

International work placements and career development – sport management students' experiences and identity changes

Authors: Dominic Buchan, Tim Breitbarth

Institution: Bournemouth University, UK

E-mail: tbreitbarth@bournemouth.ac.uk

Aim of abstract

Competition in the global graduate marketplace is strong, with universities positioning and promoting themselves as resource providers (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013). Increasingly, work placements in higher education are integrated into degree programs. Firstly, studies have revealed a positive link between work placement and subsequent academic performance in a range of disciplines (Crawford & Wang, 2016; Mansfield, 2011), although not for sport studies in particular yet. Secondly, there is evidence that extended work placements as part of 'sandwich degrees' increase graduates' success on the job market (Cashian, Clarke & Richardson, 2015). Thirdly, placements shape students' future career development identity (Holmes, 2013).

Hence, there is a good amount of research surrounding placements and career prospect. Sport and management programs are constantly evolving (Mathner & Martin, 2012). Yet, research around career development of university sport students after completing an extended placement abroad is not available. Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand how sport students perceive an international placement to have influenced their career development. In particular, it aims to explore the impact on students' identities and their perceptions of future employability.

Literature review

Super's (1963; 1980) stage career theory, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of student identity development, and Savickas' (2002) theory of career construction have been influential in describing students' development process. Consequently, scholars have researched student identity development from first year of study to graduation finding significant levels of change (Lairio Puukari & Kouvo, 2013; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010; Stott, Zaitseva & Cui 2012).

A multitude of studies conducted within this area revolve around post-university and graduate skills and future employability (Cranmer, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008). Yet, those studies are led by the premises of focusing on employers' ideas of what they look for within graduates that could improve their chances of future employability. However, when students opt to take their industrial placement abroad, Jung (2014) asserts that their exploration of career decision making, including occupational choices and motivational factors, are affected by cultural influences.

Arguably, individuals constantly search to understand who they are (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). The background to this research focuses on Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977): his ideas provide an understanding of careers through cross-hatching the individual's personal profile, alongside their societal standing and history to help better understand career choices (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). This habitus strategy facilitates individual's ability to act in social spaces whilst enabling the conditions for individual improvisation furthering the analysis of choice and reasoning behind individual's

decisions to justify their career choice and direction (Coupland, 2015).

Methodology, research design and data analysis

This qualitative study involved eight semi-structured interviews with British final year sport management students. Students were enrolled at a university offering 'sandwich' degrees and as part thereof all participants did an extended placement abroad. Interviews took place beginning of 2016. A coding framework was applied and an axial coding approach was undertaken to develop the raw data from open codes to themes (Santasier & Plack, 2007).

Results, discussion and conclusions

Findings show that the sport students were exploring their identities during and after international placements in order to develop their own career development identity. In some way, the study confirms De Vos and Soens' (2008) and Hall's (2004) claim that the psychological aspects of career development are more important to individuals over that of status-related aspects such as pay. The findings illustrate that an international placement does help to enhance career development identity. A multitude of aspects emerged: transferable skills, networking, identity change and employability were among the most influential factors that students perceived to enhance their future career. This study also discovered that career development includes processes of both long and short term nature.

Academically, there is an obvious need to advance research in the area of (sport) student career development, especially considering the increasingly international context of higher education, the sport industry and the job market. This research points out that such research should not only embrace a functional and market-driven perspective, but also focus on students' perceptions and identity development from a human, cultural, social and personal viewpoint. Implications for higher education institutions are to design and promote global engagement and placement opportunities in a way that they help to frame sport students' identity exploration and to find new ways to formally recognize their intercultural learning and experiences.

References

- Chudzikowski, K. and Mayrhofer, W. (2011). In search of the blue flower? Grand social theories and career research: The case of Bourdieu's theory of practice. *Human Relations*, 64 (1), 19–36.
- Coupland, C. (2015). Entry and Exit as embodied career choice in professional sport. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 90, 111–121.
- De Vos, A. and Soens, N. (2008). Protean attitude and career success: The mediating role of self-management. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 73 (3), 449–456.
- Holmes, L. (2013). Competing perspectives on graduate employability: Possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (4), 538–554.
- Mathner, R. and Martin, C. (2012). Sport management graduate and undergraduate students' perceptions of career expectations in sport management. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 6 (1), 21–31.