students claimed that they found it difficult to communicate with their client because of social class differences. Others lamented about clients' tendency to withhold payment to suppliers and quivering over the reimbursement of 'out of pocket' expenses incurred by students even though the terms and conditions regarding these aspects were clearly outlined in the agreement signed by the students, university and client. Students felt that they could have been given more training and warnings about the dynamics of client relationships: *We were thrown in at the deep end. We have never experienced working for a client before. We should have been warned about how clients behave*, one student lamented. Some clients were consistently delinquent when it came to answering emails while others withdrew resources and support. Students were quick to point out that they felt that the client projects could have been better organised and that the university should have screened the clients better.

This experiential exercise brought about the realisation that responsibility, accountability and meeting deadlines were the reality of the 'real world'. For the module tutor this was particularly welcomed since many students enter the degree programme with unrealistic notions of the profession and very limited career awareness. Those who investigated the profession before embarking on HE did not necessarily obtain information from professional bodies, universities or statutory providers of employment (Donnan & Carthy, 2011) but depended on peers or social media (word of mouth), press reports or a vicarious experience with event management in school. There is an ongoing issue about the reality mismatch between the expectations of students entering higher education and the needs of the professional sector (Wickens & Forbes, 2004; Sealy, 2012). As this student stated: *I imagined myself floating around in a ball gown welcoming guests as the event unfolded. I know now this was unrealistic*. Some students felt that the staging of live events was very difficult and that the marking criteria were unrealistic. Several students alluded that the demands of the clients, the district council and venue managers, on top of the challenges encountered selling sponsorship, tickets and advertising space was too much for undergraduates to bear. A simple request from a client for a 2.5 % return on their investment and a financial plan with a stated breakeven point was deemed unreasonable and annoyed some students. The performance related goals are a reality of the workplace and is connected to job targets that link to corporate objectives, thus, the justification for their inclusion in the client brief. Students' reaction to the request for a breakeven analysis was seen as '*irrelevant... it is fresher's stuff*' one commented, referring to it being covered in

the 1st year of the degree. This client was quick to point out that a minimum fundraising needed to be guaranteed if they were to collaborate in the future. This client was referring to the fact that they need to justify to their trustees the commitment of resources and labour to an event with an adequate return on investment. However, some students continued to feel that performance related targets were unrealistic, unjustified and unreasonable and that their challenges were reflective of flaws with the assessment, the university and client organisation.

Early in the projects students experienced trepidation about the demands of the client, the objectives and the amount of work involved because they felt that the objectives and projects were unachievable. Some students' early scepticism about the course content and their misguided notions about the nature of the industry created a belief that the performance targets set by clients were unrealistic resulting in some students rebuking the assessment brief and subsequently, along with their parents, insisting that the assessment be reviewed. These disputes make a mockery of the higher education system as performance related targets are a reality of the workplace. These events raise questions about the student as customer, rather than learner, bought about by the fee-paying regime and its negative impact on academic quality standards. Students' early resistance to live events, as an innovative and discursive form of assessment, and the ensuing complaints justifies tutors' preference for didactic styles of teaching. Tutors become reluctant to challenge students outside their comfort zone for fear that it would bring forth negative module evaluations or poor National Students' Survey (NSS) scores (O'Donovan, 2010). Some students encountering challenges on live projects reacted on social media and on the NSS rather than seek help from tutors. Other students noted that the level of stress involved in planning an event was overwhelming. When weaker students were asked to think problems through using problem-solving tools this was perceived as flaws with the university's learning and teaching strategy rather than the need to assess, review and change their strategies.

Discussion and recommendations

It was evident that the transition from student life to work can be quite traumatic and represents a quantum leap in learning for some individuals. Some students did not appreciate the amount of work that had to be completed or the difficulties they encountered 'on the job'. It was clear that along with logistical and human difficulties students, particularly the weaker ones, needed a 'helping hand' with client relations. Tutorials on client management and organisational culture have been introduced so that students identify and understand the different ways clients may behave during their event and after graduation. Additional training for students in conflict management, business etiquette, cultural leadership and communications assist in preparing students for live projects. Over the years there was an appreciation that event management is 'hard work' but some students continue to feel that the difficulties of their projects could be circumvented through better organisation or 'more realistic' goal setting by university staff. Students' misguided notions about the nature of the event management industry were often a key influence on their attitude towards certain experiential tasks, often producing an apathetic approach to learning. Consequently, an accelerated campaign to encourage students to go out on professional placements has been initiated to provide them with further exposure to professional organisations in preparation for commercial event projects. More realistic expectation setting was achieved through clear messages on the course website and open day presentations about the nature, and the realities, of the event profession. Although tutors were careful to stress the rewards of working in event management it was also necessary to impress upon potential graduates that the industry was not as glamorous or as easy as they may

perceive. An overview of the various career pathways and the risks of a live project are now clearly articulated during recruitment events.

Consternation bought about by the inclusion of performance related targets in the event brief bought tutors to the realisation that work needed to be done to inspire students to accept learning challenges as part of their development. Seminars that ensure students understand the rationale behind the assessment pedagogies and programme structure may make students more 'pedagogically intelligent' and aware of how these targets relate to industry practice, how they learn and their learning styles. Students need to be encouraged to embrace assessment challenges as opportunities for growth and development rather than to view them as threats. It was essential that students recognised that skills development did not occur overnight but is a gradual process that takes place over several years. Students need to be reminded constantly and consistently about the intended learning outcomes of the module, why they are important and how they link with industry needs. They need to understand that the degree is designed to take them beyond entry level jobs into management and that they should set higher goals and aspirations for themselves while acknowledging the different career route possibilities in event management. Consequently, reflection and subsequent goal setting is now a weekly exercise in the tutorials when students spend time reflecting on their learning curves through acknowledgement of their recent triumphs and successes and how they can add value to their CVs. Students may commit to learning if the pedagogic initiatives are realistic to them and merits application in the real world. As Biggs and Tang (2007) note, motivation for learning arises when something has value to the student and they expect success from their endeavors. Pedagogic literacy may help to dispel some of the distress that students experience because of the live event assessment brief. Millennial learners must be heavily supported, inspired, motivated, guided and encouraged to challenge themselves, to take their learning to a deeper level, to reflect often and to develop their own abstract concepts and contextualise their learning from concrete experience and subsequent reflection (Kolb, 1984).

It is recommended that HEIs think carefully before implementing live events as an assessment for event management students in conjunction with external organisations. While it is clear that the introduction of a client aided student learning significantly, at the same time this initiative represented a major risk to the student's degree, final grade and the university's reputation and resulted in a distillation of the university-student-client relationship. To ensure that clients do not put the student's degree at risk the university had to assume ownership and funding of the live events which is now clearly stated in the agreement with clients. The assumption that collaborative partnerships could be synergistic producing mutually beneficial results was not necessarily the case for this institution. The bigger charities were fraught in bureaucracy, which ensured that centralised decision-making was slow. This meant students could not always access resources needed to meet academic deadlines. Charitable organisations' ethos was centralised around their stakeholders and supporters which they wanted to protect, sometimes at the students' expense. Other charities' missions were built around maximising fundraising even if this meant flouting health and safety legislation. However, much more research needs to go into understanding collaborative relationships in event management education and how they can work for mutual benefits. What was evident is that the charities that emphasised building awareness and reaching out to the community ahead of any fundraising agendas were more receptive to the students' needs. Although agreements were explicit regarding the responsibilities and roles of all stakeholders the results that they produced were very different with each project. Covert and overt struggles for power characterised some relationships resulting in hostilities and conflicts that created bad relations. The involvement of 'real' clients

presented anxiety, trepidation and significant risks for the students and university and had to be discontinued in its original form.

This study identified that there are different stakeholder agendas, motivations and objectives for participating in 'live event' projects, which created an 'expectations gap' between students, clients and tutors. The study highlighted the need for the application of stakeholder theory through a 'stakeholder integrated approach' to collaboration on 'live event' projects. This involved the cultivation of relationships and a common understanding of the procedures and commitment required by all those involved. Improved communications from the outset between client and tutors are essential to the enhancement of a stakeholder approach that better reflects the working environment within universities. The study identifies the importance of designing 'live events' and employer engagement as an integral part of the curriculum from year one rather than as a 'bolt on' experience at the end of the course. This would allow students, clients and tutors to get to know each other and the opportunity for the university to screen clients better before assigning students to them. All stakeholders, through improved communications, should have a shared understanding of their purpose and role - that is, to support student learning rather than to intimidate them. Clients who are non-supportive or difficult should not be approached to participate in the 'live event' programme. Consequently, clients are now beneficiaries of fundraising and mentors to students rather than investors and are asked to be more sensitive, supportive and gentler in their interaction with them. It had to be made clear to clients that participation in live projects with students did not guarantee that the event would raise funds and that they should not include the projected fundraising into any financial projections. This approach has worked well for maintaining better community relations and for reducing the earlier conflicts that occurred between the trilogy of stakeholders: client, student and tutor. The role of the projects in the development of higher self-esteem and in creating high levels of gratification and student satisfaction cannot be discounted and brought forth a 97% overall satisfaction rating on the NSS in 2016 after all of the recommendations above were implemented. Nevertheless, the execution of 'live event' client projects for developing professional standards can be extremely labour intensive for tutors who end up managing the students' coursework, group dynamics, their expectations and idiosyncrasies and then in turn have to do the same with the client and other stakeholders. Significant pressure on the tutors to ensure a safe event adds trepidation. This method of teaching requires a significant commitment on the part of the students and staff, often requiring staff to work outside of contract hours and students giving up time spent with family and in paid work.

While recruitment needs and responding to the skills shortage were identified as key motivators for most employer involvement in live events, for charities the opportunities for third stream funding were the major motivators. For the university the opportunity to reach out to the community and positive press coverage were major benefits. This research has presented a cogent discussion on a single case of experiential learning in event management at a post 1992 university in the UK and is not intended to be transferable to other educational or institutional contexts. It is perhaps axiomatic, but worth mentioning, that further research is required in cross- institutional, educational and industrial contexts in order to further advance our understanding of collaborative partnerships for event management education and other business subjects; and, to establish a practical, relevant and coherent model for live event partnerships that is mutually beneficial for all stakeholders. The study illustrates the value of the 'student voice' in participative decision-making and highlighted contextualised areas in learning and teaching that warrant further research and consideration. It represents the subjective

experiences, beliefs, feelings and attitudes of the event students, lecturer and tutors who were the subject of the investigation.

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