

Tracking career destinations of sports graduates 2000-2015 – a longitudinal exploration of destinations and preparedness for the workplace (0228)

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Introduction

Historically graduates are more likely to be in work and with significantly higher earning capacity than their non-graduate counterparts. Post-graduate study is noted to further increase earning power (BIS, 2015). HESA (2015) data reveals that 6 months after graduation 76.6% of graduates are in work, and 11.6% are in further study. Three years on from this survey point, 87.9% of graduates are in work and 6% are engaged in further study.

It is widely acknowledged that universities have a responsibility for producing employable graduates (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Schomburg & Teichler, 2006) who have the ability to adapt and manage their future careers (Bridgestock, 2009). However, there is some debate about whether these skills can be developed in the classroom (Cranmer, 2006). Whilst some note that teaching and assessing employability skills does not impact on performance in the labour market (Mason et al., 2009); others feel that providing an opportunity for formal and informal feedback enhances skill development (Treleaven & Voola, 2008).

The advent of the TEF and the benchmarking that will derive from employment destination, occupational classification and widening access data means that increasingly universities, and disciplines, will be expected to evidence the impact of their curriculum interactions on graduate destinations and social mobility.

Sport is viewed as a vehicle by which to attain European Union social and economic goals and there has been a notable increase in employment in this sector in 21 of the 28 EU member states (Eurostat, 2016). While more than a third of sport employees are graduates there is a lack of evidence charting their career journeys (Minten & Forsyth, 2014). Studies which have been undertaken reveal that many job changes are a feature of these graduates' early careers, with roughly 40% being sports employees, though not all in graduate jobs. However, many are successful in finding graduate level employment in a range of occupations. This may not be driven by a lack of options but by personal choice and should be viewed as a positive outcome (Minten, 2007; Minten & Forsyth, 2014). Therefore, it could be argued that university curricula should not be governed by the skill set demands of a particular employment sector but instead develop a broader set of transferable graduate attributes.

HESA data for 2013-14 reveals that 65% of Abertay sport graduates are in a professional or managerial job 6 months after graduation and 20% are participating in further study. Sport students at Abertay University participate in a placement experience at each stage of study, developing personal reflective practice portfolios (PDPs). Placement has been a key feature of the sport provision since its inception in 1999. Colleagues within the department have published and presented on curriculum employability initiatives and gathered anecdotal data about graduate destination however, they have not tracked career pathways in a formal and systematic manner.

This study's key objectives were to:-

- track all Abertay sport degree graduates from the programmes' inception
- compare Honours and non-Honours graduates' destination data
- gain an insight into the graduates' career trajectories
- explore graduates' preparedness for the workplace
- utilise demographic data to contextualise findings.

Method

A mail merge message was sent to all students who had graduated from an Abertay sport programmes in the years 2000-2015 using e-mail addresses held within the student record system. The personalised message came from two team members who had been in long-term employ in this subject area and invited the graduate to complete a short survey which initially asked them to summarise their employment (including locality) since graduation. The graduates were also invited to list any further qualifications they had gained, and to comment on the utility of their studies for employment as well as indicating what had been the aspects of the programme that had been most useful in terms of transitioning into the workplace.

Initial Findings

923 students had graduated from the sport programmes in the timeframe of the study -though valid e-mail addresses were only available for 452 students. 123 graduates responded to the survey (however, departmental records allowed first destination data to be gathered for 350 graduates). Over the study period it was evident that increasing proportions of students were completing the Honours stage of study, and the likelihood of this enrolment was not determined by social class, gender or disability. Those students who had articulated from FE were significantly more likely to exit with a non-Honours degree ($\chi^2=84.68$, $p<0.01$). Few students engage in exchange opportunities during their Abertay sport programme however, this had not hampered geographic mobility on graduation with many having either worked or still working abroad.

The majority (84%) of those who responded were identifiably in graduate level jobs, with teaching being the predominant occupation. Sports development positions also featured heavily in the employment data. Postgraduate study was an increasingly common feature for those students who had graduated more recently.

Only a few respondents (n=26) commented that their degree had not equipped them for their first job. This was either because it was a non-graduate job, or because it was felt that a skillset was already in existence before enrolling on the programme. Even fewer (n=13) reported that their degree had not prepared them more generally for working life. When invited to comment on what aspect of their programme had been of most benefit, 'placement' and 'research methods' were the most cited responses. However, many also stated that growth in confidence and the developmental maturation that had occurred during their years of study were key aspects of preparing them for the workplace for the short and longer term. Student comments included '*I have put myself forward for things and tried new things that I might have hesitated at before*', '*I developed and sustained crucial skills*', '*I have continued with this (work) ethic.....and..been able to achieve success in each of my posts*'.

Emerging Discussion Points

The findings align with existing data in relation to the dynamism of the graduates' early employment (Minten, 2007) and also the HESA (2015) graduate statistic that 76% agree that 'HE prepared me well for my career or helped me progress my career aspirations'. The significance of placement supports HE drivers to ensure that there are curricular opportunities for work-based learning. The importance attached to research methods skills gives credence to the notion of developing skill sets which have transference beyond the curriculum. The working abroad evidence supports ambitions to internationalise the curriculum ensuring graduates are prepared to work on a global stage.

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