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Informed Consumers? Students, Choices and Events Management Degrees

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Abstract:

Comparatively little is known about the extent to which students on vocational courses like events management fit within the student-as consumer framework and, in particular, why and how they decide to study for an events management degree. A study of 582 new events management undergraduates was undertaken at two UK universities. Survey and interview data illustrate that, although students demonstrated aspects of consumerist logic in valuing their degree predominantly in relation to their future careers, they based their choice of course and university largely on emotional, subjective criteria and so were not the 'informed consumers' espoused in public discourse.

Keywords: Careers Decision making Events management Higher education Students-as-consumers University

1. Introduction

Higher Education (HE) in and beyond England is undergoing a period of significant change, with accelerating marketisation, expanding student numbers and increasing use of audit and metrics to rank universities, courses and individual academics (Burnes et al., 2014; Du & Lapsley, 2019). Universities are competing with each other for fee-paying undergraduate students, and so are seeking to make their 'products' (degrees and other courses) attractive to these 'consumers' (Fletcher et al., 2017; Molesworth et al., 2009). Within this marketised discourse of higher education, students are positioned as knowledgeable consumers, making informed and rational decisions about their choice of course and institution and its likely contribution to their future career and economically-motivated goals. However, the extent to which 17/18 year olds can be regarded in this way is debatable, and choices about which university to attend and which course to study are based on a variety of factors, some of which may have little to do with informed and rational decision-making.

Research on student choice of university and course within the contemporary neoliberal context of higher education has focused predominantly on 'prestige' institutions and associated courses (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). In this paper we concentrate instead on events management, a relatively recent addition to UK higher education provision. Events management courses are situated predominantly within 'new' universities with relatively weak traditions of research (Dashper et al., 2015; Dashper & Fletcher, 2019; Rojek, 2013), and low status within the hierarchical system of English higher education and so students' choices to study this subject at these kinds of institutions are less likely to be based on

traditional ideas of prestige, status and reputation. Events management is classed as a vocational subject (i.e., learning is designed in a practical way), but unlike other long-established vocational courses like teaching and nursing, has no external validation by its associated industry/profession. Furthermore, schools and colleges do not typically offer events management as a subject of study prior to university. Therefore, students embarking on events management programmes have no formal educational reference point on which to base their decision. There is currently minimal understanding of what factors do influence students to select events management as a subject for undergraduate study, which may be limiting the effectiveness of universities' marketing and recruitment strategies and causing confusion for potential students. Recognising the need for broader pedagogical understanding of the characteristics and motivations of events management students, this study adopted an open collaborative approach to address this issue through research with students enrolled on undergraduate events management degree programmes at two UK universities.

Forming part of a broader events management education research collaboration between these universities, this paper presents findings from a longitudinal perspective with data collected over a three-year period to examine the motivations and expectations of first year undergraduate student intakes enrolled in 2017, 2018 and 2019 in order to begin to understand how students make the decision to study events management at university, and indeed, which university to attend. As such, this paper represents a first attempt at understanding some of the factors that shape undergraduate students' decisions to choose events management as a course, and begins to consider the extent to which these students really are the informed and knowledgeable consumers public discourse positions them as. The paper makes an important contribution to understanding student motivations and expectations of events management degree programmes, which can help inform course marketing and recruitment strategies in a rapidly developing and competitive neoliberal higher education marketplace (Dunnnett et al., 2012).

2. The marketisation of higher education and the student-as-consumer

Whilst HE is a global phenomenon, there are differences between countries in how the marketisation of the sector has progressed. In this paper we focus on the UK context - and England specifically - as there have been several significant policy changes here over the last 25 years which have rapidly increased marketisation and shaped relationships between students and institutions (Sa, 2014). Since the Dearing Report in 1997 recommended a move from undergraduate degrees being wholly funded through government grants to shifting some of the financial responsibility onto students through loans, the government has increasingly positioned students as consumers (Bunce et al., 2017). Tuition fees were increased from £1000 per annum to £3000 in 2006-7, and tripled again in 2012 to £9000 per year. Tomlinson (2017) notes that these changes in funding represent a shift in thinking about the purpose(s) of HE, from a public good to a private service whose benefits are referenced against future earnings.

Funding is just one - albeit an important - aspect of the marketisation of HE in the UK, which also includes increased prevalence of performance metrics, league tables and expanding use of student evaluations, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) (Brown, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2017). In 2014-15 the UK government removed the national cap on student numbers, which previously had restricted numbers of students at each higher education institution (HEI) (Shaw, 2014). Removing the cap had profound effects, as universities are now able to recruit as many students as they like and so HEIs are

competing directly for student numbers. Universities compete to attract lucrative students, investing heavily in new buildings, high-end accommodation and other facilities to lure potential applicants to select their institution over rival HEIs offering similar provision (Morris et al., 2016).

Within this environment students have been (re)positioned from being thought of as learners to consumers. The student-as-consumer (SAC) approach was further consolidated when universities and students were included under the Consumer Rights Act (2015). Bunce et al. (2017) argue that this moves power from provider (university) to consumer (student), with a corresponding shift in relationships and expectations. This has implications for quality and academic achievement, as they show an overall negative relationship between students adopting a consumer orientation and academic performance.

Molesworth et al. (2009) suggest that this “drive to commodify the educational offering” (p.279) encourages students to be passive in their education, seeing it as a transactional financial investment in their employment futures and thus discounting opportunities for deeper learning and transformation. They suggest this may be particularly the case in vocational areas as students (and staff) may be less willing to engage in critique of their chosen employment domain. This has relevance for our consideration of events management degrees as the vocational focus of the degree may discourage students from questioning the sector they have chosen to study.

Academics have resisted the move towards positioning students as consumers, but students do often adopt some aspects of customer-like behaviour and university managements conceive of them collectively as a source of income, which makes the consumer frame of reference at least partially appropriate (Woodall et al., 2014). The market in HE is underpinned by an assumption that undergraduate students are informed consumers, who make their choice of HEI and course on the basis of credible (and supposedly easily accessible) information, informed by metrics, including the NSS and national league tables, such as those reported in the Times Higher Education World University Guide or The Complete University Guide, which publish university and course rankings annually. However, the extent to which students take such information into account when making their choice of course and institution is debatable. Milian and Rizk’s (2018) Canadian-based study on the value of university rankings, for instance, indicated that students rarely consulted ranking publications, relying instead on reputational information available through their informal networks (e.g., peers, family). This suggests a tension at the heart of HE, which is neither an unfettered market in which consumers (students) make rational purchase decisions, or a lofty ideal space of learning and intellectual development disassociated from the logics of the market. It is in this ambiguous context that would-be-students make decisions about which course and institution to select, and so in the next section we discuss some of the research on student choice.

3. Understanding student choice

Research on student decision-making in relation to attending university suggests that the introduction of higher fees has not deterred students from attending university, but has perhaps affected motivations for attendance (Wilkins et al., 2013). Would-be students appear increasingly concerned with the benefits they hope to accrue from their educational experience, in terms of future career and income (Barron & Ali-Knight, 2017; Stone et al., 2017), and so are making more strategic decisions based on, amongst other things, university and course reputation. However, this research also indicates that attitudes and

motivations vary widely depending on socio-economic background, gender and degree subject, among other things (Kaye & Bates, 2017; Walsh et al., 2015). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2015) review shows research in the area of student decision-making tends to focus on the effects of demographic variables on student choice, and the importance of academic reputation for students in making their choice of institution. In the context of the UK, several studies have shown how the increasingly consumerist positioning of students has enhanced focus on the idea of 'value for money' of particular programmes and institutional offerings (Tomlinson, 2017; Woodall et al., 2014).

As discussed above, the marketisation of HE and the positioning of students as consumers illustrate a shift in wider ideas about the purpose(s) of universities and the relationship between students and institutions. Within this context, some researchers adopt marketing concepts to help understand aspects of student decision-making. For example, Winter and Chapelo (2017) draw on the concept of the servicescape to consider subjective and emotional aspects of decision-making. Their study of the role of open days in student decision-making found that students were heavily influenced by their emotional response to the university and things like the physical environment (was it clean, modern and well cared for?) and the friendliness and enthusiasm of staff and students. They argue that HE is an experience-centric service so the concept of experiential marketing is relevant in helping universities shape their interactions with potential students in ways that resonate with them on an emotional level.

Moogan et al. (1999) and Brown et al. (2009) both draw on Kotler's (1997) decision-making process to consider the steps students go through in making the important decision of which course and university to select. This process begins with Stage One: Problem Recognition, whereby the candidate recognises that they want/need to attend university to achieve their career and personal aspirations. At Stage Two: Information Search, the student engages in research into course entry requirements, institutional reputation, location and finance. At Stage Three: Evaluation of Alternatives, the student compares institutions, often through attending open days and performing more thorough evaluation of course content. The final stage, Stage Four: Purchase Decision, is when the student assesses the extent to which they think the institution 'wants' them and whether they would fit in, done predominantly through attending post-application days and assessing the speed and quality of communication from the university. Brown et al. (2009) suggest that universities should adopt marketing approaches based not only on the classic 4Ps (product, price, promotion, place) but also an additional 3Ps specific to the university context, which relate to physical evidence (e.g. prospectuses, built environment), people (e.g. approachability and enthusiasm of staff and current students) and process (e.g. speed of response to student enquiries, offer of place) in order to help guide students through "the purchase of a high involvement service package, the implications of which may have long lasting ramifications in terms of their future careers" (p.322).

The growth of events management provision in the UK and elsewhere has prompted academics to begin to ask questions about the students undertaking these courses. Currently, such studies have focused predominantly on graduate careers, and in particular students' aspirations and expectations for their careers, and the role of their degree within that (Barron & Ali-Knight, 2017; Junek et al., 2009; Stone et al., 2017). The vast majority of these studies suggest - in contrast to much of the wider literature discussed above - that students are motivated by intrinsic factors, such as enjoyment, excitement or opportunities to socialise with others, rather than external factors, such as salary or career progression

(Sibson, 2011; Stone et al., 2017). Although these studies have clarified the growth of interest in events management careers, the value of educational experience, both student and employer perspectives of successful career skills, and career aspirations, there is currently no research on events management students' decision-making processes and motivations for choosing their course or attending specific universities. It is our contention therefore, that HEIs providing events management education are currently uninformed about their would-be 'consumers' and how best to attract and satisfy them. In the ever-increasingly competitive higher education environment, this lack of subject-specific knowledge may limit HEIs' efforts to attract and retain highly motivated, capable and skilful students who are passionate about events management. In this study we drew on aspects of the decision-making process model developed by Moogan et al. (1999) and Brown et al. (2009), as well as Winter and Chapeló's (2017) focus on the importance of emotional aspects of decision-making, in order to try and begin to understand why students choose to study events management at university. However, in contrast to these authors we retain a critical stance in relation to positioning students wholly as consumers. We remain aware of the differences between HE and the consumption of other products and services and how this may shape decision-making about degree choice, leading us to ask: are events management undergraduate students in the UK informed consumers of these courses?

4. Research design and methods

The study adopted a mixed methods approach, incorporating surveys and interviews with new events management undergraduates at two UK universities. Specifically, the research integrated an online questionnaire with in-depth interviews conducted in an explanatory sequential, 'qualitative follows quantitative' research framework (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 106). Within this framework, question topics were aligned between the two instruments to increase validity, with the survey capturing overview data from the population and informing the content of the interview schedule. In this context, a census approach to quantitative sampling was taken as the survey 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 an events management undergraduate degree at both universities during their respective inductions in September/October 2017, 2018 and 2019. With the exception of one question - *Inspiration for studying events management at degree level* (Table 2), which for the 2017/18 intake reports data from one institution only (the question was aligned from 2018/19), the surveys were administered consistently in both institutions to enhance reliability. Ethical approval for the research was obtained by both universities prior to the study, in accordance with strict policies surrounding research involving student samples. Participation was voluntary and the email informed the student of the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw and consent details. Reminders were sent to encourage students to complete, but no incentives were offered.

Collecting data at the start of the course was recognised as imperative to ensure student views were captured before they became immersed in the course content and gained a deeper knowledge of events management. The questionnaire comprised 14 questions split between nine closed and five open format questions. Information gathered covered the following principal aspects: the subjects studied prior to attending university, student motivations for studying events management, level of prior involvement in events (e.g., as organisers and participants), their perception of what events management is and entails,

and their career expectations following graduation. Importantly these questions were designed to be as 'institutionally neutral' as possible, as the aim of this study was to increase the data available through collaboration and gain insight from a longitudinal dataset. Therefore, an amalgamated dataset from the two surveys was created for each year. No personal details were collected, and the dataset was stored securely in line with research ethics and GDPR compliant data management processes at each university. Following the sequential mixed methods design, our analysis incorporates baseline descriptive statistics for the aspects outlined above (see Tables 2–4), but focuses on interview insight which critically explores the first-hand student accounts, set against the broader illustrative quantitative background data. In this approach, data integration of our survey results is illustrative and not intended for convergent validation purposes (Fielding, 2012, p. 127). Table 1 presents an overview of the survey and interview samples.

The second phase involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with students recruited from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts at the two universities. Students were recruited via email in the same manner as the questionnaire, however, 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 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Importantly, interviews were conducted by members of the research team who did not teach the participants as we did not want students to be interviewed by their teaching team as they may have felt obliged to reflect upon having had a positive experience; certainly at such an early stage of their university life. In total 24 students were interviewed (Table 1).

Interviews took place on the respective university campuses, e.g., in cafes, and lasted between 35 min and 1 h. Prior to the interview, all participants were briefed on its purpose and signed a consent form. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim and in keeping with the collaborative nature of the project, the two research teams conducted the analysis jointly. Interview summaries were written for all interviews to provide an overview of the emergent ideas and themes for the research team. Data were thematically analysed by all members of the team and then cross-checked by other members in order to share and confirm the findings. This also ensured rigour in the data analysis and interpretation stage of the research.

The interview guide complemented the questionnaire through exploring the aforementioned themes in greater detail. This approach facilitated broader discussions related to participant family histories of HE, and schooling among others. 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. Having one semester's experience of studying events management enabled interview participants to reflect on their choice of degree and university.

In this paper we focus on student decision making; paying particular attention to the main influences on their decisions to undertake an events management degree at these two universities.

5. Findings

Initially, data from the two universities were analysed separately to identify any differences between responses from students. However, we found that there were no discernible differences and students

from both institutions expressed similar views. Consequently we present the combined data in the following sections.

5.1. Why university?

As a starting point for understanding student decisions to study events management we first examined their reasons for attending university more generally. In line with consumerist discourse which sees the value of HE solely in relation to future career and economic outcomes (Bunce et al., 2017), our participants were united in their perception that going to university and obtaining a degree would be beneficial, both personally (e.g., maturing, gaining independence, skill acquisition) and professionally. With regard to the latter, not only did they think a degree would help them secure a job, but progress in that job. This participant for instance, noted how they originally did not want to go to university, but had taken the decision to go back into education to specifically gain a professional advantage over others:

I didn't originally want to, if I'm honest. I was just worried about the debt and everything. But then I took a couple of years out and decided that I wanted to go into events, found the course and was like, "I'm going to do it properly", because then I've got a proper background when it comes to getting a job afterwards. I felt that I needed something behind me ... you get a better advantage. (U2-1)

Some of our participants referred to their negative experiences of being turned down for industry roles on account of not having a degree:

I have applied for events jobs in the past, and I've never got interviewed. And the answer has always been because I hadn't got qualifications. So it's [important] the people who I'm speaking to via my CV or covering letter actually knowing I've got a qualification, and then taking the time to meet me, I think is going to be the big value. (U2-6)

There was some acknowledgement that the events industry is amidst a period of professionalization, which increasingly demands that those entering the industry are educated to degree level:

I think back in the day we had a lot of people come in and say, "Oh, I never got a degree, but I got here." Because it wasn't a big thing then. Events wasn't a degree you did. Now that it is, I think I'll have to have one of those [degrees], really, to get any money. (U2-2)

Table 1
Survey and interview sample.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total
Surveys	224	212	146	582
Interviews	14	10		24

In such ways, students in our study adopted a marketised view of the value of HE and saw their decision to attend university predominantly in terms of its impact on their future career goals. In doing so they position themselves within the student-as-consumer frame, making their choice to attend university for

largely instrumental reasons premised on the individual future career benefits it may bring them (Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). However, although they appear to accept a consumerist position in relation to university in general, such logic does not necessarily direct them to choose events management as a subject. Sa (2014) suggests that in the era of high tuition fees, UK students are making increasingly strategic decisions about degree subject based on perceived economic value that may be obtained in the labour market. In this context, STEM subjects are increasingly popular. However, events management is not a career with high average starting salaries (Dashper, 2013) and so the rationale of consumer logic might suggest this is not a safe choice of degree subject when viewed solely as a tool towards securing future economic success. In the next section we consider what factors - other than potential future earnings - may be encouraging students to select an events management degree.

5.2 Making decisions

Students in this study were inspired to study events management for a variety of reasons and helped to make their decision in a number of ways. In terms of inspiration, 'attending events', 'interest in events' and 'building a career in events' were cited as reasons by around 60% of our survey respondents. Around 40% also stated that they were inspired by 'opportunities to be creative', 'opportunities to go behind the scenes of events' and the 'enjoyable and social' nature of the subject (Table 2). These results illustrate an awareness of the career end point aligned with a desire to learn practical elements of events management. However, although such responses were clearly linked to future career goals, which fit with the student-as-consumer framework, this was not confined to narrow economic or status-related aspects of this future career. The vocational nature of events management degrees makes it unsurprising that students on these programmes are focused on their imagined future careers. However, the findings also highlight the perceived social and collaborative nature of the programmes and how events careers are valued, and suggest that students are motivated by a desire for an enjoyable and satisfying career as much as a financially lucrative one. Tomlinson (2017) argues that student responses to the student-as-consumer position are more varied and nuanced than government discourse suggests. Our findings support this interpretation as students in our study adopted aspects of a consumerist position while simultaneously rejecting placing primary focus on (potential) economic gains to be made from their education.

Further examples of inspiration and decision-making influences include being motivated by positive experiences of attending and working on events, and seeking advice from family, friends and teachers.

Table 2

Inspiration for studying events management at degree level.

	2017/18 ^a n % 36		2018/19 n % 122		2019/20 n % 113		Overall n % 271	
	Response	Case % ^b	Response	Case % ^b	Response	Case % ^b	Response	Case % ^b
Attending events	10	28	79	65	90	80	179	66
Interest in events	11	31	88	72	74	65	173	64
To build a career in events	8	22	85	70	76	67	161	59
Opportunity to be creative	1	3	50	41	57	50	108	40
Enjoyable/social	4	11	53	43	50	44	107	39
An opportunity to go behind the scenes at events	2	6	51	42	51	45	104	38
Previous work or contacts	5	14	48	39	43	38	96	35
Opportunity for travel	0	0	30	25	53	47	83	31
The challenge/sense of achievement related to events	3	8	31	25	32	28	66	24
Want to be a part of something special	1	3	31	25	33	29	65	24
Growth/scope/nature of events	9	25	24	20	22	19	64	24
Course content	1	3	23	19	33	29	57	21
Past study/know people on course	6	17	24	20	16	14	46	17
Matches my current skillset	2	6	20	16	24	21	46	17

^a 2017/18 data is drawn from one institution; variable was aligned from 2018/19. ^b Percentages rounded to nearest integer.

5.2.1 Family, friends and teachers

Reputation is key to student decision-making (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). The two universities in our study are, like the vast majority of providers of events management education in the UK, not highly ranked in university league tables, concentrating more on vocational education and widening participation than many of the more 'prestigious' universities. Therefore, university prestige may not be key in student decision-making, but reputation in relation to subject was important. It is thus important to consider reputation not only in relation to an institution but in the more contextually specific aspect of individual course programmes when applied to vocational subjects like events management.

Family, friends and teachers were influential in student decision making. There was a fairly equal split between participants who had family members who had been to university and those who had not. Participants who knew of others with experience of university tended to value their input:

My mum kind of knew, because she'd done it with both my brothers, trying to find them courses ... so she already had an idea in her mind of the courses that are put on. So one day she was like 'Oh, you'd be good at organising events' and so we looked into the different universities for events management. (U2-5)

Others referred to the importance of endorsements from those already familiar with certain universities and courses:

All my tutors were really supportive. Because I was one of the few girls in my class. All the boys pretty much wanted to go into the military or police, and stuff like that. One of my lecturers, her son did events management here (University Two), so he was like "it's a really good course." (U2-5)

I go to a lot of events. I like festivals, sports events; I like my football and stuff like that. My friend has just been to Australia, running like golf over there and stuff like that. He's just done the Ryder Cup over here. That's kind of how I learnt about the course as well, through him. (U1-8)

The opposite was also true whereby participants referred to being deterred by their teachers from applying for vocational degrees, including those in events management:

[School] always pushed us towards going to university ... A lot of it was school and kind of them telling us, "this is what's going to happen if you go to university".

And did school give you any ideas about what subject you might like to do?

Not really. When I originally told my Head of Year that I was going to do events management, she actually tried to push me away from doing it. (U2-12)

Often against a backdrop of non- or at least ambivalent support, our participants spoke about making decisions independent of others. Interestingly, this was not because they did not seek advice, rather that who they may usually turn to - i.e., family, friends and teachers - did not know what events management was, nor indeed, what a career in events management would entail:

No-one had ever heard of events, like my parents and my friends ... "I'm doing events management" and they were like, "oh, what's that?" I don't think it's a very well-known course, especially at my school, being so academic, everyone wanted to be a doctor, dentist, vet. They wanted to go to Oxford or Cambridge. All vocational courses, they were like, "what's that? What is this about?" (U1-7)

Similarly, this participant noted a lack of advice through school:

I don't think they [teachers] really knew what I was talking about, and I think that's the problem. People need to be educated on what events management really is. Because sometimes people are like "is that really a career?" ... I don't think they had enough idea of what it actually takes, so they were all a bit baffled (U2-1)

The support or otherwise of influential others (be they family, friends or school/college) is important in students' decisions to attend university and to choose events management as their degree subject, but there is a clear lack of knowledge and understanding about events management - both as a degree and as a career. Given the importance of reputation in influencing students' decision-making, events management degree programmes and their university marketing teams may need to do more to explain what these programmes are about and increase their profile.

5.2.2 Prior experience of events

In addition to advice from family, friends and teachers, many of our participants' interests in event management had been sparked from either organising school events, such as Prom, or being inspired by attending live events. Across the three intakes, only 12% of students had not participated in any form of events organisation prior to enrolment (Table 3).

Interviewees also discussed how through attending and helping organise events they were drawn to the emotional engagement between events and people. These interactions reinforced their interest and confidence for further involvement:

It started when I did Prom, and I was like “yeah, I’m OK at this.” And I just carried on doing it. And people gave me opportunities. And then I thought there’s an actual course you can do this in. And it’s not just weddings and the typical things you think of with events management, it’s so much more. And I knew I could do it, and I’m good at it. (U2-8)

This participant said she was emotionally drawn to events management:

I’ve always loved parties and weddings, but the penny dropped when I went to a concert and I was standing in a room ... I stood there and went “imagine how much happiness the people who organised this must get from seeing all the happy faces”. I was like, “you know what? I’d like to be that person who puts these events on and makes people happy”. (U2-1)

Interestingly however, even with this background and prior interest, many were surprised to find they could study events management at degree level:

I didn’t realise that it was a ‘thing’. I knew it was there, but I didn’t think there was a degree to go with it, and I’d never thought of the process of how you’d actually get into doing events management. (U1-2)

Therefore, participants were often pleasantly surprised that they could study events management, though given they had never heard of the courses, nor sometimes, the universities offering the courses, some expressed anxiety over whether this was a legitimate educational pathway:

I literally took to one of the university search degree guides and just typed in key words about what I liked, so ‘festivals’ and stuff, and this hit just kept coming up, “events management”. I’d honestly never heard of it before in my life, ever. And from then I just started researching it ... First of all, it was mainly finding out what universities did it, which again was a surprise, because it wasn’t my usual Russell Group unis that I’d heard of. It was a place like [University] ... I was like “I’m not going there because I’ve not heard of it before, because it’s tiny and nobody goes there, and they don’t ask for any As or Bs in your results so it can’t be very good.” So that was my first opinion of it. Then I started looking in ... We had a selection of the university prospectuses, so I started looking into it again, and thought “that is so me”, the description of it. But I was put off that I’d never heard of the universities before ... I don’t think it was until I went to visit [University] that I was like, “they’re lovely, they’re not small” ... and I realised that is for me, more so than a big Hogwarts-looking university. (U2-7)

Our data demonstrate that events management may not be widely known as a possible degree subject, and so students need to find out about the possibilities of selecting such a course through other avenues.

5.2.3 Doing their research

Brown et al. (2009) and Moogan et al. (1999) argue that an important step in student decision-making is searching for information and comparing provision. This was certainly the case for our participants. They consistently referred to ‘doing their research’ into different events management courses and different universities offering the qualification. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the internet - and Google primarily - was afforded a major role in this research. Indeed, according to this participant, her journey to starting her degree began with a quick Google search:

I went to the website. I went straight on the events management degree, I Googled it, “oh they do it at [University]”. I wasn’t exactly sure where that was ... I went onto the website and I found a little bit more about it and it still appealed and then I came along to the open day, picked up a prospectus, read some more and went to the mini seminars they were doing on that day and got all the information that way. (U2-11)

Table 3

Prior experience of active participation in the world of events.

	2017/18 n % 119		2018/19 n % 119		2019/20 n % 110		Overall n % 348	
	Response	% ^a						
A bit (e.g. helped at a few small events)	48	40	50	42	47	43	145	42
Some (e.g. a couple of specific things/roles - festival volunteer etc.)	35	29	24	20	22	20	81	23
Quite a bit (e.g. organised something or worked at several events)	17	14	23	19	22	20	62	18
None	16	13	15	13	11	10	42	12
Lots (e.g. 1þ years in industry)	3	3	7	6	8	7	18	5

^a Percentages rounded to nearest integer.

For research purposes, course descriptors on university websites and online prospectuses were where most of our participants went to in the first instance. As Table 4 shows, across the three intakes 57% of students cited university websites as their most important source of information.

Given that, at the point of researching the courses, not many of our participants actually understood what events management was, participants frequently referred to the importance of exciting imagery and sound bites for capturing their attention:

I looked at different universities, but I wasn’t sure what to look for in the course. I didn’t really know what I was looking out for. They (the prospectuses) did go through things we’d be doing, and it did sound like a good course (at this University). There were a few others that didn’t sound as good, it put me off. (U2-9)

The accessibility and indeed, inaccessibility of course information on websites was discussed by many:

The website [of this University] was important. So looking at the website, if there’s not a lot of information and the information is hard to find on the website, I’m the type of person that will just give up and won’t bother. The information that I wanted here was like, very clear, very easy to read. What you wanted was in front of you [and] if you wanted it in more depth, it was like, very easy to get to.

And was it the same on the other university websites?

No. Some, I wouldn't even be able to find what modules were being offered, so I was like, "okay, I'm not even bothering if you can't be bothered to lay out your website in a way that I can actually use it". (U2-13)

Once they had shortlisted which courses sounded the most exciting, they would turn their attention to other aspects of the university, such as the campus and accommodation:

I did do as much looking online about, like looking at accommodation, the campus ... I didn't go into it completely clueless. I'd done as much research as possible ... I had spreadsheets of every single pro and con of each accommodation and everything. (U1-6)

Once participants had navigated the (lack of) information available on events management courses and therefore, made the decision to select events management as the subject of their degree, they noted the influence and importance of visiting the universities and meeting course teams on open days and applicant days.

5.2.4 Visiting university and meeting course teams

Winter and Chapleo (2017) argue that open days are key in influencing students' decisions on an emotional level, providing them with more subjective criteria on which to make their choice of course and university. This was also the case within our study. As Table 5 shows, across the three intakes 73% of students attended either an open day, applicant day or both.

In most cases, visiting universities served to reaffirm a gut feeling about one university over another, though some participants also explained how visiting universities and meeting course teams had served to change the perceptions of family members who were ambivalent towards university in general, and events management in particular.

My mum ... because she'd never been to university, she was quite worried about the whole situation. She didn't know a lot about it. So when I first told her about it being a possibility she was not as keen on it, and obviously worried about the finance. But after she went to the open days with me she learned more about it and she changed her mind completely; actually, she was saying 'Yeah, it would be really good for you to go'. (U2-9)

University Two is a relatively small, modern university, located in a town near an historic city in England. Participants from this university frequently referred to the safe, cosy, friendly feel of the campus:

I wanted to go to a university that was in a small town, not like a major city ... And I like the homely kind of feel. I feel more comfortable in a small town ... And I'd come up here and looked at the events management course and I just loved it here ... I just came here and walked around the campuses and I just felt safe. (U2-5)

Table 4

Most important information source when searching for university courses.

	2017/18 n = 126		2018/19 n = 136		2019/20 n = 71		Overall n = 333	
	Response	% ^a	Response	% ^a	Response	% ^a	Response	% ^a
University website	68	54	75	55	48	68	191	57
University prospectus	21	17	19	14	5	7	45	14
Recommendation from friends/family	11	9	11	8	8	11	30	9
Recommendation from professional (e.g. teacher)	9	7	13	10	5	7	27	8
University guides (e.g. Whatuni)	8	6	3	2	2	3	13	4
Career advisor recommendation	4	3	4	3	0	0	8	2
UCAS website	2	2	5	4	1	1	8	2
University social media	1	1	3	2	2	3	6	2
University league tables	2	2	3	2	0	0	5	2
Press/media	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

^a Percentages rounded to nearest integer.

University One is a much bigger university, located in a large city in England. The city location of this university was a significant pull for many participants:

I like where it is. Even though I live in the city and I'm on [another] Campus, I think the campus itself is gorgeous, but as well as that it's just a nice feel. And then the city itself, I really like [City] as a city, and just from being here for a day or two for the open days, I could already feel that I'd be really happy to live in [City]. (U1-1)

Some participants commented on the importance of living in an 'eventful' city:

I felt that because I was doing events management I needed to be in a city that was 'up and coming' to have a good experience. (U1-2)

In such ways, students judged the extent to which they thought they would 'fit in' at a particular university and town/city. Feelings of 'fitting in' or not have powerful effects on students' experiences throughout their learning journey, from application through to either successful course completion or dropout, and are often influenced by factors such as class, 'race' and ethnicity (Ball et al., 2002; Lehmann, 2007; Reay et al., 2010). Approximately half of students in our study were the first member of their family to attend university and so they often had limited comparisons of university life on which to draw, making it perhaps particularly important that they felt as though they would 'fit in' in relation to a particular course, university and town/city.

Though demonstrating different priorities towards the size and location of their choice of university, participants from both universities articulated very similar views on the importance of course culture and, in particular, the student-centric nature of the teaching staff (Winter & Chapleo, 2017). This points to the importance of people in influencing students' decisions, one of the 3Ps identified by Brown et al. (2009) in relation to university marketing and student choice. These participants for instance, commented on how, during an open day, they were inspired, and made to feel at ease by, knowledgeable and enthusiastic lecturers:

[Lecturer]; she sold it for me quite a lot, she was so good.. I just remember being sat in class with [lecturer] and I just thought she was so enthusiastic and so passionate ... especially compared to [another university], it sounds really bad, but like she was so enthusiastic and she almost motivated me to sign up there and then. (U1-7)

We went around the lecture halls, the lecturers were taking us themselves. It wasn't just a random person; they were actually interacting with us and we were getting to know them at the time. And then they came into town with us, they made us feel comfortable, they gave us that time to actually talk to them, whereas other universities didn't. (U2-8)

Given the internal pressures on staff, especially pertaining to league tables, TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework), NSS and other metrics of 'performance' in the marketised context of UK HE, it was illuminating that only a handful of our participants referred to university or course rankings in their decision making process. This finding is also supported by the online survey data (see Table 2) where league tables, the UCAS website, and university guides, such as What Uni, accounted for 1, 2 and 3% of responses respectively for the most important source of information for choosing courses. Moreover, even when participants mentioned metrics, these were not enough to secure an application. Rather, students use these metrics to shortlist courses and institutions. Their overall impressions from open days and applicant days remain more influential:

Because of the leaderboard thing on UCAS. It was like at the top for events management, so I looked into it, and I looked at the prospectus on the open day at the UCAS event ... It just looked like they knew what they were doing. They just had a lot more information about it and a lot of things about other students and stuff. When I came to look round, there were some 3rd years and they were talking about their placement years and how they'd gone to all these amazing places. I think that everyone seemed very happy to be here. (U1-3)

Table 5

Cohort attendance at open and applicant days prior to enrolment.

	2017/18 n % 121		2018/19 n % 122		2019/20 n % 112		Overall n % 355	
	Response	% ^a						
Open day and applicant day	28	23	39	32	40	36	107	30
Open day only	37	31	32	26	30	27	99	28
Neither open day or applicant day	39	32	32	26	25	22	96	27
Applicant day only	17	14	19	16	17	15	53	15

^a Percentages rounded to nearest integer.

Academics work incredibly hard to boost NSS scores and other performance metrics, primarily in the hope that this will lead to a rise in university and subject-level league tables and, thus, the proverbial 'bums on seats' (Dashper & Fletcher, 2019). It is interesting, therefore, that such factors appear to have only limited influence on students' decision making.

Interestingly, despite the ubiquity of social media in contemporary British society, our participants consistently downplayed the role of social media in their decision making, a finding supported by the online survey data where just 2% of respondents cited university social media as their most important source of information (see Table 2). Participants did however, refer to having joined university and course

social media feeds once they had applied and been accepted onto the course. Crucially, by this point, participants had already made the decision to attend and so the impact of social media was minimal.

It is apparent that the students in our study based their decision to study events management at university on a range of factors related to prior experiences, career expectations, subjective emotional responses to people and place and the influence of parents, friends and schools. In such ways, students go through a process of decision-making which has some similarities to decision-making in other consumerist contexts (Moogan et al., 1999). They adopted aspects of a consumerist identity and saw university as being a route to a future career, although high earnings were not necessarily an expectation. However, contrary to government discourse, their decisions were not based on performance metrics and league tables which are supposed to guide student consumers in 'shopping around' between providers, subsequently leading to greater competition and innovation amongst universities (Brown, 2015). Rather, as Winter and Chapleo (2017) suggest, students are heavily influenced by subjective aspects of a course and institution, as well as their wider knowledge and expectations of what university might entail. This has consequences for how universities try to attract new students, as open days and good quality websites appear to be more important than performance in national league tables. However as universities increasingly adopt broader marketing approaches in order to try and attract these student-consumers, Drummond (2004) suggests that care must be taken to avoid customer (student) confusion. He suggests that the proliferation of marketing information may actually confuse would-be students, leading to poor decisions and ultimately affecting student retention when the realisation occurs that a selected course is not what it was expected to be. This may have particular relevance for subjects like events management which, as our study shows, are not well understood in wider society.

In the final section we discuss the implications of these findings for understanding the motivations of (potential) events management students for HEIs operating in a highly competitive neoliberal market.

6. Conclusions

In their review of research on students' university choices, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) argue that the HE market is not homogenous and HE experiences vary widely, meaning there is unlikely to be a definitive list of factors that affect student choices. They stress the importance of recognising HE as a segmented market, something which may seem obvious but is rarely recognised in the wider literature. Events management is a particular segment of this market; vocational in nature, located predominantly within mid- and low-ranking HEIs and with low levels of prior awareness amongst potential students and those advising them - parents, teachers and friends. There is thus need to understand the characteristics of this HE segment better, and in particular to investigate how students make the decision to study for an events management degree and what their expectations for the course may be. This is important in order to effectively communicate with potential students and market events management degree courses appropriately and hopefully reduce student confusion and increase satisfaction and retention (Drummond, 2004).

In this paper we have identified that events management students adopt elements of the student-as-consumer (SAC) framework of UK HE in that they see university education primarily in relation to their future careers and thus as a private good that will - hopefully - result in personal gains for them in the labour market. This future-career focus is perhaps unsurprising given the vocational nature of events

management degrees. However, although they appear to accept this aspect of the SAC uncritically, students challenge the supposed primacy of future economic rewards. Students in this study claim to be more interested in a creative, rewarding and enjoyable career than one that might be deemed 'successful' according to traditionally-used markers of career success, such as pay and status (Ng et al., 2005). The SAC framework thus only tells a partial story of student motivations and decision-making in relation to events management degrees, and students' choices are directed by a range of factors including a desire to fit in and enjoy their course, in addition to hoped for benefits in their future career.

Therefore, this study suggests that although students who choose to study events management at UK universities adopt a consumer position in relation to their education, at least to some extent, they can not really be considered 'informed consumers' in the ways that government and public discourse position them. They are not completely uninformed about the course and university, but their level of knowledge is relatively low and based predominantly on the advice of others, readily accessible information on university websites and the 'feel' they get of a course and university through their interactions with the institution and specific staff. The students in this study were not influenced by metrics to do with graduate employability and incomes, and did not make choices based on league tables and published KPIs, although reputation gained through word of mouth was important in many cases. Student choice of university course and specific institution is thus influenced by a range of factors, both rational (such as course content, future career aspirations) and emotional (such as enthusiasm of staff and a sense that they will 'fit in') (Winter & Chapleo, 2017). Consequently, although some caution should be exercised about adopting an uncritical consumerist position towards students and their decisions to attend university and study certain courses, the marketisation of HE in the UK has advanced to a point where ideas from (experiential) marketing and consumer behaviour may have application, and warrant further examination in the context of a vocational subject like events management.

The findings presented here suggest universities may need to rethink their recruitment strategies, particularly in relation to courses like events management that are relatively recent additions to the higher education landscape and with very limited pre-university provision that could otherwise act as a feed into a university degree. University websites are clearly paramount in providing information and a first sense of connection with a course and university. Open days and other opportunities to connect with potential students on an emotional level are also important, as many of our participants based their decision primarily on a general 'feel' they had towards a course and university.

This is not to say that league table performances and other metrics are unimportant, as they hold a powerful position in public discourse and are often a blunt tool used by governments to question the value of particular courses and subjects (Milian & Rizk, 2018). Additionally, our sample in this study was made up of predominantly UK-based undergraduate students, and we acknowledge that international students and postgraduates may value league table performance and other metrics more than home-based 17/18 year olds. Indeed, Han and Yoon (2015) found that course and institution reputation was important to graduate students in South Korea. However, our findings do suggest that balance needs to be sought between prioritising league table performance and associated metrics, as university management teams tend to do, and the more local and relational factors that participants in this study identified as important in their decisions to study events management at a particular university.

Many of the findings in this research are likely to be similar across other providers of events management education, both in the UK and internationally, but we would caution against any attempt to generalise at this stage. While our research has collected data from a significant number of students and across a three-year period, there are further opportunities to extend this work, namely through working in partnership with other events management providers, and extending the focus to course alumni and the events industry. Given the importance of knowing our prospective students, graduates and industry shapers, there is a need for wider international comparisons to explore further the decision-making processes of events management students and their expectations of university education.

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