Post-Pandemic Transformations: Rethinking Employability in Event Management Education

Jennie Randall

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Abstract

There is a growing field of literature concerning the concept of employability within Event Management Education, but few studies have attempted to provide a theoretically informed analysis of this concept through a post-pandemic lens. This thesis presents an explorative study investigating the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the skillsets required of graduates to work in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate. To achieve this, the research examines the perceptions of both employers and event management graduates currently in employment, analysing their opinions on the influence of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics needed to facilitate prospects for future employment within the events industry. It draws together their insights on how providers of Event Management Education within the Higher Education sector can facilitate students in developing the skillsets required for successful careers in the events industry as it re-emerges in a post COVID-19 landscape.

Within the context of a qualitative interpretivist epistemology, a range of in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with employers and event management graduates from a variety of sectors within the events industry. Analysis of the interview data indicates that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills needed for employment in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate, shaping both the skills desired by employers and the skillsets required to successfully fulfil the requirements of many of the roles within the industry post-pandemic. These factors have been examined and recommendations offered which aim to contribute to an understanding of how Higher Education providers can better prepare their graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the events industry, equipping them for the challenges of careers in events in a post-pandemic world.

The contextual position and timing of the research proposed presents an ideal opportunity to review and build upon what is already known and understood from previous literature in the field; whilst providing an original contribution to the existing knowledge and literature bodies of both employability and Event Management Education at a critical time within the events industry.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This introductory chapter begins by outlining the focus of the research and the field of academic research that this thesis is concerned with. Background information will be presented to contextually position the study and its rationale will be outlined to provide justification for its focus. The primary research question will be identified along with the associated objectives of the study. The chapter will conclude by categorising the study's scope before summarising the subsequent chapters to follow.

1.2 Focus of the research

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct an explorative study examining the concept of employability within Event Management Education, through a post-pandemic lens. Here employability is regarded as 'the development of skills and attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations' and is closely aligned to work of well-established authors Yorke and Knight (2006) who undertake research in the Higher Education employability field. It is intended that this thesis will contribute to an understanding of how Higher Education providers can better prepare their graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the events industry and equip them for the challenges of careers in the industry in a post COVID-19 landscape.

The study will explore how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required of graduates to work within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate. To do so, the experiences of Event Management graduates will be examined, exploring their employment experiences within the UK events industry; pre-pandemic, during the pandemic itself, and since. It will evaluate their perceptions and the skillsets acquired during these timeframes and analyse their opinions on if, and how, they feel the pandemic has influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics needed to facilitate prospects for future employment within the post-pandemic events industry. The study will similarly capture the employer perspective on these areas; while also exploring how employers believe providers of Event Management Education within the UK Higher Education sector, can better facilitate students in developing the skillsets required for successful careers in the events industry as it re-emerges in a post COVID-19 landscape.

1.3 Background to the study

The UK Higher Education system is comprised of over 2.8 million students (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2023). With undergraduate students currently accounting for almost three-quarters (71%) of the overall UK Higher Education student population (HESA, 2023), this study will place recent graduates from undergraduate courses at the heart of the research. It will specifically focus on graduates within the Event Management Education field.

With the number of undergraduate students entering the UK Higher Education system increasing by over 18.5% within the past twenty years; from 1,541,225 students in 2000/2001 to 2,042,310 students in 2021/2022 (HESA, 2023), so have the number and diversity of courses offered by Higher Education providers. The ongoing expansion in university attendance in the UK has led to the growth of not only traditional fields of study, but also the development, in recent years, of a number of newer vocational awards. Among these, Event Management has become one of the fastest growing vocational disciplines (Ryan, 2016), with the provision of Event Management Education in the Higher Education sector growing significantly in recent years (Barron and Ali-Knight, 2017). The growing prominence of programmes offered in this emerging discipline is evidenced by the 109 Higher Education providers (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS], 2023), who offer courses in this area. Courses offered in the Event Management Education discipline range from apprenticeships and higher national awards to doctoral research degrees, and are currently supplied by an array of education providers including further education colleges and universities.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) classifies Event Management Education as a distinguished discipline that seeks to explore a range of conceptual and theoretical areas, alongside developing vocational skills, in order to meet the academic and employability needs of graduates, the events industry and the events subject area (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2019). They contend that curriculum content for courses in the area is vast in nature, reflective of the events industry itself. Stating that it includes content on a diverse set of event types covering everything from music events and festivals, outdoor events, charity events, religious and cultural events, business events, conferences, exhibitions and trade fairs. Many aspects of Event Management Education draw upon academic areas such as Psychology, Design, Law, Geography, Sociology and Political Sciences, and it is therefore, by nature, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. The QAA assert that the study of events may also be offered as an integrated pathway through programmes in business, marketing, management or design and production, while retaining the distinctive characteristics of the events industry. They contend that where students study in these contexts, they apply their learning to the event industry specifically (p.5) (QAA, 2019).

The relative expansion and development of the Event Management Education discipline area in recent years has mirrored the purported growth, and significance, of the global events industry itself. Prior to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the events industry was internationally regarded as one of the largest and fastest growing of the global economy; representing a significant proportion of gross domestic product in most western nations, with the economic value of the events industry to both domestic and international markets being extensively acknowledged in the academic literature and industry publications alike (QAA, 2019; Bowdin et al., 2023; Getz and Page, 2020; Rashid et al., 2017). Recognition of the industry's perceived value from a number of key stakeholder groups, including the government, is testament to the critical position that the events industry has established in helping to achieve economic success, while also fostering the cultural and social benefits that events bring too. Whether that be cultivating social inclusion and community cohesion, educating event audiences about diversity and celebrating cultural origins, or providing opportunities for acquiring new skills or experiences through working or volunteering at an event. At a national level the 'UK Events Report 2020' asserts that 2019 was a 'landmark year' for the UK events industry, reporting that it was worth in excess of £70 billion and accounted for more than 50% of direct spend in the UK visitor economy (Business Visits and Events Partnership [BVEP], 2020). The social impact of the industry, particularly in terms of employment, during the same year, was also vast. During 2019, the UK events industry offered skilled employment and engaging careers to a diverse workforce of more than 700,000 people nationally, from apprenticeship level upwards (BVEP, 2020).

However, in January 2020, the event industry's development was abruptly halted when the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak hit the UK with its first confirmed case of COVID-19. The subsequent onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic sent shock waves through societies and economies around the world, fracturing many of the norms and structures of society. The events industry, like many others, was decimated at a global level by the pandemic, suffering severe financial hardship which is yet to be fully quantified (Bowdin et al., 2023). The industry was left struggling to survive when the announcement of lockdown restrictions and governments banning travel and gathering for events, meant almost all events were cancelled or postponed worldwide, from small scale community events to mega events including the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games. Job losses in the events industry, as a result the pandemic, were reported to be in the region of 85.9 million worldwide (Madray, 2020) and left many of the most experienced and talented employees in the field fending for themselves, seeking employment in alternative sectors as the events industry closed its doors in a matter of days.

As societies globally went into quarantine, organisations in the events industry quickly shifted towards finding alternative ways to connect with event audiences; seeking out creative online solutions as a substitute to be able to continue to host events and keep their businesses

operational. The resulting pivot to the digitisation of events of all kinds held as online, virtual events during this time presented demanding requirements for those lucky enough to remain in employment during the pandemic. The need to rapidly adapt skillsets during this time, to keep up with the mass shift towards innovations in the online and virtual events environment, became a necessity.

Now, as the events industry beings to re-emerge post-pandemic, once again welcoming event audiences, the landscape, future trajectory of the industry, and the types of events held post-pandemic is evolving (Bowdin et al., 2023). This defining turning point for the industry presents several vital opportunities for development and diversification as the industry attempts to re-establish itself and its significance in the recovery from the global pandemic. It means that those seeking to gain and sustain employment in the industry must now reflect upon the nature of future events and the form they will take, ensuring they are adequately equipped with the correct skillsets to prosper. The reported skills gap (Bladen et al., 2022) that is a legacy of the mass exodus of talent and skilled employees who departed the events industry in the peak of the pandemic also needs to be addressed if the industry is to thrive once more. It is for these reasons that an investigation of the impact of the pandemic on skills, capabilities, and attributes required to thrive in the 'new norm' (Dowson et al., 2022) of the emergent events industry is relevant in a post-pandemic climate. The timely nature of this research also presents an ideal opportunity for educators in the Event Management Education field, to critically evaluate how effectively they prepare their graduates for employment in the events industry, in a post COVID-19 landscape, ensuring that their provision remains fit for purpose.

With intentions to contribute to the scarcity of literature on post-pandemic employability within Event Management Education within the UK context, this thesis aims to advance knowledge in this under-researched area. The significance of this thesis lies in its intent to contribute to an understanding of how providers of Event Management Education can better prepare their graduates for employment in the industry, and to provide them with the skillsets needed to facilitate a prosperous career within the UK events industry, in a post-pandemic climate.

1.4 Research Question and Objectives

The overarching research question of this thesis is:

RQ: How has the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic influenced the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate?

The associated objectives for the research are:

- **RO1:** To critically analyse whether the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required of future Event Management graduates for entrance into the post-pandemic graduate labour market, within the events industry.

- **RO2:** To appraise the experiences of undergraduate Event Management graduates, exploring their employment journey in the events industry pre-pandemic, during the pandemic itself, and since. To investigate their opinions on the influence of the pandemic on the skillsets required to both work in the UK events industry and to facilitate prospects for future employment in the industry.

- **RO3:** To investigate the perceptions of employers in the UK events industry, examining their perceptions on the influence of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required to effectively prepare graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate.

- **RO4:** To appraise how providers of Event Management Education can help bridge the gap between industry and the Higher Education sector, to assist students in developing the skills, capabilities and attributes required for successful employment in the UK events industry, in a post-COVID-19 landscape.

1.5 Rationale and Justification for the research

Given the emerging nature of research on Event Management Education and the paucity of post-pandemic, employability focussed research published in this area, this thesis seeks to contribute to the narrative in this under-researched area.

In a post-pandemic climate, and as the UK events industry continues in its recovery journey from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) disease, it has been identified by authors such as Bladen et al., (2022), that there needs to be continued discussion about the future shapes that Event Management Education, training and the related certifications take. Bladen et al., (2022) suggests that this is needed to ensure Event Management Education remains fit for purpose and that UK Higher Education provision, designed to prepare graduates for employment in the industry, is effective (Bladen et al., 2022).

Addressing the aforementioned industry skills gap resulting from workforce attrition that occurred throughout the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic-related period, and with acknowledgement that the events landscape is evolving as a result of the pandemic, it ahs been identifies that careful consideration now needs to be given to how Higher Education institutions approach employability and prepare their graduates for employment within the UK events industry, post-pandemic. Werner et al., (2022) states that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused the event industry and providers of event management courses to reflect on the

nature of future events and the form they will take post-pandemic, contending that the future of skills taught in the relevant programs and courses will also need to be reassessed and restructured to ensure sustained effectiveness. In the wider educational discourse, Dalrymple et al., (2021) support the broader emphasis of this thesis, asserting that further research into the employability landscape, post-pandemic, is necessary and would be a valuable addition to the employability area going forward.

In contrast to previous research in this area, which is examined in detail within chapter two: literature review; the contextual position and timing of the research proposed presents an ideal opportunity to review and build upon what is already known and understood from previous literature in the field; whilst providing an original contribution to the existing knowledge and literature bodies of both employability and Event Management Education at a critical time within the events industry.

1.6 Chapters to follow

Subsequent chapters of this thesis will seek to execute the research process in such a manner to achieve the aims of the study. Chapter two will depict the underpinning theoretical basis within boundaries of the research, highlighting key concepts and their pertinence to the study. It will critically review key literature in the areas of employability and Event Management Education, providing direction for the data collection phases of the study. Chapter three will consider the methodology employed. It will discuss my philosophical positioning as the researcher and provide evidence to assess the trustworthiness of the research design selected for utilisation, including participants, ethical considerations and the approach to data analysis and interpretation. In chapter four, the findings of the study are presented and examined. Following this, the final chapter, chapter five, will present the conclusions and implications of the study, identifying its limitations and outlining the contribution of the research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

The introductory chapter of this thesis discussed the focus of the research to be undertaken, providing the contextual background and the rationale. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review of literature relevant to the study and the underpinning theoretical basis within the boundaries of the research.

To achieve this, the next section of this chapter (2.2) will provide an outline of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), before presenting a review of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the impacts of it, assisting with contextual positioning of the study's focus and situating the literature to be analysed in subsequent sections. The chapters third section (2.3) will explore the diversity of employability discourse linked to the study; analysing how employability has been theorised, critiqued, and challenged within the body of literature. It will examine the different conceptualisations of employability, trace the historical connections of employability and its links to education, and analyse recent and post-pandemic theoretical framings of employability, before presenting an analysis of the conceptual models of employability relevant to the study. The final section (2.4) will explore the body of literature surrounding Event Management Education relevant to the study. While it is prudent to emphasise the richness, variety, and scope of the literature bodies linked to the study's focus, it is important to stress that the narrative dimensions of this chapter are, in places, purposefully selective with pertinence to the study, due to the constraints of the thesis.

2.2 The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

2.2.1 Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

Coronavirus disease, designated COVID-19; which caused the global pandemic of 2020, 'is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus' (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2023). COVID-19 which is said to have caused 'the most challenging global public health crisis for many decades' (Jones et al., 2020), is thought to have originated in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and was spread globally at an exponential rate after its first reported detection in December 2019. The highly contagious virus, which is spread easily through close contact with people who are infected with it, sees individuals who test positive become contagious to others for a period of up to 5-10 days after transmission occurs. Sufferers infected with the virus, which attacks the respiratory system, can experience an array of associated symptoms, with older people and those with underlying medical conditions most likely to become seriously ill, requiring medical attention as a result. The World Health Organization (WHO) - the global coordinating agency for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, reported at the time of writing this thesis that the virus now has several variants and that over 760 million cases and a staggering 6.9 million deaths have been recorded worldwide since the outbreak began, with the actual number thought to be much higher and still continuing to grow (WHO, 2023).

2.2.2 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Coronavirus (COVID-19) first came into circulation after the earliest reported cases were detected in China in December 2019, with the virus then spreading to other countries around the world at an exponential rate (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on the 30th January 2020, later confirming the outbreak as a global pandemic on 11th March 2020 (WHO, 2023). The rapid spread of Coronavirus at the start of 2020 led to the introduction of a series of control measures being enforced in countries globally, intended to inhibit the spread and impact of the virus worldwide. However, despite international efforts to contain it, Coronavirus (COVID-19) has since spread to over 230 countries, causing pervasive health, social, economic, cultural and psychological impacts in its wake (Chen et al., 2022), altering the pace, fabric and nature of our lives (Hiscott et al., 2020). The British Academy, in their independent review on the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 (which was commissioned by the UK Government Office for Science in September 2020), asserted that COVID-19 has been the most challenging global public health crisis for over a century. Their findings, which were published in 2021, concluded that the impacts of COVID-19 go well beyond the medical, contending that it has changed lives and livelihoods, communities and economies across the world (Morgan Jones et al., 2020). With the devasting and inescapable effects of the pandemic having been felt globally, the contextual emphasis of this

thesis is shaped heavily by the pandemic. A narrative of the key unfolding events of the pandemic in the UK and an analysis unpacking its subsequent impacts will be presented next to contextually locate the study. An illustrative timeline of the UK government Coronavirus COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, is included on the following page to facilitate discussions within this section. It details the key lockdowns and measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, between March 2020 and December 2021: Source: Institute of Government Analysis (2022).

*

The COVID-19 outbreak was originally reported in the UK after the first cases were detected on 29th January 2020, when two Chinese nationals tested positive for the virus (WHO, 2023). These cases, confirmed at a time when the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office had issued guidance to residents advising against travel to the Hubei province, China; the original epicentre of the outbreak, subsequently led to the suspension of all UK travel to and from mainland China and self-isolation rules being imposed anyone who had returned from the area within the preceding 14 days. With cases of the virus being reported globally, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on the 30th January, 2020, stating that 'it is expected that international exportation of cases may appear in any country' and that 'all countries should be prepared for containment, including active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact tracing and actions to prevent the of onward spread of 2019-nCoV infection' (WHO, 2020).

By the end of February 2020 cases around the world were steadily rising, with the UK totalling a reported number of 23 infections (WHO, 2020), many of which were detected amongst residents who had recently returned from travel overseas from countries including Italy, France and Iran. With the virus now geographically closing in and as the number of detected cases continued to rise, the UK government speedily restricted travel to and from all countries with reported outbreaks and extended advice around self-isolation in attempts to contain the virus. In the wake of rising infection rates in the UK, Coronavirus testing (PCR - polymerase chain reaction) procedures were quickly put in place to effectively detect infections and diagnose COVID-19 more efficiently, alongside guidance which was issued for the use of compulsory face masks in public spaces and the pre-existing stringent self-isolation rules; all intended to reduce the scale and reach of the virus.

Figure. 1 – Timeline Coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdowns and measures

Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and measures, March 2020 to December 2021

IfG

16 March
PM says "now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel"

19 March
PM says the UK can "turn tide of coronavirus" in 12 weeks

23 March
PM announces the first lockdown in the UK, ordering people to "stay at home"

25 March
Coronavirus Act 2020 gets Royal Assent

26 March
Lockdown measures legally come into force

10 May
PM announces a conditional plan for lifting lockdown, and says that people who cannot work from home should return to the workplace but avoid public transport

More restrictions are eased in England, including reopening of pubs, restaurants, hairdressers.

18 July
Local authorities in England gain additional powers to enforce social distancing

4 July
UK's first local lockdown comes into force in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire.

14 September
'Rule of six' – indoor and outdoor social gatherings above six banned in England

22 September
PM announces new restrictions in England, including a return to working from home and 10pm curfew for hospitality sector

30 September
PM says UK at a "critical moment" in the crisis and would "not hesitate" to impose further restrictions if needed needed

5 November
Second national lockdown comes into force in England

24 November
PM announces up to three households will be able to meet up during a five-day Christmas period of 23 to 27 December

4 January
PM says children should return to school after the Christmas break, but warns restrictions in England will get tougher

6 January
England enters third national lockdown

8 March: Step 1
Schools in England reopen for primary and secondary school students.

Recreation in an outdoor public spaces will be allowed between two people.

'Stay at home' order remains in place.

29 March: Step 1
Outdoor gatherings of either six people or two households will be allowed, including in private gardens. Outdoor sports facilities also reopen.

'Stay at home' order ends but people encouraged to stay local.

17 May: Step 3
Limit of 30 people allowed to mix outdoors.

'Rule of six' or two households allowed for indoor social gatherings.

Indoor venues will reopen, including pubs, restaurants, cinemas.

Up to 10,000 spectators can attend the very largest outdoor-seated venues like football stadiums.

19 July: Step 4
Most legal limits on social contact removed in England, and the final closed sectors of the economy reopened (e.g. nightclubs).

8 December
PM announces a move to 'Plan B' measures in England following the spread of the Omicron variant.

10 December
Face masks become compulsory in most public indoor venues under Plan B.

15 December
NHS Covid Pass becomes mandatory in specific settings, such as nightclubs under Plan B.

2021

March   April   May   June   July   August   September   October   November   December   January   February   March   April   May   June   July   August   September   October   November   December

16 April
Lockdown extended for "at least" three weeks. Government sets out five tests that must be met before restrictions are eased

30 April
PM says "we are past the peak" of the pandemic

1 June
Phased re-opening of schools in England

15 June
Non-essential shops reopen in England

23 June
PM says UK's "national hibernation" coming to an end – announces relaxing of restrictions and 2m social distancing rule

29 June
Matt Hancock announces that the UK's first local lockdown would be applied in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire

3 August
Eat Out to Help Out scheme, offering a 50% discount on meals up to £10 per person, begins in the UK

14 August
Lockdown restrictions eased further, including reopening indoor theatres, bowling alleys and soft play

14 October
A new three-tier system of Covid-19 restrictions starts in England

31 October
PM announces a second lockdown in England to prevent a "medical and moral disaster" for the NHS

2 December
Second lockdown ends after four weeks and England returns to a stricter three-tier system of restrictions

15 December
PM says Christmas rules will still be relaxed but urges the public to keep celebrations "short" and "small"

19 December
PM announces tougher restrictions for London and South East England, with a new Tier 4: 'Stay at Home' alert level. Christmas mixing rules tightened.

21 December
Tier 4 restrictions come into force in London and South East England

26 December
More areas of England enter Tier 4 restrictions

15 February
Hotel quarantine for travellers arriving in England from 33 high-risk countries begins

22 February
PM publishes a roadmap for lifting the lockdown

12 April: Step 2
Non-essential retail, hairdressers, public buildings (e.g. libraries and museums) reopen.

Outdoor venues, including pubs and restaurants, zoos and theme parks also open, as well as indoor leisure (e.g. gyms).

Self-contained holiday accommodation opens.

Wider social contact rules continue to apply in all settings – no indoor mixing between different households allowed.

14 June: Step 4
PM confirms that Step 4 of the roadmap will be delayed by four weeks, until 19 July, as the government accelerates the vaccination programme.

Restrictions on weddings and funerals abolished.

14 September
PM unveils England's winter plan for Covid – 'Plan B' to be used if the NHS is coming under "unsustainable pressure", and includes measures such as face masks.

Lockdown / restrictions introduced   Lockdown restrictions eased   PM / government announcements   Legislation / emergency powers

Source: Institute of Government Analysis (2022).

As numbers of confirmed cases began to surge and as the first death from COVID-19 in the UK was confirmed on 5th March 2020 the government's focus moved from one of trying to contain the virus to one of delaying the onset. On March 11th 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, meaning the virus had spread worldwide (WHO, 2020). Following this, and with transmission of COVID-19 cases now increasing rapidly in the UK, the Chief Medical Officer (Professor Chris Whitty) raised the risk status in England from moderate to high, issuing advice which critically extended to curtailing all non-essential travel and contact with others, with new social-distancing measures also published. On the 25th March, the *Coronavirus Act 2020* (UK) received Royal Assent, being fast-tracked through UK parliament in just four sitting days (Institute for Government [IfG], 2020). The act provided the government discretionary power to, amongst other things, legally enforce border shutdowns, impose strict travel restrictions, dictate quarantine rules, implement social-distancing measures, and prohibit mass gatherings and events (DCMS, 2020; gov.uk, 2020). The introduction of *Coronavirus Act 2020* came at a time when radical overhauls were implemented across all sectors of society within the UK, to curb the spread of COVID-19. Strict legal restrictions were put in place and, on 26th March 2020, the first legally enforced lockdown was implemented.

The national lockdown of March 2020, which lasted over 3 months and explicitly prevented people from leaving their homes unless it was for essential reasons such as to get food, saw total travel and movement bans imposed, businesses of all shapes and sizes ordered to close. Workplaces were advised to shift to enable employees to work from home where possible, while schools and childcare settings shut to all but those of essential keyworkers; with children being home-schooled instead. Those classed as vulnerable or with pre-existing medical conditions ordered to isolate indefinitely; the world as we knew it was amidst a period of drastic social and economic change.

The implementation of the national lockdown, confining people to their homes and imposing sudden and drastic changes to the ways in which people live, work and socialise with their families and friends (McBride et al., 2020), unsurprisingly impacted upon, and compromised many facets of, life, both social and economic, for all sectors of society (Donthu and Gustafsson (2020). Economically this was a period of huge economic uncertainty triggered by threats of global economic crises and recession caused by the pandemic, leading to crippling economic conditions and financial hardship for many families resulting from loss of income and mass unemployment as industries closed down overnight (McBride et al., 2020). With the economy contracting, the value of the pound sterling fell to its lowest since 1985, the Bank of England lowered the base rate to 0.25% - the lowest level in history, the FTSE100 plunged by over 10% (IfG, 2023), and markets globally were at the mercy of the ongoing economic turmoil caused by the pandemic. Socially, the first national lockdown of March 2020 was a time of mixed emotions

for many. While some welcomed extended time to be spent with loved ones, without the inconveniences of daily life and professional commitments, others reported feelings of isolation, vulnerability, distress, anxiousness and being lonely as external support networks with other family members was disrupted and social support systems faded away due to social restriction measures (Chen et al., 2022).

The national lockdown of March 2020 remained in place until May 2020 when the impacts of the lockdown were positively influencing infection rates in the UK, meaning government began lifting some restrictions, such as enabling those who could not work from home to return to the workplace. The national NHS Test and Trace in England programme was also launched at the end of May 2020, ensuring that anyone who developed COVID-19 symptoms could be tested, while tracing and notifying recent close contacts of anyone who tested positive that they must also self-isolate to inhibit the spread of the virus (gov.uk 2022). With the expansion of national testing underway, the continuation of lockdown restrictions being eased was sustained until the end of October 2020 when rising COVID-19 infection rates caused a second national lockdown to be imposed on 5th November 2020.

The rollout of the UK's COVID-19 vaccine programme was initiated in December 2020, with the first vaccine in the world administered in the UK on 8th December 2020. The vaccination programme (and subsequent COVID-19 vaccination booster programme) which was successfully deployed nationally, eventually vaccinating all those aged 5 and over, aimed to reduce the severity and mortality rates caused by COVID-19, to ease pressure on the NHS and to facilitate the re-opening of society. With the Christmas period of 2020 fast approaching the UK government made a decision to permit up to three households to mix during a 5-day window of 23-27th December 2020 to celebrate the festive period. The results of this caused another spike in infection rates and a third and final national lockdown was imposed between January 2021 and March 2021. The effects of the January 2021 lockdown were successful. Infection rates began to subside and with the acceleration and mass expansion of the vaccination programme in situ, on the 22nd February 2021 the government published a roadmap detailing plans for lifting lockdown measures associated to the COVID-19 pandemic once and for all. The 4-step process which was implemented between March and July 2021 saw the 'stay at home' order abolished, and legal restrictions slowly lifted to most sectors of society, including schools, workplaces, retail, events, social gatherings (including weddings and funerals) and leisure facilities, with restrictions on social contact removed gradually. Some sanctions which remained at the time (with the spread of the Omicron COVID-19 variant - December 2021), included the compulsory use of facemasks in public indoor venues and NHS COVID-19 vaccine passes required for attendance to events, densely populated indoor spaces/venues such as nightclubs and theatres, and for all overseas travel.

Since December 2021 when this narrative timeline ends, there have been no further national lockdowns imposed by the British government. As COVID-19 has spread throughout the population of the world over the last 3 years, it has mutated causing 11 variants of the virus to have been in transmission since the first (Alpha) variant was detected in back in December 2019. Coronavirus (COVID-19) remains in circulation today, with the Pirola strain (October 2023) being the newest to infect people globally. However, with increased medical knowledge and provision, global public awareness and sophisticated vaccination programmes in place worldwide, the severity and impact of the disease on public health is now under control but continues to be a matter of tight global epidemiology surveillance (WHO, 2023).

2.2.3 The impacts of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The impacts of the pandemic, focussing particularly on the UK context, will next be examined. While the discussion here is not intended to be exhaustive given the on-going nature of recovery from COVID-19, it will discuss the most influential areas which serve as a useful starting point in understanding the implications of the pandemic in relation to this study.

The events leading to influenza pandemics such as COVID-19, are recurring biological phenomena and cannot realistically be prevented (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Although society has been hit by several pandemics in the past, in contrast to earlier influenza diseases such as SARS or MERS; whose impact was largely limited to specific regions of the world, the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has affected people globally (Brem et al., 2021). Recent statistics released by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that almost every country on the planet has now been affected by the disease (WHO, 2023). The worldwide spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been labelled a disaster (Brem et al., 2021), the impacts of which are still unfolding and will remain with us long after the virus, having profound effects upon the UK for many years to come (British Academy, 2021). With the scale and impact of the pandemic a topic of great discussion over the last three years, a cogent research base which seeks to classify the impacts of the pandemic is beginning to emerge.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected everyone and everything at once: our relationships with each other and with the people of other countries; our economic organisation and our social interactions; our understanding of the value of life and health, of our intrinsic interconnectedness, and of the fragility of our natural world (British Academy, 2021). It has permeated not only the personal and professional lives of many across the world, but also entire economies, industries, and nations (Brem et al., 2021). There are of course many impacts which flowed from lockdowns, including not being able to see family and friends, to travel or to be able

to take part in leisure activities, many of which were eased as lockdown restrictions ended. But there are a set of deeper impacts on health and wellbeing, communities and cohesion, skills and employment and the economy which will have profound effects upon the UK for many years to come (British Academy, 2021). Much of the research published to-date on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic align to the results of studies conducted analysing previous pandemics and major crises throughout history and recognise that many of the COVID-19 impact areas have been influenced by factors that preceded the pandemic, and were an acceleration of existing trends. The availability of literature to-date which analyses the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic ranges from studies which cover the inevitable medical and health related impacts of the virus, to those which assess the economic and social impacts.

One of the most dominant and influential studies classifying the impacts of the pandemic in a UK context is the ongoing longitudinal 'COVID-19 Psychological Research Consortium (C19PRC) study'. Founded when the pandemic began taking hold globally, the COVID-19 Psychological Research Consortium (C19PRC) was formed in partnership with Public Health England in March 2020 to address an urgent need to conduct timely, high-quality research to generate a robust evidence base that could be used by policymakers and clinicians to successfully navigate the rapidly evolving COVID-19 crisis (McBride et al., 2020). The continuing 'C19PRC study', which was launched by C19PRC when the pandemic was in its earliest phases in the UK, aims to monitor and assess the long-term psychological, social, economic and political impact of the pandemic on the lives of ordinary adults in the general population (C19PRC, 2020). The study was initiated based on what was known from previous research into outbreaks of other infectious respiratory diseases, identifying the potential for the health and wellbeing of the general public to be negatively impacted by government-imposed restrictions which are necessary to prevent the spread of highly contagious viruses (C19PRC., 2020).

The results published from the first wave of the study found significant implications in the area of mental health and wellbeing, reporting substantial rises in both depression and anxiety among the UK population following the first lockdown in March 2020 (C19PRC., 2020). The C19PRC results suggest that these factors were caused by the social restrictions imposed during the pandemic, and the structural changes to society that occurred during that time, which were triggered by not only severely restricted access to social support networks but also the unemployment experienced by many. Findings published from later waves of the study indicated that the pandemic accentuated financial concerns and sparked economic fears of an impending global economic crisis and recession (Anderson et al., 2020; Hale et al., 2020). With people confined to their homes and the propaganda of media reporting an almost constant stream of news on this invisible external threat from which we cannot protect ourselves (Donthu and Gustafsson., 2020) the pandemic caused fear in the population which also impacted upon the

population's mental health, particularly amongst vulnerable groups (C19PRC., 2020). The C19PRC study found higher rates of anxiety and depression in those aged under 35, living in a city, living alone or with children, with lower incomes, and those with health conditions. People whose incomes had been hit by the pandemic evidenced higher rates of anxiety and depression (McBride et al., 2020) than those whose incomes were unaffected.

These results align with other research published within the discourse which examine the social and economic impacts of the virus and the resulting pandemic. Research published by the UK Mental Health Foundation (MHF), the results of their landmark longitudinal 'Mental Health in the Pandemic' study, conducted during 2020-2022, outline the significance of the pandemic and its resulting impacts on mental health. The published findings argue that the factors affecting the severity of the pandemic for each individual in society are complex and determined by personalised social and economic circumstances, stating that the constellation of social identities, economic position and experiences of adversity linked to the pandemic will be unique for each person (Mental Health Foundation [MHF], 2023). These findings align with the other prevailing impact study within the discourse which analyses the COVID-19 pandemic in a UK context. The study which has been published by the British Academy, who were commissioned by the Government Office for Science back in September 2020 to produce an independent review on the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19, was entitled 'The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19' and it offered findings categorising nine core areas of societal impact as a result of the pandemic:

Figure 2. The nine areas of long-term impact of COVID-19		
1. Increased importance of local communities	2. Low and unstable levels of trust	3. Widening geographic inequalities
4. Exacerbated structural inequalities	5. Worsening health outcomes and growing health inequalities	6. Greater awareness of the importance of mental health
7. Pressure on revenue streams across the economy	8. Rising unemployment and changing labour markets	9. Renewed awareness of education and skills

(Adapted from British Academy, 2021. p.126)

The results of the report, which mirror much of the literature in the field, contend that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are as much social and economic, as medical and health related (British Academy, 2021). The review, which asserts that the impacts of the pandemic are expected be longstanding and outlasting the pandemic, synthesised the nine impacts identified into three societal impact area groupings, namely:

- **Health and wellbeing**– covering physical and mental health (including young people and work), wellbeing, and the environment we live in
- **Knowledge, employment and skills**– covering education (compulsory and tertiary), skills, knowledge and research, and work and employment
- **Communities, culture and belonging** – covering communities and civil society, cities and towns, family and kinship, and arts, media, culture, heritage and sport. (p.7)

The report concluded that COVID-19 has had significant but unequal effects on the UK population depending on where people live, their level of education, and their socioeconomic and health status. When considering the focus of this study, and its applicability to the results of British Academy's review, impact areas 8 and 9 – linked to employment, changing labour markets, education and skills, classified under the 'knowledge, employment and skills' grouping will be of particular pertinence. This aligns to the focus of this research, recognising that it comes at a critical time for education and educators within the Higher Education sector, who have a vested interest in employability and the curation of skills.

While there has been a prominence of literature within the discourse which highlights the negative impacts of the pandemic, there has also been some dialogue which sheds light on and examines the positive impacts of the pandemic. Authors such as Cukier at al. (2021) and Brem et al. (2021) argue that the pandemic promoted the rebuilding of society while also stimulating advancements in innovation (Cukier et al., 2021). Studies by Cukier at al. (2021) and Brem et al. (2021) suggest that the pandemic accelerated the adoption of new technologies, compressed technology adoption cycles from years to weeks and transformed entire sectors – government, health care, education, retail, financial services and more - driving the development of new products and services, changes in processes and the development of new business models, and even shifts in the approach to work itself. These views are widely shared within the limited post-pandemic discourse, with accounts verifying these perspectives. The technological and digital advancements fuelled by the pandemic have permeated all aspects of life since, positively influencing enhancements to many facets of the ways in which we now live, including approaches to education (Magomedov et al., 2020). Many of the authors who have published within this area contend that the increases in technology have revolutionised and transformed sectors globally, improving efficiency, productivity, and sustainability, asserting that these developments are welcomed additions that will remain into the post-pandemic future.

The impacts of the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic have caused an array of economic, social, health and psychological consequences in the UK, while also exposing areas of strength, resilience, creativity and innovation across society. With COVID-19 still in circulation, and as new

evidence of the impacts of the virus continue to evolve, a richer picture of the pandemic's effects and how it might provide opportunities to re-shape many facets of society continue to emerge. The focus of this study intends to contribute to this narrative by examining the influence of the pandemic on skillset requirements in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate.

2.3 Conceptualising Employability

With the focus of this study aiming to investigate how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skillsets required to effectively prepare graduates for employment and careers within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate, section 2.3 will explore the diversity of employability discourse linked to the study.

2.3.1 Conceptualisations of Employability

The importance of employability, irrespective of its longstanding, historical origins, and its subsequent unfolding within individual countries, is an issue of central concern to most, if not all Higher Education systems globally (Sin and Neave, 2016). With increases in UK Higher Education participation (HESA, 2023) and as the rising costs associated for students intensifies, so has interest in the areas of graduate outcomes and employability (DfE, 2021). Current conceptualisations and interpretations of employability range from the use of simple measures, designed to establish whether or not a graduate has secured a job, to in-depth scholarly books on the subject (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). The burgeoning array of publications that have emerged during the past two decades in the employability field have contributed to the ongoing employability dialogue, which continues to gather momentum, and theoretically positions employability as a contemporary topic in Higher Education research (Lowden et al. 2011). The everchanging labour market and increasing stakeholder expectations have ensured employability is a top priority for Higher Educational institutions all over the world (Huq and Gilbert, 2013). As an area of significance to a variety of stakeholder groups in their professional capacities; whether they be practitioners employed within Higher Education providers, academic researchers concerned with the Higher Education field, or policy makers responsible for the formation of policies effecting the Higher Education sector; the concept of employability remains a contemporary and topical area of discussion amongst all interested parties (Artess et al. 2017; Cole and Tibby, 2013; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Williams, 2015). The employability of graduates has become an aim that governments around the world have, to varying extents, imposed on national Higher Education systems (Yorke, 2006), where there is increasing pressure to meet the expectations of all key stakeholders including graduates, employers, government organisations, parents, professional bodies, staff, and students. These factors have driven the employability agenda across Higher Education, and ensured it is a sustained priority in the 21st Century (Tibby and Norton, 2020).

Over the past 20 years or so, many authors have attempted to define the meaning and purpose of employability. With varying opinions, perceptions and perspectives on the concept, employability is now widely acknowledged as a complex construct whose definitions have shifted throughout history and continue to be adapted as knowledge in the area advances. With recognition that the term 'employability' itself is a historically debated and contested concept within the body of

literature; represented in many forms, used in a number of contexts and with reference to a range of meanings (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2013), employability is understood from a range of coexisting perspectives (Williams et al. 2016, Cole, 2020), which have resulted a series of dominant conceptions of employability that have emerged within the discourse in recent years (Dalrymple et al., 2021).

Tholen (2015) asserts that the 'mainstream view' of employability, currently articulated and positioned within the literature, rests on the assumption that employability comprises of the individual elements that make a person successful in the labour market. Tholen states that the emphasis here is on how well the individual can adapt to the demands of the labour market and subsequently invest time, effort, or money in increasing or improving their skills, knowledge or other characteristics to make them more employable. Tholen's conceptualisation accentuates the individual, consensual and empowering quality of employability, entrenched in the improvement and development of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes (Tholen, 2015). Manolchev et al., (2022) support this and contend that the established and generally accepted approach to employability currently places the onus on individual practices and seeks to encourage a trajectory of personal development towards aspirational job outcomes. The mainstream view of employability is shared and supported by a large number of policy makers and researchers in the field (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Dalrymple et al., 2021; Manolchev et al., 2022; Rees, 2021; Tholen, 2015) many of whom appear to broadly align their own assumptions of employability with Yorke's (2004) commonly cited definition, which underpins this perspective.

Yorke's definition classifies employability as:

> A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2004, p.7).

Yorke's (2004) definition of employability is regarded in the literature as influential and important (Artess et al. 2017). It considers employability to not only be a narrowly defined range of individuals' skills and attributes, but also recognises the social and economic context of employability (DfE, 2021). As with many conceptualisations of employability aligning with the mainstream view, Yorke's definition emphasises the intentions of employability to impact upon the achievements of the individual graduate themselves, but crucially, for these achievements to also have scope to influence and contribute to the wider community and the economy; fostering favourability in Human Capital. Human Capital Theory is an economic theory that treats individuals' skills, knowledge, health, and experience as forms of capital that can be invested in and developed over time, much like physical or financial capital. The theory suggests that investments in education, training, and healthcare can enhance the productivity of individuals and improve their economic outcomes. Those who align their views to human capital consider

education to be a central element in human capital theory. They believe education is a way to build knowledge and skills that enhance an individual's value in the labour market. Formal education, vocational training, and on-the-job learning are all viewed as ways to accumulate human capital. It should be noted though, that while Human Capital Theory has been influential, it has faced several criticisms from prominent authors in the field such as Bourdieu (1986). Firstly, those authors who critique human capital theory believe that overemphasises individual responsibility. Critics argue that the theory tends to place too much emphasis on individual responsibility for economic outcomes and overlooks structural factors, such as social inequality, discrimination, and systemic barriers that can limit opportunities for certain groups (Bourdieu, 1986). Secondly, they believe that it ignores broader social factors, contending that Human Capital Theory tends to focus on individuals' traits and education, but it may neglect broader social factors like the role of family, culture, and social networks in shaping opportunities and outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986; Sen, 1995; 1999; Young, 2017;). And finally, critics suggest that the theory fails to recognise inequality in human capital investments, believing that the theory assumes that everyone has equal access to the same opportunities to invest in human capital. In reality, they believe that access to quality education, healthcare, and training opportunities are often unequal, particularly in disadvantaged or marginalised communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Harvey 1978; 2006; Wilson, 1991)

Despite there being critics, much of the literature which aligns to the 'mainstream view' of employability accepts the notions and of Human Capital Theory, principally derived from the foundational work of Becker (1964). With a significant proportion of the literature also recognising the plurality of different forms of capital, be it cultural, symbolic or social, it does engage with some of the work of Bourdieu (1986), exploring these capitals either from a social constructivist or classic liberal perspective (Dalrymple et al., 2021). Advocates of the mainstream view of employability support the importance of the employability agenda, and more recently theorise it in more relational and dynamic terms, framing employability as a complex and holistic 'process' (Rees, 2021) or as a 'journey' (Clarke, 2018, Bennett, 2019, Dalrymple et al., 2021).

Many authors who support the mainstream view of employability contend that the links between education, learning and employment can and should be, a major factor in improving productivity and enhancing economic growth; asserting that knowledge and skill development can not only raise prospects for employment but also productivity and therefore contend that education, amongst other things, can be considered an economic investment (Tholen, 2015). These views foster neoliberalist ideologies. Neoliberalism is an economic and political philosophy that emerged in the mid-20th century and became highly influential in global policy, especially from the 1980s onwards. Neoliberalism advocates for a market-driven approach to economic and social policy, emphasising free markets, privatisation, deregulation, and individual responsibility,

but it has sparked significant debate over its social and economic consequences. Neoliberalism has been widely criticized for exacerbating inequality, increasing corporate power, and reducing the welfare of marginalized populations. Critics of neoliberalism such as Klein, (2007); Harvey (1978; 2007); and Wolff (2012; 2016), argue that while neoliberalist approaches may spur economic growth, they often do so at the expense of social safety nets, environmental protections, and public health. Authors who are critics, also contend that these policies lead to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small elite, while leaving large segments of society more vulnerable.

In their latest *Education and Skills Survey,* The Confederation of British Industry [CBI] depicts and supports the connection between education, employment and economic success. It stipulates that education provides the best way to raising living standards. With a good education and the right skills, everyone has the best chance to get a job and get on in their career. Stating that for the UK to seize new opportunities and grow, we need to work towards a system that gives children and young people the relevant skills, experience and guidance for them to succeed; in turn producing a trained and diverse workforce that enables business and economic growth (CBI, 2021).
The notions of the mainstream view of employability seek to address this very issue by aiding graduates to build and showcase a set of subject specific understandings and skills and an ability to form other generic skills, qualities and dispositions valued by employers.

The mainstream view of employability holds a dominant and compelling position in the literature (Manolchev et al., 2022). However, it is prudent to take a critical stance on employability, recognising and giving due consideration to the diversity of research, discourse, theories, and approaches within the field which critique or digress away from the mainstream assumptions of employability. Authors who promote an 'alternative view' (Tholen, 2015) of employability often debate the previously discussed narrative that is associated with the mainstream views purported within the literature, instead offering differing perspectives of how employability can or should be understood. While recognition of the importance of employability and its links to education still remain, authors who align their beliefs to the mainstream do not regard employability as an exclusively individual phenomenon, they instead regard employability as relational, contextual, and conflictual (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Tholen, 2015). These authors contend that employability is not solely an absolute notion determined largely by the individual's human capital but that it is also a relative and complex construct (Brown et al., 2004), which is regulated by opportunity and inequalities. Those who promote alternative views of employability challenge the perceptions that prospects for graduates competing in the graduate labour market depend typically on individualised attributes, skills, experience, and abilities. Instead, they consider the labour market to be an arena where individuals and groups strive to obtain

advantage over others, using means that do not necessarily always relate just to skill, ability, or work-related capacity (Tholen, 2015). Those who align to the alternative view of employability recognise that employability is facilitated or enabled by a number of factors, including the external environment (such as the labour market and economic conditions), access to social capital (which could include personal connections, alumni networks) (Rees, 2021) and other relational variables such as personal circumstances – for example family responsibilities (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), that can also serve as barriers to employment, and might affect both the ways in which graduates interact with the labour market and how they view employment opportunities (Manolchev et al., 2022). Authors such as Smetherham (2006) and Brooks and Everett (2008), believe that employability can also be impacted by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and background which can shape subjectivity mediate the choices made around employment.

In contrast to theoretical position of the prevailing mainstream literature in the employability field, literature published from the 'alternative view' stance, considers both labour-market behaviour and employability to be heterogeneous, dependent upon (social, economic, institutional, political and cultural contexts) structures, values, and/or discursive forces. The alternative view recognises the importance of employability and the links to education but positions it as a complex construct shaped by relative and subjective factors.

With the focus of this thesis aiming to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate, the nature of the study will draw upon both conceptualisations of employability in their own right. The focus and inherent features of the study align to the mainstream view of employability and skills development, while acknowledging the contextual factors linked to the alternative view of employability, evidently linked to the post-pandemic nature of the study. Irrespective of the 'view' or standpoint adopted when attempting to conceptualise or define employability, the links between employability and its relationship to education are longstanding and will be reviewed in the next section (2.32).

2.3.2 Tracing connections between education, employability and the economy

The UK economy, its position of associated economic prosperity and the links with education and employment have, for many years, been the topic of much political discussion, with the relationship between Higher Education, employment and the economy being a time-honoured point of contention. Within this section the following policy documents are discussed with relevance to the study:

Table 1: Educational policy directives	
Policy Name	**Page**
Robbins Report (1963)	23
Ruskin Speech (1976)	24
Dearing Report (1997)	24
Education Act (1997)	25
Kennedy Report (1997)	25
Moser Report (1999)	25
Browne Report (2010)	26
Augar Report (2019)	27
Augar Report: Interim Review (2021)	28

Historically, in its review of the UK Higher Education system well over fifty years ago, the Robbins Report (1963) was published. It was commissioned by the UK government to examine the demand for higher education and to make recommendations on the future of the sector. Published at a time when less than 5% of all young adults were entering Higher Education, the Robbins report called to widen access and participation in tertiary education through expansion of the UK Higher Education sector. As the first national Higher Education policy directive presented in the UK to recognise explicitly the link between education and its direct relationship with employment and the economy, it proposed four fundamental objectives for the UK Higher Education sector: to teach skills; to produce cultivated men and women; to maintain research in balance with teaching; and to promote common standards of citizenship. It principally offered the view that few would enter Higher Education without an eye to subsequent employment, contending a necessity for employability and education to be closely aligned when considering the future trajectory of the educational landscape (Robbins, 1963 and Yorke, 2006). The report had a significant impact on the expansion of higher education in the UK, recommending the establishment of new universities and an increase in the number of students attending higher education institutions. It proved to be an epochal narrative, that has been considered pivotal in helping to propel the remarkable transformation of the Higher Education sector to be as it exists today.

However, the Robbins Report was not without its critics, both at the time of its publication and in subsequent years. While the Robbins Report was undeniably influential and contributed to the expansion of higher education in the UK, its critics argued that it was overly idealistic, overly focused on traditional academic education, and insufficiently attentive to the social, economic, and demographic complexities of the time. The criticisms reported since its publication reflect a diversity of perspectives on the role of education in society and continue to influence debates about the structure and accessibility of higher education in the UK. These authors acknowledge

that while higher education is often assumed to be a pathway to better employment outcomes, that this link is more complex, arguing it is influenced by various factors such as the changing nature of work, credential inflation, social inequality, and economic structures.

Despite its critics, the Robbins Report's legacy remains important in shaping the landscape of higher education in the UK, even if some of its assumptions and recommendations have been revised in light of changing circumstances.

Some thirteen years after the publication of the Robbins Report, came the Ruskin Speech given by Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan at Ruskin College, Oxford on 18th October, 1976. Callaghan's 1976 speech drew upon some of the ideology presented in the 1963 Robbins Report and is widely regarded the defining moment that signified 'The Great Debate' about the nature and purpose of public education. Within the speech Callaghan outlined education's role in contributing to the economy, indicating a clear alignment in governmental policy to enhancing employment opportunities. He asserted that 'the goals of education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society and also to fit them to do a job of work' (Callaghan, 1976). The explicit references to the role and function of education for employment continued 'there is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. In today's world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill' (Callaghan, 1976). The speech alluded to the fact that education could help to overcome the UK's economic problems through a focus entrenched on producing individuals capable of gaining and sustaining employment, contending that education should prepare future generations for life; a view that very much remains intact, and is shared by many today. Brant and Vincent (2017) referred to Callaghan's speech as a turning point in educational policy development.

The more recent Dearing Report (1997) similarly emphasised the importance of skill development in students and drew particular attention to the vital role that Higher Education plays in a modern economy (Yorke, 2006), asserting that to achieve global competitiveness, education and training should enable people in an advanced society to compete with the best in the world (Yorke, 2004). The focus of skill development offered within the Dearing Report centred around Higher Education providers supplying opportunities for students to acquire skills for life. The Dearing report claimed that skills such as numeracy, communication, team-working, problem solving, personal development planning and IT/digital literacy skills will be the 'key to future success of graduates, whatever they intend to do later in life' (p.133). The Dearing Report (1997) made a major impact on Higher Education policy and played a role in shaping today's Higher Education and employment climate (DfE, 2021), with many of its recommendations still

being felt in today's policy directions and discourse, such as in the Augar review of post-18 education (DfE, 2021).

The Dearing Report's recommendations were framed in response to perceived employers' needs, stating that work experience was to be made available to undergraduate students across all subjects. This key recommendation for the Higher Education sector led to a greater level of governmental funding being shared amongst, and distributed to, both the Higher Education and apprenticeship budgets. The ideologies of the influential 1997 Dearing Report were echoed in the subsequent Education Act (1997) and Kennedy Report (1997) which similarly made connections between education and employability. At a time when employment discussions were high on the political agenda, numerous politically driven reforms also took place in the Higher Education sector, realised by Tony Blair and the new labour government. The motives of the new labour government intended to widen participation in Higher Education, encouraging individuals from lower income households to progress into Higher Education. The introduction of the teaching and Higher Education bill in July 1998 which saw the introduction of tuition fees, offset by increases in funding for and provision of loans for all students, saw a shift in a governmental steer towards employment and skills development. This gave further momentum to the employability agenda, propelling it to become an area of key political concern, and with increases in the associated publicly funded initiatives, these mandated a higher level of accountability in the areas of graduate employability moving forward, firmly positioning employability on the educational policy agenda.

The Moser Report published in 1999, just two years after the 1997 Dearing Report, furthered discussions around employability and skills development after Sir Claus Moser and his consultative group undertook a review of adult basic education, identifying inadequacies in the nation's literacy and numeracy skills. The report proposed a new framework for lifelong learning, offering recommendations that included the government setting up a 'Workplace Basic Skills Development Fund' that would provide seed funding for companies to set up basic skills programmes either in the workplace or local educational institution (Moser Report, 1999). It also proposed that there should be the development of a 'National Adult Basic Skills Strategy', which should include setting national targets, increasing opportunities for learners, developing a new system of qualifications, and introducing changes to teacher training and inspection (Moser Report, 1999). The outcomes and recommendations of the Moser Report intended to raise standards of basic skills, aiming to increase access to opportunities in Higher Education while meeting employer needs and supporting future employability. The publication of the Moser Report (1999) made clear the intentions of the new labour government (1994-2010) to raise standards of education and skills acquisition, thus giving more opportunities for future progression into Higher Education and subsequent employment (Gillard et al., 2016). The

objectives of the Moser Report demonstrated clear links to the aspirations of the earlier Kennedy Report (1997) that focussed on widening participation in the Higher Education sector. The push for the marketisation of education, whilst focusing on employability, set the scene for much of the landscape of modern-day Higher Education (Crossan, 2022). It marked a shift in the relationship between the student and the university towards one that stressed the outcome and links to usable skills at the end of the degree (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018).

The Browne Report (2010) was published in October 2010 following an independent review of Higher Education funding and student finance by Lord Browne. The aims of the review were to 'ensure that teaching at our Higher Education institutions (HEIs) is sustainably financed, that the quality of that teaching is world class and that our HEIs remain accessible to anyone who has the 'talent to succeed' (The Browne Report, 2010). The intentions of the review once again echoed the ethos of ensuring participation opportunities were plentiful in the Higher Education sector, while fostering a neoliberal stance, contending that 'graduates go on to higher paid jobs and add to the nation's strength in the global knowledge-based economy' p.2. '

The Browne Report published positive correlation statistics linked to participation rates (45% of people between the ages of 18 and 30 enter an HEI, up from 39% a decade ago) (2010), stating that as a result of incremental improvements made to the Higher Education system, students from disadvantaged backgrounds had been given a fair chance to study for a degree. The review ensured a renewed governmental focus on the Higher Education sector, with the results of the report making recommendations to the newly formed Cameron–Clegg coalition government on the future of fees policy and financial support both undergraduate and postgraduate students here in the UK, which included moving towards a significant lifting of the cap on university tuition fees.

The Browne report was published at a time when the subsequent actions and decision-making process of the new coalition government resulted in deep cuts to public expenditure, seeing a dramatic 80% cut in the Higher Education teaching grant. In the face of such a drastic cut to the teaching grant it became clear that unless the sector could raise substantial new income it faced a serious crisis of funding. The coalition government subsequently implemented moves to triple Higher Education tuition fees to £9000+ per year in most places, which resulted in mass student protests and demonstrations (NUS, 2010).

Following the publication of the Browne Report, and in line with its statements supporting neoliberalist stances, the government shifted its attention towards employment and notions of employability. Within six months of the Browne Report came the Higher Education White Paper entitled 'Higher Education: students at the heart of the system' (DBiS., 2011), which set out the government's policies for the reform of Higher Education in the employability area. The White

Paper's emphasis on the importance of increasing collaboration between HEIs and employers (paras 3.2, 3.28) 'to promote better teaching, employer sponsorship, innovation and enterprise' (para 3.29) were outlined in its chapter named 'a better student experience and better qualified graduates' (DBiS 2011, p.33-45). It stipulated:

> Embedding employability into the core of HE will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring a significant private and public benefit, demonstrating HE's broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development. (DBiS 2011, p.5)

This quote evidences governmental approaches to the student experience in the employability area, outlining 'graduate employment prospects' (p.6), as a firm priority within the Higher Education sector. These reforms, outlined at a time when the tuition fee increases were implemented, saw the government commit to providing work-ready graduates, stipulating that 'one of the purposes of Higher Education is to prepare students for a rewarding career' (DBiS 2011, p.38).

When tracing the connections between the government and its influence on Higher Education policy and the employability agenda, the next major development came with the unveiling of the recent 'Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)' in 2017.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a system that assesses the quality of teaching in universities in England. It aims to encourage Higher Education providers to improve and deliver excellence in teaching, learning and student outcomes (OfS, 2023). The introduction of the TEF proposed to recognise and reward excellent teaching within UK Higher Education (HE) provision (Gov.uk., 2017), providing institutional ratings in areas linked to the student experience and student outcomes. The TEF evidences clear governmental intentions to raise standards in the employability area stating that it aims to 'better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions' (2023, p.7), aligning its measure driven rating system, to the employment rates of undergraduate students.

Despite there being sceptics of the TEF (O'Leary and Wood, 2019; Cole, 2020), who argue it is not fit for purpose, the TEF, which has been implemented alongside the Graduate Outcome survey, remains a national policy instrument intended to promote, amongst other things, employability across the Higher Education system. These factors offer congruence with the focus of this research and demonstrate a correlation between contemporary government policy directives and employability provision within the Higher Education sector.

The Augar Report (2019), published following the government's latest review of post-18 education and funding, and the first since the Robbins report in 1963 to consider both parts of post-compulsory education (FE/HE) in unison. It intended to address issues such as choice,

access, skills provision and value for money, including how future students would contribute to the cost of their studies (University and Colleges Union [UCU], 2019). The results of the review similarly recognised the links between the quality of education and the notions of employability and detailed proposals to strengthen the education system to 'meet skill shortages' and 'widen participation in tertiary education' (p.9). Framed around a number of guiding principles, the report highlighted the importance of having graduates who are equipped to prosper in employment, and stated in its first principle 'Post-18 education benefits society, the economy, and individuals' (p.12):

> The potential benefits of an increasingly educated adult population have guided our work. But increasing the sheer volume of tertiary education does not necessarily translate into social, economic and personal good. That depends on the quality, accessibility and direction of study. Augar (2019, p.12).

This first guiding principle emphasises the importance of quality of education, while highlighting its economic and social value, demonstrating correlation to the aims of the aforementioned TEF.

As yet the Augar review and an evaluation of its intended recommendations have been difficult to achieve due to the uncertainty and volatility of the education sector caused by both Brexit and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which have both posed significant challenges since 2020. Recognised within the government's interim review of the Augar report, published in 2021 (DfE, 2021), the review states that

> The UK economy faces significant change over the next decade: addressing the impact of an unprecedented global pandemic, delivering on new opportunities outside the EU, and adapting to the changes created by big data and other technological advances. (p.2).

The interim review contends that 'education and skills are crucial to our response to these changes and we are making bold investments and reforms to build a high quality, unified system' (p.2). The government indicate that the proposed educational reform will be vital in safeguarding our future and rebuilding a 'world-leading skills system'. This is a view shared by Dalrymple et al. (2021), who assert that the profound economic and political reconfigurations that have exerted far-reaching, and still unfurling societal impacts, have also provided fundamental and disruptive shifts in geopolitical landscape, both throughout Europe and internationally, directly impacting upon all sectors of society. These discussions link to the centrality of this research which seeks to investigate this developing area, exploring the impact of the pandemic upon skillset requirements in a post-pandemic climate. The timing of this thesis presents an ideal opportunity to explore this contemporary perspective of employability within the post-pandemic Higher Education sector.

As this section has indicated, the historical tracings and connections between education and employability are longstanding, with the relationship between employability and Higher Education being prominent in education policy directives and discourse over the last 50 to 60

years, and still present today. The ways in which recent theoretical framings of employability within the Higher Education discourse have emerged will next be analysed, in section 2.3.3.

2.3.3 Recent theoretical framings of employability

The expansion of employability discourse has gathered pace in the last five years, with a plethora of research published around employability in Higher Education settings and an increasingly broad array of theoretical lenses being brought to bear on a variety of employability areas (Dalrymple et al., 2021). The steady increase in employability scholarship in recent years ranges from conceptual framings of employability (Fung, 2017), case studies of best practice (Norton and Dalrymple, 2021), and a proliferation of published studies (Dalrymple et al., 2021; Manolchev et al., 2022). These advancements, largely influenced by developments in the global economy in recent years (CBI, 2022), mean that traditional views of employability are now being challenged. Scholars argue that traditional approaches to employability have been predominantly concentrated on 'getting students to the front of the queue' (DfE, 2021, p.23) and graduate outcomes, rather than approaches centred around lifelong learning aimed at attaining a range of critical skills and experiences, which will lead to better and more fulfilling lives (Scott and Willison, 2021; Manolchev et al., 2022). Recent expansions in the employability discourse have resulted in diversification within the literature body, and a range of contemporary perspectives being offered within the employability field (Smith., 2010).

More recent theoretical framings of employability, which move discussions beyond those focussed on graduate outcomes, now illustrate the necessity for employability to not only assist students in securing their first graduate employment position but they urge employability to seek to develop the skills and experiences which enable those outcomes too (Scott and Willison, 2021; Manolchev et al., 2022), Contemporary discourse in the field characterises employability as a complex and holistic 'process' (Rees, 2021) or 'journey' (Clarke, 2018; Bennett, 2019; Dalrymple et al., 2021), acknowledging that employability is a lifelong process that enables graduates to be successful. Literature here contends that employability should encourage students to construct career paths which enable them to successfully contribute to society and prosper throughout their lives (Cole and Tibby, 2013, Cole and Hallet, 2019, Higdon, 2016). Cole and Tibby, (2013) support this and assert that employability 'centres on supporting students to develop a range of knowledge, skills, behaviours, attributes and attitudes which support their lifelong learning' (p5). Yorke and Knight, (2006) argue that employability is therefore not merely an attribute of the new graduate, it is something that needs to be continuously refreshed throughout a person's working life. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) further substantiate these claims and suggest that employability is an evolutionary process that should enable individual development and progression. This view ties into the range of literature in the employability field which suggests employability is about an individualised process of 'becoming' linked to reflective practices which

enable the creation of distinctive 'graduate identities' amongst graduates (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). Research here challenges the interpretations of employability that focus on the development of a generic set of skills, qualities and characteristics, deeming them inadequate, authors here contend that there is no one fixed identity for graduates and that the concept of individualised graduate identities are a way of deepening the understanding of graduate employability (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Clarke, 2018; Cheng et al., 2022). The ethos of the discourse here aligns with the view of Manolchev et al., (2022) which asserts that 'employability should be a programme of active learning and reflection which enables students to rewrite their futures by improving their wellbeing, employment prospects and place in society'.

As theoretical framings and our understandings of the employability discourse progresses and with widescale acknowledgment that employability is an important focus for, and a key driver within, Higher Education institutions (Bell, 2016; Clarke, 2018; Rees, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022), the Higher Education sector continues to be under ever increasing pressure to align both their operations and strategies to be employer oriented, developing and offering effective programmes which support students in transition from education to employment, creating employable, 'work ready' graduates (Manolchev et al., 2022). Commenting on the changing role of Higher Education, Tomlinson (2017) supports this, suggesting that conceptions of value in Higher Education have moved from an intent to enrich society and individuals through knowledge, to an educative value based on providing a measurable, marketable commodity focused mainly on issues associated with employment (Bettinson et al., 2023). With the latest research indicating that graduates from Higher Educational institutions are not fulfilling employer's expectations (Nadda, 2022) and with performance metrics such as Graduate Outcomes (2017) - formally known as DLHE (2008), and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (2017), both seeking to measure and quantify employability success in the area of student outcomes through the measurement of graduate employability and employment outcomes, Higher Education institutions need to not only meet employer expectations but also 'perform' well in the area of employability if they are to successfully compete in the Higher Education arena.

Of course, not all agree with these perspectives (Holmwood and Maynard, 2018). It would be naïve to fail to acknowledge the very extensive alternative views and dissenting voices given the plethora of debates and discussions evident within the discourse. These voices become even more pertinent when considering the criticisms of these performance measurement tools such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (2017). Many stakeholders—including academics, students, and policymakers—have raised concerns about its design, methodology, and impact. Several scholars and critics have raised concerns about the TEF, arguing that it may have negative consequences for teaching quality, academic freedom, and the student experience (Scott, 2017;

Brown 2018). Some of these authors are academics in the fields of higher education policy, sociology, and educational theory, and their critiques have been influential in shaping discussions around the TEF.

While the TEF was created to enhance transparency, accountability, and the quality of teaching in UK higher education, its implementation and impact have been met with various criticisms. The emphasis on metrics such as student satisfaction and employability, the lack of attention to qualitative aspects of teaching, and the potential for unintended consequences are key concerns (Clegg and Stiles, 2020). Many critics argue that the TEF might inadvertently prioritise short-term, easily measurable outcomes over the development of deep, intellectual engagement, and pedagogical innovation (Scott, 2017; Clegg and Stiles, 2020). Additionally, the burden on institutions to comply with the TEF process could detract from the more meaningful goal of enhancing educational experiences for students. These perspectives continue to challenge contemporary policy decisions within the Higher Education sector.

In response to the challenges presented within the Higher Education landscape in recent years, the sector has undergone pervasive changes, revising mechanisms to best incorporate the necessary employability initiatives into students' overall learning experiences (Nadda, 2022). Recent research suggests that employability should be integrated into the culture of the institution (Tibby and Norton 2020) and that employability initiatives should be embedded across all programme provision at a strategic institutional level (Rees, 2021), as 'bolt on' activities or 'stand-alone' employability initiatives are deemed to be inadequate and are not thought to be effective in their implementation nor the subsequent outcomes achieved (Tomlinson, 2010; 2017). Advance HE views embedding employability as a joined up area of responsibility stating that 'all stakeholders, including academic and support staff, students, careers services, students' unions and employers, have a role to play in embedding employability and should be encouraged to engage in and be involved in doing so (Tibby and Norton 2020., p.5).

Current comprehensive reviews of employability provision in UK universities, such as those conducted by Dalrymple et al. (2021) and Norton and Dalrymple (2021), depict a fragmented terrain, suggesting that a wide range of approaches to employability provision is being undertaken. All of these approaches are intended to substantiate efforts in designing and implementing attractive employability offerings within degree programmes (Manolchev et al., 2022), aiming to measure student career readiness, future career goal setting, and portfolios of skills and personal attributes (Norton and Dalrymple, 2021).

Clarke, (2018) contends that universities have adopted a range of generic skill-based learning outcomes within their provision for employability which, when embedded into degree programmes, are expected to increase graduate employability, building 'career capital'

(Kozhevnikov, 2021) intending to improve graduate employment outcomes (Clarke, 2018). Accordingly, most universities publish a list of graduate attributes that are to be fostered during the students' undergraduate careers and that are often aligned with the qualities and/or skills sought by employers (Walters, 2021). Manolchev et al., (2022) argues that much of the current UK university employability provision demonstrates clear alignment to Fung's (2017) work on achieving a 'connected curriculum', which centres on the implementation of six, interconnected dimensions of learning:

(1) effective collaborations between students and academics

(2) research-inspired learning being at the centre of module and programme design

(3) connecting assessment with real-world topics

(4) clear links between learning within the lecture theatre and learning during placements

(5) authentic assessments which have significance for a diverse audience

(6) creating an experience which connects students and their wider, student communities.

To enhance employability provision and in addition to core curricula offered within degree programmes, many UK universities are now including internships, work placements, work experience and international study in their course offerings. The intention of these initiatives is to grow students' social capital, to improve students' job readiness (DfE., 2021), and to enhance graduate employment prospects (Clarke, 2018), while serving as a catalyst for fostering useful employer-university relationships for students (Helyer and Lee, 2014). Such initiatives recognise the value between aligning university programme planning and the needs of both employers and industry (DfE, 2020, Nadda, 2022), aiming to improving students' ability to secure suitable jobs after graduation (DfE, 2021). They follow a compelling narrative that highlights institutional and employer partnership working that is emerging as an area of best practice to achieve the intentions of employability (DfE, 2021).

Much of the employability literature centres on skills development and equipping graduates for the workplace (Nadda, 2022), but more recently, a growth in research that recognises the value of the employer and their voice in the employability field has also emerged (Sin and Amaral, 2017; Handley, 2018; Rhew et al., 2019). This has emerged as a result of prospective employers of graduates becoming more explicit about the variety of skills expected from the potential recruits (Wang & Tasi, 2014), outlining their expectations of graduates to have not only the technical and discipline competences from their degrees but also stating that they require graduates also to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities (Lowden et al., 2011). The importance of liaising with industry, to identify the skills and attributes required of graduates for certain industries, as Rees, (2021) asserts, is of great importance if employability is to be effective.

With the focus of discourse moving towards the adoption of more dynamic and fluid approaches to employability; which Cole and Hallet, (2019) contend are fundamental to maximise chances of success; current conceptualisations of employability now recognise both the heterogeneity of the student body and the complexities of the global context (Jackson, 2015). As the focus of this study is influenced by the global context of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a review of literature published in the area of post-pandemic employability will be presented illuminating its relevance to the study.

2.3.4 Post-pandemic employability

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has not only affected everyone and every section of the society but has also shifted approaches to employability (Shobha and Johnson, 2021). The UK economy experienced a series of political and economic shocks in the wake of the global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and, as a result, it has radically transformed both the labour market and the economic prospects awaiting today's recent and rising graduates (CBI, 2022). With the latest research published indicating a national skills deficit (DfE, 2022), intensified by the pandemic (CBI, 2022), increased competition for jobs caused by the mass unemployment during the pandemic (Nicola et al., 2020), and access to a reduced pool of employment opportunities as markets continue to recover from the economic turmoil of the pandemic; it is essential that due consideration is now given to approaches to post-pandemic employability, if Higher Education institutions are to produce graduates who are able to compete in the post-pandemic labour market (DfE, 2021).

This view is shared by Shobha and Johnson, (2021) who contend that the pandemic has created an opportunity to meet new workplace challenges caused by COVID-19 by upskilling and re-skilling the workforce. Hite and McDonald (2020) support this and stipulate that the pandemic has shifted the foundations of entire industries substantially, requiring both post-pandemic entrants and returning employees alike to develop new skills and knowledge to successfully thrive in the post-pandemic labour market. According to the 'Future of Jobs Report 2023' published by the World Economic Forum [WEF], 42% of the core skills needed for current jobs have changed as a consequence of the pandemic (WEF, 2023). With acknowledgment that jobs in many industries have been changed forever as a result of the pandemic, consequently national skills gaps have worsened, and new skills gaps have also emerged (DfE, 2022, CBI, 2021). The Department for Education (DfE) recently concluded from their Employer Skills Survey (2022) which covered England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which focussed on assessing the current skills position and skills needs of employers; that as the global pandemic crisis recedes and the UK economy begins to recover, employers now face new skills challenges, with both the level of skill-shortages and the skills-gap density increasing compared to pre-pandemic levels

(DfE, 2022). Since the pandemic, the issue of future skill requirements has been subject to some investigation and discussion (British Academy, 2021), with research published indicating that a renewed focus is required now by numerous stakeholder groups in creating a joined-up approach to bridging these acute skills gaps, to maximise the country's prospects, future economic prosperity and for society to thrive (CBI, 2022) With the notions of employability linked to skill development and acquisition (Yorke, 2006), and with employability recognised as an area of key responsibility for Higher Education institutions (Smith, 2010), how the UK Higher Education sector now responds to the global challenges posed by the pandemic will be critical.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in their 'Education and Skills Survey 2022' assert that the global coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the structural changes underway in the economy, contending that the Higher Education sector has a crucial role to play in meeting national economic demands, and that it must respond accordingly. The published results of the survey argue that there is now, more than ever, a pressing need for the provision of high quality, flexible and effective education and training that meets employers' needs, ensuring that the workforce has the skills they require to thrive for the future, in post-pandemic society (CBI, 2022). Scholars in the employability field have long emphasised the importance of preparing students for employment in a complex world (Barnett, 2011; Scott, 2016; Cole and Donald, 2022). For employees and post-pandemic graduates, this means responding to the new environments caused by the global context, which add further demands to the already growing work readiness expectations of employers before the pandemic (Cavanagh et al., 2015).

Although research published on employability with a post-pandemic context is still in its infancy when compared to the broader employability and educational areas, the subject of future skill requirements has been a topic discussed and superficially examined within recent literature demonstrating some similarities and alignment of understandings regarding future skill requirements in post-pandemic landscape, both in general, and specifically for graduates.

Cukier et al., (2021) in their review of the 'skills in the post-pandemic world', argue that the arrival of COVID-19 has not only highlighted the critical importance of specific skills for specific roles that have changed or expanded, but has also highlighted the skills needed to anticipate and respond to the disruptive changes caused by it. The National Council for Education support this and contend that COVID-19 has changed the working landscape and the focus of employability. They argue that the ability to support the next generation of employees, ensuring they are motivated and equipped with the skills needed so they can play an active role in a better future, is fundamental, but they also acknowledge that it is as imperative to upskill those already in employment, or those seeking new employment if the UK is to produce a sustainable future

workforce (2020). There is no doubt that the Coronavirus pandemic has accelerated structural changes already underway in the economy and as a result placed an even greater imperative on skills development (British Academy, 2021).

Authors in the field suggest that to cope with the changes and adaptations ever present in the changing, global context, of the labour market, and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employers are now seeking to hire people with initiative and adaptability (Nadda et al., 2022), looking for graduates who demonstrate job readiness in a post-pandemic climate (DfE, 2021), an ability to adapt quickly to the changing workplace and market, alongside resilience (Cukier et al., 2021) and capabilities to respond seamlessly and 'hit the ground running' (Smith, 2010). In their suitably titled report 'The skills needed from a post COVID-19 workforce' (2020), the National Council for Education identified the skills they deem vital in the recovery trajectory following the coronavirus pandemic. The report outlines adaptability, creativity, digital and data literacy, leadership, and emotional intelligence as the prevalent skills needed in a post pandemic climate. Feld et al., (2020) advocate these and in their research focussed on 'Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during—and after—the COVID-19 crisis' suggest the need for digital, cognitive, social and emotional, and adaptability and resilience, leadership, critical-thinking and decision-making, and project-management skills. The much more recent and contemporary 'Future of Jobs Report 2023' published by the World Economic Forum echo and enforces these views stipulating that the top-10 core skills needed in a post-pandemic climate include:

1. Analytical thinking
2. Creative thinking
3. Resilience, flexibility and agility
4. Motivation and self-awareness
5. Curiosity and lifelong learning
6. Dependability and attention to detail
7. Technological literacy
8. Empathy and active listening
9. Leadership
10. Social influence skills.

These core skills identified within the post-pandemic literature recognise the importance of workers' skills and abilities to adapt to the complex, ever-changing and disruptive labour market, in particular, those technical and cognitive skills. Also highlighted are attributes relating to self-efficacy, empathy and working effectively with others, which Allas et al. (2020) argue are critical post-pandemic attributes. Allas et al. (2020) argues that this has been caused by a shift towards more holistic working practices as employers recognise the role that mental health plays in productivity, which have resulted in investments in employee wellbeing.

A sizeable proportion of the discourse in the post-pandemic employability area predictably illuminates the need and requirement for increased specialist skills in the technology and digital related areas. The intensified prevalence within the literature on the technological, data and digital skills required post-pandemic is dominant but unsurprising given the role and impact these areas have served, in all sectors, over the past three years. Research here focusses on the influence of the pandemic on employment and its technologically focussed interventions as a result. The widely regarded view is that the new post-pandemic working environment is highly technology driven and that technology adoption will remain a key driver of innovation and business transformation in the next five years (WEF, 2023).

With Coronavirus coercing businesses in most industries to find new digitally enabled ways of working to survive during the peak of pandemic, this brought with it an accelerated pace of digitisation and a range of new technologies that have emerged, profoundly changing the post-pandemic working world as we know it (CBI, 2022). Altering the face of employability as a result (Shobha and Johnson, 2021), much attention has been focused in recent years on digital transformation and the urgent need to upskill and reskill as a result of technological advancements, and these needs have become greater since the pandemic (Cukier et al., 2021). New ways of working have emerged as a result of the pandemic, posing significant challenges to both employers and employees trying to navigate these new arrangements. The rapid use of digital tools and remote work has placed new technological demands on employees who, in many instances, now require different skills to support significant changes to how work gets done and to the business priorities their companies are setting (Feld et al., 2020). These technological trends and developments are forecast to continue post-pandemic, with the literature suggesting that the increased adoption of new and frontier technologies and broadening digital access will be likely factors in driving both organisational transformation and job growth in the coming years (WEF, 2023). The use of digital platforms and apps, e-commerce and digital trade, data analytics and AI are all expected to result in further labour market disruption (WEF, 2023), intensifying skill development or new skill acquisition in this area among those seeking employment in a digital post-pandemic world (Cukier et al., 2021). This narrative could prove fundamental in the context of this study which examines how the pandemic has influenced skillset development and acquisition post-pandemic.

Recognising that while these might be some of the generalised skill requirements post-pandemic, other industry or discipline specific ones will exist, influencing skill set requirements for different sectors (Feld et al., 2020). This view correlates to the aims of this study in understanding the influence of the post-pandemic on skillset requirements for the events industry specifically.

2.3.5 Conceptual models of employability

An important aspect to consider in achieving the aim of the study is the conceptual and theoretical foundations underpinning the research, something that this section intends to achieve by examining models of employability in Higher Education pertinent to the research.

Before analysing the models of employability relevant to the study it would be prudent to recognise the breadth of studies and authors within the discourse centred on employability within Higher Education who have attempted to devise models which conceptualise employability. These models range from those that attempt to depict the components and facets of employability (Law and Watts, 1977), to those which serve as a practical instrument for employability implementation within the Higher Education context (Cole and Tibby, 2013). The heterogeneity of models within the literature span those that focus on a common, universal application of employability (Rufai et al., 2015), to those that argue no one-size-fits-all approach to employability exist (Behle, 2020: Kenworthy and Hrivnak, 2014).

Eimer and Bohndick, (2023) in their systematic review of employability models for Higher Education, contend that in order for employability to be effective and for practitioners to work with this construct in a productive way, they must first clarify their own approach to employability which will enable them to select an appropriate model for developing teaching interventions. With the contextual nature of this research aiming uncover how we can better prepare graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the post-pandemic events industry, due concentration will be given to models which centre on this contextualised nature. Examination of those models which appreciate not only the development of generic skills, but those that also recognise both the individualised nature of employability and the discipline-specific qualification aspects within their models will be considered. With this in mind, the narrower models that do not include subject understanding and discipline-specific skills were regarded as less valuable within the context and scope of this research and will therefore not be considered in detail here. Instead focus will be given to the models which were given careful consideration in line with the intentions of the study.
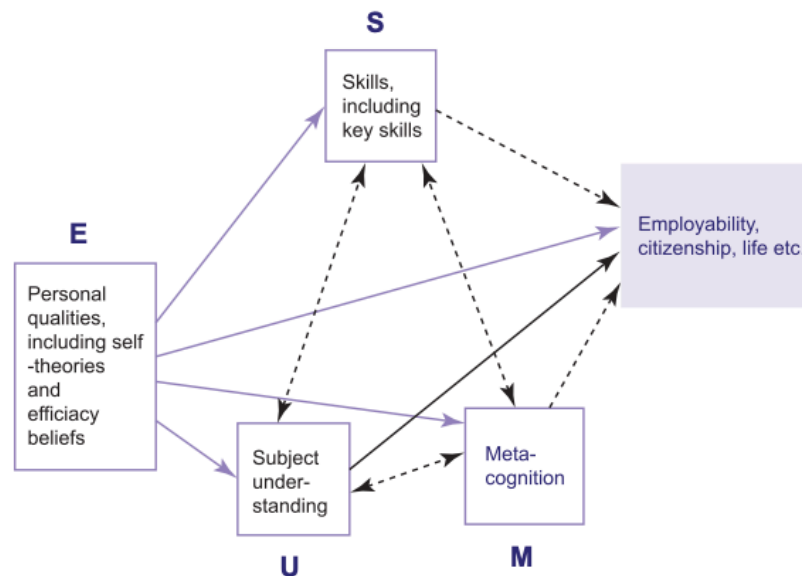
Knight and Yorke (2002): USEM model

Figure 3. Knight and Yorke (2002, p.5): USEM model.

One of the earlier and most influential conceptual models of employability was developed by Knight and York in 2002 and is referred to as the USEM model (understanding, skill, efficacy beliefs and metacognition). The USEM model depicts pedagogical approaches to employability and is comprised of four interrelated components; understanding (subject knowledge), skills (related to the job, and generic) efficacy belief (self–theories) and metacognition (learning how to learn), focused on the ability for Higher Education to provide graduates with the skills required by the labour market, through various programs or internships (Shobha and Johnson, 2021). Knight and Yorke (2002, p. 261) assert that the USEM model aligns 'to both governmental expectations and traditional academic values' (p.261), stressing the relevance of self-efficacy beliefs and self-theories, which they regard as changeable (Eimer and Bohndick, 2023). Knight & Yorke state that employability should assist students to alter their self-beliefs from fixed to 'malleable' ones (p.261), acknowledging the role that Higher Education has in shaping students' 'confidence and ability' to act 'in a diverse and changing society' (Knight & Yorke, 2002, p. 264). While the USEM model provides a useful way of comprehending how employability enhancement may be achieved, and offers aspects which correspond to areas of this research, it does concentrate on broader institutional approaches for educators of employability on a more generic basis. As the nature of my research is grounded in the examination of post-pandemic employability within the events discipline specific context, a more suitable framework was sought.

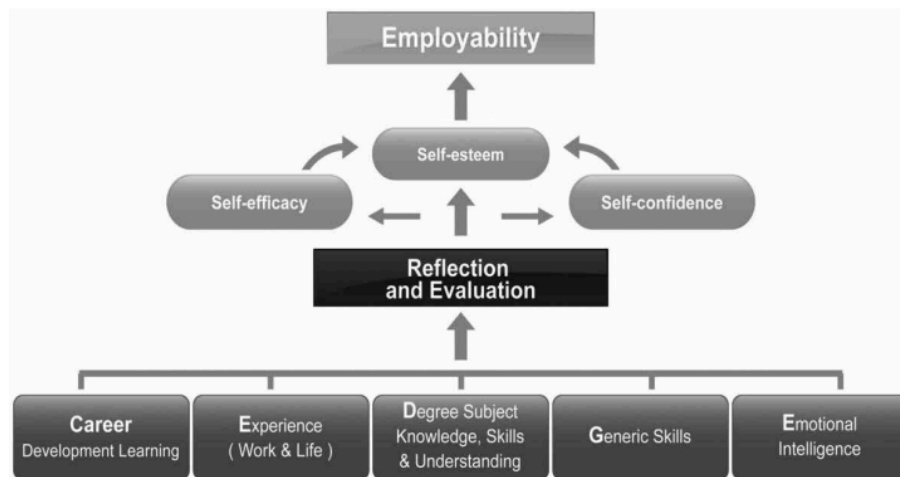**Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007): CareerEDGE Model**

Figure 4. Dacre Pool and Sewell., (2007, p 280): CareerEDGE Model**.**

The CareerEDGE model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) is a highly regarded and prominent model within the employability discourse. First published 16 years ago, but having been re-visited in 2020 by the authors who confirmed its currency and applicability in more current contexts (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2021), the CareerEDGE model is recognised by academics globally, and has been influential in expanding understandings around the development of graduate employability. The model, comprised of four different tiers, aims to 'provide a framework for enabling students to reach their full potential and become successful 'value-added' graduates' (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2016). The five 'essential' (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p. 280) areas within the lower tier of the model, namely; career development learning, experience (work & life), degree subject knowledge & understanding & skills, generic skills, and emotional intelligence, intend to form the basis on which students reflect and evaluate their situation. These reflection and evaluation processes are expected to lead to developing self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem, which the authors see as the core foundation for employability (Eimer and Bohndick, 2023).

Given the contextual post-pandemic nature of this study and the current economic climate, with the resultant uncertainty and precarity evident within the labour market, it is more important than ever that our students feel confident in navigating complex and uncertain terrains and are as prepared as they can be to face future challenges and thrive in this rapidly changing world (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2021). The CareerEDGE model supports this endeavour and was deemed useful in contributing to my research. Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) model and its components, which also acknowledge the importance of degree subject knowledge & understanding & skills stating that these are "of vital importance" (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p. 281), were used to shape the theoretical underpinning of the interview design for the study. The 'practical and

coherent' (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p. 277) nature of the model, which centres on providing a foundation for work with students to develop their employability, also serves as a tool to plan programmes and interventions in Higher Education (Eimer and Bohndick, 2023) and these factors offered congruence with the intentions of this research and rendered CareerEDGE model useful in this context.
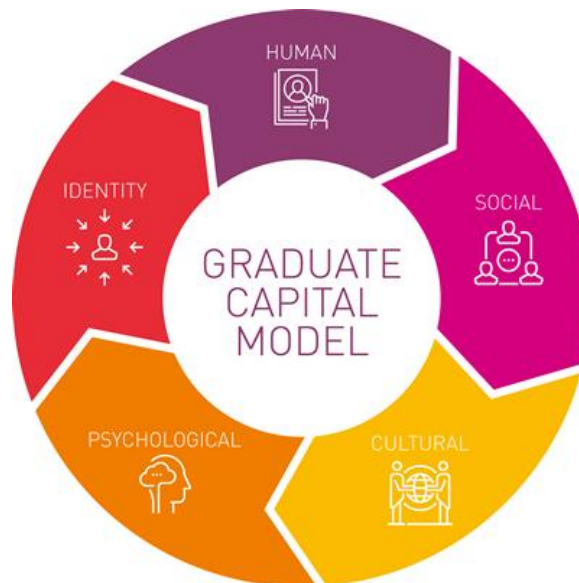
Tomlinson (2017): Graduate Capital Model (GCM)

Figure 5. Tomlinson (2017, p339): Graduate Capital Model (GCM).

Tomlinson (2017) proposes that graduate employability can be understood as a set of 'graduate capitals' involving 'key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates', which include 'a range of educational, social, cultural and psycho-social dimensions and are acquired through graduates' formal and informal experiences (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 339). Tomlinson's (2017) model comprises of human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital and psychological capital. Other than graduates' skills, which Tomlinson defines as de-contextualised, graduate capitals are 'highly diverse and context-specific' and acquired 'not just within HE' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 339). While this model evidenced some congruence to aspects of this study, not all of Tomlinson's graduate capitals were deemed to be aligned with the central focus and of the intentions of this research. For these reasons Tomlinson's model most was deemed less valuable in comparison to Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) CareerEDGE model, and Reid et al.'s, (2021) UQ employability Framework which will be examined next.

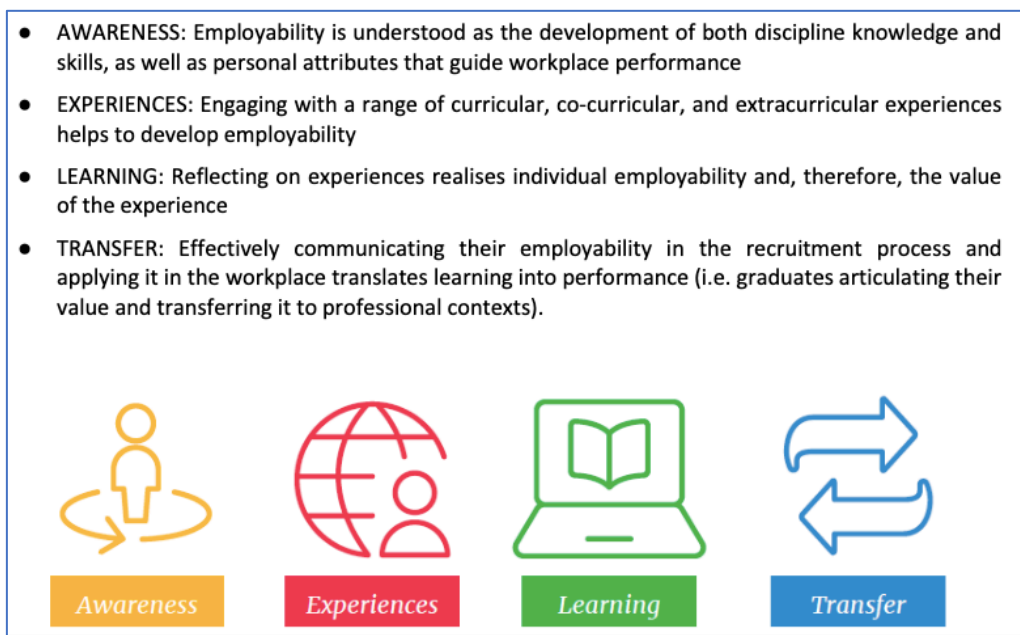**Reid et al., (2021) The UQ employability Framework**

- AWARENESS: Employability is understood as the development of both discipline knowledge and skills, as well as personal attributes that guide workplace performance
- EXPERIENCES: Engaging with a range of curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular experiences helps to develop employability
- LEARNING: Reflecting on experiences realises individual employability and, therefore, the value of the experience
- TRANSFER: Effectively communicating their employability in the recruitment process and applying it in the workplace translates learning into performance (i.e. graduates articulating their value and transferring it to professional contexts).

Awareness   *Experiences*   *Learning*   *Transfer*

Figure 6. Reid et al., (2021, p.10) The UQ Employability Framework.

In similarity to both Knight and Yorke (2002) and Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), Reid et al. (2021) regard reflective learning practices to be key in the development of employability. Eimer and Bohndick, (2023) argue that, for Reid et al., reflection of all (learning) experiences leads to meaning-making, which then adds to identity building. From the background of this 'personal growth' individuals can transform experiences to individual career narratives and turn the 'here and now' skills into future-focussed capabilities' (Reid et al., 2021, p.101). In recognition of this, Reid et al. (2021) devised The UQ Employability Framework (University of Queensland employability framework) which comprises four pillars: 'awareness', 'experiences', 'learning', and transfer' intended to direct students through reflective processes surrounding their formal, informal and work-related learning experiences (Eimer and Bohndick, 2023). Reid et al.'s (2021) employability framework shows congruence to other reflective learning models such as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Gibbs' reflective cycle, but applies reflective practices in the context of employability development. Reid et al. (2021) state that their framework supports the development of employable graduates who can add value to an organisation and make a significant contribution to society and the economy throughout their careers (p.2). The UQ Employability Framework, while still relatively new, aims to shed light on employability from a holistic perspective, helping to shape understandings linked to individualised graduate capabilities and identity. It implies that employability is about learning; and that the development of competencies through engagement in and reflection on experiences should empower the learner, with Reid et al. (2021) stating that 'employment is a by-product of this enabling process'

(p.3). The UQ Employability Framework demonstrated usefulness in the context of this research, with events being recognised as an inherently vocational and practically experience driven discipline and with the nature of the study intending to investigate participant experiences of the pandemic and its influence on employability development.

As a result of examining the conceptual models and frameworks of employability discussed within this section, it has become evident that there are distinct areas of overlap and commonality theorised within the discourse regarding what aspects ought to be considered by educators when seeking to provide opportunities to improve graduate employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Tomlinson, 2017; Reid et al., 2021). More recent conceptual models of employability recognise the need for producing graduates who are confident in navigating complex and uncertain environments that impact upon labour market conditions. They acknowledge that employability should focus not only on the development of skills (both generic and discipline-specific) for employment, but also foster approaches that promote self-reflexivity. The models and frameworks highlight that employability interventions within the Higher Education context should provide opportunities that promote the individualised nature of employability development and harness prospects to develop personalised identities that hope to cultivate meaningful, lifelong experiences. For educators and Higher Education institutions, employability provision should be strategically positioned to maximise engagement, making content relevant and context specific, while allowing opportunities for practical application and self-evaluation to maximise the chances of success.

2.3.6 Reflections

In critically reflecting upon the discourse analysed within this review of the employability literature, what became apparent was the prevalence of diversity of voices represented. The employability literature encompasses a wide range of voices, but it is primarily shaped by scholars, policymakers, employers, and practitioners and educational institutions.

The voices of scholars often focus on defining employability and examining the skills and competencies that are valued in the labour market, while policymakers explore how to develop systems and policies that foster employability across different sectors. Employers contribute by providing insights into the practical skills and attributes they seek in candidates, frequently emphasising adaptability, problem-solving, and communication. While practitioners and educational institutions, are key voices in shaping employability through curriculum design, career services, skill development and more recently, graduate attribute initiatives. There is however, a notable deficiency of perspectives representing the voices of students and graduates, particularly from marginalised or underrepresented groups, which were less prominent, despite their critical role in understanding the broader challenges and barriers to achieving employment.,

It was important to incorporate diverse voices within this review of the literature to ensure a critical and comprehensive understanding of the employability discourse.

2.4 Event Management Education

With the focus of this thesis centred on investigating post-pandemic employability in relation to Event Management Education, the next section will analyse the literature conceptualising Event Management Education.

2.4.1 The Events Industry

The exponential growth of events worldwide in recent decades has led to the formation of an identifiable events industry, with its own practitioners, suppliers and professional associations (Bowdin et al., 2023). In the UK, the events industry is vibrant, vast and wide ranging (Raj and Rashid, 2022), incorporating a diverse set of sectors and sub-sectors which have come to include meetings, conferences, exhibitions, trade shows, incentive travel, event hospitality, ceremonies, weddings, sporting events, music, cultural, outdoor events and festivals, events education and training (BVEP, 2020). Recognised as a fast-growing (Bladen et al., 2022), rapidly developing industry, that makes a significant contribution to the UK economy (Raj and Rashid, 2022), the events industry is supported by an emerging body of knowledge, education, research, an array of industry professionals, and a number of bodies (including the umbrella body UKEVENTS, and its partners) and professional communities established showcase the industry, such as The Power of Events (Bowdin et al., 2023).

Although definitive data is not available due to the complex nature and diversity of the industry, figures suggest pre-pandemic the UK events industry was contributing over £70 billion to the UK economy (BVEP, 2020), employing in excess of 700,000 people nationally, from apprenticeship level upwards (BVEP, 2020), in a range of roles and employed across a variety of employment modes (including full-time, self-employed, part-time, and freelance contexts). The variety of opportunities and routes into employment offered by the industry for those seeking to forge careers within it, is underpinned by the portfolio of event typologies available to work within. Categorised by Jago and Shaw (1998) these include major events, mega-events, hallmark events, and local community events. As a nation, the UK is recognised as a leader in the events industry (Raj and Rashid, 2022), producing and hosting world renowned events across a spectrum of sectors, including most recently the 2022 Commonwealth Games, Glastonbury Festival 2023, UEFA Women's EURO England 2022, Edinburgh International Festival, Royal Ascot, Nottinghill Carnival and the 2023 UCI Cycling World Championships.

With widescale recognition that the events industry has established itself as central to local and global strategies for many kinds of change, in local, national, international contexts (Bladen et al., 2022), and that events are now key contributors to the social, cultural and economic development of the countries that hold them (Raj and Rashid, 2022), increased regulation and the growth of government and corporate involvement in events and the industry has also occurred.

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Governmental interest in events is layered and multifaceted. At a national level, central government view events as strategic vehicles to impact upon key metrics, promoting them as a fundamental part of their strategic plans in social, cultural, and economic development, using events to leverage positive tourism outcomes (Getz and Page, 2020). At a local level, Bowdin et al., (2022) suggest that local government and statutory bodies have an integral relationship with the industry and are responsible for overseeing the conduct and safe staging of events.

The continued growth and expansion of events around the globe has been nothing short of extraordinary (Getz and Page, 2020) but, as Bowdin et al., (2022) contend, the path of the modern events industry has not always been smooth, and nationally and internationally it has faced many challenges in its short history. With key changes caused by advances in technology, cultural and geopolitical changes and world health issues (Bladen, et al., 2022), the industry has had to adapt. The contemporary events industry as we know it today has had to respond to issues associated with globalisation of markets and communications, which have affected the nature of associated trends within the industry (Bowdin et al., 2023). In recent years the industry has had to modify practices to align to changing societal attitudes towards, and impacts of, climate change and sustainability, had to witness numerous terrorist attacks around the world linked to events including the 2016 Bataclan attack (Paris, France) and the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing (Manchester, UK); and endure the 2003 SARS crisis, the 2007/2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), and most recently, the global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020 (Bowdin et al., 2023). This research seeks to examine how the events industry has been impacted by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and to consider its implications for the skillsets of those individuals looking to enter employment within the industry in a post-pandemic climate.

2.4.2 The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the events industry

In March 2020 the events industry, along with the rest of the world, was just beginning to become aware of the effects of the COVID-19 virus, which later became a pandemic that raged across the globe (Dowson et al., 2022), profoundly impacting all sectors of the worldwide economy. One of the most significantly impacted, was the events industry (Madray, 2020) which, due to operating restrictions imposed through lockdowns and social distancing measures, resulted in the postponement or cancellation of live events globally (McGrath, 2022).

In the shadow of a world ravaged by COVID-19, which wreaked indelible havoc on the global events industry, along with the rest of the world's societies and economies (Bladen et al., 2022), the events industry was left facing unprecedented times, witnessing devastating economic impacts in the wake of the pandemic caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19). Thriving, profitable event businesses saw their bottom lines devastated, with most earnings greatly reduced and, in some cases, no income at all for an extended period in most countries of the world, due to either a total ban or severe restrictions strictly preventing mass gatherings (Ferdinand and Kitchin,

2021). Event organisations saw their fortunes change overnight as countless high-profile events including live music concerts and festivals, sporting fixtures and arts and theatre events, were abruptly cancelled as governments worldwide initiated restrictions to prevent the transmission of the virus (Ferdinand and Kitchin, 2021). Here in the UK during March 2020, this manifested in guidance intended to disrupt the spread of the virus, which was issued by the DCMS (The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport) restricting mass gatherings of any sort (both indoor and outdoor). As a result, along with many other industries, events venues closed their doors and event organisers cancelled all scheduled events. The decision to curtail all large gatherings in the UK was partly steered by the repercussions of The Cheltenham Festival 2020: the 3-day festival event which attracted over 251,000 visitors, which the government gave permission to run on 10th March 2020. This was a move which subsequently led to the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust recording almost twice as many COVID-19 deaths as neighbouring authorities. With new sanctions imposed on large gatherings, almost all in-person events across the UK were cancelled at this time, including some of Britain's landmark events such as the world-renowned Glastonbury Festival which was due to celebrate its 50th Anniversary in 2020, the UK's biggest rock music festival, Download and the 50th BBC Radio 1 Big Weekend.

The closure of the events industry due to COVID-19 had immediate effects, with severe consequences on the employment status of many workers in the industry at the time, and on the solvency of galleries, museums, heritage sites, theatres and music venues (Marrone et al., 2020). In a UK context, research published by BVEP (2020) detailed the results of findings from a major UK event industry study conducted during the peak of the pandemic, which indicated that approximately 72% of the events companies and freelancers working in the events industry at the time of the survey reported that they had only 3-4 months financial viability remaining. The outcomes of BVEP's survey signified that freelance respondents were the hardest hit, due to their sole reliance on live events which at the time accounted for 80% of their earnings. 61% of UK event businesses surveyed indicated that less than 20% of their 2019/20 turnover was covered by government financial support schemes, and 75% of those surveyed agreed that the lifting or easing of social distancing requirements was essential to enable the industry to recover (BVEP, 2020; Fullard, 2021; Raj and Rashid, 2022). The financial precarity of the industry during this time as a result of the global economic strain caused by COVID-19 was clear and these conditions were sustained throughout much of 2020 and 2021 and into 2022, when legal restrictions remained in place for specific event types (and sizes) and for particular venues and event spaces (Bowdin et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 virus had a devastating impact on the events industry, many businesses were unable to operate from March 2020 to July 2021, or when they were, they were working within

significant restrictions (Bowdin et al., 2023). As a consequence of the downturn in the economic conditions at the time, many events companies cut their budgets and reduced costs by laying off staff (Raj and Rashid, 2022), which led to skilled people moving out of the industry or being made redundant, causing a shortage of talent in the industry as a result (Bowdin et al., 2023). Since 2020, many events companies and events venues have folded for a range of reasons including uncertainty and lack of income and cash flow for an extended period (Dowson et al., 2022).

While the COVID-19 outbreak has been predominantly framed as an economic crisis within much of the events-based discourse, importantly there is also a dominant range of literature which examines the influence of the pandemic on areas of diversification and opportunity within the events industry, depicting the pandemic as an unintended catalyst for intensifying the development and innovation of virtual events (Brown, 2021; Bladen et al., 2022; Bowdin et al., 2023; Brown and Drakely, 2023). Authors here provide accounts which commonly contend that the pandemic led to an explosion of virtual events, stating that as countries entered into lockdowns and travel borders were closed, in-person events came to an abrupt halt, causing a shockwave across the events industry (Bladen et al., 2022). Brown and Drakely (2023) assert that after an initial period of shock and uncertainty caused by COVID-19, the pandemic caused the events industry to evolve and innovate in an attempt to maintain its social and economic value. With Coronavirus removing the ability for people to meet in-person for events for an extended period of time, the resulting pandemic led to rapid change and innovations in online, virtual event formats implemented within the events industry (Bowdin et al., 2023). During the height of the pandemic, the events sector sought to utilise transformative ways to engage with audiences through the application of technological communications software to produce events in an online, virtual capacity (Seraphin, 2020). It created a sudden and immediate shift to planning events within the virtual events context and encouraged the adoption of new working methods to coincide with and enable this (Raj and Rashid, 2022; Brown and Drakely, 2023).

While virtual events were not an entirely new concept within the events industry (Brown and Drakely, 2023), pre-pandemic the events industry had been slow to embrace the digital and technological evolution of virtual events (McLoughlin, 2014; Sadd, 2014; Brown, 2021). As a result of the effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the pivot to virtual event formats, the global value of virtual events has increased significantly. Brown and Drakely (2023) stipulate that pre-pandemic the global value of virtual events was estimated to be worth in the region of $18.5 billion in 2015 (Raj et al., 2017), a figure which had grown to $139 billion by 2022 (Brown and Drakely, 2023; Grand View Research, 2023).

Bowdin et al., (2022) argue that the pandemic hastened existing trends, and accelerated others such as the move to video conferencing and the live streaming of sport and music-based festivals and events. Ferdinand and Kitchin (2021) outline how event audiences at the time showed

themselves willing to adapt to new online, virtual event formats during the pandemic, stating that some attendees took advantage of opportunities to participate in events which would have been previously out of reach. The movement online has meant for some events greater affordability too, due to the reduced prices charged by organisers and the elimination of associated overhead and production costs (Ferdinand and Kitchin, 2021). These factors support the work of Dashper and Finkle (2020) and Dowson et al., (2022) who argue that events help to build social cohesion and enhance wellbeing of participants, providing environments which magnify both cultural interactions and social entanglements. These authors contend that, as a result, events have the potential to facilitate inclusive engagement by creating spaces to bring diverse communities together and to address social, economic, cultural, and political issues. Virtual events acted as enablers in the absence of in-person events during the pandemic, helping to bring meaning, purpose, a sense of enjoyment, and an ability to participate, to millions (Dowson et al., 2022).

The purported benefits that online and virtual events provided during the pandemic, including offering opportunities to engage with larger global audiences, create new income streams, attract new audiences and offer sustainable business models for event professionals (Brown and Drakely, 2023). This meant that as in-person events began to return to service, the success of virtual event experiences had fundamentally changed the post-pandemic events landscape (Dowson et al., 2022). It has been acknowledged that in a post-pandemic climate, online virtual event delivery and digital components will remain and contribute a constant addition to the industry, co-existing and being simultaneously delivered alongside in-person event experiences. In this way, a new hybrid model of event delivery is taking precedent (Raj and Rashid, 2022; Brown and Drakely, 2023). Hybrid events are defined as a mix of in-person 'live' event experiences augmented with 'virtual' activity (Event Industry Council, 2021). As depicted in Brown's (2021) hybrid event intersection, detailed in Figure 6, hybrid events lie at the overlapping point of where physical events and virtual events intersect, offering the authenticity of the live event experience, whilst taking advantage of the affordances of virtual event orientation.
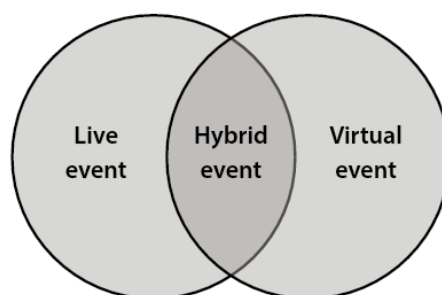

Figure 6. Adapted from (Brown, 2021): Hybrid event intersection

Brown and Drakely (2023) state that as a result of the pandemic, event consumers have become savvier and demanding in recent years, yielding increasing accessibility and enhanced expectations of high-quality event experiences. This has added pressures to those working within the events industry.

A myriad of technological advancements in the events industry, increasing consumer requirements and recognition that trends in virtual and hybrid events are expected to grow at 23% annually until 2027 (Hyder, 2020), have been fundamental in driving significant increases in the diversity of online event platforms available to event organisers. Brown and Drakely (2023) offer valuable insights here in their discussion of post-pandemic hybrid events, stating that as a result of the pandemic online event platforms have expanded greatly and now include not only basic functionality such as webcasting, video presenting modes, chat functionality and polling, but they also offer more bespoke functions such as automated registration, integrations with external applications (for example, X (formally Twitter), LinkedIn), real time data analytics, and also social spaces (p.9). The Event Industry Council in their 'Digital and Hybrid Events Guide' (2021) stipulate that in selecting the most appropriate platform, event planners must have the capabilities to navigate the wider spectrum of platform availability, comprehending and articulating how these correspond to the achievement of the specific event objectives. Asserting that 'it is key that event platform choice aligns with event objectives' (p.16).

There appears a compelling narrative within the literature that the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic created an intensive focus on innovation within the events industry which accelerated the rapid development of virtual and subsequent hybrid event formats. As the events industry recovers from the pandemic, there is a consensus that it will re-emerge differently, and a recognition that hybrid event formats will represent the future direction for the recovery of the industry (Cal, 2020; Mohamed and Saber, 2022). Authors such as Dowson et al., (2022) and Brown and Drakely (2023) argue that as the industry re-emerges in the post-pandemic era as, so too have a multitude of new and continuous enhancements of practices that will help sustain the industry's recovery and generate engaging post-pandemic event experiences. Dowson et al., (2022) asserts that the new knowledge, skills and ways of working that were hard-learned during the pandemic, particularly in the design and delivery of hybrid events, will also be taken forward. However, the discourse indicates that while event attendees have a level of familiarity with virtual technology, tools and applications, due to engaging remotely because of the pandemic (Ritcher, 2020), not all event professionals are fully versed in designing and delivering the technically challenging demands of a high-quality hybrid event (Mohamed and Saber, 2022). Many of those employed within the event industry possibly requiring retraining and up skilling to ensure they are technically proficient for the future directions of the industry (McLoughlin, 2014; Mohamed

and Saber, 2022; Brown and Drakely, 2023). These perspectives link to the centrality of this research in which seeks to examine the influence of the pandemic on skillset requirements for employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

Bowdin et al., (2022) suggests that the future role of those working in the post-pandemic events industry will continue to evolve due to the complexities involved with employment within such a wide-ranging, fast-growing (Bladen et al., 2022), rapidly developing industry (Raj and Rashid, 2022). These authors contend that having the know-how to work in the industry will become even more critical when navigating the challenges currently facing the industry, posed by external conditions. These include the impact of the on-going cost-of-living crisis, the continuing supply chain issues linked to Brexit, increasing concerns about the environment and climate change, leading to an increased emphasis on sustainable events, and the range of enduring political issues.

With the focus of this study centred on providing insights useful to educators within the Event Management Education field, the next section will seek to examine this growing area.

2.4.3 Event Management Education

The field of 'Event Management' has expanded rapidly in the last 20 years, both in terms of the nature of its curriculum, and with reference to the growing range of disciplines and subject areas it has embraced (Getz, 2021). The growth in the number of events, their attendance, and their associated media coverage, have contributed to a corresponding groundswell of academic interest in the event studies area (Baum, Lockstone-Binney, & Robertson, 2013). The enormous breadth, scope, and contribution that both events and the industry provide, has meant that scholarly activity studying the field of events has become increasingly significant (Kashef, 2015). The scale and depth of scholarship that has developed has drawn together a broad interdisciplinary range of interests which are evidenced in many leading publications within the Event Management field (Getz, 2021). The diversity of perspectives being published within the events subject area is expanding exponentially, and so the body of literature supporting the discipline continues to develop and evolve accordingly (Getz and Page, 2020). The growing research agenda within the Event Management field, coupled with the large number of industry and career opportunities offered by the industry has prompted the emergence of the specialist field of 'Event Management Education (Getz and Page, 2020).

Whilst the broader 'events' subject area has developed as a dynamic area of study and is supported by a cogent critical research and publication base (QAA, 2019), the niche area of Event Management Education, a field that is younger than its research counterpart, is still at an early stage, and remains under-researched (Kashef, 2015). Many authors in the field acknowledge and recognise that that there is a scarcity of publications on the topic (Ryan, 2016; Robertson et al.,

2018), particularly in the UK context. Whilst still in its infancy, studies in the field of Event Management Education have prospered somewhat in recent years and this has provoked an advancement in academic thinking and understanding in the subject, which is expressed through the emerging body of literature in the area (Sharples et al., 2014). Kashef (2015) asserts that the expansion and development of the event industry globally, has led to an increase in demand for event professionals, and in turn a huge increase in the opportunities for education and training in the area. These factors have helped to position the area of Event Management Education as a specialist scholarly subject.

Verification of the Event Management Education subject area is substantiated by the professional organisations and bodies that have been created to support the specialist discipline, namely, *The Association of Events Management Education (AEME)* - founded in 2004, and the recently formed (2021) *Institute of Event Management (IEM).* AEME is a professional body which aims to advance Event Management Education in the UK and overseas. It exists to raise the profile of Event Management as a disciplinary area for research and education, and to bring together and support researchers, practitioners and industry in the UK (AEME, 2017). The Institute of Event Management (IEM), founded in 2021 was formed to promote professional recognition for event managers, creating professional standards, supporting skill development, accrediting courses, and developing a body of knowledge and resources in support of continuing professional development within the industry (Bowdin et al., 2023). The prominence of organisations such as AEME and IEM further efforts to legitimise the subject area and help promote visibility of this burgeoning field (Bladen et al., 2022).

From a scholarly perspective, interest in the emerging discipline of Event Management Education is evidenced by a range of established, dedicated Event Management specialised peer-reviewed journals in which significant research is being geared towards professionalization, featuring education as a fundamental aspect of the discourse (Ryan, 2016). This study intends to contribute directly to the Event Management Education field.

The provision of Event Management Education in the Higher Education sector has grown significantly in recent years (Barron and Ali-Knight, 2017). The number of Event Management Education programs offered by universities around the world is steadily increasing (Allen et al., 2012; Barron and Ali-Knight, 2017, Werner et al., 2018). The English-speaking nations, together with key Northern European countries, have developed programmes of study leading to the award of diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate awards. These courses focus on providing education and training for future event professionals, and cover areas such as event planning and management, marketing, finance, human resource management and operations (Bowdin et al.,

2023). Modules in event management are also included in many tourism, leisure, recreation and hospitality qualifications in universities and colleges (Getz and Page, 2020).

As depicted by the QAA (2019), events courses need to explore a range of conceptual and theoretical areas, alongside developing professional skills, in order to meet the academic and employability needs of graduates, the events industry, and the events subject area. Programmes may include the opportunity to participate in a period of industrial placement or work-related learning, including volunteering activities, which enables students to gain structured and relevant events industry experience. The focus of programmes in Event Management Education typically offer a series of different pathways and may include (but are certainly not limited to) the study of topics as outlined in the QAA's latest 'Subject Benchmark Statement for Events, Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism' (2019):

Table 2: Subject Benchmark Statement for Events, Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism
• Consideration of the concepts and characteristics of events as an area of academic and applied study   • Nature of events and the structure, composition and management of the events industry, to include the commercial, public and third sector involvement in events   • Consideration of international, cultural and global environment contexts   • Psychology of the event consumer and client and resulting issues such as the inclusion and exclusion and academic concepts such as co-creation   • Sensory conception, design and staging of event experiences and eventscapes   • Technical, administration, planning, operations, health and safety, risk assessment and mitigation, and contingency planning, project and risk management involved in the provision of events planning   • Human resource requirements for all organisations and stages of event delivery   • Personal development of each student through group work and experiential learning   • Various legal, environmental and ethical requirements necessary for successful events, incorporating international reference points and key policy documents   • Marketing of events and the relationship between events and destination management and brands   • Business events, festivals, popular culture and events in urban/rural spaces   • The use of technology and digital platforms in events and the nature of hybrid events and activation in current and future environments   • Relationship with the built and natural environments, land-use change, construction and spatial planning, transport planning, architecture and infrastructure developments   • Role of events in national and international economic development and regeneration   • Critical review of the policy, strategy, impact and legacy of events, including historical and future investigations   • Career development and learning opportunities in the events sector

Source: QAA (2019)

The growth of courses focussing on the provision of Event Management Education have been driven by a number of key growth factors which are summarised by Getz and Page (2020) in Figure 7.

Figure 8. Adapted from Getz and Page (2020): Key drivers of growth in Event Management Education

Getz and Page (2020) argue that these drivers of growth indicate a more refined and industry-focused progression in events education. They contend that there is a rising need for Higher Education and lifelong learning in the profession of event management and educators must ensure that anyone with a higher degree, or a professional with advanced standing, should be well versed in theories and methods of this dynamic and fast-changing area (Getz and Page, 2020). Interest in the recent emergence of the Event Management Education field has been fuelled by the prominence of the events industry itself which has prompted a greater need for trained specialists to plan, organise and deliver such events (Bladen et al., 2022). These factors have provoked the identification and refinement of a distinct body of knowledge of industry best practice, alongside supporting the accompanying development of events education programmes and career paths, qualifications, accreditation and formalised training opportunities (Bowdin et al., 2023). As the size and needs of the events industry have grown, Event Management Education has started to emerge as a discrete discipline (Bowdin et al., 2023) and forms the central context for this study. The recent growth of the Event Management Education field has meant that there is a vast gap in the available literature on this topic for lecturers, students and professionals alike (Bowdin et al., 2023; Getz and Page, 2020). This study intends to help bridge this gap and contribute to the Event Management Education field.

This research comes at a pivotal time for the events industry; while the industry is still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Indications suggest that the industry growth will reach and exceed pre-pandemic levels by 2025 (Bowdin et al., 2023), necessitating the need for increasing numbers of appropriately skilled workers. Bladen et al. (2022) argue that this need has become even more acute following the attrition that occurred throughout the pandemic-related lockdowns, which saw events in most countries curtailed, if not halted, traditional revenue models disrupted and swathes of industry talent seeking gainful employment elsewhere (p.11). Ensuring the industry

has a sufficient level of skilled workers will be key to achieving future sustained economic growth in the wake of the industry's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ferdinand and Kitchin (2021) suggest that while events offer an attractive and rewarding career path for many, the precariousness of employment coupled with significant challenges currently faced by the sector caused by economic shocks of the coronavirus pandemic, mean that educators should seek to prepare graduates for employment in an uncertain terrain. Bladen et al., (2022) indicates the skills and requirements are relatively fluid, due to the nature of the industry and the complexities caused by recent global events, which only emphasise the extent of employment flexibility needed and insecurity present in the current events industry. The focus of this research seeks to investigate and progress understanding of these facets by examining the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the skillsets required to work within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate. The next section therefore presents an analysis of the employability discourse relevant in the Event Management Education field.

2.4.4 Employability in Event Management Education

In the field of event management, there has for a number of years been debate about how best to meet the needs of industry and thus improve the employability of graduates (Fletcher et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2012; Whitelaw and Wrathall., 2015; Walters, 2021). The scope of the discourse which seeks to analyse employability within the context of events currently includes literature which focusses on the skills, attributes and competencies needed to work in industry alongside studies which provide insights into the best way to improve employability prospects for events graduates. While interest in the field is growing (Padron, 2019), there is an acknowledgment that there remains a paucity of publications on the topic, particularly examining these aspects within the UK context (Ryan, 2016; Robertson et al., 2018; Getz and Page, 2020; Bowdin et al., 2023), something that this research seeks to contribute to.

As the careers potential and associated opportunities with planned events have grown dramatically, in alignment with trends in the experience economy (Getz and Page, 2020) so too has the concentration of studies linking employability with Event Management Education. The growing scholarly attention employability within Event Management Education is receiving is reflective of the previously discussed increasing prevalence and scrutiny of employability within the Higher Education sector and increasing competition between graduates for jobs within the events industry (Walters, 2021). These factors, coupled with acknowledgment that there is a sustained and increasing demand for appropriately qualified event managers, who are able to maximise a wide range of creative, technical and personal skills to produce inspirational events (Barron and Ali-Knight, 2017) to fulfil the industry's requirements and bridge the

aforementioned purported industry skills gap (Bladen et al., 2022). These perspectives have firmly grounded the field as an area of interest within the current climate.

There has been some discussion within the discourse surrounding the most suitable traits, attributes and skills needed by the modern-day events manager (Bladen et al., 2022). With the fast-paced nature and breadth of the industry, its sectors, the types of events and the range of roles it encapsulates being widely acknowledged, the deliberation about which skills are the most fundamental for event professionals is on-going. Existing research recognises that event management graduates need both 'hard' and 'soft' skills (Werner at al., 2021; Arnott, 2022). Hard skills are classified as career and discipline-specific technical and knowledge skills; while soft skills considered to be those more generic interpersonal skills such as the ability to be creative, communicate, collaborate, problem solve, reflect, work effectively in teams, cope with uncertainty, demonstrate a capacity for lifelong learning, self-manage and demonstrate self-confidence (Bladen and Kennel, 2014; Getz and Page, 2020; Walters, 2021; Bowdin et al., 2023). Studies in the field have also sought to analyse the competencies required of events graduates (Bladen et al., 2022) and relevant areas of knowledge required of those intending to enter a career within events, acknowledging that event professionals need more than skills alone (Goldblatt, 2014; Scott et al., 2020). Bladen et al., (2022) gave consideration to some of the key competencies needed to work within the events field, as detailed within Figure 8 below, categorising these into three distinct areas; intellectual, emotional and managerial:

Intellectual	Emotional	Managerial
Critical analysis and judgement	Self-awareness	Engaging communication
Vision and imagination	Emotional resilience	Managing resources
Strategic perspective	Motivation	Empowering
	Sensitivity	Developing
	Influence	Achieving
	Intuitiveness	
	Conscientiousness	

Figure 9. Bladen et al., (2022, p.41) Key competencies for events

While much of the literature contemplating knowledge areas required of those employed within the events industry is varied, it holistically reflects those depicted by the QAA as details in the earlier table 1. Getz and Page (2020) argue that event professionals must have a broad base of knowledge, together with the ability to reflect upon how it will shape both specific managerial or business decisions and the wider implications of events in society and the environment.

More recent dialogue within the literature offers parallels with the aims of this research, where authors such as Brown and Drakely (2023) acknowledge that while the event industry has evolved rapidly in the last 30 years, with a subsequent growth of education and professionalism, there are still gaps emerging regarding knowledge and skills for managing events and event

experiences (p. vii), particularly given the complex challenges and dynamic environment the industry has faced and is still facing post-COVID-19 (Werner at al., 2022). Contemporary research published in the field asserts that the pandemic has shifted the future of many aspects of events and the necessary skills associated with these (Parnell et al., 2022), contending that, as a result of the pandemic, the skills required of those in the industry have changed (Bladen et al., 2022). The discourse presents a compelling narrative that indicates that the global context has raised new requirements of those tasked with planning, organising and delivering events (Bladen et al., 2022) while posing questions about how such skills are acquired and the role of events management education in the professionalisation of future events managers (p.10). These perspectives align with the overarching aim of this study which seeks to examine the influence of the pandemic on the skillsets required of graduates within the post-pandemic events industry. Furthermore, they support the rationale of the study and its purpose.

Literature focussing on the post-pandemic skills requirements of event management graduates remains in its infancy and scarce given the recent, continuing unfolding of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its influence on the re-emerging events industry. Arnott (2022) and Sealy (2022) contend that, in the current post-COVID-19 climate, graduates and practitioners in events need to demonstrate diversity, versatility and adaptability of their skills, enabling them to transfer knowledge and undertake various roles that can be experienced when working in the post-pandemic events industry (Arnott, 2022). These views scaffold to the previously discussed generic wider employability literature framed in the post-pandemic context (Feld et al., 2020; Cukier et al., 2021; WEF, 2023).

The work of other authors in the events field, such as Nadda et al., (2022) and Werner at al., (2022), suggest that some of the events-based pre-pandemic skill sets have become outdated as new and innovative skills in areas of technology and digitisation have taken hold due to the introduction of new practices being implemented within the events industry (Nadda et al., 2022). These views align to the views of Ryan et al. (2020) who acknowledge that events are in the midst of rapid social and technological change. Both Werner at al., (2022) and Brown and Drakely (2023) similarly contend that the skills needed within the sector have broadened, particularly in relation to technology. Brown and Drakely (2023) state that different skills and strengths were needed during the pandemic and since, to accommodate both the innovation and the reality of delivering both virtual and hybrid events. Further stipulating that post-pandemic, as the sector has upskilled, there is now an expectation that all practitioners (including new graduates) are capable and skilled in developing and delivering virtual and hybrid events as well as the live experience (p.15). Werner at al., (2021) support this and argue the need for those working in events to acquire new skills and competences, particularly in the context of technology and IT; recognising the 'hybrid future' as more events are becoming digital (p.875). The views of Fryatt

et al., (2020) echo these perspectives, asserting that the skillsets required to design and deliver virtual and hybrid events are somewhat different from in-person events, recognising the role the pandemic has played in altering skillsets within events as a consequence.

When reflecting on the future trajectory of skillset development for events within the post-pandemic context and the increasing place of technology within them, Brown and Drakely (2023) suggest that technology and its integration across the event life-cycle are increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the events being created post-pandemic, which are also shifting the skills and capabilities needed by those entering the industry as well as those of practitioners already in the sector (p.20). They state that this is forecast to continue to be an innovative tension into the future of the events industry (Brown and Drakely, 2023).

With recognition within the discourse acknowledging there are skillset shifts caused by the pandemic there is also acknowledgment that there needs to be continued discussion about the future shapes that events education, training and related certifications take (Bladen et al., 2022). Werner et al., (2021) contends that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has caused the event industry and providers of event management courses to reflect on the nature of future events and the form they will take. With hybrid, virtual and innovative events being foreseen for the coming years, skills taught in the relevant programs and courses also need to be reassessed and restructured (p.867). These factors link to the centrality of this research which intends to draw together insights into how educators within the Event Management Education field can better prepare their graduates for employment within the post-pandemic events world, hoping to shed light on the nature of employability relevant to events through a post-pandemic lens, set within a UK context.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has focussed on providing a comprehensive narrative of the key literature relevant to the study, examining the nature of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, its implications and the pertinent discourses of both employability and Event Management Education. In doing so, it has located the study and legitimised the position the research, confirming a paucity of literature and a gap within the existing literature that this study intends to contribute too. The next chapter presents the research design, depicting both the methodology and the methods employed within the research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The term 'methodology' refers to the theory of obtaining knowledge; considering the best ways, methods, or procedures, by which the data that will produce the evidence basis for the construction of knowledge, about whatever it is that is being researched, is obtained. While the 'methods' are the specific research techniques that are used to collect and subsequently analyse the data (Sikes, 2006).

3.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose this chapter is to outline and justify the research strategy for the study, outlining both the methodology and the methods employed within the research. It presents the philosophical stance and positionality of the researcher, whilst reviewing the methodological approaches utilised within. The research tools, the research participants and rationale for both the data collection and analysis methods used within are examined, alongside the ethical considerations pertinent to the research.

As depicted in Chapter Two: Literature Review, there has been increasing focus in academia in recent years on the study of employability within Event Management Education. Despite this, there is a scarcity of literature published that examines these concepts through a post-pandemic lens. This study has been designed to begin to address the gap in knowledge by exploring what skills, capabilities, knowledge, and attributes are required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate. By adopting an interpretivist, qualitative approach, this inductive study analyses the responses of both employers and event management graduates working within the UK events industry both during and since the COVID-19 pandemic to establish the factors that will facilitate the prospects of future graduates for employment in the events industry.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The research strategy and methodological design employed within any study reflect a series of philosophical decisions that are made by the researcher, which all subsequently determine the research methods to be utilised to meet the study's aims and objectives set (Gorse., 2013). The term 'research philosophy' refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge through research (Saunders et al., 2019). Burrell and Morgan (2016) contend that whether the researcher is consciously aware of them or not, at every stage of the research undertaken, several types of assumptions will be made. Burrell and Morgan (1979), suggest, as shown in Figure 9, that these assumptions include but are not limited to:

- *Ontological assumptions* - assumptions about the nature of the phenomena being investigated and the realities the researcher encounters within the research
- *Epistemological assumptions* - assumptions about the basis of human knowledge, its nature and forms, how it can be acquired and how communicated to other human beings
- *Axiological assumptions* - assumptions about the extent and ways the researchers' own values, beliefs and positionality influence the research process.

Each of these assumptions inevitably shape the researchers' methodological considerations, instrumentation, and subsequent data collection; influencing how research questions are understood, the methods used and how the findings are interpreted (Crotty, 1998).

A well-thought-out and consistent set of assumptions will constitute a credible research philosophy, which will underpin a sound methodological choice and research strategy, as well as appropriate data collection techniques and analysis procedures. Careful consideration of ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions will allow the researcher to design a coherent methodological approach to the research project, in which all elements of research coherently fit together (Saunders et al., 2019). This considered view moves us as researchers beyond simply regarding research methods as a technical exercise, to us being concerned with understanding the world; which is informed by how we view our world(s), what we take understanding to be, what we see as the purposes of understanding and what is deemed valuable (Cohen et al., 2017).

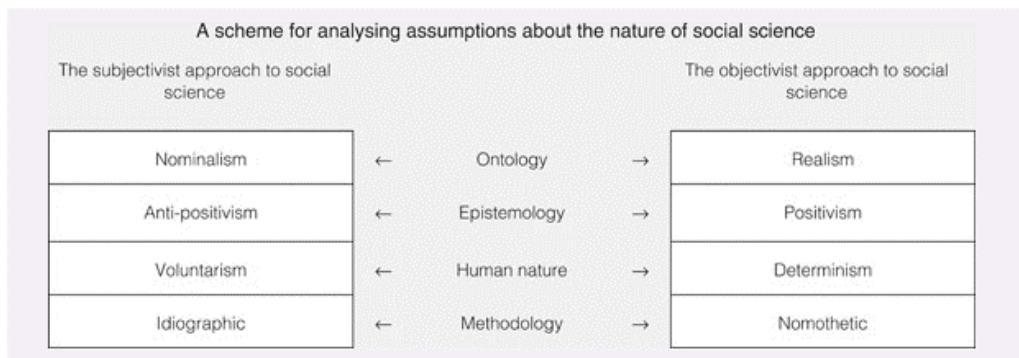| A scheme for analysing assumptions about the nature of social science				
The subjectivist approach to social science				The objectivist approach to social science
Nominalism	←	Ontology	→	Realism
Anti-positivism	←	Epistemology	→	Positivism
Voluntarism	←	Human nature	→	Determinism
Idiographic	←	Methodology	→	Nomothetic

Figure 10. Adapted from Burrell and Morgan (1979): Scheme of assumptions.

This study assumed a subjective, interpretivist ideological stance. Ontologically, subjectivism asserts that social reality is constructed from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors (people). The subjectivist researcher is interested in different opinions and narratives that can help to account for different social realities of different social actors, something that was critical to the achievement of the aim of this study. Adopting a subjectivist stance means embracing notions of nominalism (Saunders et al., 2019), which accepts that there is no underlying reality to the social world beyond what people (the social actors) attribute to it and,

because each person experiences and perceives reality differently, it makes more sense to talk about multiple realities rather than a single reality that is the same for everyone (Burrell and Morgan 2016). This study aligned closely to the notions of subjectivism as it considered the graduates and employers who participated in the study to be social actors and the constructors of their own social reality (Wood and Smith, 2016). It sought to understand the different realities and perceptions of both the employers and graduates that participated in the study, attempting to decipher their conceptions of post-pandemic employability in Event Management Education. By examining the perceptions of employers and graduates, analysing their interactions within their environments, and seeking to make sense of them through the interpretation and meanings that they attribute to these concepts, these participants created their own reality about the skills, capabilities, knowledge, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate. These factors positioned the study firmly within the interpretivist research paradigm.

Saunders et al., (2019) assert that the primary focus of research in the interpretivist paradigm is to uncover understandings regarding the ways we, as humans, attempt to make sense of the world around us. Here, the epistemological assumption is that knowledge is socially constructed. Those who embrace interpretivism contend, epistemologically, that the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated (Cohen et al., 2017) and further contend that the social world is best recognised from the viewpoint of the participant currently in-action. The central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience. Interpretivists are concerned with the individual and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them, using approaches such as 'verstehen' (understanding) and 'hermeneutic' (uncovering and interpreting meanings) to try to see the social world through the eyes of the participants (Saunders et al., 2019). Studies in this paradigm are often concerned with the direct experience of people (social actors) in specific contexts, where researchers understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants. In this study, the participants themselves define the social reality and are constructors of knowledge (Beck, 1979). For an interpretivist researcher it is important to understand motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences which are both time and context bound (Neuman, 2000).

With the focus of this study motivated by uncovering accounts from those actively involved within the Event Management field; both during and since the Covid-19 pandemic, it sought to give a 'voice' to the research participants, providing them opportunities to create their own narratives by sharing their accounts, experiences and opinions on the skills, capabilities, knowledge, and attributes required for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic

climate. Here the adoption of an interpretivist philosophical stance was most appropriate as it was important to capture subjective accounts from those individuals (social actors) considered as active participants, involved 'in-action' within an appropriate setting, to share perceptions on their realities and become constructors of knowledge. With both time (post-pandemic) and context (employability within the Event Management Educational field) imperative to the achievement of the study's aim, the adoption of an interpretivist approach enabled me to see the social world through the eyes of the participants (social actors), uncovering, understanding and deciphering their interpretations of the world around them, something that was essential to achieve the study's aim (Cohen et al., 2017).

Given the emerging nature of post-pandemic employability within Event Management Education, and as I attempt to elucidate the complexities of it, the subjective accounts, and interpretations of the two participant groups (graduates and employers) became ever more critical in uncovering insights and attempting to answer the research question. The two participant groups both hold unique and differing values, motivations and perceptions which were vital to unpack in order to explore the subjective meanings which motivate them as social actors and underpin their views on the topic. The accounts shared were localised and specific to the research participants and are based on the reflective interpretations and opinions of those interviewed. The findings are representative of the views shared by these participant groups only and are not intended to offer generalisability.

Positionality

With widescale acknowledgment that researchers and their research are neither neutral nor innocent; researchers should be mindful that their own background interest, knowledge and biography precede the research (Cohen et al., 2017). Hence, researchers should consider their own 'positionality' within the research process (Madison, 2005) as they will inherently have their own values, biases and world views, and these are lenses through which they look at and interpret the already-interpreted world of participants (Preissle, 2006). Cohen et al. (2017) assert that through reflexivity researchers should consciously and deliberately acknowledge, interrogate and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, and influence on, the research. Rather than trying to eliminate researcher effects (which is impossible, as researchers are part of the world that they are investigating), researchers should self-appraise their role in the research process and product (Berger, 2015). This involves reflecting upon how their own biographies and backgrounds; which are often mediated through, and are in conjunction with, issues of power and status, have influenced the research and disclose this publicly as part of the necessary transparency of the research. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) support and advocate researcher reflexivity in their 'Ethical guidelines for Educational Research' (2018), identifying it as an important consideration, particularly when

considering the extent to which a researcher's reflective research into their own practice impinges upon others – for example, in the case of power relationships arising from the dual roles of teacher/lecturer and researcher, and their impact on their research. BERA contend that dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions which may be addressed appropriately by, for example, making the researcher role very explicit; involving an independent third party in the research process; seeking agreement for politically controversial research, and ensuring that researcher role remains impartial.

As a practitioner working as a lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Event Management Education field within the Higher Education sector, the nature of this study is one of direct interest to me in my role as the researcher. I have a vested interested in the development of Event Management Education as an educational field and in the practices implemented within the discipline, both within my own institution and beyond. My interest in this area gathers momentum in light of the widespread decline in student enrolment numbers in the sector since the pandemic. My motivation for the research is grounded in aspirations to contribute to the development of the broader discourse in the field with the results and findings of the study also yielding a meaningful contribution to me in my professional capacity. In this context these factors influenced the focus of this study, which is relevant to me from both an academic perspective and as an interest area with practical application within my professional remit.

My positionality and role as the researcher were also carefully considered here, particularly in regard to those participants involved in the research whom I had pre-established relationship. The graduate participant group were the most influential, as I had historical involvement with their student journeys whilst they were undergraduate students. Though their involvement as participants within the study is in a graduate capacity (rather than as active students), the power dynamic and dual role capacity was still carefully contemplated and clearly acknowledged within the research process to avoid issues relating to the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of data obtained. Having pre-established historical relationships with the graduate participant group, I was mindful to manage any potential opportunity for my dual role to impact upon the data collection process. In fact, what ensued was that having a albeit distant, pre-established relationship, positively facilitated the interview process due to having a base level of rapport from previous interactions. This put the participants at ease and enabled them to open up, in an honest manner about the areas of discussion in the interview questions. This proved beneficial given the sensitive nature of the study and participants discussing a potentially distressing time of their employment experiences during the pandemic.

Procedurally, the research design and conduct were scrutinised to minimise the impact of any power dynamics or areas of influence that may have adversely affected the behaviours or

responses of the respondents. The approach to the management of these influences was closely aligned to conform to BERA's 'Ethical guidelines for Educational Research' (2018).

3.3 Research Context

This exploratory study employs a research design intended to investigate post-pandemic employability in Event Management Education, analysing the skills, capabilities, knowledge, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate. The research context and methodology employed in this study is qualitative in nature supporting the focus of the study.

Qualitative research strategies have been widely adopted by educational researchers in order to improve the quality of their empirical studies and are often associated with an interpretive philosophy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research is by nature interpretive, because researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative researchers believe that people can subscribe to different views and believe valid but different truths exist and their interest is in exposing these (Newby, 2014). Qualitative research intends to capture participants' meanings and the relationships between them (Saunders et al., 2019), enabling researchers to gain a sophisticated understanding of an individual's perspective, as it prioritises the study of perceptions, meanings and emotions (Silverman, 2019).

This study focusses on analysing the responses of both employers and event management graduates working within the UK events industry both during and since the Covid-19 pandemic to explore the factors that will facilitate the prospects of future graduates for employment within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate. A mono-method (Saunders et al., 2019) qualitative research strategy was adopted, which employed qualitative data collection methods, via semi-structured interviews (which is discussed fully in section 3.7). A qualitative research approach to gathering data was sought to gain an in-depth and rich understanding and investigation of the factors linked to post-pandemic employability in Event Management Education.

In selecting a qualitative methodology, consideration must be given to the challenges arising from it when contrasted with quantitative methodological approaches, particularly regarding issues associated with the reliability and validity of qualitative research.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiries do not necessarily seek replicability. It can be expected that with different research participants and with the study carried out on a different day, in a different place, the findings would be different (Stahl and King, 2020). Therefore, quantitative understandings of validity do not apply to this study. Instead, this research aims for the less specific goal of *trustworthiness,* as first depicted by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and

Guba articulate four criteria in their approach for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The first three of these aspects are elaborated upon below, in terms of their application to this research. The fourth, confirmability, or the researcher aiming to construct a new reality from the findings, does not correspond to the aim of this study.

Lincoln and Guba's first criteria for trustworthiness is credibility. Credibility concerns the extent to which the research findings 'hang together' (Stahl and King, 2020, p.26) and Lincoln and Guba explain that this is mostly achieved through various methods of triangulation. According to Silverman (2019), triangulation of data 'refers to the attempt to get a "true" fix on a situation by combining different ways of looking at it or different findings'. Within this study triangulation of the data was achieved through methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1970; Wellington, 2015) and environmental triangulation (Guion et al., 2011), rather than seeking theoretical, data or investigator triangulation. Triangulation was attained from the two research participant groups and was undertaken to allow for greater validity, credibility and authenticity of the data gathered and to support the analysis and interpretations made; based on the responses obtained from the graduates and employers participating in the study. This is known as 'methodological triangulation' which involves 'within method' triangulation, where the same method is used on different occasions (Denzin, 1970; Wellington, 2015) and can be conducted across different populations.

However, within this study it was also important to seek to gain data from multiple sectors of the events industry, which led to the achievement of 'environmental triangulation' (Guion et al., 2011). Credibility here was gained from reviewing post-pandemic skills requirements from a range of sectors within the events industry, including the corporate, music, sport, arts and entertainment sectors. Stahl and King (2020) go on to mention that credibility in this context is enhanced by respondents' time spent in the profession in question. The respondents within this study offered insights based on varying career lengths, modes of employment, and roles undertaken over their career trajectories, with many of the employer participant group reporting career lengths in excess of 20-25 years within the events industry. Triangulation in this study was important to add depth, breadth, complexity and richness to the research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) ensuring that the findings that were analysed and conclusions made added new knowledge to the topic area (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

Relating to the quantitative concept of validity, Lincoln and Guba's second criteria of trustworthiness is transferability. While not usually a primary aim of qualitative research, as the nature of this type of research does not seek replicability (Robson and McCartan, 2016), transferability enables the transfer of findings from one context to another. In this study, transferability is achieved in two ways. First, the study, including the research question,

objectives and interview questions, are theoretically and empirically embedded in previous studies that have explored the areas of employability, and post-pandemic responses in other sectors (Tholen, 2015; Dalrymple et al., 2021; Rees, 2021). Second, while generalisation is not the aim, the findings from this study are intended to inform research in other educational contexts. As Stahl and King (2020) suggest, 'transfer in research is not a recipe, but rather a suggestion for what must be researched in another context' (p.27).

Dependability, the third element of Lincoln and Guba's criteria, concerns the extent to which research findings are local and specific, not just to the context but also to the researcher, and the extent to which findings are free from researcher bias. Stahl and King (2020) note that the researcher's anticipation of peer review heightens their awareness of what is recorded as fact and what is considered to be interpretive comments emerging from the data. It should be noted though, that both the observations and interpretations of the data are equally valid (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and researcher bias should be accepted as an essential part of the interpretive paradigm (Stahl and King, 2020). On the subject of bias, Stahl and King (2020) continue that it is naïve to think about controlling or removing bias and that researchers should undertake reflexive auditing as a very basic requirement of any research. In the context of this study, as already discussed, as the researcher I have a vested interest in finding solutions to enhance the provision of Event Management Education and this bias is not discarded. Here the interpretation of the data gathered will be reported in a transparent fashion, and at face value. The findings will not ignore any arising themes or issues that might contradict the intentions of the study, nor overlook those divergent conclusions that might not align with my own personal beliefs or opinions.

Despite there being critics of qualitative enquiry and those who claim qualitative research approaches are perceived to lack academic rigour, there are authors with opposing viewpoints who contend and argue the value and usefulness of qualitative enquiry, particularly in exploratory contexts such as this, where there is an inherent need to investigate areas which are rich and complex in nature (Newby, 2014). It is suggested here that given the nature of the issue being investigated in this study and the aforementioned paucity of academic literature in the field of post-pandemic employability in Event Management Education, qualitative data collection methods are appropriate to gain a clear contextual understanding of these issues from those working in the events industry. As assumed by an exploratory methodological design, the findings of such a study are not necessarily meant to be generalised to a wider population, but instead are intended to provide a deep contextual understanding of the issues at hand.

3.4 Research Approach

Having considered the methodological perspective, the exploratory nature of the study and the research question being addressed within, an inductive approach to the research was employed.

There is growing recognition that the use of purely inductive, or idiographic (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) approaches to research are appropriate for studies such as this, which are exploratory in nature, studies, which typically aim to identify patterns of behaviour within the person across a population of experiences or situations (Saunders et al., 2019). In exploratory studies the adoption of an inductive approach adds significant value to research as it allows for the development of contextual understanding as data is gathered from the 'emic' perspective – that is, from within the social group - from the perspective of the subject (Gorse, 2013). Research using an inductive approach to reasoning is likely to be particularly concerned with the context in which such events take place. Its emphasis on the importance of subjective interpretations, is most likely to be informed by the interpretivist philosophy (Newby, 2014). Cohen et al., (2017) support this and contend that interpretive research is congruent with an inductive research approach whereby theory emerges and arises from particular situations; it is generated by the research. Theory should not precede research but follow it. Investigators work directly with experience and understanding to build their theory on them. The data yielded will include the meanings and purposes of those people who are their source (Cohen et al., 2017).

An inductive approach was selected for adoption within this study due to the paucity of research of post-pandemic employability in Event Management Education and because it not only aligned to the envisaged mode of research, but it also offered flexibility affordances within the research process and aligned to the interpretive nature of the study.

This study aimed to investigate factors that will facilitate the prospects of future graduates for employment within the events industry, through a post-pandemic lens, conceptualising these from both graduate and employer perspectives, meaning the study is interpretive and complex in nature. Employing an inductive approach was deemed appropriate within this study due to its interpretive nature and the associated fit to the focus of the research study. Being an exploratory study, which seeks to discover and understand the phenomenon, process, perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Cooper and Endacott, 2007), adopting an inductive approach permitted flexibility within the research process and meant that regardless of how post-pandemic employability factors were perceived by the participant groups, an inductive approach offered affordances in investigating these factors thoroughly.

Adopting an inductive approach also closely aligned to the mode of research. According to Thomas (2006), the generic inductive approach aims to condense the raw text into a format that enables clear links to be established between the research objectives and the summary findings enabling a model to be developed about the underlying structure of experiences, processes or

perceptions derived from the text data (Liu, 2016). The research design of this study had the same purposes. It attempted to collect empirical data and develop theoretical insights from both the graduates and employers participating in the study, exploring their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, characteristics and attributes required of event management graduates in a post-pandemic setting, organising these into important themes and patterns, while building connections between the research aim and these themes.

In conducting an inductive study, testing theory was not the intention, but instead I intended to uncover new information and knowledge in an area which currently has a scarcity of research on the topic. Gorse (2013) supports this approach and states that the adoption of an inductive research approach becomes particularly important in areas of study that have received little attention in the past, meaning that the development of theory is lacking. This study encouraged ideas and themes to emerge from the personal accounts provided by the research participants themselves, seeking to build a theory that is grounded in the data, instead of imposing a predetermined theory to the data that is collected (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Saunders et al., (2019) assert that studies employing an inductive approach create knowledge from the data and findings directly. The aim in this study was to generate meaning from the data set gathered from the graduates and employers participating in the study and to establish patterns and themes within the findings to reach conclusions and address the research question.

3.5 Research Participants

There were two participant groups within the study:

1. **Employers:** Participants were recruited from a pool of employers across a range of sectors of the UK events industry and were sourced from the close network of employers my institution has contact with. In total six employers were interviewed.
2. **Graduates:** The graduates were recruited from previous cohorts of the BA (Hons) Event Management programme. The graduates interviewed were those who had completed the course within the past 5 years and been in employment within the events industry since, to position them importantly and contextually in relation to the pandemic. Six graduates were interviewed.

Sampling

A non-probability, purposive sampling method was used for both participant groups. Saunders et al., (2019) state that the relationship between the sample selection technique and both the purpose and focus of the research is important and should be aligned to the research question(s), objectives, and choice of research strategy. In this study these aspects dictated a non-probability, purposive sampling technique, as it involved undertaking in-depth research that focused on a

small number of information-rich cases, enabling the research question to be fully explored and insights to be sought from the two participant groups on the skills, knowledge, characteristics and attributes required of event management graduates in a post-pandemic setting. Wellington (2015) advocates non-probability sampling methods for such studies and states that it is a feasible approach in qualitative research due to the intensive nature of fieldwork where there is an emphasis on understanding or insights to be gained. A purposive approach which, as Cohen et al., (2017) states, is often a feature of qualitative research, was undertaken as it enabled the participants within the sample to be handpicked for inclusion based on the possession of the characteristics being sought to meet the focus of the research. Bryman (2008) supports this and contends that purposive sampling is strategic and entails an attempt to establish a good correspondence between the selected research objectives and the sample of interviewees. This was important in enabling the research question to be answered and the objectives of the study to be met, by selecting cases that were contextually relevant, given the post-pandemic nature of the study, is an approach that Polkinghorne (2007) supports, stating that purposive sampling within qualitative studies is common as it enables the full scope of issues to be explored. Recognition and regard were given to the selectivity, which is inherent in a non-probability, purposive sampling technique deriving from the researcher targeting a particular group (Cohen et al., 2017). After due consideration, it was decided that this was the most congruent sampling method when considering the achievement of the study's research question and objectives in working with a small sample of cases that are purposely selected to be informative.

The range of participants interviewed within this study was broad enough to capture the diverse perspectives required to achieve the aim of the research, while being focused enough to allow for thorough analysis. It was important to have participants who were able to provide a range of lived experiences and viewpoints, whose experiences and perspectives directly related to the achievement of the research questions. This ensured that the data collected was rich and deeply rooted in the context of the study.

The sample included two participant groups that were selected based on their characteristics; the first of these were graduates who had completed the BA (Hons) Event Management course within the past 5 years and been employed in an events organisation, within a sector of the UK events industry, before, during and since the pandemic. The second group were employers who have been operational in the UK events industry during the same period. Both sample groups were selected from a range of sectors of the events industry to offer diversity in perspectives and data gathered in the interviews. Details of participant information can be found in the table below.

Table 2: Participant information			
Participant code	*Job role*	*Sector of the Events Industry*	*Mode of employment*
Employer			
E1	*Events Consultant*	*Sport Events*	*Freelance*
E2	*Company Director*	*Music Events*	*Self-Employed*
E3	*Events Director – Company Owner*	*Corporate Events*	*Self-Employed*
E4	*Head of Events*	*Event Security: numerous sectors*	*Full time - Employed*
E5	*Events Apprenticeship Manager*	*Corporate Events*	*Full time - Employed*
E6	*Event Consultancy Specialist*	*Corporate Events: B2B Events*	*Freelance*
Graduate			
G1	*Event Coordinator*	*Charity Events*	*Full time - Employed*
G2	*Events Lead - Education*	*Corporate Events*	*Full time - Employed*
G3	*Production Coordinator*	*Arts and Entertainment*	*Part time - Employed*
G4	*Senior Event Executive*	*Corporate Events: B2B Events*	*Full time - Employed*
G5	*Event Manager*	*Corporate Events*	*Full time - Employed*
G6	*Assistant Volunteer Manager*	*Sport Events*	*Freelance*

The sample size for the study was determined by the point I reached data saturation from the interviews conducted, a widely recognised and long held benchmark for establishing adequate sample sizes within qualitative research (Wynter, 2018). Cohen et al. (2017) indicate that saturation is reached when no new insights, properties, dimensions, relationships, codes, categories or themes are produced even when new data are added. O'Reilly and Parker (2013) contend that reaching data saturation is a critical component of qualitative research that helps ensure the data collection process robust and valid. A view shared by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), who assert that saturation is considered the cornerstone of rigor in determining sample sizes in qualitative research.

Hennink and Kaiser (2022) state that despite there being varied approaches to assessing saturation, recent studies have converged on a relatively consistent guideline for sample sizes for saturation for commonly used qualitative research methods. They argue that these results provide strong empirical guidance on effective sample sizes for qualitative research, which can be used in conjunction with the characteristics of individual studies to estimate an appropriate sample size prior to data collection. Wynter (2018) argues that in qualitative research, particularly in studies such as this, with homogenous populations and narrowly defined objectives, 9-17 participants may be a sufficient sample to achieve saturation. Saunders et al., (2019) suggests that once the point of saturation is reached within qualitative research, there is no benefit to collecting any additional data, as it will not contribute any new insights or themes.

Reaching data saturation is a pivotal point in qualitative research as a sign that you've generated comprehensive and reliable findings.

Within this study I adopted an iterative approach to the data collection process, meaning that as the interviews progressed, if new insights and themes continued to emerge, I persisted to expand the sample size to include more participants to gain a more comprehensive understanding.
The final sample size was led by the point I began to reach data saturation. I felt the saturation point was achieved at interview twelve. At this stage I felt nothing new was being contributed to the insights being shared. Reaching the point where additional interviews yielded little new information, signalled that the range of participant experiences had been adequately captured, and saturation had been achieved.

The finalised sample included twelve participants, consisting of six employers and six event management graduates; originating from an array of sectors within the events industry, working in a range of roles and capacities, and employed across numerous modes of employment. The diversity of participants included within the sample uncovered a contextualised understanding about the skills, capabilities, knowledge, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for careers within the events industry.

3.6 Research Tools

Cohen et al. (2017) contend that the quality of any research study is heavily influenced by the appropriateness of its methodology and the instrumentation (methods) adopted. The decision on which instrument (method and/or tool) to be used for data collection, frequently follows on from an earlier decision on which kind (methodology) of research to undertake. The methods and research tools selected subsequently dictate how the data is collected and analysed. With the nature of this study being a subjective and inductive one, and its focus firmly rooted in gathering qualitative data about the views of employers and graduates, semi-structured interviews were employed as the key research tool.

Hammond and Wellington (2020) advocate the use of interviews for research where the purpose and nature is comparable to that of this study. They assert that 'interviews are of value to researchers seeking to probe an interviewee's account of an event as well as their thoughts, values, feelings and perspectives more generally' p.109. They indicate that in contrast to other research instruments, interviews allow the researcher to see an event or context from the point of view of the people they are researching – something that was critical to the aim of this study. Newby (2014) suggests that research interviews can take several forms and one of the skills of the researcher is to choose the approach that best meets the needs and circumstances of the research. In this case semi-structured interviews were selected as they were the most congruent

type of interview to fit with the purpose of the study, the achievement of the aim/objectives of the research and their aptness for addressing the research questions. Hammond and Wellington (2020) state that semi-structured interviews typically offer a set topics or broad questions that are to be covered, but these are open-ended, and the interview can move into unexpected areas. These types of interviews are highly interactive, allowing for clarification of questions and identification of unexpected themes. Saunders et al., (2019) support this and state that in qualitative, exploratory studies the methods used are often unstructured or semi-structured so that questions, procedures and focus may alter or emerge during a research process that is both naturalistic and interactive.

Importantly in this study, the flexibility afforded by semi-structured interviews allowed for a deep and rich narrative to be obtained from each research participant, enabling a detailed account of experiences and perceptions to be gained and understood on an individual basis. The interview schedule (available in Appendix B) provided a set of interview questions which were utilised as initial conversational discussion points with each research participant. The semi-structured approach then permitted the freedom to adapt the questions, to ask follow-up questions to probe or explore a viewpoint more fully, or to open up other explanations and provide answers to questions that were not foreseen when the research questions were determined. The interview guide was structured to reflect the research questions and collect data on an indicator that could be used to answer the research questions (Newby, 2014). The semi-structured approach to the interviews conducted here aligned to the subjective nature of the study and linked to the perspective that views about the social world are socially constructed. This approach regards interview data as being socially constructed; co-produced on the one hand by the views and interpretations of the employers and graduates as the participants interviewed and, on the other hand, by the interviewer who asked questions, responded to the participant's views and interpreted the resulting data during the subsequent data analysis (Denzin 2001; Heyl 2005). The responses from the employers and graduates obtained via the interviews conducted were used to determine knowledge.

In contrast to a traditional face-to-face qualitative interview design, this study adopted a more contemporary, online interview format for the data collection process.
Though face-to-face interviews have long been regarded as the norm for conducting qualitative interviews in research (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021), recent technological developments, which were accelerated by trends caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have seen shifts towards preferences in digitised methods of data collection within qualitative research (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021). While the use of virtual communication methods for conducting research are not a new, the soaring popularity of virtual platforms used to facilitate remote working and learning

during the pandemic have encouraged the increased use of such tools for research (Newman et al., 2021), and has altered the way researchers now interact and communicate (Parker, 2021; de Villiers et al., 2022). With researchers now increasingly opting to conduct their qualitative research interviews using popularised virtual means which include online video interviews and the use of online interview application platforms (de Villiers et al., 2022).

Conducting interviews online has a number of advantages when compared to more traditional face-to-face methods (Dodds & Hess, 2020), which this study sought to take advantage of.

Firstly, by employing an online interview format within this study, it afforded increased convenience for both the researcher and the participants by allowing them to partake in the interview from a remote location of their choice (Sah et al., 2020; Varma et al., 2021). Traditional face-to-face interviews are typically conducted in a setting, format and style chosen by the researcher and unfamiliar to the participant. Brown (2022) indicates that for participants accessing interviews from a preferred location, using a personal device may provide the participant with a sense of familiarity and comfort. This may help to enhance feelings of control when providing ongoing consent to participate in the interview (Brown, 2022). Online participation offers the opportunity to simply exit a call if a participant feels uncomfortable, compared to potentially awkward face-to-face interactions with a researcher in the event that a participant chooses to terminate an interview early (Newman et al., 2021). Williams et al., (2012) also suggests that the added freedom of online participation may result in individuals providing less inhibited responses when discussing sensitive topics compared to face-to-face interactions, something that was of great importance to this study given the nature of study. It was of vital importance to ensure all participants within the interview process here were made to feel comfortable given the sensitive nature of discussions linked to the study. All participants were offered the option to have their camera on or off to suit their preferences, their responses were also carefully monitored and managed, with in-built optional breaks to be taken where and when needed. These factors were implemented throughout the interview process to ensure any feelings of discomfort that may have occurred, given the participants were discussing their experiences during the pandemic, could be carefully managed to minimise any distress that may have occurred.

By avoiding the need to travel, the online interviews conducted were less time consuming for both the researcher and participants and more cost effective too. A benefit advocated by Trier-Bieniek (2012), who suggests that online interviews can lead to substantial cost savings on travel and accommodation, particularly when the interview participants are geographically dispersed. Conducting qualitative interviews via virtual means also enabled the researcher to include participants that would otherwise be hard to reach due to geographical or access-related

limitations, thus increasing the ability to capture a range of perspectives and experiences (Sah et al., 2020; Varma et al., 2021), being more inclusive in nature.

As Brown (2022) identifies, online interviews can also be arranged to accommodate a participant's technological preferences by using digital tools and platforms already familiar to the individual, in this case the tool used to conduct the interviews was MS Teams, a platform popularised during the pandemic and familiar to all participants. Many online virtual communication tools also offer real-time transcription capabilities meaning that researchers are provided with a high-quality draft transcript upon completion of the interview (Lobe et al., 2020), this was a significant benefit to me as the researcher in reflecting upon the interview, and a time-saving technique meaning the finalised transcriptions after were far less time consuming to produce. Finally, as Brown (2022) also suggests, online interviews may also help to address potential power imbalances between researcher and participant, this was an important consideration within the research process undertaken here given the pool of participants included within the sample and my prior relationships with some participants.

Though online interviews are suggested to provide a viable and advantageous alternative to in-person communication, these benefits should be balanced against a number of potential limitations when conducting qualitative interview research online.

Online data collection presents notable challenges for conducting qualitative interviews, each of these were carefully considered and where appropriate, mitigated to ensure they were actively managed within the interview process conducted within the study.

A key limitation of conducting interview research online is that it may be less conducive to facilitating rapport between researcher and participant (Varma et al., 2021). Developing a certain affinity between researcher and participant can help to provide a comfortable environment and is necessary for eliciting in-depth participant responses. As the interviewer is the instrument of data collection, an online setting may inhibit the fostering of trust and proximity, thus restricting the research findings (Salmons, 2012; Varma et al., 2021). Due to my dual role and prior relationships with participants, a base level of trust was already in place which helped to overcome these factors.

Online interviews may also make it harder for the researcher to pick up on non-verbal cues which could hinder their ability to successfully steer the discussion and could influence data collection (Tremblay et al., 2021). An interaction limited to a computer screen and audio may miss more subtle or nuanced responses which can be key to fully understanding a participant's perspective or experience (Varma et al., 2021). Crucially, the distance created between interviewer and interviewee, could impede the researcher from being able to effectively detect signs of distress that would ordinarily be recognised during a face-to-face interaction, creating the potential for

unintended harm or discomfort. These aspects were something I was mindful of and with all participants who participated in the interviews opted to engage with their cameras on, enabled me to monitor these aspects effectively and act accordingly, where needed.

Online interviews present a number of challenges concerning privacy and confidentiality (Varma et al., 2021). It has been suggested that digital platforms may provide a false sense of privacy, resulting in individuals lowering their guard where they would have otherwise been more security conscious in a face-to-face setting (Newman et al., 2021). The possibility for unanticipated interruptions, such as a family member walking in during an interview, also adds to the risk of unintended disclosures of private information. Researchers themselves should also be mindful of any identifying information associated with their background and digital interactions with participants, which may include ensuring that their usernames and IP address are masked (Newman et al., 2021).

Finally, a significant challenge when adopting an online approach to conducting interview research is how to mitigate the effects of the digital divide. The digital divide represents the gap between those who have full access to digital technologies (such as the internet, smartphones and computers) and those who do not. This digital divide is affected most by factors such as age, disability and socioeconomic status. This digital divide may lead to selection biases in research by placing access restrictions on marginalised pockets of society (Toscos et al., 2019). The digital barriers imposed by online research could lead to a lack of representation of certain voices in society, thus bringing into question the generalisability of the findings. As this study was not intending to generalise from the results, I felt this factor could be mitigated.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in the study. Those participants who expressed an interest in participating were emailed a participant information sheet, detailing the aim and scope of the study and the broad areas for discussion within the interview. Once they expressed an interest and willingness to participate, the arrangements for the interview were made. A copy of the consent form was emailed to participants who were asked to electronically sign it and return it by email prior to the interview commencing. Appendix B outlines the main discussion points for each of the interview sets and summarises the interview questions posed and their alignment to the research question and objectives for the study; illustrating how they were addressed through the data collection process undertaken.

A total of twelve interviews took place online and were conducted and recorded using Microsoft (MS) Teams. The interviews lasted on average 45mins per interview. The signed consent forms, interview recordings and the subsequent transcriptions produced were all encrypted and only accessible to the researcher. These files were stored securely in separate folders on the Google Drive linked to the researcher's University of Sheffield account. No names or other identifying

characteristics of the participants were evident within the transcripts, and codename aliases were used to protect participant's identities (more information on data confidentiality and anonymity is discussed in section 3.9 - ethical aspects of the research).

A pilot interview was conducted a few weeks before the main data collection began, this pilot was conducted with a graduate participant who was selected based on their characteristics as those included within the final sample; an individual who had completed the BA (Hons) Event Management course within the past 5 years and been employed in an events organisation, within a sector of the UK events industry, before, during and since the pandemic. This pilot interview enabled me to replicate the exact interview process before the final interviews were conducted. It enabled me to ensure that the interview topics, questions and format were all appropriate for the forthcoming interviews to be undertaken. It also provided me with an opportunity to check the reliability of the technological aspects linked to the data collections phase, including testing the use of MS Teams as an online interview platform, its recording capabilities, and transcription feature to ensure its suitability. Conducting the pilot interview, and reflecting upon this was a really useful exercise. It enabled me to feel confident and assured me that the use of MS Teams as a data collection tool in this capacity was reliable and appropriate in obtaining the data required. As a result of undertaking the pilot interview it also shed light on some aspects where minor tweaks were made, these included some slight alterations to the interview topics and revisions to the order in which the discussion topics would be presented within interviews, these aspects I felt would facilitate a better interview experience and yield a richer set of data as a result.

The data gathered within the interviews conducted and the subsequent analysis, findings and outcomes obtained, are intended inform learning and decisions about employability by Event Management educators in the UK, particularly regarding the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for careers within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate.

3.7 Approach to Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis are an interrelated and interactive set of processes (Saunders et al., 2019) that researchers should carefully consider within their research design, particularly when deciding upon the approach to the presentation, analysis and interpretation of the data collected within the study. The object of data analysis is reveal the information we need to answer our research question (Newby, 2014).

The data to be analysed in this study was qualitative data obtained via the semi-structured interviews conducted with the employers and graduates participating in the research. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) approach was adopted in analysing the data collected. This involved organising, describing, understanding, accounting for, and explaining the data, making sense of it in terms of deciphering participants' definitions and perceptions of post-pandemic

employability in Event Management Education. Noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities from the qualitative data gathered (Cohen et al., 2017), Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method was utilised to facilitate the thematic analysis conducted. Their method is an iterative process consisting of six steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The first stage of the thematic analysis undertaken was to become familiar with the data. Once the semi-structured interview process had concluded, the first step was to carry out a transcription of the recorded data. This process was undertaken by myself, allowing me as the researcher to fully immerse myself in the data, enabling me in gaining an understanding of the in-depth, context-specific, rich, subjective data and meanings gathered from the responses obtained from the interviews conducted.

By transcribing the interviews, I was able to generate codes from the data, coding both during the transcription process itself and by conducting further iterative cycles of reading after the transcriptions were completed, with each cycle generating further insight. Saunders et al., (2019) contends that in an inductive study such as this one, researchers are likely to code almost all data gathered, exploring all possible meanings within the data to guide the direction of the research. This search for meanings also led to finely detailed coding, where coding of smaller segments or units of data was undertaken to capture every possible nuance. To establish qualitative codes from the data set a manual open coding, an emergent coding technique, was employed.

Open coding involves applying codes that are derived from the text (emergent codes) and it is closely aligned with an inductive approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Open (or emergent) coding has identified as a suitable method of generating a participant-generated 'theory' from the data, whereby the analysis of text allows the researcher to find the answers within; and where theory is developed from the data rather than imposed upon it (Blair, 2015). During the open coding phase, individual participant responses were coded for emergent key words and concepts which subsequently informed the themes generated from the analysis process. Codes were merged where substantial overlap was identified, highlighting relevant areas of data for further scrutiny, these aspects were then analysed so creating sub-themes. Undertaking this process led to the development of five dominant themes that were drawn and refined from the transcripts analysed. The themes that emerged from the data were organic and were based on authentic accounts of the graduates and employers' perspectives shared.

The themes are summarised in the below:

Table 4: Summary of key themes	
Theme One	The influence of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Theme Two	Technological and Digital
Theme Three	Mental Health and Wellbeing
Theme Four	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)
Theme Five	Bridging the Industry – Higher Education gap

By categorising and analysing data against these themes, it allowed for connections to be made, data sets to be compared and contrasted, and conclusions to be drawn from the data gathered (6).

3.8 Ethical aspects of the research

Research ethics play a critical part in formulating a research design. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) believes that educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons – including themselves – involved in or touched by the research they are undertaking. Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice, in recognition of both their rights and of differences arising from age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant characteristic (BERA, 2018).

This study was designed and conducted in line with BERA's 'Ethical guidelines for Educational Research' (2018) and after obtaining ethical approval for conforming to the research ethical procedures as outlined by the University of Sheffield. Recognised as a fundamental and integral part of the research design, the ethical issues and associated procedures were carefully considered and strictly adhered to throughout the research process to ensure that those involved in the study were not at risk in any way, and not exposed to any anticipatable opportunities to experience harm or embarrassment at any stage of the research process. With the nature of the study intending to probe the human research participants involved in the research about their experiences before, during and since the pandemic, asking them to divulge information linked to their reflective accounts of this time, caution was a priority when constructing the interview questions posed to avoid any potential distress or sensitivity of feelings that may have been triggered when recalling life events linked to the pandemic. There were no research participants classified as vulnerable, nor any under the age of 18.

The following ethical considerations and procedures linked to the study were executed:

- Detailed information was provided to all research participants (via a participant information sheet) regarding the aim and scope of the study, meaning all participants could fully understand not only what was involved in participating in the study, but also

their rights, and the responsibilities of the researcher. Participants were emailed a copy of the participant information sheet prior to the interview and before consent was gained.

- After providing full disclosure of all information necessary for making an informed and voluntary decisions to participate in the study to prospective participants, a consent form was issued to those participants who expressed an interest in participating. This enabled the participants to understand and agree to their participation, and the terms and practicalities of it, without any duress, prior to the research getting underway. Their rights to withdraw from the study at any point before the interview and up until the final write up and submission of the thesis, without needing to provide an explanation, were made clear. Details of what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used and how reported were provided alongside relevant information about the retention, sharing and any possible secondary uses of the research data. An electronic copy of a signed consent form was gained from all participants prior to interview.

- Issues of both confidentiality and anonymity were carefully considered and appropriate procedures adhered to within the study, ensuring the privacy of all participants was preserved and my obligations as the researcher were upheld to safeguard information entrusted to me, ensuring it was not misused or wrongfully disclosed. I assumed an ethical duty that is central to respect for participants and the integrity of the research project, with awareness that any breaches of anonymity and confidentiality may harm the participant, the trust relationship between me as the researcher and the participant, other individuals or groups, and/or the reputation of the research community/University of Sheffield.

The arrangements concerning confidentiality and anonymity procedures were communicated clearly to all participants (along with their rights to withdraw or pause the interviews at any stage) via the participant information sheet which I emailed prior to each interview conducted and reiterated verbally before the interview commenced, encouraging a sense of trust and to ensure that all participants were comfortable taking part in the research.

I assured participants' confidentiality and anonymity were protected during the study through the adoption of codename aliases which were implemented both within the transcripts produced from the interviews conducted and throughout the write up of the thesis too. All recordings and documents obtained during the data collection and analysis stages (participant contact details, signed consent forms, interview recordings, transcriptions and raw thematic data documents) were all encrypted meaning they were only accessible to the researcher. They were all stored securely in Google Drive folders accessed via the researcher's University of Sheffield account.

General Data Protection Regulations (2018) were also strictly adhered to at all times during the data collection process and when storing the data gathered. Participants were ensured of their anonymity and confidentiality at all times to reduce this concern and were assured of their right to read the findings section of the thesis prior to submission to ensure it was fair and representative of the responses given. Once the research is complete and my EdD is successfully awarded, all transcripts, consent forms and other data will be destroyed within 3 months.

3.9 Chapter Summary

The methodology chapter has outlined the research design, the approach taken to analyse the data gathered and has considered the ethical challenges and issues associated to the study. With the research context set in analysing the influence of the pandemic, it became clear that COVID-19 also influenced and impacted upon the research design implemented within the study. Pertinent areas where this became evident included the recruitment of research participants to be used within the sample, the mode and methods of data collection selected for use within the study, and both the range, and sensitivity, of topics discussed during the data collection process too. All of these areas which were explored and discussed at various points throughout the chapter became noteworthy areas within the research process.

The next chapter entitled 'Analysis and Interpretation of Data' will examine the main themes deriving from the data set and present the keys findings, with a view to addressing the study's central research question and the objectives of the study.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Interpretation of Data

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter examines the key findings of the study which have been systematically extracted from the data and are based on authentic accounts of the two differing participant groups outlined in the previous chapter. The chapter focuses on the exploration of the twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews executed within the research, analysing the insights offered by the graduates and employers who participated in the study. With codename aliases assigned to each research participant when reporting the results, the chapter critically appraises the parallels and disparities in the anonymised responses gathered from the interviews conducted. Both the main findings and the associated themes presented within this chapter have been constructed following the employment of a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to the analysis of the data collected, and aim to address the overarching research question (RQ) and objectives of this thesis.

As a reminder, the overarching research question of this thesis is:

RQ: How has the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic influenced the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate?

The associated objectives for the research are:

- **RO1:** To critically analyse whether the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required of future Event Management graduates for entrance into the post-pandemic graduate labour market, within the events industry.

- **RO2:** To appraise the experiences of undergraduate Event Management graduates, exploring their employment journey in the events industry pre-pandemic, during the pandemic itself, and since. To investigate their opinions on the influence of the pandemic on the skillsets required to both work in the UK events industry and to facilitate prospects for future employment in the industry.

- **RO3:** To investigate the perceptions of employers in the UK events industry, examining their perceptions on the influence of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required to effectively prepare graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate.

- **RO4:** To appraise how providers of Event Management Education can help bridge the gap between industry and the Higher Education sector, to assist students in developing the skills, capabilities and attributes required for successful employment in the UK events industry, in a post-COVID-19 landscape.

The empirical findings of this thesis aim to address the central research question which seeks to analyse how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate (RQ). To achieve this, interviews were undertaken with a diverse range of employers and event management graduates from across the events industry; originating from an array of sectors within the events industry, working in a range of roles and capacities, and are employed across numerous modes of employment (see Table 2: Participant Information).

The results of yielded a rich data set that was reflective of the representative diversity of research participants included within the sample. The interviewees provided detailed, individualised accounts of their experiences before, during and since the pandemic, discussing how these have sculpted their perceptions of the pandemic and its influence on the events industry, their own employment practices, and the skillsets now required of graduates to work in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate.

The findings presented here have led to a data set acknowledging that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic *has* influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required of future Event Management graduates for employment in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate (RO1), and the subsequent identification of five primary themes to be explored within this chapter, which will examine the role the pandemic has had in influencing skillset requirements for the events industry post-pandemic (RO2, RO3):

Table 5: Themes and Sub-themes	
Theme One	**The influence of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic**
Sub-theme one *Sub-theme two* *Sub-theme three*	*The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its influence on the events industry* *The recovery of the events industry and post-pandemic events* *The influence of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on post-pandemic skillset requirements in the events industry*
Theme Two	**Technological and Digital**
Sub-theme one *Sub-theme two* *Sub-theme three*	*Technologically enabled event delivery formats: Hybrid events* *Virtual platforms, apps, data analysis and consumer engagement* *Changing consumption habits of event attendees as a result of the pandemic*
Theme Three	**Mental Health and Wellbeing**
Sub-theme one *Sub-theme two* *Sub-theme three*	*Mental health and wellbeing awareness* *Changes to practice within the post-pandemic events industry: event audiences* *Changes to practice within the post-pandemic events industry: event teams and employees*
Theme Four	**Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)**

Sub-theme one *Sub-theme two*	• *The influence of the pandemic on the EDI agenda in post-pandemic events* • *The EDI agenda in the post-pandemic events industry: Event audiences*
Theme Five *Sub-theme one*	**Bridging the Industry – Higher Education gap** *Recommendations*

The chapter concludes by analysing the recommendations put forth by the graduates and employers interviewed, which consider how providers of Event Management Education can help bridge the gap between industry and the Higher Education sector to effectively assist students in developing the skills, capabilities and attributes required for employment in the UK events industry, in a post-COVID-19 landscape (RO4). These recommendations aim to contribute to an understanding of how Higher Education providers can better prepare their graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the events industry, equipping them for the challenges of careers within the events industry in a post-pandemic world.

4.2 Theme One: The influence of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is something that unarguably impacted upon us all in some way, shape or form, as the literature discussed in chapter two outlines. With the focus of this research centred around the implications of the pandemic on the skillsets for employment within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate, I shall first present an analysis of participant perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on the events industry itself, producing a narrative account of their observations and experiences during this time.

4.2.1 The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its influence on the events industry

In examining the responses generated within the research that analyse the impact of the pandemic upon the events industry, it came as no great surprise that participant accounts aligned closely to much of the empirical literature published in the events field which suggest that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had profound impacts on the events industry and those employed within it when the pandemic struck (Madray, 2020). The accounts offered by both the employers and graduates interviewed linked directly to the work of Bladen et al., (2022) and McGrath (2022), and similarly discussed the unfolding of the pandemic, and its consequences for the events industry, which led to the mass postponement and cancellation of events globally.

When scrutinising the responses offered by the two participant groups more closely, there were some noteworthy differences in their experiences at the time and their accounts reported as a result. The research has uncovered that while the graduates were perhaps more shielded from the extremities the pandemic was causing on the wider events industry at the time; being more concerned with the impact of the pandemic on their own personal circumstances and their day-to-day role, they were still aware of the seriousness of the global context caused by the pandemic. The employers interviewed, who were more exposed to the reality and severity of the situation for the industry from a broader, more strategic, professional capacity, offered very frank and honest accounts of their experiences during this time. They discussed not only the impact of the pandemic on the events industry and their respective sectors, but also on their businesses and their state of mind at the time.

When reflecting upon the time of the pandemic respondents stated:

> "At the time when the pandemic was declared we were running the Cheltenham Festival, securing the Gold Cup, which was basically one of the biggest super spreader events of COVID... We were one the last events to go live before they cancelled everything... we'd budgeted to do all these events and we just knew they weren't going to happen." *E4/6:56*

> "...the world went into meltdown and everything stopped" *G4/10:11*

"All of my events were wiped off the calendar, like so many others in industry the pandemic wiped out entire incomes and people's livelihoods to some degree. As a result, a whole raft of events were cancelled." *E1/9:52*

" ...the pandemic changed everything" *G2/7:36*

"... the industry just stopped. Nobody could open. It was a very, very scary time. Scary for everybody that's in it, because you didn't know how long it was going to last." *E3/17:21*

Both participant groups noted that, with the cancellation of the events worldwide, the pandemic triggered huge fears, concerns and anxiety linked to the economic uncertainty caused by the global context at the time. These results converge with the broader contemporary discourse examining the implications of the pandemic from a mental health perspective. Authors such as McBride et al., (2020), Shelvin et al., (2020) and Butter et al., (2022) assessed the impact of the pandemic on COVID-related anxiety and mental health, and contended that economic consequences of the pandemic are linked to and associated with psychiatric symptoms.

Respondents reported that the economic uncertainty of the pandemic, its timescales for recovery and the impact of this on both the future the of industry and the roles within it, was unnerving. The graduates suggested that they were left feeling apprehensive about their immediate and future career prospects in the industry. While the employers noted feeling uncertain about the future viability of their businesses, and unsettled about their inability to provide informed advice and information to employees about both predicted timelines for returns to normalised working conditions.

"What I realised was that the pandemic had hit. I didn't know what the future of the events industry was going to look like. It was obviously one of the first industries to be hit quite badly and at the time nobody knew how long it was going to last" *G5/10:01*

"I'd got like three or four things in the pipeline that were starting to come together and then the pandemic hit. That was a massive blow to me because I felt like I'd finally just got my foot in the door and got to meet more people in industry. My networking was all finally pulling off and everything I'd done through university too, then the pandemic happened ... I didn't really know where to go next." *G6/16:03*

"... at the time of course, none of us really knew how long that would be. Was it going to be six weeks, 8 weeks, 12 weeks. We know now that it was nearly two years before we kind of got back to regularity." *E4/11:17*

When reflecting upon the period of the pandemic and discussing their experiences at the time, both the graduates and the employers interviewed acknowledged that the pandemic had enormous repercussions on their experiences and employment journeys at the time; influencing their mindset and, in many cases, their role and/or mode of employment at the time. The research revealed that pandemic had severe economic consequences and brought about changes to

employment conditions across the industry, many of which resulted in cessation of paid employment, leading to detrimental impacts for the incomes and livelihoods of many. This finding corresponds to the wider literature and impact studies analysing the impact of the pandemic, such as the national study conducted by the British Academy (2021), as discussed in section 2.23, which contended in its nine areas of long-term impact of COVID-19, that 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) has consequentially caused rising unemployment levels and changes to the labour market' p.7.

Importantly, these findings demonstrate congruence with the academic body that analysed the impact of the pandemic on the events industry specifically, suggesting that the closure of the events and arts industry had immediate effects, with severe impacts on the employment status of both employees and venues alike (Marrone et al., 2020). Many thriving, profitable, event businesses saw their bottom lines devastated during the pandemic, with most earning greatly reduced and in some cases no income at all for an extended period (Ferdinand and Kitchin, 2021). The accounts gathered in this research suggested that several employers tried to mitigate the financial devastation caused by the pandemic by taking advantage of the government's furlough scheme, applying for a grant to cover the majority of wages for employees not working due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions.

> "We spent three months really wondering what the hell to do. How long is the money going to last? The government furlough scheme saved our business and I've been very vocal about that. The furlough schemed allowed us to keep the staff at home, providing an income to them so that they could survive." *E3/17:21*

> "So as an event business, it was a very difficult time for us because we had to close. And because we do events for large numbers, we don't do events for 400 people, we do events for 4000 or whatever, it was really difficult. Most of the staff went on to furlough, apart from a very, very few members of staff; so everyone was on furlough, including myself. I had about six months off and most of my team I worked with had about a year and a half off, it was just crazy." *E5/12:22*

Sadly, several of the interviews conceded that due to the longevity of the pandemic and the financial challenges posed by it, many event organisations ended up going out of business and redundancies sadly became commonplace across the industry.

> "I was on furlough for six months, so it was really time for me to figure out what's coming next. It was very stressful…. Every week we had calls where we were being reassured that everything will come back to normal, until one day I received the redundancy letter." *G2/9:19*

> "We had loads of redundancies, so I'd say from roughly 1200 full time employees… we lost about 600 or 700 key staff during the pandemic." *E5/13:40*

> "… unfortunately we had to make some quite significant cost savings in the organisation I was in, so there were redundancies." *E6/5:52*

The detrimental impacts of the pandemic on employment conditions across the industry, and the uncertainty at the time, resulted in some of the interviewees noting that, as finances dried up in the events industry, many event professionals sought alternative employment in other sectors, in an attempt to sustain their financial position and offer some financial security.

> "I took on my second profession and became a dual practitioner, because I did not know, as no nobody did, what was going to happen with the world. It gave me a massive sense of relief and security" *E1/10:27*

> "… pretty much every single person that I knew because I all I knew really was people from touring were unemployed. Wondering what to do next, they ended up, you know, driving for people like Morrisons or going into Amazon deliveries etcetera because there was such demand at the time." *E2/6:42*

> "I know people that were working that were high flyers in the events industry that were then packing for DPD and becoming Amazon drivers and Tesco delivery drivers, just to make ends meet." *E1/10:27*

The narratives uncovered in the research demonstrated that this was an extremely harrowing time for those employed in the industry, which caused high levels of distress and anxiety, negatively impacting upon the mindset and wellbeing of some respondents. The responses gathered here suggest that the mass unemployment experienced by many, sparked economic fears of an impending economic crisis and indicated that the pandemic also accentuated financial concerns (Anderson et al., 2020; Hale et al., 2020). This finding is not unique to those employed within the events industry, and aligns to results articulated within the wider national impact studies examining the impacts of the pandemic from a health and wellbeing perspective, such as the influential C19PRC impact study, which sought to classify the impacts of the pandemic in a UK context (C19PRC., 2020). The C19PRC study has reported significant repercussions in the area of mental health and wellbeing as a result of the pandemic, asserting that individuals whose incomes had been hit by the pandemic, suffered higher rates of anxiety and depression as a consequence (McBride et al., 2020).

There were however, a significant proportion of interviewees from both research participant groups who gave accounts discussing the fact that they were fortunate enough, during the time of the pandemic, to remain in paid employment in various guises within the events industry. Interestingly, those who shared these accounts outlined how the pandemic had shifted the requirements of their jobs at the time to bring event operations in line with the legal restrictions imposed by the pandemic. They noted that with government guidance prohibiting mass gatherings and all in-person events halted, events businesses sought to pivot their operations, transitioning their event offerings to an online, virtual format.

> "... there was a big switch immediately to delivering the event and content virtually." *E6/5:40*

> "... on a work basis, everything got positioned into a virtual event format. No one was put on redundancy, no one was put on furlough. We were all still working throughout." *G4/12:38*

> "We saw the model of other conferences and what they'd done so instead of cancelling the event and paying back money to people, because that would have literally drove the company into administration, we just pivoted to online events and we learned really quickly how to do it." *G3/20:26*

Employers noted that the transition enabled them to abstain from making redundancies or terminating employment, asserting that as a result of adapting their services during the period of the pandemic, their organisations remained viable and survived. They noted:

> "... where a lot of the other companies in our sector made everyone redundant, and basically terminated everyone's employment over that period, we pivoted our whole business." *E4/7:56*

> "... we started to get some work because we adapted and I think that's partly why we came out the other side, because we adapted our services at the time." *E3/18:23*

The data gathered suggest that the shift of businesses across many sectors of the industry to online, virtual event formats was something that was a radical transition, fuelled by the pandemic and its pervasive conditions, a view shared by Bowdin et al. (2023). The findings here also revealed that the development of the online, virtual, event environment yielded investment during the pandemic, with both existing employers financing training and development opportunities for their workforce to support the delivery of these events and new companies emerging to deal with the influx of demand for these event types at the time.

> "We completed training via VEI, the Virtual Events Institute, everyone within our company was told that they needed to do this form of training. It was great... you learnt all sorts of things on how to run virtual events." *G4/12:38*

> "There are a lot of a new breed of event tech companies that just appeared from nowhere. A company called 'Hopin', who you probably heard of, that got a huge amount of investment to develop virtual and hybrid technology during the pandemic." *E6/6:54*

In line with contemporary research in the events discourse (Bladen et al., 2022; Raj and Rashid, 2022; Mohamed and Saber, 2022), respondents identified that online, virtual events became popularised during the pandemic due to the social restrictions in place at the time. With people having been confined to their homes and the propaganda of media reporting an almost constant stream of news around the crippling Coronavirus (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020), virtual, online events became a lifeline to many. The acceleration and spread of the online and virtual events gave consumers a sense of escapism and positivity at an otherwise terrifying and frightening time.

The respondents in the two research participant groups here offered comparable responses across the differing sectors of the industry when talking about how they took advantage of the affordances offered by virtual, online events landscape during the pandemic. Those in the live events sector stated that they responded by staging various events in the absence of an audience and broadcasting these in an online capacity, and those in the corporate events and charitable sectors outlined shifts that took their events for delegates wholly online.

Many of the participants suggested that for the key stakeholders in events industry the pivot to virtual, online events widened access for attendees across the industry, offering them the opportunity to participate in events which would have been previously out of reach. This was a view shared by Ferdinand and Kitchin (2021), who contended that the movement to online events meant that some events offered greater affordability, due to the reduced prices charged by organisers and the elimination of associated costs, such as travel. Respondents here noted that the remote nature of events and the online, virtual format also made them more accessible for all, positively contributing to the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda. The final area of positivity noted by interviewees, when discussing the shift to virtual, online events, was that they also highlighted a renewed approach to producing and delivering events in a sustainable manner, showcasing a range of innovate approaches to events delivery that positively impacted upon sustainability initiatives and consumer awareness of sustainable event production. These findings correspond to the views articulated by the Event Industry Council, who argue that these events 'connect and inspire attendees in a more inclusive, diverse and accessible, sustainable and global way' (2021 p.5).

It is important to note that while many respondents talked positively of this time, identifying areas of opportunity and outlining how grateful they were to have had the option to continue working on events during the pandemic, not all respondents shed positive light on the transition to the virtual, online events environment. Some of those who worked in this capacity at the time offered contrasting views, and noted the challenges and difficulties posed by this development, identifying a lack of access to resources and support which are discussed in greater depth later. Employer E6 commented that during this time, while their business remained operable, pay cuts issued to all staff were a necessity to keep the business afloat.

> "Everybody in the business had pay cuts for a period 18 months I think it was. So it impacted all of us because we were a small business." *E6/12:02*

4.2.2 The recovery of the events industry and post-pandemic events

When analysing the responses surrounding the conduct of events in a post-pandemic climate, participants stated that while online, virtual events are still in operation, they have since declined

in some sectors of the industry, as the industry has returned to offering in-person events. Both participant groups stated that the legacy left behind as a result of the pandemic and the influx of associated technological advancements in event design and delivery, is that hybrid event formats have emerged and there is a recognition that almost all events now have some form of hybrid/digital element to them (Bladen et al., 2022; Raj and Rashid, 2022). Employer E6 stated:

> "… all events now, well, most events are now offering some kind of digital component. So now you've got to think about your proposition for the physical event and then the digital component too. And whilst delivering a full hybrid event is very costly and requires a lot of tech, there is now as a minimum, some kind of digital component to every event now and that's here to stay, and I think that's probably a good thing."
> *E6/14:35*

This quote positively indicates that hybrid events elements are here to stay, an interpretation that corresponds to contemporary research which examines the prevalence of hybrid events in a post-COVID-19 climate (EIC, 2021; Bowdin et al., 2023). The dominance of hybrid event formats and the associated impact of this development upon the skills, attributes and characteristics required for employment in the post-pandemic events industry will be discussed in greater detail later in section 4.3.

The findings on the impact of the pandemic on the recovery of the events industry were significant. All of the employers interviewed remarked on the destructive impact of the pandemic on the loss of talent and skill within the industry. Commenting on the substantial numbers of individuals who left the industry as a result of the pandemic; either through coercion or choice, they all noted the intensification and widening of the skills gap in industry as a result. These findings reflect the literature of both the wider post-pandemic employability discourse (Hite and McDonald, 2020; Shobha and Johnson, 2021; DfE, 2022) and post-pandemic impact studies (British Academy, 2021; CBI, 2022; WEF, 2023) which indicated that the longer-term, wider effects of the pandemic include the diminution of our stock of talent and loss of breadth of skills (British Academy, 2021).

The quotes provided below give an insight into perceptions of how this has manifested within the events industry as a consequence of the pandemic. The employer results offered powerful accounts that indicate that not only have the numbers of people who have left the industry as a result of the pandemic been significant, so has the associated level of skills loss.

> "The skills loss in industry has been kind of massive." *E2/10:41*

> "I'm sure you've heard from many other people, unfortunately a lot of good people decided to leave the industry." *E6/6:01*

> "… it's certainly fair to say that post COVID we have lost a lot of skill sets, a lot of people left, skilled people… two years was a long time and furlough only covered full

time employed people. A lot of people with those skill sets just left and it takes a number of years to recoup that experience." *E4/27:26*

"There was a very large contingent of very highly experienced older people, there is a massive generational skills gap there now." *E1/18:52*

Respondents identified an array of reasons why people left the industry during the pandemic and have not returned since. These included wanting to undertake more flexible working arrangements offered by other sectors, the chance to explore new professional opportunities, for early retirement purposes, or because of the financial impacts and precarity of the industry as a result of the pandemic. The data suggested that the pre-pandemic workforce was highly experienced but that, as a consequence of the pandemic, many reassessed their professional preferences and this has contributed to an unintentional, but considerable, skills loss within the events industry.

"People left because of the financial impact and also the new opportunities that arose to work at home and to not put in the long hours that are required in a lot of roles in the industry. It's become more about now how we can entice people back into the industry." *E3/21:53*

"...a lot of people left, a lot of the older generation which is you know, 50 or 60-year-old skilled people, who went into different industries or decided to retrain themselves into something else that they could do." *E4/27:46*

"... because of the maturity in the industry before the pandemic, maybe there was a natural gravitation point where people thought 'I'm just going to retire' or 'I'm going to get a part time job doing something different'." *E3/38:25*

"There was a lot of people who had probably been working silly shifts pre-pandemic, and when they got made redundant, they got a job that was normal shifts, meaning they didn't want to come back. Other people got jobs working from home and they didn't want to then start coming back in." *E5/14:08*

The results of the reported skills loss within the events industry, as contended by the employer participant group, have had substantial repercussions as the industry is emerging post-pandemic. The employers interviewed stipulated that recruitment campaigns have been difficult due to a lack of resource, and a reported lack of skill, experience and knowledge amongst the post-pandemic workforce.

"...its been tricky because in terms of staffing, a big part of our job is resourcing the events that we take part of, and a lot of that casual workforce that we once had, has disappeared." *E4/14:19*

"We lost lots of skilled people... which meant we then had to start a really big recruitment drive and we've really struggled to try and recruit." *E5/14:08*

"I have noticed more than anything else that... there's such a lack of knowledge now. There's so little knowledge and so little experience." *E2/22:26*

"When we tried recruiting, the quality was incredibly poor, it was low skilled individuals. We're having to focus more on our training than we've ever had to do before and limiting what people were being asked to do because of their capabilities, which sounds awful, but it's a fact." *E4/16:07*

The compelling narrative provided by employers was indisputable and further affirms the rationale of this study in ensuring Higher Education providers are adequately equipping graduates for employment in the events industry post-pandemic. Being able to bridge the skills gap within the events industry that has been left behind as a result of the pandemic has never been more critical than it is now.

Some of the graduates offered similar perspectives, stating that they too have noticed a drop in the skill levels of those working around them post-pandemic and acknowledging that they have had to take on more responsibility as a result.

"I also know that major events in sport are massively struggling to employ people. It's generally the same core group of people that are moving from event to event. There is a lot of people that came in to help on events since that probably didn't have the skill set, but it was a person in a seat with another pair of hands, that could do something." *G6/ 33:32*

"I probably took on more responsibility of more of event manager role, rather than just an event executive. A lot of decisions probably came my way that weren't in my pay grade. It felt like you just had to club together a bit more rather than being like, well, this isn't my responsibility." *G4/17:17*

It was interesting to note that when reflecting on the impact of the pandemic, some of the employers suggested that it has influenced their outlook and perspective now on their future involvement in the events industry. Those who passed comment on this outlined their apprehension in the future stability of the industry and their place within it.

"The pandemic has made me very grateful for my income now, and I think as a result has shaped my view of the future, because I wouldn't ever put my eggs in the one basket again around events, which I had done in the past." *E1/15:29*

"... one of the things that was super interesting for me with the pandemic, was how precarious the finances were for so many companies. So many companies went bust because their financial situation just simply wasn't sustainable, with any kind of shutdown at all... I'd hope that they are the indemnifying themselves against that precarity going forwards. *E2/11:42*

"I've never worked outside the events industry. I've been here for 18 years and it makes you think, actually, about my career progression. I'm at a certain stage of my career where I need to make sure I'm progressing, Is this the right place to do that?

How long is the sector to going to struggle for? I'm still kind of, sort of debating like, is committing myself to the event sector right now the best place to be." *E6/8:24*

These findings were significant given the career length of many of the employers and these factors signify the long-lasting and deep-rooted implications of the pandemic on the viewpoints of even the most experienced and knowledgeable individuals in the industry. They correspond to the 'alternative view' of employability (Tholen, 2015) which emphasises the contextual nature of employment factors in the labour market, linked to the global context. They also offer congruence with the contemporary literature published in the employability field which states that employability is an 'evolutionary process' (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), articulating employability as a lifelong learning process aimed at attaining a range of critical skills and experiences, which will lead to better and more fulfilling lives (Scott and Willison, 2021; Manolchev et al., 2022).

4.2.3 The influence of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on post-pandemic skillset requirements in the events industry

Having analysed participant interpretations of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the events industry, section 4.3 aims to critically examine the influence of the pandemic on skillset requirements in the post-pandemic events industry. It will seek to assess participant perceptions on whether the pandemic has influenced the skillsets required of graduates seeking employment within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate and if so, consider the ways in which participants feel the pandemic has consequentially shaped the skills, attributes and characteristics required.

When interpreting the interview data gathered and analysing this against both the overarching RQ of the study and RO1, it was imperative to obtain a clear understanding from both research participant groups on their perceptions of the pandemic and if they feel this has influenced the skillsets required of graduates seeking employment within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate. The research revealed a conclusive and a virtually unanimous agreement among the research participants interviewed that, as a consequence of the drastic changes the events industry went through as a consequence of the pandemic, and how the industry is now re-emerging post-pandemic; the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic *has* subsequently influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required to work in the events industry post-pandemic. Both the employers and graduates interviewed were in agreement that the pandemic has not only shaped the events landscape and how events are now conducted as a result, but it has also altered the skills and knowledge required of those looking to secure or sustain employment within the industry.

"The skill sets equipping staff definitely look different to what they did pre-pandemic as a result of the pandemic itself." *E4/33:53*

"… yes but also the areas of knowledge that people need to now have to work in events looks different post-pandemic too." *E5/32:19*

"… yes totally…" *E5/29:40*

"Yes, I think the impacts of the pandemic on the skills needed now are different, for the different sectors of the industry." *E1/11:29*

In systematically extracting the responses gathered on the impact of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics for the events industry in a post-pandemic climate, there were a number of key areas of discussion that emerged. The responses captured and discussed within these areas ranged from those that supported the development of new skills as a result of the pandemic, to those that inferred that some of the existing skills (pre-pandemic) have become more prevalent and risen in importance within the events industry since the pandemic, altering skillsets as a result.

I will first note that participants indicated that the pandemic had influenced the development of a number of generic employability skills such as adaptability, flexibility, resilience, stress-tolerance, and versatility. While these outcomes scaffold the broader post-pandemic employability discourse (Feld et al., 2020; Cukier et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021; Nadda et al., 2022, WEF, 2023) and are important to note within the context of the study, the focus of this research is on exploring the influence of the pandemic on post-pandemic skillset requirements for the events industry. With this in mind, the subsequent sections of findings presented here will concentrate on analysing the responses participants gave that contribute to the achievement of RO2, RO3, and the overall research question of the study. This is an approach advocated by (Rees, 2021) who states that liaising with industry to identify the skills and attributes required for certain industries, is important in understanding industry specific employability requirements.

The responses gathered will be examined in detail within themes two, three and four and will focus on analysing the areas where the employers and graduates interviewed felt the pandemic had influenced skillset requirements for employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

4.3. Theme Two: Technological and Digital

Theme two considers the role and impact of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required of graduates for employment in the post-pandemic events industry from a technological and digital perspective. This theme was the most dominant area of discussion amongst the responses gathered from the interviewees, and was the theme in which they advocated for the most significant area of skillset development as a consequence of the pandemic.

In examining the responses gained from participants surrounding the role and impact of the pandemic on skillset requirements, both groups interviewed stated that the pandemic has influenced and accelerated the need for technological and digital skills for employment in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate. The responses revealed that the development of technological and digital skills since the pandemic has been significant, with participants contending that the possession of these skills now forms an essential part of both employer expectations and the skills needed to work in the events industry in a post-pandemic era. Participants stated:

> "… if you want to work in events now post-pandemic, you absolutely need to be able to show digital and technology skills." *E1/20:25*

> "Technology has become a bigger skill requirement now; the pandemic has heightened it. Where technology was important before, it's gone much higher up post-pandemic because there's more scope, there's more opportunity, and there's more jobs that need filling around really niche areas of events and the industry." E1/25:54

> "I think that definitely the main change in my skill set as an outcome of the pandemic is definitely learning digital and technical skills." *G3/43:26*

> "The ability to have technological or digital skills is now something that is a mandatory part of the job." *G4/37:03*

These findings have parallels with studies such as 'Preparing for the future of work' (OECD, 2020) and the 'Future of Jobs Report 2023' (WEF, 2023) which have assessed post-pandemic workforce skill requirements more generally, highlighting the rise and prevalence of technological and digital skills in the post-pandemic workplace. Studies such as that of Cukier et al., (2021), suggest that the pandemic accelerated the adoption of new technologies, compressed adoption cycles from years to weeks, and transformed entire sectors. Cukier et al., (2021) states that the pandemic revolutionised the development of new business models, and even shifts in the approach to work itself (Cukier et al., 2021). These factors have influenced post-pandemic workplace requirements of digital and technological skills as a result. With the premise of this research centred on post-pandemic skills for the events industry specifically, in this theme I will explore these aspects within the relevant industry context, based on the narratives and perspectives shared by participants interviewed for this study.

The emergence of this theme was based on the responses gathered that investigated the ways in which the pandemic has shaped the conduct of events and post-pandemic skillset requirements, from a technological and digital perspective. The main areas of dialogue that respondents identified linked to this area included:

- The emergence of technologically enabled event delivery formats: Hybrid events
- Knowledge of virtual platforms, apps, data analysis and consumer engagement
- Changing consumption habits of event attendees as a result of the pandemic.

4.3.1 Technologically enabled event delivery formats: Hybrid events

The legacy of Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the technological advancements that consequentially occurred in the events industry have led, post-pandemic, to the development and prevalence of many aspects of technologically enabled facets of event design and delivery. As discussed previously, the impact of the pandemic on the events industry was devasting, leading to the cancellation of events globally. The data revealed that the industry quickly pivoted to offering online, virtual events to help to create a positive solution to the sudden void in event delivery caused by the pandemic. The data showed that as the industry began its recovery post-pandemic, and as in-person events began to make a return, the emergence of the much more commonly cited hybrid events has taken hold.

The findings of this research identified the impact of technology, and the emergence of these new technologically enabled event delivery formats, such as hybrid events, have been an area of significant development for the industry, a view recognised within the literature (Nadda et al., 2022; Sealy, 2022; Brown and Drakely, 2023), and one that was acknowledged and advocated by both the employers and graduates interviewed. The diversity of experiences shared about the shift to technologically enabled event delivery formats both during and since the pandemic, and the perspectives on this topic were profound. Both participant groups were in agreement that the emergence of, and sustained interest in, hybrid events, and their role in the industry post-pandemic, has shaped the skills and requirements to work in the industry from a technological and digital perspective. The accounts provided by the graduate participants who are actively employed within industry verify this.

> "I definitely think the pandemic has forced me to strengthen a lot skills that I already had in but in different ways. I mean, like digital skills, I already felt like I had quite strong digital skills, but using them in a new capacity now is definitely one of them. *G1/42:32*

> "The pandemic demonstrated to me how important it is to have that online event management experience. Whether it's a small event or you know, just like virtual seminars, just having some sort of experience is important now. *G5/13:41*

"I started by doing a lot of things like website uploading and updating and I was working on the web design then I was creating designs for marketing and for live streaming. I was live streaming, so digital skills wise I think I've learned so much because I was pushed to." *G3/20:58*

These accounts affirm that the pandemic has coerced those working in industry, both during and since, to strengthen both their technological and digital skillsets, and to build their experience levels in these areas. The narratives suggest that the prominence of technological and digital skills within the post-pandemic events landscape has grown as a consequence of the pandemic.

When discussing the impact of hybrid events within the industry post-pandemic, differing perspectives were reported by the two differing participant groups. Interestingly, the employer participant group offered their insights from a broader more strategic angle than the graduate participants, talking about the benefits and challenges of hybrid event adoption and its influence on events in a post-pandemic climate.

"How events now work and how and they're put together, structured, how the content is formed and what the experience and proposition look like now is different post pandemic to what it was pre pandemic." *E6/18:08*

"During the pandemic sport events during the they reinvented themselves in many ways... The pandemic sped up the technological advancements... I think events were awakened to possibilities that they'd never thought of and audiences more importantly, have awakened to what possibilities are at hand, how they might like to consume sport events as a result." *E1/24:16*

The graduates interviewed shared accounts that reflected the changes to the intricacies of their role. They highlighted how hybrid events have now become a fundamental part of their job and discussing how event attendees now engage with events as a result.

"I currently run a variety of events in currently in hybrid model... These vary from small conferences to large conferences to trade shows. The majority of our conferences are hybrid, filmed and then broadcasted to a virtual audience." *G2/16:09*

"All of our events are hybrid and have an element of virtual to them. So the show that we're doing next month, it has all the seminars which are going to be recorded and then made available to watch after. That's something that would never have been done before the pandemic." *G4/19:51*

The responses gathered indicated that the adoption of hybrid events and the associated technological and digital components are pervasive across the industry, post-pandemic. The findings suggest that the technological advancements of as a result of the pandemic have been very impactful on the post-pandemic events environment and the associated skillsets required to run events in a post-pandemic setting as a result. They suggest that ensuring graduates are prepared and adequately equipped to work in the events industry will require sufficient knowledge and the associated technological and digital skills to enable them to deliver hybrid

events as a high priority in a post-pandemic climate. These factors have been highlighted by employers and graduates alike, suggesting that increased technological and digital skills form the basis of employer expectations and the skills required of roles in the post-pandemic events industry.

Recognition of this was validated with the responses gained within the research, with graduate G5 recognising:

> "… I really need to start developing my technological skills now, because this is clearly going to be, at least for the immediate future, quite important." *G5/11:17*

These influencing factors link to the literature and work of authors such as Dowson et al., (2022) and Werner et al., (2022) who contend that there is an urgent need to acquire additional skills and knowledge in these areas because, as the events industry recovers from the pandemic, it is re-emerging differently. They assert that with the new knowledge, skills and ways of working that were hard learnt during the pandemic, the development of hybrid events will be taken forward and exemplified within the events industry as the future.

These findings are fundamental to the aim of this study indicating a clear relationship between the impact of the pandemic and how subsequent development of technologically enabled event delivery formats have heightened the need for technological and digital skills among graduates seeking employment in the post-pandemic events industry. They relate to the scant post-pandemic skills discourse in the events field and closely to the work of Werner et al., (2022), whose study analysed event management skills in the post-COVID-19 world, but in the context of China, Germany, and Australia. Werner et al. claim that technological and digital skills are critical in the post-pandemic events climate in light of the shifts to hybrid event delivery, but argue that while their research offers valuable insights, further research is needed to validate their findings, given that the situation post-COVID-19 is continually evolving (2022). The results of this thesis support these views, from both a different cultural perspective and time frame; presenting confirmatory results in a UK context during 2023.

4.3.2 Virtual platforms, apps, data analysis and consumer engagement

The findings so far indicate that the influence of the pandemic on the technological and digital capabilities needed for the events industry post-pandemic have been largely fuelled by the rise of technologically enabled event delivery formats. However, the emergence of these events initiated some additional areas of discussion amongst the participants interviewed, which encourage consideration of the technological and digital skill requirements of those working in the industry post-pandemic.

The first and perhaps most obvious area of discussion focussed on the influence of technology on the changing role of those employed in the events industry as a consequence of the pandemic. As discussed earlier, many organisations within the industry have faced significant financial hardship and had to make cost savings as a result of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. The employer responses analysed within the study suggest that, as a consequence, downsizing strategies have been implemented with respect to both human resource levels and training budgets, which have been curtailed as many businesses in the events industry try to balance their finances, remain viable, and recover from the financial losses incurred during the pandemic. With an increased focus for many companies in the industry on improving efficiency, productivity and profitability, the employer participant group in this study indicated that post-pandemic employers now have an increased focus on seeking a workforce who have a flexible and adaptable skillset, and are able to showcase a multitude of technological and digital skills within the events area as a result of the pandemic. They stated, for example:

> "If you wanted to work in events now, you absolutely need to be able to show digital and technology skills. Because gone are the days where for example there is a separate social media manager, you are expected to deliver that in in amongst your role, everybody's expected to do that really." *E1/20:25*

> "You need to be technically proficient now, and be able to adapt, change and learn new things." *E2/59:40*

> "… so whether it's excel, whether it's blender, whether it's schedule, whether it's cinema 4D, so many different tools, if you can become proficient in one of those, you will get a job in the industry." *E2/1:01*

While aspects of these narratives correspond to the both the generic post-pandemic employability literature, which argues that possession of a flexible and adaptable skillset is crucial (Rees, 2021; Walters, 2021; Cole and Donald, 2022; Manolchev et al., 2022; WEF, 2023), and existing pre-pandemic dated events based literature, which touches upon the IT and digital skill requirements of event graduates (Getz, 2021; Padron and Stone, 2019), these findings contribute an expansion in understanding for events conducted in a post-pandemic climate, with employers suggesting that these skills have risen in importance as a consequence of the pandemic.

Inherently, with the influence of the pandemic and the accompanying rise and adoption of virtual, online and hybrid event models in situ, there were also, unsurprisingly, responses gained from the research that highlighted the need to possess knowledge of, and demonstrate capabilities and skills to work with relevant platforms and software used to produce and facilitate virtual and hybrid event experiences.

> "I'd probably say the digital side, having knowledge of and learning all the different systems, I'd say that that has changed since the pandemic." *G4/44:26*

> "100% I would say technical skills and IT skills have changed because a lot of events to this day still have an element of a streaming platform or, you know, people can log

in and do a particular task that's online. The events that we do now… still have a large amount that have a virtual aspect to it, where people are streaming from across the world or the like I said there's an activity or a task that is a virtual part of it." *G5/ 30:02*

This is also something that graduates G2 and G5 contend that these skills form a part of the criteria for many roles in the events industry post-pandemic.

"I started with absolutely no knowledge about virtual platforms, but something to point out is all of the job applications and job descriptions suddenly required all event managers to have virtual event experience." *G2/12:19*

"If you have no idea on how to run a virtual event platform or what it even looks like it, you will struggle to get those higher-level jobs. Because… you could have a client that saying I want to run a part in-person part virtual event, can you help me? You need to be able to have at least a basic level of understanding and what the different challenges are of those events because they do differ to pure in-person events. I don't think I would have been able to have get the job that I am in now, had I not had those two years of running online events." *G5/30:02*

These accounts verify the view that having the skills to be able to work with virtual and hybrid event platforms increases the employability of graduates within a post-pandemic events environment. These narratives offer valuable insights and show congruence with the work of Brown and Drakely (2023) who outline the increasing breadth and scope of online event platform diversity and functionality as a result of the pandemic. The views obtained from participants here are also supported by Werner et al. (2022) who states that with the future event industry being hybrid, there should be a 'more prominent focus within HEI's on the technological and digital skills needed, teaching students about virtual and hybrid event platforms' (p.7).

Employer E1 and graduate E4 discussed how these changes have influenced different sectors of the industry post-pandemic within the broader events landscape, indicating the growth and emergence of new specialist technologically and digitally focussed roles within the industry in the wake of the pandemic:

"Technology has become a bigger skill requirement now; the pandemic has heightened it. There are more jobs that need filling around really niche areas." *E1/25:54*

"There are roles coming up, massive roles surrounding content and delivery. There's all sorts of rules and regs around host broadcast rights and things at the major TV end that contravene around tech aspects. So, there's just there's a whole set of tech and digital skills coming up, and that's only around one aspect which is the publicity and the promotion of events and the coverage of events, that's not the actual technical delivery of events, which is something again. In sports events the actual competition is delivered in a hugely technical way in terms of the way the results reported, how its monitored and it's measured with goal line technology and all of that sort of thing. Then there's obviously the actual show, the event presentation of the show, the lighting, the rigging, the sound, the facilities, everything connected to that." *E1/21:06*

"… ever since the pandemic we now have a digital events team that works with us. We never had that before. They work on things like digital marketing. So, within the

contracts of what we get from exhibitors and sponsors, there's the ability for them to pay for digital marketing, which might be an MPU banner that goes on the website. The team also conduct interviews, whether it's pre show or post show, they take testimonials, Then they work on the 'swap card' software too, making sure that all the integrations are working correctly." *G4/20:53*

The relative growth of roles in industry and the expansion of skillsets geared towards the technological and digital aspects of employment in events, further endorses this area of skillset development in the events industry post-pandemic. These findings are particularly important in the context of future employability and in preparing graduates for entry into the post-pandemic labour market within the events industry. They align with the wider post-pandemic employability discourse which emphasises the necessity for technological and digitally focussed skillsets in the post-pandemic employment arena (CBI, 2021; Manolchev et al., 2022; WEF, 2023), while offering new insights in understanding the influence of the pandemic on this area within the events context. The findings suggest that the acquisition and development of technological and digital skills will be vital to ensure graduates are able to adapt to the ever-changing, technologically enhanced labour market, to position themselves for the future digitisation of roles within the events industry.

The research uncovered that as advances in technology and digital components within events have expanded, so have the ways in which those who work in industry now seek to engage event audiences and analyse the data produced from the holistic event experience. Respondents discussed this area of development with great passion, contending that the influence of the pandemic, and the development of technological and digital skills linked to this, were positive outcomes of the pandemic. Here both the employers and graduates alike advocated the value of having the relevant skills, attributes and characteristics that enable those working in industry post-pandemic to work with the data produced from these technologically supported events, particularly when conducting event evaluation and justifying the value of the events produced.

"With all the increase in all the technology, I think the roles in the event space require you to have digital and data skills, as it's much more data driven now... you need to collect and provide data to justify the value of the event. So I think whilst as an individual you want to be driven to provide the event experience, the jobs that are coming are much more data driven for sure. I think that's definitely changed." *E6/14:00*

"Definitely a huge part of skillset development is around virtual events and understanding the virtual audience. Understanding and being able to analyse the data, analyse people's expectations and behaviours. But also, like coding and just a basic understanding of like customer journey. It's very different when you plan customer journey from a physical point of view or a virtual point of view. I think these are kind of like key things I would say." *G2/29:14*

"But I guess the influence on skill sets now is around digital and data. I think like most industries post-pandemic the digital and data aspects are going to come up. As how

you manage digital tools or how you work with digital tools and how you work with data is important, even if you're going to be the on-site manager doing the event delivery, you still need to have a good understanding of those of those concepts." *E6/26:43*

The impact of the pandemic on the use of digital tools to collect and analyse data on events post-pandemic and the associated development of skills in this capacity were clearly identified as both an area shaped by the pandemic, and an important and vital part of roles in the industry post-pandemic. With the aforementioned financial strain on organisations in the events industry as a result of the pandemic, having the skills to be able to justify return on investment for the events hosted by extracting quantifiable data outputs has grown in importance.

It is important to note that the areas of data management and analysis purported by respondents were not discussed in isolation, instead they were discussed alongside responses reflecting upon the impact of the pandemic, linking to attendee engagement methods and techniques in a post-pandemic climate. The graduate participant group were vocal about this area, being actively involved doing the job day-to-day.

> "Something that I think virtual events have provided us with is that data and data analysis. You can now understand and observe when people are dropping off the event when watching virtual content. We are able to identify different types of audiences such as government leaders or teachers or the Higher Education audience and we're able to come up with a slightly different solutions where you know, everyone has their own kind of track where they can follow the content for the event. So and one for all formula doesn't really fit very well now. So that was a great finding of the pandemic and events, really." *G2/18:10*

> "And then content became the key because so many events now are like in the virtual format.
> Back in the days when you were attending a conference, the content was just one part of it. You were seeing your friends, you were saying your co-workers, you were networking, Now all of that was has been stripped back to just content, so if you make it wrong, it's going to have a huge impact on your overall satisfaction, rate. "*G2/30:19*

These accounts expose the relative importance of having a joined-up approach to designing impactful event experiences in post-pandemic setting. They contend that by having the skills to navigate, access and analyse relevant aspects of event data, you can in turn assess the effectiveness of the engagement techniques implemented within the event experience. These findings align to aspects of the results offered by WEF's *Future of Jobs Report 2023* which indicate that trends relating to technological literacy and data analytics are valued by employers, as they are deemed to be important facets in progressing business practices in a post-COVID climate. Importantly, the findings gathered from the data captured here provide contextualised understandings into the influence of the pandemic on the development of relevant technological and digital data management skills that are applicable within the post-pandemic events industry.

4.3.3 Changing consumption habits of event attendees as a result of the pandemic

The impact of the pandemic and its role in altering technology enabled event delivery formats and experiences for event attendees has been well documented within this chapter so far. One area that has received less attention is that of post-pandemic consumption habits of attendees within events and the influence of this on post-pandemic skill set requirements in the events industry.

When analysing the responses obtained from the interviews conducted, the findings suggested that while the technological modifications around events have enriched the consumer experience, they have in turn also influenced a subsequent change to the post-pandemic consumption habits of attendees within events. The research indicated that these post-pandemic consumption preferences within the industry have been enabled by the introduction of virtual and hybrid event experiences and have induced attitudinal changes to both how consumers now want to consume events post-pandemic, which have subsequently influenced the skillsets needed by graduates to produce and sell effective and engaging event experiences in a post-pandemic climate.

The data shows that the pandemic and the technological advancements introduced during this time increased accessibility to events (which will be discussed more in section 4.3.3) but also exposed event audiences to alternative ways to engage with and consume events. Interviewees from both the employers and graduate participant groups indicate that these aspects have yielded a legacy post-pandemic that offers attendees a greater variety of choice and autonomy in how they consume events. Employer E6 noted:

> "I think most event platforms now have some component for allowing you to let's say sell ticket to different parts of your event, whether it be physical, whether it be just digital - where you just get access to the content, or whether it's actually hybrid - so you get access to the content and some networking and you can have virtual meetings too. So thinking about how are you going to sell this to your audience? The technological tools help you engage people in different ways, so the event is not now confined just to two days at the NEC. The event experience is much bigger and the tools are now allowing you to do that. They allow you to make it a bigger and more tailored experience." *E6/16:31*

This quote offered by employer E6 outlines how the industry and the technology now enabling events post-pandemic have shifted and expanded to meet changing consumer preferences and event consumption models. These changes are prevalent across most sectors of the industry post-pandemic, whether that be in corporate events sector that now offers sophisticated technologically enabled event experience packages, or in sport and music events which are broadcast and made available via technologically enhanced means. This research has stressed that acquiring a technologically enhanced skillset, which is grounded in knowledge of changing

consumption attitudes of event attendees, and an ability to be able to plan, sell and deliver such experiences will be essential in a post-pandemic environment.

The research has shown that the pandemic has not just had technical implications for the development of technological and digital skills in the post-pandemic events climate. One of the more practical implications of the pandemic on post-pandemic consumption habits of attendees within events was linked to the event delivery side for event attendees and results from changes to the ways in which society has shifted to a cashless model in many industries post-pandemic, events included.

Employer E2, who is involved with live event production in the music industry, stated that they had seen a shift in attitudes of attendees when it comes to spending preferences, and associated technological and digital skills are required to deliver cashless payment systems within event venues to facilitate the consumer experience. Employer E2 when discussing the impact of the pandemic on event delivery stated that it had influenced:

> "... something as simple as people's perspective on using cash because everyone suddenly went to card payments. People wouldn't use or take cash because it was unclean or something." E2/15:52

> "The pandemic impacted how people spend money. It used to be that you'd do around about 25% on card transactions and about 75% cash. But suddenly, as if by magic you're in a position where you can barely take cash. So one of the big things that I hadn't even factored in when I was doing my pre-production and working with the stadiums post-pandemic, when discussing what I would need from them and what I wanted to pay for etc, was Wi-Fi access for my card machines. And the card machines that I had could run on SIM card or they could run on Wi-Fi, but I hadn't sorted out any Wi-Fi because they didn't think it was going be a thing. It hadn't occurred to me and like two shows in I was suddenly ringing round all these venues going can you get me some Wi-Fi. It was just things like that, which I hadn't even given any consideration, which suddenly were absolutely essential" *E2/13:50*

These quotes suggest that the practical implications of the pandemic on the events industry and skillset development should not be overlooked. Having suitable skillsets to be able to deliver such experiences and recognise the societal shifts for the future will be critical as the events industry continues its recovery journey post-pandemic. These aspects have received little to no attention in the literature in relation to post-pandemic skills set development within the events industry. The results offered in this research suggest that having the skills to produce engaging consumer experiences in the post-pandemic world, and the aptitudes and skills to recognise and adapt event offerings to meet changing consumption habits of event attendees is important in a post-pandemic climate.

4.4 Theme Three: Mental Health and Wellbeing

The third theme analyses the impact of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required of graduates for employment in the post-pandemic events industry with respect to mental health and wellbeing. This theme was a key area extracted from the responses of interviewees and has evidenced itself as an influential area of skillset expansion as a consequence of the pandemic.

The data obtained from interviewees indicated that the pandemic had significant impacts on the mental health, wellbeing and emotional intelligence capabilities of those interviewed. It suggested that the pandemic has not only heightened awareness of this crucial area, but that it has shifted the skills, attributes and characteristics of those working in the events industry. The research indicated that the knowledge, understanding and practices around mental health and wellbeing have been strengthened within the events industry as a consequence of the pandemic, resulting in modifications to the practices implemented in supporting both event audiences and those employed in the industry.

4.4.1 Mental health and wellbeing awareness

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, as the wider literature depicted by Donthu and Gustafsson (2020); McBride et al., (2020) and Chen et al., (2022) in chapter two indicates, caused significant impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of several groups of society with many feeling exhausted, fed up, depressed or anxious. Some also experienced bereavement, furlough or unemployment as well as loneliness, disruption to normal life, and relationship stress. While some were able to enjoy new family routines or more time outdoors, for many life felt difficult and uncertain affecting mental health and mental wellbeing (MHF, 2023).

The influential COVID-19 impact studies by C19PRC (2020), the British Academy (2021) and MHF (2023) outlined the significance of the pandemic and its resulting impacts for mental health awareness, diagnosis, and treatment. These studies reported worrying statistics that suggested that the pandemic negatively affected people's mental health to varying degrees as a result of the restrictions imposed during that time. They noted access to mental health support services were affected by lockdown measures and this had a corresponding impact on both incidence and persistence of pre-existing conditions and the ability to treat new cases that emerged as a consequence of the pandemic (British Academy, 2021).

These results were similarly echoed and highlighted within the responses obtained from the interviews conducted in this study. Both the graduates and employers interviewed talking openly about the impact of the pandemic on many areas of mental health from both a personal

perspective and a professional capacity, most notably commenting on the influential changes within the post-pandemic events industry as a result.

The perspectives shared suggested that the influence of the pandemic has had direct impacts upon those employed in the events industry and on the skills, attributes and characteristics required to work in the events industry in a post-pandemic setting. The employers gave accounts asserting that there is now a greater focus and a much broader awareness of mental health and wellbeing within the events industry as a direct result of the pandemic.

> "There's definitely a bigger focus on mental health in the industry than there was before. I think because a lot of people over the pandemic have maybe started to understand a little bit more and kind of had that time to kind of be introspective." *E2/43:49*

> "... it's an attribute and it is a much bigger awareness of a wellbeing and general mental health issues as well. And in a way that wasn't there before." *E1/28:19*

> "I think that if it's just the impact of pandemic we're talking about, I think mental health is a priority area that's really high up now." *E5/31:11*

The graduates shared narratives indicating that the pandemic has influenced their own perceptions and understanding of mental health and wellbeing issues, recognising that it has influenced their appreciation of mental health matters and their awareness of identifying and managing their own mental health needs.

> "... with something like a pandemic and people's whole lives being completely switched around, there's only so much you can do for so long before it does have an impact on your mental health." *G1/45:57*

> "I definitely think it's a lot of exposure that has made me more aware of dealing with and managing my own mental health. Understanding when I might need a break from certain things or be able to remove myself slightly. Having that time to switch off from a stressful situation, recover and then come back in again with like a fresh mind. And I'm really fortunate that with my company that I work for, they definitely support that as well." *G1/46:13*

When discussing the area of mental health, the employers and graduates commented on the adjustments made within the events industry that recognise the value of prioritising and positively influencing mental health and wellbeing agendas, with employer E3 asserting:

> "... we've become less demanding and reactive and we're now a little bit more considerate." *E3/38:07*

The responses captured in this area broadly aligned to two key areas of modification in the area of mental health and wellbeing within the events industry, that have both influenced the alteration of the skills, attributes and characteristics needed to work in the industry post-pandemic. These two areas are changes to practice within the post-pandemic events industry for

event audiences, and the changes to practice within the post-pandemic events industry for event teams and employees and I will now further explore both.

4.4.2 Changes to practice within the post-pandemic events industry: event audiences

In examining the responses captured regarding the impact of the pandemic on the area of mental health awareness in the events industry, the findings divulged a number of key changes to practice that have emerged post-pandemic that focus on supporting event audiences. The narratives provided here were offered by both participant groups who outlined that, as a result of the pandemic and its influence on the mindsets and mental state of event attendees, a number of modifications to practices within the industry have emerged, designed to re-integrate and support attendees with respect to a mental health capacity in a post-pandemic events environment.

Participants reported their observations of event audience behaviours as the events industry began to re-open, noting that there were increased levels of anxiety and mental health matters prevalent within the post-pandemic event attendee population, a finding which aligns to the results of the wider aforementioned COVID-19 impact studies and work of McBride et al., (2020) and Chen et al., (2022).

> "... because of the pandemic, people hadn't been out, there was a level of nervousness, there was a level of anxiety amongst people, particularly for 18, 19, or 20-year-olds, who hadn't been out of the house for the best part of three years." *E2/20:44*

> "It probably was around the time of the Commonwealth Games the industry was sort of just starting to open. I think we noticed there was a lot of anxiety within our customers at the time." *E5/22:24*

The interviewees contended that as a result of such observations, adjustments within the events industry have since been implemented, intended to ease levels of anxiety and provide better mental health support mechanisms to event attendees. The responses given by the employers and graduates both recognised the necessity for, and value of, such adjustments in providing a better and more supportive event experience in the mental health and wellbeing context within a post-pandemic events environment.

> "...we do have attendees that have medical issues down to COVID and we have more medical facilities. There's also been a big uptake in mental health support at our events. One of the big companies I work with now is 'TLC welfare', who help me look at our event sites. We now have a safe space, a quiet zone; we have all these places where people can come and enjoy stuff. But, if they're not enjoying it, or there's an issue or a problem they've got somewhere to go. Historically, it would just been a medical centre and we would drop people with all issues off there. Whereas now we have a joint approach of medical provision and a dedicated welfare team where we can deal with people... we're now having to manage people with different needs all the time." *E4/29:30*

"Looking at my position now, it's that mental health awareness. In our company we offer mental health first aiders at our concerts and large-scale events, because we found that there are so many people… that are not used to being in crowds… It can be very overwhelming. We've had many individuals that have had panic attacks, that have struggled, that haven't been able to explain how they're feeling. We've had a lot of agoraphobia in people on site… And so that is something that we look at for. As a first aider and the event manager you are quite often the main person or the first-person people will call or go to should a situation happen. So that's something incredibly important and I think that wasn't something I learned at uni or even in my first two jobs, because at the time it wasn't necessary, but post-pandemic it's so crucial now." *G5/31:29*

These accounts suggest the modifications that have been made around mental health and wellbeing provision at events post-pandemic, with the research participants contending that these contemporary developments now form a 'crucial' part of services offered within the post-pandemic events setting. The respondents interviewed clearly conveyed that these changes to the events landscape are a direct response to the pandemic and are key areas of focus for event organisers, particularly when planning in-person event delivery. The employers and graduates interviewed stated that the effects and impact of the pandemic has heavily influenced and shaped both event planning and provision in the mental health and wellbeing area and the associated skills, attributes and characteristics required of those working in the post-pandemic events industry as a result.

Both the employers and graduates who participated in the research agreed that having sufficient knowledge, understanding and awareness of mental health, and the skills and aptitudes to provide both mental health support and mental health first aid (where appropriate), to event attendees now form vital aspects of roles within the events industry. The responses gathered suggest the associated capabilities to plan events that effectively incorporate mental health and wellbeing provision, but also the skills to deal with and manage mental health related situations that might occur at events, are fundamental requirements of those seeking employment in the event industry in a post-pandemic climate. These findings offer divergence from pre-pandemic skills and employability discourse within the events context, signifying new findings that indicate that as a result of the pandemic, the possession of mental health skills, knowledge and expertise are now critical for effective event planning and delivery, particularly in the live event sectors, within in a post-pandemic climate.

4.4.3 Changes to practice within the post-pandemic events industry: event teams and employees
The other key area highlighted within the research surrounding mental health and wellbeing development, as a result of the pandemic, focussed on the changes to practice influencing those working within the industry. This area was highlighted by respondents as one that has been an

extremely positive outcome of the pandemic, altering working conditions for those in the post-pandemic events industry.

> "The pandemic has been impactful on mental health, but I feel in the majority, the results of it have been positive on the impacts for working conditions in the industry." *E3/33:41*

Participants from both the employer and graduate groups discussed working conditions within the industry pre-pandemic, suggesting that mental health awareness, stress and work-life balance was not something that had previously been a high priority within organisations or the events industry. Respondents commented on the attitude to work pre-pandemic as being complacent and that there had been an expectation that whilst working in events you would stay as long as required to see the event through and get the job done – regardless of how many hours that might mean you worked in any time frame.

> "When I started to actually go into the world of work in events, the hours were just crazy. While I was enjoying my job, was absolutely exhausted." *G5/ 44:28*

> "Probably my first proper event job, I was like turning up on site at 7:00 o'clock in the morning and I wasn't leaving until 11:00 o'clock at night, and I was doing that, back-to-back. And whilst they tell you that that's what the industry is like, I think until you are actually doing it, that's two separate things." *G5/43:10*

> "… and one of the things that I found the hardest was like multitasking on a tired brain. I think you just had to do everything, and be able to do anything, with very little sleep. And so yeah, I was feeling like an octopus sometimes, like trying to juggle everything. And you'd start a task and then something else is suddenly have come up as high priority because the deadline has changed. So then you'd have to drop this and pick this up, and it's like utterly crazy trying to remember everything." *G6/36:06*

In interpreting the accounts provided around the impact of the pandemic and its consequential influence on mental health awareness amongst those working in industry, it seems that the pandemic had enabled time for self-reflection and a re-evaluation of priorities, particularly in a work-life capacity.

> "My personal reflection at the time was that I worked too hard. I'd worked my fingers to the bone for six or seven years, and at the expense of my family. So what COVID did… which was gave us more time together… and I came out of COVID with more of a passion to not have to work full time. I want to work four-day week. I want to enjoy a quality of life and reap the rewards of the hard work that I've put in. I definitely do have a better balance now." *E3/26:17*

> "The pandemic has definitely taught me the value of a work life balance; it's taught me the value of a perhaps being more aware of your own wellbeing. A work-life balance is super valuable because then you can also perform well at work." *G3/51:05*

> "I think one of the largest things is that during the pandemic people… came to realize they really wanted the better work life balance as a result. You already see

this in some places where the event manager might hand over to another event manager. So rather than opening up at 6PM and not closing till 2AM, which a lot of people used to do, you actually have a handover, that doesn't happen across the whole industry and there's still a real reticence to overstaff in order to sort of maintain mental health. But I think that's something that's coming and people have become way more aware of as a result of the pandemic." *E2/8:09*

"… more people are doing flexible hours so more people have gone part time and again." *E3/32:13*

These narratives suggest that the pandemic did influence mindsets around working conditions and seeking a better work-life balance. These findings align to the broader literature which analyses the impact of the pandemic from a professional capacity, which contend that as a consequence of the pandemic there is now a renewed societal focus and motivation to uphold a better work-life balance. The findings here, within the events context, demonstrate that positive interventional changes are being implemented within the industry as a result, with a greater diversity in modes of employment available as a resulting factor.

In support of this, many of the graduates commented on how mental health support and provision for those employed within the industry has changed as result of the pandemic, inferring that this has been increased and positively welcomed and received in post-pandemic workplace settings.

"I found that in my company there's a very strong ethos for a work life balance post pandemic… I definitely think there is now post pandemic more of an ethos of mental health and being aware of not only your own mental health and work life balance, but also your colleagues… So that's one thing that stands out to me is something definitely post pandemic change." *G1/43:25*

"I just love the team and the culture. They focus so much on health and well-being and they care so much about the individuals at the NEC Group and it makes you proud to work there because you're not just a number or a body, they invest in you. We get so much training and experiences, and you know some of the some of the events I've been able to work on, if someone had said to me even two years ago that I'd be working on the Commonwealth Games or the Conservative Party conference well that was just mind-blowing to work on, it was just insane. I'm really happy with where I am now." G5/24:31

Employers contended that, as a result of the pandemic and the increased awareness of mental health within the industry, graduates now need to possess a greater knowledge and understanding of mental health and wellbeing. They regarded this as important from both a self-awareness angle, being aware of their own needs, but also being aware of those working around them within the events team, to be supportive of each other from a mental health and wellbeing angle.

"You've got to have people working for you who are going to make sure to look after their welfare to make sure that they, if they need to take 15 minutes just to rest their brain because it's so intense that they do that, you know, rather than just having a complete meltdown and letting them have a meltdown." *E2/38:05*

"So emotional intelligence is massive. They need an awareness of themselves. They need awareness of others and the needs of others, and I think this is a growing. As an attribute that will be absolutely something that I think that employers are looking for that ability to not work in silos, that ability to be at having awareness of how others might be feeling in the team. I think that is all connected to mental health and well-being as well." *E1/28:19*

Due to the scarcity of literature analysing post-pandemic skill requirements within the events industry these findings cast new light on the relative shift of importance in mental health and wellbeing awareness and capabilities for graduates looking to work in the events industry, from both a self-awareness angle and with respect to those working alongside them.

4.5 Theme Four: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Theme four analyses the impact of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required of graduates for employment in the post-pandemic events industry in relation to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda. This theme was a prevalent area extracted from the data collected, and a clear narrative emerged that indicated that the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are something that have increased in significance across the events industry as a result of the pandemic.

The data suggested that the pandemic played a critical role in driving forward the EDI agenda within the events industry, indicating that the pandemic helped to further efforts in the EDI area, ensuring events post-pandemic are fully inclusive spaces that promote the representation and participation of different groups of individuals, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, ability, disability status, gender, religion, culture or sexual orientation. The accounts obtained from participants suggested that the pandemic both heightened awareness of the EDI agenda from a myriad of perspectives and altered practices within the events industry as a result. Participants suggested that these factors had subsequently led to alterations in the skills, attributes and characteristics required of those working within the events industry in a post-pandemic setting.

4.5.1 The influence of the pandemic on the EDI agenda in post-pandemic events

The equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda is not a new construct in the area of events, but as noted in chapter two, it is an area that remains under-researched (Finkle et al., 2018; Calver et al., 2023). Much of the literature in the Event Management discourse focusses on the operational and managerial dimensions of event planning, to the detriment of critical analysis on power and representation within the industry (Dashper et al., 2014), of which equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is an important aspect (Calver et al., 2023). Some authors recognise the value of this theme, asserting that research focusing on non-hegemonic populations as they relate to events environments is still in need of further exploration (Finkle et al., 2018; Calver et al., 2023).

The findings of the research undertaken here indicate that with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic restricting the traditional operational aspects of in-person event delivery, pivoting event operations into online, virtual formats meant that events hosted during this time became more inclusive and accessible. Events held in this context provided increased opportunities for participation that broke down many barriers that were associated with in-person event environments, enabling many marginalised groups of society the opportunity to partake in events that might have otherwise been out of reach.

The responses captured by the employers and graduates involved in the research acknowledged the role that the pandemic played in broadening awareness of the EDI agenda in the events

industry, contending that the area of EDI is now a prevailing and welcomed outcome of the pandemic across the industry.

> "Awareness of inclusivity and diversity as well. I think that is that is a much bigger factor and something that's grown in prevalence since the pandemic as well. I just think that's become more of a hot topic generally." *E1/44:17*

> "… post pandemic we're more aware of the kind of, EDI accessibility agenda now, it's something that's more prevalent than it was before the pandemic. *G6/52:59*

> "We do a lot more work on diversity and inclusion. We did do some before but that's more at the forefront due to do the pandemic." *E5/33:11*

> "… then a much greater drive to inclusivity. People are kind of able to reshape the industry a bit more because so many things came tumbling down they're kind of more able to rebuild them in a way that they want, which is which is good, I think." *E2/44:59*

The quotes provided above from both the employers and graduates interviewed signify that the EDI agenda is now a post-pandemic priority and a contemporary area widely recognised within the events industry since the pandemic. Participants stated that not only is the EDI agenda more broadly acknowledged across the industry, with an increased awareness apparent post-pandemic, they also suggest that the pandemic has provided the industry with the chance to rebuild itself in a more inclusive way. Respondents suggested that these changes have brought about alterations to the knowledge and skillsets of those employed in the industry post-pandemic, as evidenced by employer E3 who stated the following:

> "The areas of knowledge that people working in the industry now need have changed slightly to be more inclusive." *E3/52:09*

This was a view shared by participants E1, E4 and G5 too, who recognised that in order to plan inclusive event experiences, those working in the industry now need to have an adaptable skillset that aligns to societal shifts, recognises diversity and enables them make adjustments and alterations to their events that effectively encompass different subsections of society. They note that:

> "The generation coming up that are big believers in that." *E1/27:49*

> "The amount of effort going into include and being inclusive of everyone is having a big impact on things." *E4/30:26*

> "I think being able to adapt and adjust to people in events is now really important." *G5/46:37*

These findings converge with the literature and work of Finkle et al. (2018) who contends that issues of under-representation, marginalisation and intolerance have begun to emerge in events and critical events discourse as a result of recent swell of media attention and public interest in

the EDI area (p1). Respondents here suggest that as a result of attitudes to social change and shifts in societal norms, which were emphasised by the pandemic, there is now an expansion in awareness and understanding surrounding issues of inclusion and accessibility in the post-pandemic events landscape. The results suggest that increased access to events during the pandemic has been a catalyst for change in practices within planned events in a post-pandemic climate. The findings indicate that events post-pandemic have a greater focus on ensuring individuals and groups are treated fairly and with respect, including non-mainstream and non-majority communities (Dashper and Finkle, 2020), working towards more equitable practices (Gagnon et al., 2022) being implemented within the events industry as a result.

The findings have suggested that the pandemic had a substantial impact on the advancement of practices within events, linked to the EDI area. This next section aims to examine these aspects and summarise what the implications of these may be in relation to the development of skills, attributes and characteristics of those preparing for employment in the events industry in a post-pandemic setting.

4.5.2 The EDI agenda in the post-pandemic events industry: Event audiences

The responses of the employers and graduates in interviews around this area provided an understanding of EDI developments within the post-pandemic events landscape. Respondents outlined how events are now planned and delivered in a more inclusive manner, stating that post-pandemic event organisers now recognising diversity and are implementing accessible adjustments to their events in attempts to provide equal opportunities for participation across all sectors of society. The analysis indicates that events post-pandemic are planned in line with the legal requirements linked to the EDI agenda (such as The Equality Act, 2010) but also, importantly, acknowledge that event organisers and managers are now more aware of consciously making provision for all attendee groups as a result of the pandemic due to expansion in attendee participation at events by marginalised groups during this period.

Some of the responses here noted that these advancements were slowly being introduced pre-pandemic, but that the pandemic has emphasised and accelerated the development of these within events in a post-pandemic climate, accelerating the need for such skills:

> "I think there's a real drive to inclusion now that that there wasn't before."
> *E2/43:21*

> "I learned much more during COVID about neurodivergence. I believe now there is a level of understanding that we need to be considerate of those people that are at the severe level of that, such as having safe spaces and adapting events to ensure that we are encompassing people's needs. I think that's probably become more prevalent and we now need a greater awareness."
> *E3/50:10*

> "... there is now so much encouragement of working with. 'Attitude is everything', who are the accessible charity plug-in within the events industry,

to make things fair and accessible to everybody. I think it was growing in that direction before COVID, but I think everyone has a better appreciation for life and people want to achieve more now. People are going to events that wouldn't have done in the past and we're having to manage people with different needs all the time. I'm seeing accessible viewing platforms double or treble in size now, or organisers putting multiple platforms up at events… so there's definitely more management of that now than ever before.

The customers I work with want to achieve gold standards; they want to win awards for being an inclusive festival… I think that attitudes have changed towards people and there's certainly alongside that more training of staff, we do more in the area of EDI." *E4/30:16*

These narratives confirm the work of Dashper and Finkle (2020) who assert that understanding the complex requirements of individuals with different impairments and needs is difficult, and event organisers may benefit from working with charities and other organisations to support their efforts to be more accessible (p.3). These authors similarly advocate joined-up approaches to working with the UK disability-led charity, 'Attitude is Everything', and recommend alignment of event practices to their 'Attitude is Everything Venue and Festival Charter of Best Practice (2016)'.

Graduates acknowledged the factors detailed within the quotes above and outlined how their capabilities had changed as a result of being exposed to events in a post-pandemic climate. Respondents noted their observations of EDI adjustments in events that have been more prevalently incorporated into post-pandemic event provision. Their accounts endorsed those of the employers and discussed the noticeable modifications made in the area of EDI since the industry re-opened its doors after the pandemic.

"I'm definitely more aware and like understanding and people's accessibility requirements and what support they need throughout." *G6/50:53*

"I've noticed changes making things more accessible to event participants as well." *G1/31:32*

"This is probably the first event that I've come to realise, it might have been other events, but I've probably just never seen or noticed it. Like for example we now have quiet rooms and we have tape on ramps and steps for people that are visually impaired… also have ramps that like are accessibility friendly for wheelchairs and those people are in a powered wheelchair as well. Things we've had at this event is the headphones for autistic children for if noises get too loud… We've had like period products to support women. There was a viewing ramp and there was trackway put down on the grass… we provided bowls and poo bags for Guide Dogs … so that was a provision as well." *G6/52:59*

These views correspond to the work and views of Dashper and Finkle (2020) who argue that 'it is through better understanding of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion that advances in events can be achieved for the benefit of more people and communities' (p.1). This data also provides further evidence of aspects discussed in theme three surrounding mental health and wellbeing provision and the literature which depicts the increasing awareness about invisible disabilities

and neurodivergence, illustrating how they can impede event experiences for both attendees and performers. Snapes (2019) states that many events are providing additional resources and designated spaces available to support event attendees in these capacities, something that respondents in this research emphasised has been more prevalent in event practices since the pandemic.

Interestingly, graduate G6 noted that the EDI agenda now forms part of the post-pandemic event evaluation and KPI reporting mechanisms, indicating that having measurable outputs in the area of EDI is an important aspect of event evaluation and one that ensures quantifiable impact outcomes. G6 noted that these are of interest not only to the event organisation and committee, but also to their associated delivery partners.

> "... having just completed the UCI Cycling World Championships in Glasgow, we're spending the time now doing our reporting. So understanding how many people turned up, understanding what the feedback is from volunteers and looking at our KPIs around equality, diversity, inclusion, EDI, and all the stats around that as well, which obviously we have to do for the delivery partners because we hold all the data." *G6/31:11*

These observations of the alterations and adjustments made to practices within the events industry and the increased prevalence of inclusivity, diversity and accessibility as a consequence of the pandemic were compelling. When reflecting upon these aspects and the implications of them on the knowledge and skillset requirements of those entering employment in the events industry post-pandemic, the employers interviewed stated:

> "Graduates need to have sufficient knowledge in this area. They're going to do shows and variety of events with a variety of audiences, with a variety of offerings, and so, they need to understand the surrounding culture." *E2/48:31*

> "... you want them to be able to have a kind of greater understanding of culture generally, what it does within society and their place within it and audiences place within it... you want them to be developed as human beings, because there comes the soft skills you want and there comes the ability to take initiative and there comes the ability to rub along well with others." *E2/48:31*

> "... what I would say is I think that the knowledge they need have is to be more aware of is what is required to get people to events now. I feel like we need to be a bit more accommodating and giving that extra support to attendees. So that we explain better how to get there and making sure that when they get there that there is a safe space or you know, facility wise we are there." *E3/50:10*

These observations capture the essence of equality, diversity and inclusion and suggest that employers value those who are able to demonstrate understanding, knowledge and aptitudes to produce event spaces that can bring diverse groups of people together and welcome everyone regardless of age, race, ethnicity, ability, disability status, gender, religion, culture or sexual

orientation. This is something that the data in this research emphasises as crucial in a post-pandemic climate. These narratives are echoed within the contemporary post-pandemic work of Calver et al., (2023) who argue that inclusion and diversity are now vital within event planning as they create an environment of acceptance, foster innovation, expand opportunities, and contribute to a more equitable society. These authors state that, by embracing diversity and promoting inclusion, events can be created that are enriching, impactful, and inclusive for all participants. As an under researched area of discourse in relation to skillset development within the events industry, these findings provide new insights into the pandemic and its influence on both employer expectations and the skills, knowledge and understandings in the EDI area that are required by graduates for employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

4.6 Theme Five: Bridging the Industry – Higher Education gap

The final section of findings presented here in theme five, examines the recommendations put forth by the participant groups interviewed that draw together their insights on how providers of Event Management Education in the Higher Education sector can facilitate students in developing the skillsets required for successful careers in the events industry as it re-emerges in a post COVID-19 landscape (addressing RO4). Many of the insights shared and recommendations under this theme were localised and specific to the research participants interviewed, and are not intended to be exhaustive or generalisable. With the nature of this study being interpretivist one, the recommendations put forth here are based on the reflective interpretations and opinions only of those interviewed.

The findings and responses captured under this theme were rich and pragmatic, offering recommendations that focus on preparing students for employment within the post-pandemic events industry. The perspectives shared within this section evidenced some commonalities and alignments of views purported by the employers and graduates interviewed, but also exposed some differences in standpoints between these participant groups in their approaches to the recommendations proposed. The employers within the study, as they have done throughout, offered a broader and more strategic approach to the recommendations put forth, with their views being heavily shaped by their expectations as employers and the conditions of the industry. By contrast, the graduates shared accounts that were clearly grounded with a greater emphasis on preparing students to meet the requirements of roles in industry, while offering recommendations that were also based on reflective insights linked to their own experiences within the Higher Education system.

4.6.1 Recommendations

When discussing with participants how providers of Event Management Education within the Higher Education sector can facilitate students in developing the skillsets required for successful careers in the events industry as it re-emerges in a post COVID-19 landscape, there were a series of key recommendations that became evident. The first recommendation relates to the influence of the pandemic on the nature of programmes offered within the Event Management Education area. Employer E1 asserted that:

> "If any program has not been reviewed since the pandemic or around that time, then it really should be. Universities should not be just delivering the same modules year and year out without reviewing them. Yes you can update content, but have you had a big review of establishing it the modules now are fit for purpose?
> Have they been tested on industry? Has anybody gone to industry and said this is what we're proposing to teach? Is there anything that you've got to add? Do you think this was suitably prepare a student? Is there any engagement with

industry at all, around that around the actual design of the programs? There should be, because I think the pandemic did cause a shift." *E1/36:31*

This view acknowledges the impact of the pandemic and contends that programmes should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose in a post-pandemic climate. It suggests that the influence of the pandemic caused a shift within the events industry, requiring revisions to post-pandemic programme provision within Higher Education institutions. This quote claims that minor reviews will be insufficient. Instead, it advocates the necessity to work with industry, gaining industry input within that process, inferring that post-pandemic programme reviews should take a holistic, joined-up approach supported by those involved in post-pandemic event delivery. This recommendation is a fundamental development area for Higher Education practitioners, ensuring that the core offering of programme provision aligns to industry requirements and adequately equips graduates with the necessary skills, attributes and characteristics for employment in the industry in a post-pandemic climate.

This recommendation aligns to the aforementioned employability discourse, in particular, it demonstrates alignment to the USEM model by Knight and Yorke (2002), which depicts pedagogical approaches to employability, emphasising the need for students to obtain 'skills related to the job' alongside 'subject understanding'. It similarly also offers parallels to aspects of the CareerEDGE model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), who indicate that degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding are considered vital contributors to employability. This recommendation is also supported by the wider generic educational literature and the work of Karam et al., (2021) and (Zimmerman et al., (2020) who assert that Higher Education institutions have increased the focus on utilising quality assurance mechanisms, such as course reviews and periodic subject reviews, to drive continuous improvement in discipline-specific curricula in recent years. One of the scarce studies which investigates the quality of course design in a post-pandemic world was published by Martin (2023). This study (though largely focusing on online course design in a post-pandemic context) contends that there is an increasing need for critical reviews of Higher Education courses in a post-COVID climate, to not only help ensure programmes meet the latest quality assurance expectations, but to also drive up the quality of course design, which Martin (2023) argues will improve student satisfaction, learning experiences, and retention rates as a consequence. These perspectives suggest that by ensuring programmes are reviewed they will not only encourage incremental curricula improvements ensuring fitness for purpose in a post-pandemic climate, but may also yield enhancements in other metrics such as student satisfaction, learning, and retention. These factors become even more imperative in light of the metrics scrutinised within the aforementioned Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the institutional ratings issued as a result.

The impact of the pandemic on the nature of programme provision was a commonly cited area discussed by both participant groups who shared accounts that discussed the various ways they feel programmes should be compiled post-pandemic. I recognise that it will be a complex balancing act to get changes right due to the nature of the industry both in terms of its scale and scope, and the fast-moving environment it encapsulates, a view shared by Raj and Rashid (2022). Graduate G4 stated:

"… it's hard because it's such a huge industry. How can you teach everything?" *G4/56:27*

Employers E3 and E6 contend that the focus of programmes in the events area should provide graduates with opportunities to gain:

"…knowledge of the sector and of the industry as well as the skills to be able to do the job." *E6/32:06*

"I think for me it's about giving them a good foundation and an excitement for working in the industry, so that they want to know all aspects and they want to work in all departments so they can get an understanding of where they want to go." *E3/43:54*

Approaches to curriculum composition and the aims of courses in the Event Management Education field continue to be an on-going topic of discussion within the discourse (Getz and Page, 2020; Bowdin et al., 2023). Many of the responses gathered in interviews on this area disclosed recommendations that linked curriculum development and the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment adopted in events programmes. The employer responses indicated that programmes should be taught by teams of staff who have not only the academic expertise but who also maintain a level of involvement and experience within the industry. They acknowledge that the events discipline is an applied subject that requires staff who keep abreast of changes happening within the fast-moving events industry and who are ideally positioned to contribute meaningfully to the student journey. They stated that this is even more prevalent since the pandemic:

"Your academic staff have got to be practitioners." *E2/58:41*

"I think I think if you're teaching a subject like events, you should have work in events at some point in every year. They should be doing things off their own back to stay involved, to stay connected, to stay up to date with the information to know what is required. Having the experience of actually delivering events personally, not just attending." *E1/33:17*

"… having practitioners as part of part of the staff I think is hugely important." *E2/1:16*

"Very, very few academics have industry experience or certainly very few have continued on in industry. Not enough in my book. Not all subjects need it, but when you've got applied subject like events, you do. For example, if you're training to be a nurse or a doctor or a dentist, you want to be taught by nurses,

doctors and dentists, you don't want to be taught by an academic who read about it in a book. *E1/31:06*

These responses contend that making sure that academics who teach on events discipline-based programmes are sufficiently equipped and have the correct knowledge and experience to be able to deliver them is vital, particularly in a post-pandemic context. While having suitably qualified and experienced practitioners with specialist discipline specific knowledge has always been important in the delivery of events programmes, the employer responses suggest this is an important factor post-pandemic. The employers suggested that with the associated changes the industry has undergone as a result of the pandemic, and alterations to event practice as a result, mean that having that authentic first-hand experience of the influence of the pandemic and these changes, will enable practitioners to better teach students within programmes, to prepare them for careers in the industry as a result.

When discussing how the pandemic has influenced the elements that should be taught as mandatory components of such programmes, the findings align to areas discussed within the aforementioned themes and suggest that as a result of the pandemic, the changes to the industry and alterations to the associated skillsets required in these areas should now be included within post-pandemic programme provision. Participants stipulated:

> "Universities should teach technical and digital skills. Do they have modules about technical delivery; how to deliver our hybrid event, how to deliver the technology? I'm sure it's something offered as sort of volunteer opportunities or maybe loose placement opportunities. But is it actually taught by lecturers? That's to me something that will be needed." *E1/34:55*

> "... making sure that the course has a digital side to it now so the post-pandemic students are prepared for the digital side of the events world, which is an incorporation of every event I'm doing at the moment." *G4/59:47*

These perspectives correspond to theme two of the findings which focussed on the development of technological and digital skillset requirements, indicating that, post-pandemic, these elements are critical aspects to be included within course curricula. These aspects were echoed within the wider COVID-19 impact evaluation studies which provide dialogue on the implications of the pandemic and its effects on workplace skills in a generic capacity (British Academy, 2021; CBI, 2022; WEF, 2023), contending that the pandemic placed new technological demands on employees who, in many instances, now require different skills to support significant changes to how work gets done and to the business priorities their companies are setting (Feld et al., 2020). The second area discussed with relevance to taught content in post-pandemic programme revision centred on areas corresponding to theme three, around mental health and wellbeing. Participants stipulated:

> "Crisis management too, we don't often think about that, we have the foresight of what we would do, but nine times that attempt doesn't happen. So it's definitely important and I think again that's sometimes is the best way to learn… what are we going to do?" *E3/1:06*

> "Within university is there needs to be something about prioritizing your time or something about also a work life balance. But also about like a mental health within the industry and within workplace. I think that's really important." *G4/1:03*

> "New people coming into the industry are way behind the curve and emotional development or emotional toughness or resilience. They've not had the bumps and bruises to shape and form them in the way that people have before because they had three years stuck at home due to the pandemic. So there should now be a greater focus on mental health within university provision for sure." *E2/43:49*

> "It's an attribute that I think should be include post-pandemic, and it is a much bigger awareness of a well-being and general mental health issues as well." *E1/28:19*

These perspectives align with the responses capturing the essence of the pandemic and its repercussions within both the mental health and wellbeing context and the widening awareness of the global context caused by it, reflected in suggestions to include crisis management. This recommendation corresponds to the CareerEDGE employability model by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), who advocate 'emotional intelligence', 'self-efficacy', 'self-esteem' and 'self-confidence', as vital aspects need to facilitate employability, and enabling students to reach their full potential. The final area identified aligned closely to theme four and the EDI agenda, suggesting that course content should seek to include taught aspects around inclusivity and diversity, broadening students' comprehension and awareness of this vital post-pandemic facet within event planning and delivery.

> "An awareness of inclusivity and diversity as well. I think that is that is a much bigger factor over the generations, but also something that's grown in prevalence since the pandemic so that should be included as well. I just think that's become more of a hot topic generally." *E1/44:17*

The accounts given by participants suggest that the graduates leaving programmes within the Higher Education sector will be better prepared for entry into the post-pandemic events graduate labour market, possessing a wider and more relevant skillset suited to the post-pandemic events industry.

When reflecting upon how these elements should be taught, respondents from both participant groups offered accounts that strongly advocated that alongside having these aspects taught within core modules in traditional Higher Education settings, having opportunities for students to gain practical hands-on experience of seeing and experiencing all aspects of event planning,

production, delivery and evaluation for themselves was critical in enabling the development of skills required. These narratives contend that having practical experience of such an applied subject is crucial as it will enable students to learn the intricacies of events, while also showcasing to future employers that their knowledge extends beyond a theoretical understanding. Instead, it will demonstrate a practical understanding of events and will provide evidence they have obtained the skills required of roles within the industry.

> "As an employer I would be asking them in interview to talk about what they had done... they need to be demonstrating that they have got an aptitude to be academic, that they have got a level of competency which will emulate the level of intelligence and the associated skills to apply in an industry context, but they will also be needing to show that what they did on their degree is practically based not just theoretical." *E1/22:52*

> "Students should definitely be partnering the academic stuff with real work-life experience." *E4/25:01*

> "... having that broad view of events and how different events run is important... being able to draw on experience going into a graduate position is definitely going to be a valuable asset for an employer to see that you've already had those practical experiences, not just the theory...with events, you should have the opportunity to do those practical things before you go into full time employment." *G1/48:48*

> "I think offering more practical experiences for events courses is valuable alongside the teaching because you can teach as much as you can, but the industry is very wide." *G3/1:11*

These accounts validate and argue the value in gaining such practical experiences from both the employer and graduate perspectives. They indicate that having the opportunity to apply the theoretical constructs in events into a real-life practical setting is beneficial to the learning process, and in preparing students for the reality of careers within the post-pandemic events industry.

In discussing the mechanism of how this practical hands-on experience might be offered within programme provision a number of areas were proposed by the participants as viable options to achieve this. These centred on having embedded learning opportunities within the course curriculum to enable and encourage all students to leave university having successfully gained both the practical experience of events and acquired the necessary skills, attributes and characteristics to enter employment within the events industry. The breadth of examples that were provided by respondents within the research included having mandatory live event projects, compulsory work experience opportunities, extra-curricular activities and experiences, field visits to event organisations and venues, practitioner insight events where best practise is shared from industry experts, and offering industry placement opportunities within the curricula.

"… organising events within the curricula… I do feel it would help to prepare students a lot more if they had the opportunity to organise more live events within their course because that's where you start to refine those skills and then start to prepare for an actual career in events." *G5/43:29*

"… embedding practical opportunities, so everyone should do at least like minimum of X amount of hours in industry order to proceed to the next step. Because what you read in books very rarely relates to what you what you experience on site." *G2/40:45*

"… taking students to events, taking them to venues, to have a visit, have a look round, speak to different people involved within the events and work with employers. I think that's a fantastic learning experience" *E5/45:41*

"Having industry input where there's industry speakers come in, I think that's really good. Having practical experience and practical knowledge from people in different sectors of the industry." *E6/29:36*

"Industry learning opportunities… engaging with industry specific training will help to equip you for employment afterwards." *G4/59:52.*

"Every student who is involved in an events program in Higher Education has to have some level of experience incorporated within the course. I think it should be a big part, including a placement and short-term opportunities too." *E3/1:00*

These perspectives, contributed by both participant groups, showcase a range of differing approaches to assuring programmes offer relevant aspects of practical, experiential provision. There was common agreement among participants that if ensuring programme provision offers elements of these initiatives, Higher Education providers would in turn assist students in gaining the necessary skills required for employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

These views were underpinned and supported by the graduate pool of participants who provided accounts that endorsed these proposals, discussing the value of such initiatives and their usefulness in ensuring they met employer expectations and were equipped for employment in industry.

"Gaining experience is the key especially for those just about to enter the industry. It's difficult to enter the industry and just having a degree is not enough." *G2/32:14*

"…employers are always looking for experience and that needs to be within the events industry because it shows that you've properly worked on an event. They definitely look for people that have done events and done the actual event time." *G6/32:51*

"When you graduate having a good understanding of where you want to be in this huge industry and that is something that you can only learn by exposing yourself to what it looks like." *G4/54:56*

"I really had to gain experience in various different events and I think what really helped me was my volunteering because that helped me to get my

placement… I was then so marketable following university that I didn't really struggle in terms of finding a job." *G5/22:01*

"I managed to secure a placement at Disney and it was my first experience with a large corporation, a bit overwhelming but truly rewarding… I hosted variety of events there, conferences, PR events, influencer events, premieres, private movie screenings, charity events, and trade shows… a really rewarding experience." *G2/5:52*

These areas of recommendations offer congruence with Reid et al., (2021) UQ Employability framework, which recognises the value and importance of experience. Reid et al.'s model implies that employability is about learning; and that the development of competencies through engagement in and reflection on experiences should empower the learner, with Reid et al. (2021) stating that 'employment is a by-product of this enabling process' (p.3). The UQ Employability Framework demonstrated usefulness in the context of this research, with events being recognised as an inherently vocational and practically experience driven discipline and with the nature of the study intending to investigate participant experiences of the pandemic and its influence on employability development.

The alignment in the accounts given by the graduates here links to aspects of both the broader employability discourse and the events body of literature which offers best practice examples of providing impactful learning opportunities with course curricula that foster notions of skills acquisition and development, positively influencing employability prospects as a consequence. With the aims of this study intending to assess these aspects through a post-pandemic lens it was interesting to note that the data suggests that the acquisition of skills in a post-pandemic context do not look drastically different to those pre-pandemic, they are just positioned differently in ensuring the techniques and mechanisms implemented are achieved in the present climate. The requirement for graduates to have engaged with industry and gained experience alongside their degree is something the participants identified as significant, but being a typically vocational discipline, this is something that has always been of importance to employers. In similarity to pre-pandemic requirements, the ability for graduates to showcase the possession of industry experience remains a desirable requirement for many events positions in the post-pandemic climate. What the responses suggest though is that post-pandemic, embedding opportunities to gain such experience should now be a mandatory, fundamental part of course curricula on events based programmes, maximising the prospects for all students on events courses to gain this during their time on the degree, leaving university with the skills required of graduates to gain and thrive in employment in industry after graduation.

Having addressed the areas of teaching and learning within the responses purported from interview. The final area discussed focussed on effective assessment methods that are designed

to afford students the opportunity to showcase a breadth of knowledge and understanding in relation to the events discipline.

> "Another area to consider is the kind of assessments and making sure that are reflective of real life, that they're authentic." *G6:1:09*

> "Assessments should reflect how it actually is in the events industry, so you could do simulations or scenario-based stuff that incorporates more of an actual event setting to test those skill sets." *G6/1:12*

> "Real life case studies I think that would be hugely beneficial." *E3/1:04*

> "Scenario based learning and assessment would even be a more beneficial thing as well, even if it's not related to having to necessarily run a practical event. Those scenarios where it's like, OK, well, this is the context of event, this is a problem that's occurred, what might you do? Scenario based learning and assessments would also be valuable in that sense as well." *G1/55:09*

The research revealed that having authentic assessment methods that are reflective of real-life, problems and scenarios allow Higher Education practitioners the chance to test relevant skill sets in these contexts. Adopting authentic means of assessment through the use of both practically assessed aspects and those offered within the context of simulations and case studies, gives practitioners the opportunity to deliver meaningful assessment experiences that examine student performance on worthy intellectual tasks that relate to the practices of students' future professions within the events industry. These findings correlate with the literature that analyses conceptualisations of authentic assessment (Nieminen et al., 2023). Given the preceding findings offered within this thesis and the reported increase of the technological and digitised side of events prevalent within the post-pandemic events industry, it will be prudent for Higher Education practitioners to think about how to build digital aspects into authentic assessment design, ensuring these will both develop and assess students' digital skills that graduates would use in the workplace.

4.7 Summary of findings

In summary, the accounts issued by both the graduates and employers interviewed provided an overwhelming narrative that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had significant impacts upon the events industry and those employed within it when the pandemic occurred. The responses gained showcased the impact of the pandemic as far reaching, influencing not only the industry and the employment trajectories of those employed within it, but highlighting the transformative nature of event production and delivery.

When reviewing the impact of the pandemic critically, and when scrutinising the accounts shared by participants during the interview process, it is evident the pandemic caused devasting negative consequences for many individuals and organisations within the industry, altering employment status, roles and level of responsibility and/or modes of employment. These aspects not only affected the mental health of many in the industry, but also caused an intensification and widening of skills gaps as a consequence. However, the narrative provided by those interviewed also highlighted the positive impacts of the pandemic on the industry, as some contended that it accelerated significant areas of transformative opportunity and diversification within the industry, modifying event production and delivery methods via online, virtual event formats, whilst positively contributing to both EDI and sustainability agendas.

The findings demonstrate that the pandemic has altered the skills, attributes and characteristics required to work in the events industry post-pandemic, from a technological and digital perspective. The influence of the pandemic on the technological and digital skillsets now required has been caused by the introduction of technologically enabled event delivery formats, such as hybrid events, the requirements to have knowledge and skills to manage virtual event platforms, capabilities to analyse and manage the data produced from such events. It indicates that possessing the skills to produce engaging consumer experiences in the post-pandemic world and the aptitudes and skills to recognise and adapt event offerings to meet changing consumption habits of event attendees is of significance post-pandemic.

The analysis of interview data collected also showed that the pandemic had significant impacts on the mental health, wellbeing and emotional intelligence capabilities of those interviewed. It indicated that the pandemic has not only heightened awareness of this crucial area but that it has shifted the skills, attributes and characteristics of those working in the events industry. The research suggested that the knowledge, understanding and practices around mental health and wellbeing have been strengthened within the events industry as a consequence of the pandemic, resulting in modifications to the practices implemented in supporting both event audiences and those employed within the industry. The responses discussed within this theme demonstrated that mental health and wellbeing has become an influential area of skillset growth as a consequence of the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on the events experience from an EDI perspective is substantial. The subsequent influence of this on the skills, attributes and characteristics of those seeking employment within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate are discernible. Possession of the skills, attributes and characteristics to deliver inclusive events that recognise and align to the EDI agenda and provide equal opportunities for participants have increased in importance within the post-pandemic events industry. These factors have in turn accelerated the need for such skills in a post-pandemic climate.

These findings contribute to the overarching aim of the study and provide an evidence base that supports the fact that these factors have led to changes in the skills, attributes and characteristics both desired by employers and required by many roles in the post-pandemic events industry.

With the focus of this thesis centred on employability and skills development the recommendations proposed by the employers and graduates interviewed offer some practical insights into how Higher Education providers might be able to support Event Management Education students in obtaining post-pandemic skill sets required for employment within the events industry. Employer E1 indicated that:

> "Employability should be embedded as part of the curriculum to my mind anyway. That sort of level of teaching, whether it's in embedded within modules, across all modules, would be ideal, but those are the specialist career services and things like that. they're all there, but if they're optional, you know, students are less likely to, I think, get involved. You can't expect the young people are going to do that, so if it if it takes forcing it through the curriculum, then I don't think that's a bad thing." *E1/39:09*

This quote emphasises and echoes many of the findings presented above, contending that employability and skills development initiatives should be tailored for the events industry, focussing on the specific skills, attributes and characteristics required of the industry. They should manifest as embedded curriculum initiatives across all teaching, learning and assessment areas in attempts to maximise opportunities for skill acquisition amongst the student body.

The findings articulated a number of key recommendations for the development and progression of post-pandemic curriculum, which included specific suggestions on curricula composition. Firstly, the findings suggest that all providers of Event Management Education should conduct a post-pandemic review of their provision, whether that be via a course review or period subject review. The findings indicated that undertaking this process would not only ensure that programmes meet the latest quality assurance standards, but would also improve the quality of course design too. In doing so, the findings suggest that engaging in this process would encourage programmes and course teams to review the nature of their offerings, ensuring that programmes are fit for purpose in a post-pandemic climate. The findings contend that this procedure should

be conducted as a joined-up approach with industry input, to ensure course offerings align to current industry requirements, equipping graduates with the skills needed upon graduation to successfully compete in the graduate labour market within the post-pandemic events industry. Participants agreed that a well-designed curriculum that is aligned with industry standards ensures that graduates are not only knowledgeable in their subject area but also able to apply their learning in real-world contexts.

In terms of discipline-specific curriculum composition, there was a common acknowledgment of the complexity of this for events educators to get right due to the multifaceted nature of the industry, its scope and scale, as well as its fast-paced nature. When discussing the impact of the pandemic on curriculum composition, and when reviewing the information put forth within the themes discussed, participants clearly articulated the importance of including learning outcomes and curricula content which focusses on the building the skills needed for roles within the events industry, post-pandemic.

The first of these was the area of technological and digital skills. The findings suggested being technically proficient was particularly important within the post-pandemic events context when considering the changes to event online and hybrid delivery formats left behind as a legacy of the pandemic. For practitioners designing course content, the findings indicated that the inclusion of module/course content that enables students to build the technological and digital skillsets required of post-pandemic roles in industry, was critical. They suggest having curriculum which provides learning opportunities that are reflective of the specific post-pandemic trends, audience preferences, event attendee consumption habits. Key recommendations here included curricula content which teaches students how to design and produce online and hybrid event delivery formats, digitised event experiences and to be confident in the use of virtual event platforms, apps and working with event data. With recognition that all events post-pandemic, now have some kind of digital component included within them, a legacy of the pandemic, this area of skillset development was highlighted as critical to address within revised curriculum content.

The second area was the area of mental health and wellbeing. The findings suggested that the ability of students and graduates to have an expanded knowledge base, understanding and awareness of mental health and wellbeing associated with the post-pandemic events environment was of significance. As a result of modifications to events practices designed to support the changing needs of events attendees as a result of the pandemic, participants indicated that this area should be included with events curricula to encourage the development of skills and aptitudes within students, enabling them to design events that effectively incorporate and provide mental health and wellbeing support and mental health first aid to meet the changing needs event audiences. The findings contend that curriculum should have content that includes mental health and wellbeing provision at events, something that has risen in importance post-

pandemic. Participants highlighted the need for curricular to be informed by key organisations and agencies in this area, such as 'TLC Welfare'.

The third area of curricular developments that emerged from the findings surrounds the inclusion of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). With acknowledgments from participants of the rising prevalence and broadening awareness across the events industry, of the EDI agenda, and its links to post-pandemic event provision, the findings indicated the need for curriculum to include content which equips students to design and deliver event experiences that are fully inclusive spaces, and that promote representation and participation from all groups of society. The findings suggested that as a result of expansions in awareness and understanding surrounding issues linked to inclusion and accessibility in the post-pandemic events climate, students should now be exposed to curricular that encompasses content to prepare them to recognise diversity and implement EDI related adjustments in their events. Again, the importance of joined-up working with organisations and agencies in this area were discussed as advantageous, here organisations such as 'Attitude is Everything 'were noted.

The final area of findings linked to curriculum development, was linked to assessments being designed in an authentic manner. The key recommendations in this area suggested discipline-specific authenic assessments might include hands-on practical projects, internships, or case studies that reflect current industry practices, allowing students to develop problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills alongside their academic expertise. Furthermore, the findings suggested integrating employability-focused elements such as career readiness workshops, soft skills development, and exposure to event workplace environments to enhance a student's transition from academia to employment. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, a discipline-specific curricular is a vital tool in fostering skilled and adaptable graduates. These recommendations extracted from the interviews conducted within the study, aim to contribute to an understanding of how Higher Education providers can better prepare their graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the events industry, equipping them for the challenges of careers within the events industry in a post-pandemic world. It would be hoped that by implementing such initiatives, graduates would finish events programmes having received a meaningful experience that equips them for careers in the post-pandemic events industry.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study, summarising the key findings and outlining both the practical and academic contributions of the research. The key limitations are examined and the implications of the research are presented. The chapter concludes by appraising future directions for complementary research.

5.2 Research Conclusions

There is a growing body of literature that explores the concept of employability within Event Management Education (Fletcher et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2012; Whitelaw et al., 2015; Walters, 2021) but, as yet, few studies have attempted to provide a theoretically informed analysis of this concept through a post-pandemic lens within a UK context. The focus of this thesis was to offer a relevant contribution in this area by presenting an exploratory investigation which aimed to answer the central research question:

RQ: How has the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic influenced the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate?

The research analysed the opinions of employers and graduates from a variety of sectors within the events industry on the relative influence of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the skillsets needed to facilitate prospects for future employment within the events industry, as it re-emerges in a post COVID-19 landscape. To achieve this the research intended to address the associated objectives of the research which were:

- **RO1:** To critically analyse whether the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required of future Event Management graduates for entrance into the post-pandemic graduate labour market, within the events industry.
- **RO2:** To appraise the experiences of undergraduate Event Management graduates, exploring their employment journey in the events industry pre-pandemic, during the pandemic itself, and since. Investigating their opinions on the influence of the pandemic on the skillsets required to both work in the UK events industry and to facilitate prospects for future employment in the industry.
- **RO3:** To investigate the perceptions of employers in the UK events industry, examining their perceptions on the influence of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required to effectively prepare graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate.

- **RO4:** To appraise how providers of Event Management Education can help bridge the gap between industry and the Higher Education sector, to effectively assist students in developing the skills, capabilities and attributes required for successful employment in the UK events industry, in a post-COVID-19 landscape.

The analysis of the interview data indicated that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills needed for employment in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate, shaping both the skills desired by employers and the skillsets required to successfully fulfil the requirements of roles within the industry as a result. These factors have been examined and recommendations offered which aim to contribute to an understanding of how Higher Education providers can better prepare their graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the events industry, equipping them for the challenges of careers in the events industry in a post-pandemic world.

In order to address the existing limitations within the employability in Event Management Education field, this study aimed to develop a contextual understanding of these issues from a post-pandemic perspective, contributing to an area of academic research that has yet to receive the attention it warrants. The contextual position and timing of the research presents an ideal opportunity to review and build upon what is already known and understood from previous literature in the field; whilst providing an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge at a critical time within the events industry.

5.2.1 Summary of findings addressing the objectives of the research

This section intends to provide a summary of the findings linked to each of the study's research question and objectives. In doing so it seeks to demonstrate how each of these were achieved, thereby addressing the intended aim of the study.

RQ: *How has the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic influenced the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate?*

The key findings of the study indicated that the influence of the pandemic upon the skills, capabilities, and attributes required to effectively prepare Event Management graduates for employment and careers within the post-pandemic events industry has been multi-faceted. Data captured from the graduates and employers interviewed suggested that the pandemic has both altered the skills required of many roles within the events industry, shaping the skills needed to gain and sustain employment within the post-pandemic events industry, as well as shifting the post-pandemic skillsets desired by employers within the events industry. Developments fuelled

by the pandemic have altered the future events landscape, meaning that educators within the Event Management Education field must keep abreast of trends and changes as the events industry continues in its recovery from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In doing so, educators must review programme provision ensuring it remains fit for purpose, in efforts to effectively prepare graduates for the employment within the post-pandemic events world.

RO1: *To critically analyse whether the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced the skills, attributes and characteristics required of future Event Management graduates for entrance into the post-pandemic graduate labour market, within the events industry.*

The research concluded that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic induced a series of transformative changes within the events industry which have shaped both the post-pandemic events landscape and the labour market awaiting graduates in a post-pandemic climate. Participants contended that these factors had in turn influenced the skills needed to navigate the post-pandemic working world of the events industry. The findings here were two-fold, and reflective of both the changes within the wider post-pandemic employment context, and those changes within the context of post-pandemic events specifically. Participants from the employer and graduate groups similarly acknowledged the disruptive influence of the pandemic upon the employment conditions within the post-pandemic labour market and workplace, outlining the need to be adaptable, flexible, to show resilience and evidence transferable skills. Theoretically, the responses here correspond to the generic post-pandemic employability skills discourse, which recognises the importance of workers' skills and abilities to adapt to the complex, ever-changing and disorderly labour market, outlining requirements for both post-pandemic entrants and returning employees alike to develop new skills and knowledge to successfully thrive in the post-pandemic labour market.

The second area of findings here was linked to the context of events, relevant within the post-pandemic events industry. The results here were compelling and suggested that the pandemic had direct implications and influenced how events are conducted in a post-pandemic climate, altering practices as a result. Both the employers and graduates interviewed noted changes to practice which influence event planning, production, delivery and evaluation modes and so modifying the skillset requirements of those employed within the industry as it has re-emerged post-pandemic. The results suggest that the pandemic has increased the importance, prevalence and expansion of some pre-pandemic skills areas, while also encouraging the creation of new areas of knowledge and inciting the growth of new skills and attributes necessary within the post-pandemic events environment.

The findings concluded that the influence of the pandemic has modified both the desired skills of employers and the skillsets required of roles within the post-pandemic events industry. With

limited relevant post-pandemic employability focussed literature in the events field in a UK context, these findings contribute new insights and understandings with respect to the influence of the pandemic in the events context.

RO2: *To appraise the experiences of undergraduate Event Management graduates, exploring their employment journey in the events industry pre-pandemic, during the pandemic itself, and since. Investigating their opinions on the influence of the pandemic on the skillsets required to both work in the UK events industry and to facilitate prospects for future employment in the industry.*

The graduates interviewed provided detailed narratives of their personal employment journeys, reflecting upon their time at university, their transitions into employment within the events industry, their employment trajectories since, and their employment experiences both during and since the pandemic. The nature of the findings here aligned to contemporary theoretical framings of employability which recognise the individualised and contextual nature of employability and graduate identity (Hinchcliffe and Jolly., 2011; Tomlinson., 2017; Clarke, 2018; Cheng et al., 2022), with no two interviewees reporting identical accounts of their experiences. Their accounts detailed the challenges they had faced within employment during this timeframe, acknowledging that the pandemic had encouraged them to reflect upon, expand and develop their skillsets to enable them to adapt to the post-pandemic demands of employment in the events industry. These results converged with the recent wider post-pandemic employability discourse which theorises employability in relational, contextual and dynamic terms, framing it as a 'journey' (Clarke, 2018, Bennett, 2019, Dalrymple et al., 2021), and recognising that the core skills needed for current jobs have changed as consequence of the pandemic (Hite and McDonald, 2020; Manolchev et al., 2022; WEF, 2023).

Graduates outlined how the pandemic has shaped areas of practice change and the requirements of their roles within the events industry as a result of the pandemic, contending that the consequential impact has altered post-pandemic skillset requirements for employment within the events industry. In the absence of post-pandemic focussed literature within the events context, these findings offer aspects of alignment to some of the broader post-pandemic workplace skills and employability discourse which assert that graduates need to possess an ability to cope with the changes and adaptations ever present in the changing global context of the labour market, and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the skills to adapt quickly to the changing workplace and market (Cukier et al., 2021). They offer new contributions to contextual understandings within the events field about the changing requirements of roles within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate, and the associated skills required of those seeking employment within the industry due to the limited availability of literature within the discourse.

The thematic analysis concluded there was a commonality and agreement among the entirety of the graduate participant group who contended that the pandemic had influenced the skills, attributes and characteristic requirements of those seeking employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

RO3: *To investigate the perceptions of employers in the UK events industry, examining their perceptions on the influence of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required to effectively prepare graduates for careers within the events industry, in a post-pandemic climate.*

Employer observations of the influence of the pandemic on skillsets required of graduates within the post-pandemic events industry were insightful. They contended that the pandemic had influenced the broader events employment context (including post-pandemic labour market conditions within the events industry and the new post-pandemic working environment), alongside altering numerous areas of practice within events, which they argued had consequentially shifted the skillset requirements desired by them. Employers were vocal about the adverse effects and economic conditions caused by the pandemic, and the impacts of these upon the widescale skill shortages evident in the events industry since, stating that both the skill-shortages and the skills-gap density had increased compared to pre-pandemic levels. These findings align with wider COVID-19 impact evaluation studies on the implications of the pandemic and its effects on workplace skills in a generic capacity (British Academy, 2021; CBI, 2022; WEF, 2023).

The findings from the employer groups also indicated that pandemic has created new areas of opportunity within the post-pandemic events industry that have altered practices implemented within, to ensure that events now align to changing attendee consumption habits as a result of the pandemic, and that they reflect post-pandemic societal trends. Employers contended that these aspects had shifted their opinions on the desired skills required within the post-pandemic workplace, noting that the pandemic had influenced the skills they look for within those seeking employment in the events industry as a result. While there has been some discussion of employer expectations changing in the wake of the pandemic on a more generic business capacity (DfE, 2021; Shobha and Johnson, 2021; Nadda et al., 2022), the applicability and specifics of the skills required to meet those desired by employers within the events industry have yet to been coherently addressed within the literature, meaning these findings in divergence from pre-existing literature constitute new findings in the field.

RO4: *To appraise how providers of Event Management Education can help bridge the gap between industry and the Higher Education sector, to effectively assist students in developing the skills, capabilities and attributes required for successful employment in the UK events industry, in a post-COVID-19 landscape.*

The findings here summarised the recommendations put forth by the employers and graduates interviewed who explored ways to improve practice within event programme provision in UK Higher Education institutions to better prepare graduates for employment in the post-pandemic events environment. The results here offered a myriad of proposals that ranged from compulsory post-pandemic reviews to ensure event programme provision remains fit for purpose in the ever-changing post-COVID-19 climate, to renewed approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that are reflective of the post-pandemic environment and aim to improve the employability of graduates as result. The employers and graduates outlined the areas of taught content to be included within programme curricula – linked to the emanating themes presented within the earlier analysis and interpretation of data chapter, linking to the post-pandemic events landscape. The value of having practical learning and application opportunities to apply theoretical constructs in events in real-life practical settings was strongly advocated within the findings, described as being a 'crucial' element in enabling students to chance to build their post-pandemic skills repertoire, in turn influencing their employability prospects. The embedding of learning opportunities in various guises was summarised by the findings, which included having mandatory live event projects, compulsory work experience opportunities, extra-curricular activities and experiences, field visits to event organisations and venues, practitioner insight events where best practise is shared from industry experts, and offering industry placement opportunities within the curricula. The implementation and adoption of authentic assessments through the use of both practically assessed aspects and those offered within the context of simulations and case studies, gives practitioners the opportunity to deliver meaningful assessment experiences that examine student performance on worthy intellectual tasks that relate to the practices of students' future professions within the events industry. The findings concluded that by implementing the recommendation put forth it would be hoped that graduates would finish events programmes having received a meaningful experience that equips them for careers in the post-pandemic events industry.

5.3 Contribution of the research

Whilst there has been debate within the literature for a number of years about how best to meet the needs of industry and improve the employability of graduates in the Event Management field (Fletcher et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2012; Whitelaw et al., 2015; Walters, 2021), there is a paucity of academic research focussed on employability in the field in a post-pandemic context. Within the broader educational employability literature, there have been attempts to explore the

influence of the pandemic on post-pandemic framings of employability and skills in the Higher Educational context, but this has not been addressed coherently with respect to the Event Management field. This research contributes to understanding in this under-researched area.

In its analysis of interpretative responses from two key stakeholder groups concerned with employability within the events context, this research examined the perceptions of employers and graduates, exploring their opinions on the influence of the pandemic on the skills, attributes and characteristics required of graduates for employment within the post-pandemic events industry. It is here that this research makes its most significant contribution to both professional and academic understandings of this contemporary research area. The research provides insights into the contextual post-pandemic employability factors relevant within the event management field from the perspectives of the two differing participant groups. With the findings of the research indicating post-pandemic shifts in both the skills desired by employers, and the skills required of roles within the events industry, this research makes a relevant contribution. It provides a contextualised contribution to understanding that is absent within the wider discourse and begins to address the scarcity of academic research concerning post-pandemic employability within the Event Management Education field.

While the findings are not generalisable due to the interpretive and small-scale nature of the study, they do add value to current understanding in the area. The practical implications and recommendations of the study, relevant within the Higher Education domain, provide insights that suggest institutions should ensure their events programmes are fit for purpose, being reflective of the post-pandemic demands of the industry and the requirements of those employed within it. The research also highlights how practitioners within the Event Management Educational field can facilitate their graduates in acquiring the necessary skillsets required to better prepare them for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

5.4 Limitations and constraints of the research

There were four primary limitations in this study. The first is a methodological limitation linked to the choice of employing interviews as the principal data collection tool. While semi-structured interviews were deemed to be most effective tool for the collection of the qualitative data inherent with the design of the study, in hindsight, focus groups may have enabled the research participant experience to have been more impactful. By participating in focus groups, the participants would have been able to share learning opportunities and best practice, taking away items that might have proved useful in positively shaping their own professional practices within the workplace and/or industry as a result. This benefit was not contemplated at the time of data collection tool selection because the focus was on preserving privacy. Given the sensitive nature

in discussing the impact of the pandemic, providing confidential opportunities for participants to discuss their experiences facilitated an openness that enabled participants to open up to me, that would not have been achieved in a focus group setting.

The second limitation was theoretical one based on the availability of the literature linked to the study. A prominent limitation of the research has been the lack of post-pandemic literature and the limited of availability of relevant literature published within the event context which constrained the scope and impact of the research. Now one might argue that we will not really know the reality of the impact of the pandemic until 10-years from now, and given the time constraints of the EdD I did not have the luxury of doing longitudinal research, but while the restricting nature represented by the paucity of literature was a limitation, this also enabled me to make a clear contribution in an under-researched area.

The third limitation of the study is that the key findings offered from the research are limited to the views and voices of only the interviewees included within the sample. The results yielded a rich data set that was reflective of the representative diversity of research participants included within the sample, but with the nature of this study being interpretivist one, the key findings offered by the study were based on the reflective interpretations and opinions only of those who were interviewed. The findings and results could have been expanded upon if the characteristics of the sample were altered. There continues to be on-going discussion of post-pandemic skill development, some of which is considering these aspects in an international context. By expanding the aims and sample of the study to include an internationalised Event Management Education perspective it could offer further examples and an international insight to this study. However, this was outside of the parameters and intentions of this study which was focussed on the UK context. The insights shared and the subsequent findings presented were localised and specific to the research participants interviewed, and were not intended to be exhaustive or generalisable.

Finally, in retrospect, I would have liked to take the next step and develop some more robust, systematic and comprehensive practical advice for practitioners. Action research – which involves identifying, investigating and solving an issue, would have been the advantageous in this context. However, this was not possible for two reasons. Firstly, I would have needed to identify and research the issue first. Due to the limited availability of literature within the context of the study I was not able to fully know the intricacies of the issue to enable me to design and conduct a study within this capacity. Secondly, such action research was never part of my intention in my research design and was perhaps beyond the scope of the EdD requirements given the word count and time restrictions.

5.5 Implications of the research

The conclusions of this research suggest both curricular and pedagogic implications.

From a curricular perspective, the research contributes insights into the nature of post-pandemic employability and the skillset requirements of graduates destined for employment and/or careers within the post-pandemic event industry. The findings present a series of recommendations (as detailed within section 4.4), that indicate curriculum provision within the Event Management Education area should focus on development of both discipline subject-specific knowledge as well as relevant graduate attributes and skills required to work within the events industry in a post-pandemic climate.

Related to recent conceptualisations of employability, the study promotes the need for a course curriculum to provide opportunities to improve graduate employability through a variety of means, grounded in progressing discipline subject-specific knowledge and skillset development suitable to the current events industry context. The research suggests that the pandemic has heightened the requirement for curriculum to be constructed in a way that facilitates the production of graduates who are confident in navigating complex and uncertain environments that impact upon labour market conditions. It recognises that curriculum content focussed on the development of discipline subject-specific knowledge, should be co-created with close input from industry, ensuring it is reflective of contemporary developments within the events industry, legislative changes, and trends in consumption habits and the attitudes of event attendees.

From an employability standpoint, the research acknowledges that curriculum should focus on the development of skills (both generic and discipline-specific) for employment in the events field, while also fostering approaches that promote self-reflexivity. The research suggests that curricular should be enriched with touchpoints which replicate those within the events industry context, building specialised skills, attributes and competencies that prepare graduates for employment in the post-pandemic events environment. It proposes that, for educators and Higher Education institutions, employability curriculum provision should be strategically positioned to maximise engagement, making content relevant and context specific to the events industry, while critically allowing a plentiful amount of practical application and self-evaluation opportunities. Finally, the research suggests that employability interventions within the Event Management Educational context should promote the individualised nature of employability development and harness prospects to develop personalised identities that hope to cultivate meaningful, lifelong experiences for careers within the events industry.

The pedagogic implications of the study centre on the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment suitable to the Event Management Education field, and set within the post-pandemic environment. The findings suggest a compelling case that, pedagogically, approaches to the

improvement of graduate employability within the event post-COVID climate should offer a mix of theoretical and practical opportunities across methods of teaching, learning, and assessment. The results indicate a more prominent emphasis on practical application and experiences that expose students to the realities and challenges of planning events within post-pandemic conditions and parameters, thus building discipline subject-specific knowledge, understandings and skills, critical for the post-pandemic events environment. Such activities should assist with producing graduates who are competent in planning a range of event types, formats and delivery methods in which they become technologically and digitally proficient, enabling them to undertake planning, organisation and delivery of post-pandemic event formats, such as virtual and hybrid events. The research suggests that the teaching should be undertaken by a mix of academic staff, industry professionals and dual-role practitioners who are able to offer not only the theoretical and scholarly constructs of events, but also, critically, the ability to share real-world expertise from those working within the events industry during its post-pandemic recovery, distributing best practice and ensuring pedagogic approaches are bona fide. The use of authentic assessments that deliver meaningful assessment experiences, reflective of post-pandemic industry conditions, will also prove vital in improving graduate employability, thereby equipping them for careers in the post-pandemic events industry.

5.6 Directions for future complementary research

The central aim of this study has been to understand the influence of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the events industry, and how it has impacted the skillsets required of those seeking employment in the post-pandemic events industry. The findings have produced a rich and detailed contextualised understanding of these issues at the current time. With the ongoing nature of the events industry's recovery from the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), further future research analysing the evolving of this developing area would constitute a worthwhile extension of this research, informing practices implemented in the Event Management Education, in both UK and international contexts.

An interesting advancement of this research would be to conduct future research which examines post-pandemic skill requirements by sector in the events industry. Research in this context could prove valuable in offering more specialised skillset recommendations aligned with the individualised sectors of the events industry (UKEVENTS [BVEP]., 2020). By doing so it would expand understandings of employability from a sector-specific context. These understandings would be of use not only within the scholarly, academic context, but also in the industry and practitioner contexts.

Logically, and following on from the limitations and constraints of the research identified within section 5. 4, a potential direction for future complementary research would be to conduct action

research to develop a robust, systematic and comprehensive set of practical advice for events educators and practitioners. While this was beyond the parameters of this study, this would be a coherent next step in building upon the findings of this research. It would be of significant value to the research area, offering practicality in the implementation of employability development suitable for the Higher Education sector and the progression of Event Management Education curriculum.

5.7 Personal Reflections

To conclude this thesis, I would like to share my personal reflections with regards to the research undertaken, and how the key findings have shaped my own professional practice as a result.

Embarking upon this doctoral research journey and producing this thesis have been a really rewarding and valuable learning experience. Having acknowledged my positionality within the research; as an academic teaching within the Event Management Education area for the past 14 years, this thesis has challenged my pre-conceptions and prior held beliefs surrounding Higher Education and the place of employability within it. It has enabled me to track both my changing broader perceptions of employability within the Higher Education sector, and as its particular role within the Event Management Education field too.

Having both a personal and professional interest in the events area, and having witnessed the devastation the COVID-19 pandemic had on not only personal facets of life but also in wiping out the industry virtually overnight, I was intrigued to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the recovery of the industry, and what implications this may yield for both events graduates and events educators. With my practitioner 'hat' on, I have learnt that pandemic has shaped altered the ways in which students and educators within Event Management Education field now need to approach and engage with employability post-pandemic if they are to adequately prepare graduates for some of the complexities and idiosyncrasies of employment within the post-pandemic events industry.

I have come to realise through this research, that fostering employability is a complex and individualised process among students, and so as educators within the Event Management Education field we must provide the correct opportunities and support to facilitate student development in the employability area. I have learnt that to achieve this, educators we must ensure we are keeping abreast of the trends and changes as the events industry continues in its recovery from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and ensure we align programme offerings to contemporary developments, ensuring they remain fit for purpose, in an attempt to prepare graduates for roles in industry. While this is something that has always been important, given the contextual timing of the re-emergence of the events industry post-pandemic, this is now more

vital than ever. By ensuring the programme curricula scaffolds to both role requirements and the post-pandemic skillsets desired by employers within the events industry, as educators we can ensure we are equipping graduates with the life-long capacities to navigate employment within the ever-changing graduate labour market.

As a result of conducting this research, I have been able to make adjustments to my own professional practices and disseminate the knowledge and understanding gained with other events practitioners too. The key findings of the study have shaped the content included within both course and module level offerings to students at my institution, and altered the elements included within our provision for students too. This curricula now encompasses opportunities for students to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in the technological/digital, mental health and wellbeing, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) areas, while shaping the broader approaches to employability fostered on the course, renewing the focus around providing opportunities to gain the practical experience that came through in the research as being so crucial.

Personally, it has given me a sense of new found confidence in both my skills as a researcher and my knowledge of the Event Management Education and employability fields. It has taught me that I need to be more confident in my own abilities and not be afraid to have a voice in the academic community too.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethical Approval

Jennie Randall
Registration number: 130101042
School of Education
Programme: EdD

Dear Jennie

PROJECT TITLE: Post-Pandemic Transformations: Rethinking Employability in Event Management Education
APPLICATION: Reference Number 054431

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 13/07/2023 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 054431 (form submission date: 09/06/2023); (expected project end date: 01/12/2023).
- Participant information sheet 1123346 version 1 (06/06/2023).
- Participant consent form 1123347 version 1 (06/06/2023).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Joseph Hargreaves
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendices

Appendix B – Interview Schedules

Employer Interview Guide

Biographical Please could you give me an overview of your current position held? Sector of the industry, organisation type, what does your role involve, mode of employment. How long have you worked in events/the events industry? Please could you talk to me about how you first got into working in the events industry? Please could you tell me about your employment journey, career profile and the experiences gained within the events industry to date? Current role… how did you get there?
Impact of the pandemic Reflecting upon the pandemic itself and that period of time, talk to me about your own experiences during this time: professional/employment capacity What, if any, in your opinion have the impacts of the pandemic been upon the events industry? To what extent do you think the pandemic has influenced how events are conducted now? What, if any, have the impacts of the pandemic had upon you and your career profile?
Skillsets and the influence of the pandemic What do you think are the most important skills, attributes and characteristics that graduates need to demonstrate for employment in the events industry? Do you think the pandemic has influenced the skillsets required of those looking to work in the events industry now, and if so, how? To what extent do you think post-pandemic these skillset requirements have changed or altered?
Reflections and Recommendations Reflecting upon your experiences of working with graduates, do you think graduates are adequately equipped to work in the events industry? Any shortfalls? How could they be better equipped? What would be your recommendations for Higher Education providers to better support graduates with their transitions into employment in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate? What could providers of events education do to better prepare graduates for employment within the post-pandemic events industry?

Graduate Interview Guide

Biographical

Please could you confirm which course you studied on and what year did you graduate?

What sparked your initial interest in events/why did you want to get into working in events?

Please could you briefly talk to me about the experiences linked to events, you undertook while at university? Did you do a placement?

Please could you tell me about your employment journey in the events industry?

Please could you give me an overview of your current position held? organisation, what does the role involve, sector, employment mode, length of service.

How did you get there and was there anything you think helped you to secure your current role?

Impact of the pandemic

Reflecting upon the pandemic itself and that period of time, talk to me about your own experiences during this time: professional/employment capacity

What, if any, in your opinion have the impacts of the pandemic been upon the events industry?

To what extent do you think the pandemic has influenced how events are conducted now?

What, if any, have the impacts of the pandemic had upon you and your career profile?

Skillsets and the influence of the pandemic

When reflecting upon your own skillset that you've acquired to work in the events industry, can you tell me what you think the most important skills, attributes and characteristics are that you've either had to demonstrate or that you think are needed to be successful in employment in the industry?

Talk to me about your own journey in obtaining those skills, how did you obtain/acquire these?

What experiences did you expose yourself too or have to engage with to develop these skills?

Has the pandemic impacted or changed your own skillset in anyway? If so, how?

In your opinion has the pandemic influenced the skills needed for employment within the events industry post-pandemic?

Reflections and Recommendations

When reflecting upon your transition from university into employment in the events industry, did you feel equipped to work in the events industry as a graduate? Any shortcomings?

How do you think your course/university could have supported you better in easing your transition/preparing you for employment in the industry?

Thinking specifically about the skills, attributes and characteristics needed to work in the industry, what advice would you give to new students/graduates looking to work in the industry now?

What would you say are your recommendations for Higher Education providers to better support students and graduates with their transitions in the events industry in a post-pandemic climate?