Sport Management Internships: Student Perspectives and Learning

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The paper will focus on the methodology employed to introduce an internship option within a postgraduate programme in sport management and to analyze progress and results after one year and to assess the effectiveness and value of the internship experiences using a case study approach involving twenty-nine interns. The intention is to learn from the positive and negative aspects of these case studies in order to further develop the internship programme and provide postgraduate students in sport management with a more satisfying and rewarding internship experience.

The benefits of the internship experience for sport management students have been well-documented and pursuing an internship is frequently quoted as being one of the most critical components of professional preparation that leads to employment in the sport industry (Hager, 1984; Parkhouse, 1978, 1984, 1987; Parks, 1991; VanderZwaag, 1980). Many Universities and colleges that offer sport management courses highlight the importance of practical training and make efforts to develop internship programmes for students. However, it is noticeable in the UK that although numerous Universities and colleges offer work experience opportunities, and internships in particular, in their undergraduate programmes, there are relatively few in postgraduate sport management programmes. Of the 23 Universities in the UK that offer a Masters' degree in sport management, or closely related subjects, only three are presently offering an internship within the curriculum.

Since sport qualifications at the tertiary level have primarily been developed for vocational purposes, “the integration of work based learning is therefore considered a natural focus” (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994, cited in Ferkins, 2002, p.29). The field experience serves as an integral part of sport management programmes (Ross & Beggs, 2007) providing an opportunity for learning that is not available in the classroom. In addition to the application of knowledge attained through the teaching of coursework in the academic setting, an internship gives students the opportunity to develop other aspects of their future career. As stated by Cunningham and Sagas, “Positive outcomes include the acquisition of additional human capital by way of experience and training, gaining influential contacts, and developing mentor/protégé relationships”. In essence, an internship experience enables students to better understand their coursework in marketing, management, strategic planning, event organization, and the like. As such, offering students a more holistic set of relevant experiences will benefit them throughout their career (Smith & Westerbeek, 2004).

In summary, the internship experience is a valuable addition to any educational curriculum, as students are provided with the opportunity to apply learned knowledge for which there is “no substitute” (Fender & Watson, p. 36, 2005). Yet, despite the acknowledged importance of such experiences within the sport curriculum, there has been limited research conducted in this context (Fleming & Ferkins, 2005). In addition, the majority of the literature on sport management internships provides recommendations from practitioners (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; Parks & Quain, 1986) or contains information based on the curricular concerns of educators (Chouinard, 1993; DeSensi et al, 1990). Few studies have focused exclusively on the student experiences and outcomes associated with engaged practice (Peretto Stratta, 2004). This study attempts to partially address this shortcoming.

The present work draws from the experiences of the first year’s cohort of twenty-nine postgraduate sport management students who undertook a 12-weeks (480 hours) internship in 2011. It discusses the methodology employed to create and activate the internship programme, analyzes initial progress and results and assesses the effectiveness and value of the internships. It analyses the outcomes achieved by the students using a case study approach. It considers the students’ weekly reflective diaries and self-evaluation exit reports with the intention of learning from the feedback in order to make recommendations for developing the internship programme and improving it to meet the needs of the students, institution, and host organisations. A thematic analysis of both these documents is used to qualitatively investigate and report on the student experience, knowledge and skill development. The feedback is summarized in four student outcomes: researching and securing the internship,
development of skills and learning, coursework relevance to practice, and the interns strengths and weaknesses.

The present dire economic climate has made it particularly difficult for graduates to secure relevant employment on finishing their degrees and a lack of relevant experience and contacts are frequent barriers to obtaining a first job. Internships are a way of potentially providing postgraduate students with both but the nature of the internship, the criteria for acceptance, and the assessment attached to it, are critical if the experience is to be a productive one for the student and to meet the University’s academic criteria.