Sport Management Interns' Competencies and Learning

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The subject of sport management forms a part of management education and with the growth of professionalization and commercialization in sport, the sports industry needs managers with specialized management competencies, along with relevant experience. Gaining employment in the sports industry is ever more competitive and a degree, even at master's level, no longer guarantees a graduate that first job or career advancement. It has been frequently stated that the right internship for sport management students can be a critical part of their professional development and may be instrumental in gaining employment with the host organization itself, or in the wider sports sector (Bell, Crebert, C-J Patrick, Bates & Cragnolini, 2003; Stratta, 2004; Sutton, 1989; Hager, 1984; Parkhouse, 1978, 1984, 1987; Parks, 1991; VanderZwaag, 1980). Cannon and Arnold (1998) found that students use internships as a way of enhancing their job prospects and to gain a competitive advantage in the recruitment process. The internship experience provides a learning opportunity that cannot be reproduced in the classroom and can therefore serve as a valuable part of sport management programmes (Ross & Beggs, 2007). Appropriately organized and supervised internships can provide students with new experiences that challenge them to acquire new skills and knowledge, and extend their previous learning (Dixon, Cunningham, Turner & Kent, 2005).

For many students, even postgraduates, the internship is their first experience of a professional work environment. It will test their ability to fit into the host organization's culture and meet its demands, to work in a team, to network and build professional relationships, to monitor their strengths and weaknesses, and to see themselves as professionals in the industry. Students gain real-world experience as opposed to classroom learning and through the internship opportunity they are provided with a chance to be immersed in experiential learning and able to evaluate their professional futures (Narayan, et al., 2010). Ultimately an internship exposes them to 'life' in a professional organization that preferably relates to their career aspirations and enables them to gather first hand knowledge and skills and to see whether the work suits their ideal long-term career plans (Stock, 2004). Other research suggests that developing such preferred skills as critical thinking and written and oral communication obtained through an internship experience can lead to students becoming more marketable, in addition to giving them the practical experience employers require in new graduates (Maskooki, Rama, & Raghunandan, 1998; Perry, 1989; Raymond, McNabb, & Matthaei, 1993). Raymond et al. also found that the ability of students to apply the knowledge gained in the classroom and to solve problems is essential to employers and is most effectively learned through internships.

As recorded by Ko, Henry, and Kao (2011), competency studies have been a major research area in sport management. The studies undertaken generally analyzed the competencies of sport managers in a variety of different work environments, including sports facilities, sports events, sports clubs and federations, indoor health and fitness clubs, and in commercial, private, and intercollegiate environments. It is evident from the findings of these studies that the competencies needed for practitioners in the profession differ considerably, depending on the setting and the role performed. Despite the volume of research activity in this area of study, researchers have stressed the importance of constant evaluation of the competencies needed to perform effectively in the sports industry due to the rapidly changing social environment (Lambrecht, 1987; Toh, 1997). While there are industries where significant advances have been made, and despite the extent of the research conducted into competencies required by managers for the sports industry, there is very little research that considers the role of internships in developing management competencies. In fact, of all the many studies reviewed, none considered the managerial competencies of pre- or post-internship students to see if their competencies met the needs of the sports industry (Walo, 2001), or to investigate whether these competencies had changed during the internship period. This is a serious and concerning shortcoming given the vital role sport management education plays in producing graduates who are able to meet the needs of the sports industry, and the ever-growing importance of the industry to the global economy.

Set in a UK context, this study draws from the experiences of the cohort of forty-six postgraduate sport management students studying at a large urban university in England who undertook a twelve-weeks internship at a variety of businesses and organizations within the sports industry in twelve countries around the world during the
two-year period, 2011-12. It employs a qualitative research approach with the data gathered from the interns through a thematic content analysis of their weekly reflective journals and exit reports, completed at the conclusion of the internship. The student interns were required to submit these documents as part of the module assessment and to support their learning. The study examines the in-depth, qualitative meaning of their perceptions and the outcomes related to the development of personal, employability and management skills, competencies and learning acquired from the internship experience (Peretto Stratta, 2004). The research used a coding instrument to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the student interns and how the students perceived the internship had helped develop and enhance them. The instrument incorporated a list of skills and competencies adapted from Katz's (Katz, 1955) tripartite categorization of skills for effective administrators, and particularly from Zeigler and Bowie’s (1995) five general areas of competencies identified as being important to the development of future sport managers. The findings were recorded in a combination of a quantitative summary of the data extracted from the documents and qualitative verbatim comments from the students.

The study aims to consider the value of the internship experience from the perspective of the students, and specifically to identify the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the interns and the competencies developed and enhanced by the internship. This information should enable prospective interns to obtain a better understanding of how the experience can build on their strengths and help overcome their weaknesses; and how it can develop essential knowledge, skills, and competencies that will aid employability. For prospective internship host organizations, the main benefits will be to offer them a sharper understanding of the pre-internship experience, competencies, and expectations of sport management students. It may assist them create an internship that meets the needs of the students and helps them achieve their goals, but remains in accordance with the educational needs and requirements. The principal benefit to sport management educators will be to aid them in better understanding the pros and cons of an internship from the students’ perspective so that the advice and support offered to prospective interns and host organizations can be more relevant and useful.