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The careers of sports graduates: Implications for employability strategies in higher education sports courses

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ABSTRACT

Increasing emphasis on the economic importance of higher education (HE) has led to a focus on the employability of graduates. Within sport there has been little empirical research into graduate careers, consequently the aim of the study was to explore the nature of the careers of sports graduates and the implications for the development of sports students' employability. Using mixed methods it was found that their career is dynamic, exhibiting characteristics of traditional, protean, boundaryless and bounded careers. The implication for HE sports courses' employability strategies is the need for sports graduates to develop career management skills.

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades there has been increasing emphasis within Western countries on the economic benefits of Higher Education (HE) and, in particular, how universities meet the needs of employers by providing employable, 'work ready' graduates (Bridgstock, 2009; Department of for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2012; Leitch, 2006). Within sport, an issue for concern has been the perceived problem of the high number of sports graduates who do not gain employment within the industry (Skills Active, 2008), meaning that graduate employability strategies have tended to focus on matching the skills sports graduates' acquire to sport employers' needs (Emery, Crabtree, & Kerr, 2012; Hanson, Minten, & Taylor, 1998; Minten, 2010; Skills Active, 2010; Sleep & Reed, 2006). However, the general consensus within employability literature is that employability is more than just about obtaining a job; also critical is the nature of the work graduates obtain in terms of realising potential, satisfaction and fulfilment (Dacre-Poole & Sewell, 2007; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Minten, 2010; Yorke, 2006). Consequently, a key criticism of Higher Education's approach to employability has been the focus on the short-term skills and dispositions that make an individual attractive to an employer, rather than viewing it as something that continues over an individual's career (Bridgstock, 2009). Hillage and Pollard's (1998, p. 2) definition of employability highlights this long-term view as: "the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment".

A criticism of employability research has been that it has tended to be from the perspective of employers, universities and government; meaning that their needs have dominated the debate (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). There are few studies from the perspective of graduates and how they make the transition from higher education to careers (Nystrom, 2008).

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Consequently, the aim of the study was to explore the nature of the careers of sports graduates and the implications for the development of sports students' employability.

1.1. Context

In order to understand the graduate career, it is important to review the changing nature of careers. Traditionally, a career has been defined as: "a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered predictable sequence" (Wilensky, 1960:554). However, the perception of a career has changed during the last three decades; it is no longer based on hierarchical progression through a series of job roles involving increased responsibility and seniority, but as being multi directional, dynamic and fluid (Adamson, Doherty, & Viney, 1998; Nystrom, 2008). This has often been termed the 'new career' (King, 2006).

McKeown and Lindorff (2011) argue that the changing nature of careers impacts profoundly on the notion of graduate employability and the role of HE in facilitating graduates' transition to employment. They suggest that employability literature has portrayed the graduate job search as a planned and logical activity based on long-term career plans, rather than the likelihood of graduates having multiple careers, and therefore, requiring flexible goals and action plans. Tomlinson (2007) supports this view when he argues that graduate careers are no longer anchored around single jobs and organisations.

Contemporary theories tend to explore careers from the subjective experience of the career actor and their individually defined goals (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006). In contrast, Tomlinson (2007:286) argues that the current approach to graduate employability is based on a universalistic view of students as rational investors in education who approach the "labour market in uniformed and stereotypical ways". He believes that these assumptions ignore the different orientations and work-related identities that students develop with regard to their future labour market activities, which could be critical in how they "construct a sense of their own employability and place in the labour market" (Tomlinson, 2007: 286). For example, underpinning the debate on employability in sport has been an assumption that HE sports students aspire to develop careers within the sport industry. Conversely, Hansen et al.'s (1998) research into the employment of sport-related graduates found that approximately half (48%) of those not employed in sport chose to work in other industries and had no intention of working in sport. Furthermore, Sleep and Reed (2006) found that a relatively high proportion (37%) of sports science graduates used their degree to gain general management positions outside of sport. The most recent first destination statistics of graduates found that only 20% of sports science graduates gained employment in sport and leisure related occupations (Redman et al., 2012); however these figures are problematic given they are collected six months after graduation (Harvey, 2001) and do not include all sports related degrees.

In terms of why students undertake sports courses, both Hansen et al. (1998) and Keech (2006) established that many sports students chose their course out of interest in sport and to study a degree that they enjoyed rather than for specific vocational reasons. This finding is not confined to sport. In a major study of the wider student population, Purcell and Pitcher (1998) also found that subject enjoyment was the main motivation for course choice, which they termed 'hedonistic motivation', although, they did find that many students saw a degree as an important stepping stone to their career. In later research, Atfield and Purcell (2010) found that a third of final year students were ambivalent about obtaining a job relating to the subject they had studied. Thus, in order to provide appropriate support to develop students' employability, McKeown and Lindorff (2011:310) argue that: "it is not simply a case of aligning universities' deliverables with employer expectations. The university graduate is also in this relationship, and graduate experiences and expectations about work and job seeking are also important".

1.2. Theories of the new career

There are two main theories commonly associated with the new career: the protean career and the boundaryless career. In order to provide a framework from which to analyse the careers of sports graduates, these theories will be reviewed alongside Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, and Roper's (2012) notion of a bounded career.

1.3. Boundaryless career

The concept of a boundaryless career was developed by Arthur and Rousseau (1996), who argued that an individual may develop a successful career through lateral, vertical and spiral moves across job roles, employers, industries, and, with increasing globalisation, countries (Briscoe et al., 2006; Clarke, 2009; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). These moves provide opportunities for learning and development, increasing the currency of an individual's skills and work experience, and consequently their employability (Briscoe et al., 2006; Clarke, 2009). Sullivan and Arthur (2006) further clarified that the boundaryless career can be considered broadly along dimensions of physical (transition across boundaries) and psychological (perception of the capacity to make transitions) mobility.

The limited longer-term research into graduate employment, both within sport and with graduates in general, has found that there is a lot of job movement within the first three years of transition into the workplace, which suggests that the physical mobility aspect of the boundaryless career may be relevant (Elias and Purcell, 2004; Hansen et al., 1998). However, as this research was based on survey data it is difficult to identify what sort of movement was made and why.

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