World-wide, there is little research about women’s career paths in sport management (Allin & Humberstone, 2006; Roper, 2008). Although some studies (Moore & Konrad, 2010; Shaw, 2006) have examined gender equity efforts within sport organizations, there is very little research on women’s expectations and experiences as they progress in their career. In particular, we are interested in relatively recent women graduates’ career experiences in sport management. This is because the, the late 20’s or 30’s age bracket would be one in which we would expect to see young people work towards middle or senior positions, particularly given the smallness of New Zealand sport organizations. Despite this expectation, we see very few women in senior management positions in New Zealand sport organizations. One reason that women have not progressed into leadership positions may be because organizations are ‘gender blind’ that is, do not consider gender to be a concern. Rather, organizations are dominated by mainstream managerialist doctrines including ‘employing the best person for the job’ without considering what gendered assumptions might inform ideas regarding ‘best people’ (Shaw, 2006). Within this context the aims of the research are: (1) To investigate recent (1998-2008) sport management female graduates’ expectations of the workforce; (2) To examine their experiences of the workforce; (3) To contribute to our sport management curricula by using information from these experiences to better prepare future graduates.

Female alumnae who graduated between 1998-2008 were selected from the alumni data bases at Massey University and University of Otago and invited to complete a survey hosted on SurveyMonkey. Participants were selected based on their degree (Sport Management: Massey) or major (Sport and Leisure Studies: Otago). Two hundred and thirty four participants were invited and the questions focused on their jobs, areas of work and level of management. Qualitative questions included participants’ experience of working in the industry and any challenges or problems that they have encountered in their career. Participants were offered the opportunity to participate in a telephone interview at a later date. The closed questions on the survey were collated on SurveyMonkey and provided descriptive statistics to provide summary information on female sport management graduates. Preliminary analysis of the open questions has been undertaken.

There was a 35% response rate (n=83) to the survey. 54.2% of respondents were aged between 25-29 and 95.2% identified as New Zealand European. 66.3% had completed their degree through the University of Otago and the others through Massey University. Three quarters of the respondents had graduated between 2004-2008. One fifth earned between NZ$50-60,000 with another 20% earning between NZ$40-50,000.In their first positions after graduation, 48% of respondents worked in the sport industry. Currently, 38% are working in the sport industry. Further, 19% of respondents worked in non-sport industries directly after graduation. Fifty seven per cent of respondents currently work in non-sport industries. The key skills learned from University courses were planning and organising (78.1%), independent learning (73.4%), time management (65.6%), communication (59.4%) and building relationships (57.8%). Part-time jobs held during university and related skills were rated as most useful (42.2%) in preparing them for work followed by the internships (37.5%). When asked what key attributes or skills women needed to be successful in sport management – building relationships came out most strongly (98.1%), followed by communication skills (96.2%), interpersonal skills and planning/organising both with 90.6%, and passion and drive with 88.7%. One quarter of the respondents felt that being a woman had hindered their career. In their qualitative responses, they stated that the sport industry was run like an ‘old boys club’, was male dominated. They also, highlighted the challenges of raising a family and working in the environment, not being taken seriously and how emotionally draining working in the sport industry can be.

Sixty four percent felt their career expectations to date had been met. Qualitative responses indicated that positive features of their careers included being promoted and receiving positive feedback, benefiting the community and developing others, as well as learning new skills. These experiences provided a sense of achievement to respondents and made them feel valued. They also liked to make a difference in people’s lives. The negatives included working long hours including weekends for low pay. Negative feedback, the impact of internal politics and in some cases the
perceived lack of applicability of their degree to the work environment. These experiences led to increased levels of stress and some respondents also felt that their expectations of what roles a degree could lead to had not been met. On reflection the respondents felt that they could have been better prepared for working in the sport industry by being exposed to more business courses, particularly project management, budgets and financial accounting and sport law. In addition, more opportunities for practical experience would have been welcomed and clarity around the realities of working in sport in terms of salary, working hours and career pathways.

These initial findings contribute to our understanding of female sport management career pathways as well as their expectations and experiences of their careers to date. The findings suggest that there is a disconnect between the expectations female students have of the sports industry and how they are prepared for working in it. It is also interesting to note that many had left the sports industry within a few years of graduating. This has raised questions for us regarding our curricula and how well they serve the needs of our graduating female students. Interviews will be conducted with these respondents early 2012 and data will provide further information that will contribute further to our discussion.