

## A16. Managing greener events: A practical student approach to sustainability

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Events management is a relatively new discipline in higher education, with named degrees in the subject originating from the late 1990s. This is a growing field of study at the University of Gloucestershire and nationally, with student numbers increasing rapidly year-on-year. The BA (Hons) programme is generally studied by 18 year-old, A Level entry students, with relatively few mature students.

Such degrees have come out of specialist coverage of the events industry over a number of years through degrees in tourism, leisure and hospitality management. The event industry is diverse, ranging from weddings, conferences, meetings and exhibitions, to major international conventions, festivals, sporting events, music concerts, corporate events, and fund raising events. As a relatively new discipline there is a not long history of academic teaching or research into sustainability associated specifically with the events industry. Where there is an overlap with tourism, hospitality or leisure, obvious linkages can be made, for example, through considering the legacy from Olympic Games for host nations.

The events management degree programme at the University of Gloucestershire is a four-year sandwich programme. Students undertake a compulsory short work experience module, *Events management skills in the workplace* during Level 1, involving approximately 90 hours in the industry. Students are first introduced to sustainability principles alongside business ethics in Level 1. They run an event in a management team of four or five students during Level 2 and then spend a year on paid placement in the events industry, where they have opportunities to explore how sustainability issues are manifest in the real world of events management.

### **Aims**

Level 2 students organise and run an event as a management team of between four and five. Generally these are held in or close to the

University and range from student social events, balls, day conference and various charity-based events. The purpose of the exercise is to develop a deeper understanding of events management and the day-to-day considerations event managers need to consider in planning and running an event successfully.

During 2006-7 one group have specifically focused on sustainability, through organizing a conference for students on the topic of sustainability. In doing so they have also applied the 'Greener Events Guidelines' (Appendix 1), published by the Government Office for the South West, to the conference. In operationally managing the conference, the students will:

- Develop knowledge and understanding of the event planning process and utilise this knowledge by applying it to a real event
- Analyse and evaluate the different components involved in organising and running an event
- Analyse and identify possible problems within the context of an event and propose strategies to minimise associated risks
- Develop knowledge of sustainable issues and the application of Greener Events Guidelines.

The conference title and date was pre-determined by the tutors, but all operational management aspects of the event, including the conference content were the responsibility of the student group allocated to manage the conference. The module is fully assessed in relation to the planning and management of, and reflection upon, the event.

### **Rationale**

The activity aids the students' learning in two ways: first, in arranging conference speakers students need to use knowledge and understanding of sustainability gained early in their studies; and, second, they need to apply government 'Greener Event Guidelines' (Appendix 1) to an actual event about sustainability, showing due consideration of the environmental, social and economic impact.

The Government Office for the South West supported the conference and will evaluate the extent to which students have implemented the

Guidelines. By practically applying the Guidelines to a specific event students have to consider what they can realistically achieve, what, as event organisers they can control, and what is outside of their control. For example, actively encouraging the use of public transport can be achieved, but as students they have no control over some supply chain issues which are outside their span of control.

Many Event Management degree programmes require students to use operational event management skills, through running events. Applying the 'Greener Events Guidelines' to such current activity is providing a further dimension, and so could easily be integrated into existing learning and assessment activities within these programmes.

### **Implementation**

Students undertaking this activity need to have a full understanding of the underlying theory before being able to apply this in a practical management environment by running an event. At the University of Gloucestershire, an introduction to this theory is within the pre-requisite module, with further development in taught sessions before the events take place.

Students need to have a good general knowledge and understanding of sustainability in its broadest sense. They should understand the 'Greener Event Guidelines' and be able to apply the checklist in the Guidelines to a specific event. The specific sections in the checklist cover: venue choice, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (including travel), catering and locally produced food, and reducing waste (and costs).

Students are assessed through a planning document and a reflective critical appraisal of the event post-event. The assessment considers the extent of students' reflection on what they have been able to implement from the Guidelines. If they have not been able to utilise fully the Guidelines they need to reflect on the issues which lead to this. Finally students are asked to consider what they could do differently, if they were running a further event.

### **Sustainability focus**

These students are 'managers of the future' for the events industry and the sustainability knowledge and skills they learn in their programme will influence their practice.

In using the Guidelines students are developing their knowledge and skills of economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability. For each aspect in the Guidelines explanation is given to support the Guidelines' recommendations. For example, the economic, social and environmental implications of using locally produced food are explained. A checklist of suggestions to consider in relation to food and refreshments is then given, so students can check that their planning is appropriate in sustainability terms.

Not only is this activity a learning opportunity for students organising the conference, but those attending the event, internally and externally, as delegates or as speakers, will see sustainability in action, imparting knowledge and understanding into the wider community. If an attendee books online, uses public transport to attend and experiences such a 'greener event', they may well draw messages which will become embedded in their own practice.

### **Active learning**

This is unquestionably an active learning experience for the students. They are running a real conference, for real paying customers. To run such a conference successfully students need to understand the underpinning theory and then apply it to a live practical situation. By engaging with this project students need to apply knowledge and understanding in an holistic way. They are not looking at sustainability in isolation; it is one of many factors they need to consider in operationally managing an event, alongside risk assessment, legal issues, financial management, dealing with people and so on. Even simple small details have been a steep learning curve for the students. For example, sourcing a conference bag made from jute that was deemed 'climate neutral'; deciding to use water from a local source supplied in large containers, as opposed small plastic bottles of water; ensuring all hot beverages were 'fair trade'; keeping paper usage to a minimum; and encouraging delegates to use public transport. They have also learnt from what has not been possible, for example, being tied to a food provider that does not use local suppliers.

If the event is also organised on the topic of sustainability, as in this case, the students are also engaging with external agencies involved in sustainability in arranging speakers on the subject, thus engaging with a 'real life' situation in every sense. Such an activity is about planning, execution and reflection on the event. Students will reflect on what they

have learnt, challenges they accounted on their journey pre-event, what worked and what issues they accounted before, during and after the event and finally by critically evaluating the event afterwards they develop reflective practice skills.

The use of 'live events' in assessment is discussed by Lannon (2004) in relation to the predecessor to this current module. Lannon identifies that running such an event allows students the opportunity to apply what they have learnt in a practical context and therefore fits with Bentley's (1998) 'crucial tests of education'. Lannon further identifies that the three stages of assessment (event planning, event management and post-event evaluation) mirrors the 'action-focus model' recognised by Ellis (1992) 'as ideal for integrating theory with practice' (Lannon, 2004: 99).

### **Feedback**

It is too early to formally evaluate the learning that has taken place, as the activity is ongoing. However, as stated by Lannon (2004), feedback from previous students undertaking live event management projects of this nature is very positive. Students can feel there is a lot of work involved in running such events, but will often report that the outcome makes it worthwhile. Research undertaken with final year students returning from placement (Lannon 2004) has identified such an event management experience is particularly cited by students as helping them prepare for the demands they face working in the industry during their placement year.

Formal evaluation of the event by the students will involve evaluating feedback from presenters and delegates after the conference. Both presenters and delegates on the day commented on this being a fantastic way to spread the sustainability message and were extremely supportive of the event. So far, the students have certainly engaged fully in the process of planning the conference using the 'Guidelines' and checklist to support their decision-making. Through this active learning experience they have already shown improved understanding and skills with regards sustainability, alongside other operational event management skills. In discussing the event with outsider parties in the industry, including the Government Office for the South West, they have felt the pressures and reality faced by operational managers in the industry.

Such experience and skills development shows important personal development and is something that students can cite on their *curriculum*

*vitae* when applying for placements in the events industry at the end of the academic year and after graduation. Support for the event has been good, with speakers from industry and academics alike being involved in the conference. This has allowed the students to communicate effectively with individuals involved in various aspects of sustainability and has been a positive experience for those concerned.

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

The key strengths of this activity are that it has allowed students to develop skills and solve problems in a real life environment. They have had to act and respond in a professional manner and multitask. Reflection on the activity has improved their subject understanding, as well as their operational management skills.

If there is a weakness it is two fold. First, such a project can be a large undertaking for all concerned and significant tutorial support is needed to make it work well, which can be costly in time, although valuable as a learning experience for the students. Second, as with most real life projects there can be risks for the institution, so the management and support package needs to ensure risk assessments, legal issues, insurance and so on are fully considered at the outset. For example, all materials must meet the University guidelines; students cannot process sensitive data, such as booking payment details and approval for expenditure for the event. The reputational risk to the University has been controlled in a number of ways: through academic tutor mentoring and support (students make proposals and get feedback, with approval agreed before anything can go outside the institution); and the involvement of administrative staff who are involved in conference running activity, (whose time can be costed to the conference). Such administrative staff have advised students on University processes, for example, where such staff would normally set-up a conference webpage the students have provided material to go on a webpage and staff have ensured that it meets University style requirements before allowing it to go live.

### **Programmes**

The module *Events Operations Management* and is taken during Level 2, (15 CATS points). The module is compulsory for the undergraduate degree in Events Management.

As a future development it is proposed this module moves from 15 CATS points to 30 CATS points. Such a move will allow a greater depth of understanding to be developed and will allow further aspects to be included within the module. One suggestion is that such a module would enable the use of the Guidelines as standard practice across all events run by students in the module – the current initiative has been tested with a specific sustainability conference only at this stage.

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**Key words:**

Events operations management; greener events management, practical skills development; sustainability

**References**

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**Appendix 1 Greener Events Checklist**  
**For discussions between event managers and venues**

You can mark the appropriate boxes as you plan the delivery of your event

**Venue choice**

- Choose a venue that has good public transport access
- Ask potential venues for their in-house environmental policy
- Venues offering in-house technical equipment & support (e.g. staging, audio-visual) can reduce equipment transportation
- Choose a venue that is interested in doing more to become green/sustainable, and let them know that this is the reason why you selected them
- Consider the use of video conferencing

**CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions (including travel)**

(see 'Reducing Waste' checklist also)

- Take measures to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from delegates travelling to the venue, i.e. provide information about local public transport (with pedestrian routes) and encourage its use. Where appropriate promote car sharing
- Minimise unnecessary lighting, heating / air-conditioning
- Offset the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions arising from your event

**Catering & Locally Produced Food**

- Ensure that dietary requirements are catered for (you can use the event registration form to obtain this information)
- Plan meals using seasonal local produce wherever possible. Organic produce should also be considered
- Wherever possible ensure fruit is provided as an alternative to sweet desserts
- Plan food requirements carefully to avoid unnecessary waste
- Left over food: consider donating to local charity or sending for local composting
- Ensure tea/coffee is Fair Trade & provide tap water as an alternative (if you must use bottled water, make sure it is local!)
- Ask venue to provide milk / cream in jugs rather than individual plastic cartons and use reusable crockery, glassware & cutlery where possible (to reduce waste)

**Reducing Waste (& costs)**Pre Event:

- Use websites & emailing lists to promote the event
- Use double-sided printing for promotional materials & handouts. Use recycled paper where practicable
- Use portable display materials (easily transported by an attendee & can be re-used)
- Seek naturally lighted meeting & exhibition areas
- Format any handouts so as to minimise the amount of paper used
- Where possible, write material in a re-usable format (general rather than event specific)
- Minimise the length of the registration form or use electronic registration where possible & publish the event itinerary online
- Ask the venue to recycle paper & cardboard waste etc – and to provide suitable recycling bins
- Make your own note pads from scrap paper

During the Event:

- If you are providing delegate packs (if in a folder, make it re-usable), give these to delegates when they register on arrival – not beforehand – to avoid duplication
- Avoid mass distribution of handouts - allow attendees to download copies from the internet
- Ensure presenters are aware of electronic presentation facilities & that their presentation will be distributed electronically after the event
- Provide re-usable name badges (& remember to collect them at the end of the event!)
- Minimise use of accessories that are harmful to the environment (e.g. plastic leaflet wallets)
- Feature conference name & date on holding slide rather than single use stage set graphics
- Minimise use of high wattage stage lighting
- Promote energy & water efficiency to participants – e.g. switch off lights when rooms are not in use
- Use drymark eraser boards rather than paper in workshop presentations
- Request that any unused items be collected for use at another event

Post Event:

- If not issued at the event, send out delegate feedback questionnaire by email
- Give any feedback you have to the venue

**This is part of 'Greener Events', a guide on reducing the environmental impacts of conferences and seminars. Published on the BUSINESS page of <http://www.oursouthwest.com> with other sources of guidance, management tools and environmental support programmes.**

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