

“PRACADEMIA”: PROPOSING ACADEMIES OF EXCELLENCE IN APPLIED SPORT & EXERCISE SCIENCE

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Introduction

Experiential and work-based learning are not new concepts. Many higher education institutions have developed internal infrastructures and forged relationships with external partners to ensure appropriate work placements can be readily incorporated into the curricula. Such placements can help students to develop specific personal and professional skills that are difficult to teach within classrooms, lecture theatres, and even laboratories. However, for a work placement to fulfil its potential as an effective pedagogical approach, it should closely reflect the specific day-to-day happenings and authentic challenges associated with careers linked to the students’ field of study. The aim of this paper is to argue the case for an initiative designed to prioritise the professional development and employability of students at all levels of higher education. Specifically, the paper will provide a brief review of relevant literature before summarising some of the ongoing efforts within the Carnegie Faculty’s School of Sport that have instigated a call for the establishment of “Academies of Excellence in Applied Sport & Exercise Science”.

The case for applied practice opportunities in Sport & Exercise Science programmes

The term “experiential learning” is most commonly associated with Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which posits that learning is a process by which experience facilitates the creation or acquisition of knowledge. According to Kolb, those who pursue a career in the physical sciences (which would include Sport & Exercise Science) are likely to prefer and benefit from learning through “assimilation” (i.e., abstract conceptualisation of theories, reflective observation). However, Sport & Exercise Scientists need to obtain “concrete experience” and engage in “active experimentation” – activities more aligned to “Accommodating” learning styles – before they can achieve professional accreditation with established organisations (e.g., British Association of Sport & Exercise Sciences, British Psychological Society, Sport & Exercise Nutrition Register). As in many professional fields, Sport & Exercise Science graduates are required to meet rigorous standards of proficiency and competence if they are to secure employment within their chosen discipline. If higher education institutions are truly in the business of enhancing the career prospects of students, they must work hard to create more authentic learning environments that stimulate personal and professional development, beyond the attainment of greater theoretical knowledge, at all levels of study.

Work-based learning (WBL), as opposed to experiential learning, refers to programmes of study developed through collaborations between educational institutions and work organisations, the aim of which are to offer students authentic learning opportunities to gain experience of work-based scenarios. Provided they can be integrated effectively, Lemanski, Mewis, and Overton (2011) claim that WBL programmes offer numerous benefits to higher education institutions (e.g., links with external partners), learners (e.g., development of skills specific to the target profession), and employers (e.g., development of projects that achieve operational objectives of the business). Furthermore, Claxon, Lucas, and Webster (2010) have drawn on



neuroscientific evidence to show that learners are most likely to thrive when educational environments consider the context and culture within which learning takes place. The following sections of this paper will provide an overview of two specific case studies which highlight contemporary examples of WBL initiatives employed within the Carnegie Faculty's MSc. Sport & Exercise Science suite of courses. The authors will then share some reflections based on their implementation of applied practice opportunities at Level 7, before concluding with their vision for the future of WBL environments.

Case Study #1: Applied Practice Programme (MSc. Sport & Exercise Nutrition)

The Leeds Beckett MSc in Sport and Exercise Nutrition has been aligned to the Sport and Exercise Nutrition Register (SENr) competency framework since its establishment over ten years ago. Having received high levels of commendation from external reviewers for the applied practice opportunities available to students, it was the first course nationally to achieve SENr accreditation status. The inception of the *Applied Practice Programme (APP)* that sits alongside theoretical course content was driven by the recognition that employers look way beyond the theoretical knowledge of job applicants in the recruitment process, and seek graduates who have gained appropriate work experience and have developed relevant (what might be termed 'soft') skills alongside their studies. To support this, the course team has developed a series of internships and placement opportunities over the course lifecycle. These opportunities are possible through support offered to on-site sports scholars, and due to the University's location and partnerships with local sports clubs in rugby league and union, football and cricket.

The *APP*, run by a Registered Sport and Exercise Nutritionist with extensive applied experience, incorporates a series of workshops to address key skills and competencies of the applied practitioner including: Working in Sport & Exercise Nutrition, Interviewing Skills, Dietary Analysis, Dietary Interpretation & Intervention, Professional Conduct and Standards and Workshop Skills Development. Athlete and coach engagement ensures students gain first-hand experience of understanding the athlete lifestyle and training demands. Students are equipped for this interaction through the programme workshops and through peer and mentor observation, and additionally prepared for the multidisciplinary nature of working in elite sport through a professional practice module. Exposed to (and encouraged to work in adherence with) the SENr Code of Conduct whilst engaging with athletes throughout the programme, students are required to audit their competencies against the SENr framework on commencement of the course and at key time points throughout. This is used to inform and direct personal and professional development supported through the *APP*. Students undertake a final audit of their competencies against the framework and submit this as part of a portfolio assessment. The broader benefits afforded by the *APP* include exposing students to environments in which they can develop sound communication and interpersonal skills, evidence the ability to build effective working relationships and influence others, develop strategies for operating under pressure and managing conflict, and build greater self-awareness in terms of understanding their own personality, values and motives.

Case Study #2: Practicum (MSc. Psychology of Sport & Exercise)

The major strength of the *Practicum* – a credit-bearing module within the MSc. Psychology of Sport & Exercise programme – is the integration of an applied practice placement, which is supervised by the module leader (a Registered Sport & Exercise Psychologist). The placement gives each student the opportunity to experience what it is like to design, deliver and evaluate a programme of psycho-educational workshops



tailored for a specific client group whilst working as part of a support team. Throughout the course of the placement, students write a reflective account of the experience, which then forms the basis for the module coursework assignment. The module is unique not just within the University, but nationally, since no other Sport & Exercise Psychology programme in the UK offers WBL of this nature within the credit-bearing provision. It is this innovation in curriculum development that led to the programme achieving accredited status with the British Psychological Society (BPS) in 2012.

Through module evaluations in recent years, students have reported the placement to be a valuable part of their student experience, and a key influence in their decision of both University and programme of study. The structure of the module, whilst distinct from others on the programme, is also a major strength. The *Practicum* runs “long and thin” across semesters one and two. In semester one, the sessions are largely classroom-based, but link closely with the *Professional Practice in Sport & Exercise Psychology* module, allowing students to develop a range of skills that are essential to ensure they are able to work competently and ethically whilst on placement. Prior to semester two, students’ skills and competence are audited before being given clearance to engage in placement activities. Students who do not successfully complete the skills audit are still able to complete the module/assessment, but are restricted to observing the delivery of psycho-educational workshops. This ensures that students are provided with the opportunity to engage with a form of experiential learning, but in a more abstract/less direct manner (Kolb, 1984) to maintain professional standards of ethics and proficiency.

Benefits, challenges, and future directions

Employability is the key driver behind the development of our WBL activities. For the last three years, over 96% of our graduates have reported to be in employment or to have continued on to further study (e.g., PhD or professional training). Furthermore, a large portion of our graduates have been successful in securing positions within the Sport & Exercise Science domain. This is especially encouraging given the high level of competition for many of the prestigious professional roles that our graduates have gone on to achieve (e.g., Strength & Conditioning Coaches and Sport & Exercise Nutritionists working with professional sports teams, Exercise Physiologists working within the Armed Forces, Sport and Exercise Scientists working on behalf of National Governing Bodies). The following quotes from recent MSc. Sport & Exercise Science graduates clearly summarise the benefits accrued as a direct consequence of engagement in applied practice opportunities offered as part of their programme of study:

“The placement with XXXX was a unique opportunity to gain knowledge from some of the best conditioners and coaches in their field. It allowed me to practically apply and develop all the skills required to succeed within a professional sporting environment. The experience and knowledge I have accumulated throughout the year has paved the way for me to start my professional career in sport, and for that alone it was an unmissable opportunity.” (Male graduate now working as a Strength and Conditioning Coach with a professional sports team).

“I found the APP to be an invaluable experience, which enhanced my learning through providing hands-on experience. In particular, it gave me a greater appreciation of how evidence-based practice is often a compromise between the theoretical ‘best practices’, practical limitations and individual needs. It also gave me valuable skills in project management, research planning, and



administrative organisation, which have been helpful in enabling me to secure PhD funding.” (Female graduate now studying for a PhD in Sport & Exercise Nutrition).

"For me, the Applied Practice Programme has enabled me to access a broad range of athletes and provided me with opportunities to which I otherwise would not have gained. The programme has not only enhanced my communication skills, increased my confidence to support vulnerable individuals, and skilled me to be non-judgemental, but it has also reassured me that sports nutrition is the career path I want to lead. Overall, I have had a very positive experience on the Applied Practice Programme and I believe there should be many more guided opportunities to support aspiring sports nutritionists in this way." (Female student currently enrolled on the MSc. Sport & Exercise Nutrition programme).

“The placement opportunity itself is the most beneficial part of this [Practicum] module. Being able to use what we have learned in other modules in a practical application setting is one of the most valuable experiences I will take away from this entire Masters course.” (Male student currently enrolled on the MSc. Psychology of Sport & Exercise programme).

At the same time as being a major strength of the WBL initiatives outlined above, the placements/professional development opportunities also represent a particular challenge in terms of managing students’ expectations. Despite the best efforts of the course team, it has been common for some students to feel that more could have been done to give them detailed and timely information regarding placements and client groups. Given the complexity and uncertainty associated with authentic WBL opportunities, a number of issues often arise that are beyond the control of the course team and students (e.g., client/placement withdrawal, students failing to successfully complete essential skills audits, ethical concerns which make the placement inappropriate for student engagement). Even some manageable difficulties (e.g., conflicts between individuals working as part of a support team) can derail placement opportunities if the demands of the situation are perceived to exceed the capacity for resolution. Such instances can mean that drastic measures (e.g., reallocation of groups/placements) need to be taken rapidly. This can leave students feeling rather dejected, especially when a lot of time and effort has been devoted to the development of resources, activities and working relationships linked to a particular placement. On reflection, the authors advise that extensive efforts be made to ensure that students are aware of the unique and challenging nature of applied practice placements, especially as they are designed to mirror scenarios that could easily be encountered in the “real world” careers they are eager to pursue. This can be achieved by inviting potential placement providers to directly engage with students wherever possible in advance of placement activities. Students can then be reliably informed about the kind of placements that may be available to them – this will also give students the opportunity to ask specific questions of placement providers at an earlier stage, thus taking a more preventative approach to address some of the concerns mentioned above.

To-date, client groups have consisted primarily of athletes and coaches from a variety of team and individual sports. However, more recently, the placements and development opportunities offered to students have afforded them the chance to support recreational exercisers and sedentary individuals with a view to helping clients improve their health and well-being rather than (or in addition to) their performance. An example of this is the *Healthy Lifestyle Programme* that was designed by students enrolled on another of our Level 7 modules – *Research and Professional Practice (RPP)*. The student-led programme was delivered to around 100 staff from across the University and similar to the



Practicum placements, formed the basis of an end-of-module reflective assignment. The feedback from both staff-clients and students indicated that this was a mutually-beneficial initiative, so much so that the programme lead, Becky Wride (Wellbeing Project Officer) is currently working with the course team to ensure that a similar opportunity can be embedded within the *RPP* and *Practicum* modules as well as the *APP* ahead of the 2016-17 academic year.

The authors are proud of the above initiatives and have worked hard over several years to ensure that our students are afforded appropriate professional development opportunities that, where possible, are integral to their core programme of study. In addition, by working in partnership with appropriate professional bodies (e.g., BPS) we are now able to offer an approved programme of professional training at Level 8 to graduates of our MSc. Psychology of Sport & Exercise course (with plans for a similar professional training route at Level 8 with the SENr under development). However, the authors are also quick to recognise that there is still a lot of work to do before we can claim to have created opportunities whereby students at all levels of higher education learn **through** work as opposed to **for** work (Lemanski, Mewis, & Overton, 2011). Our vision of the 21st Century learning experience includes much more than a short-term work experience placement. Rather, we propose that an “Academy of Excellence in Applied Sport & Exercise Science” would offer learners an immersive professional training experience integrated within an established educational institution. The authors suggest that the establishment of such an “Academy of Excellence” would represent the future of experiential learning and the “gold standard” for optimising student employability in a burgeoning field of study. Moreover, the authors argue that by developing an infrastructure to support such employability-focused initiatives, higher education institutions will place themselves at the forefront of evidence-informed pedagogy whilst enhancing the appeal of their taught programmes in the eyes of key stakeholders (e.g., prospective students, external partners). Although the current paper has outlined examples specific to the context of Sport & Exercise Science, the authors firmly believe that “Academies of Excellence in Applied Practice or Pedagogy” could be readily developed in any area of study.

References

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