

RUNNING HEAD: Learners and learning in sport management

Learners and learning in the global industry of sport management

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Abstract

Sport is a global, culturally complex, and popular industry that attracts widespread attention. Unsurprisingly, then, sport management education has grown in popularity because of young professionals seeking to gain qualifications that equip them for a career in the industry. Increasingly, sport management is delivered in Higher Education environments that prioritise internationalising activities, such as student and staff mobility and aggressive recruitment of overseas students. This creates a complex environment for sport management educators. In this Chapter, we discuss tensions between educating students about a global sport industry and the richness of local and national cultures within the global sport industry. From this basis, we explore how differences between students (e.g., domestic and international) create complexities for educators and Higher Education providers that seek to benefit from the promise of internationalised learning environments.

Learners and learning in the global industry of sport management

Sport is a complex, multi-billion-dollar industry that attracts widespread global attention. The Rio Olympic Games, for example, was watched on television – at some point – by approximately 6.9 Billion people aged 4-years or older (International Olympic Committee, 2016). In 2018, the FIFA World Cup was estimated to have been watched by 3.5 Billion people when television and digital audiences were combined (Federation Internationale de Football Association., 2018). Beyond major sporting events, Dubber and Worne (2015) cite evidence that Manchester United is estimated to be supported by 10% of the global population. Each of these statistics demonstrate that sport has reach that transcends national boundaries and demographic categories.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, demand for sport management education has increased in tandem with the global popularity of sporting teams (e.g., The Los Angeles Lakers), brands (e.g., Nike), athletes (e.g., Michael Jordan or Serna Williams), events (e.g., The Olympic Games) and their related industries. Supporting this observation, the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) estimates that there are approximately 800 undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral level sport management programmes worldwide (NASSM, 2021). The growth of sport at national, regional, and local levels has spurred young people to pursue sport management education with a view to working in an industry about which they are passionate.

Ströbel et al. (2020) suggest that as sport management has become more established in different nations and institutions, a need has emerged to design curriculum that equips graduates to be *successful* in the *global sport industry* (see also Masteralexis & McDonald, 1997; Weese, 1995). In a similar vein, Weese (2020) recommends that all academic staff should ‘*ensure*’ that a range of international content, examples, and opportunities (e.g., exchange programmes and

overseas mobility) are designed into curricula to appropriately prepare students. An argument that aligns closely with the aggressive internationalising agendas of many Higher Education providers (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

In pursuing agendas for internationalisation, Higher Education institutions seek to attract and recruit a diverse blend of domestic and international students (de Haan & Sherry, 2012; Hubble & Bolton, 2020). Sport management is no different. Therefore, in the domain of sport management education, we deliver a subject that is complex and global, to a diverse mixture of local and international students. While presenting a rich context for education, knowledge development, and cultural exchange (cf. Pope, 2010), the effects of internationalisation present challenges, which need to be overcome if our students are to benefit from its promises.

Therefore, in this Chapter, we will:

1. Discuss the context of internationalisation and its implications for sport management education.
2. Consider evidence about 'desirable' characteristics of students that graduate from sport management programmes.
3. Articulate between-student differences that create issues for internationalising agendas and cultural exchange in Higher Education.
4. Provide recommendations for educators to maximise cross-cultural sharing and learner experiences.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Sport management programmes occur in Higher Education environments that are increasingly encouraged to internationalise and adopt a global outlook (de Haan & Sherry,

2012). From a basic position, internationalisation refers to the attraction of overseas staff and students, the provision of international opportunities for staff and students (e.g., exchanges, partnerships etc.), and a series of other endeavours to demonstrate a global outlook (e.g., participation in international league tables). Each strategy is intended to achieve specific organisational outcomes, such as: competitive advantage, knowledge development, and curricula enrichment (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The resources cultivated through internationalisation are then marketed to potential learners as a set of *justifications* to select one university instead of others.

Despite its prevalence in Higher Education, internationalisation is not without complexities. Egerton-Palk (2014) cites data from the 4th International Association of Universities survey, showing leaders in Higher Education institutions fear that many students do not benefit from internationalisation practices. Patel and Lynch's (2013) research supports this perspective, showing that internationalisation tends to prioritise host culture, rather than creating a multicultural and diverse learning environment for all students. In many cases, then, internationalisation creates environments that – due to a dominant host culture – support acculturation, rather than an open exchange of different cultures and cross-cultural learning opportunities (Pope, 2010). For example, students studying in the UK may be more inclined to learn about popular British sports and pastimes (e.g., The Premier League), rather than encouraged to introduce their own culture experiences into the learning environment.

Patel and Lynch (2013) advocate, instead, for a *glocalised* approach to Higher Education that seeks to realise the benefits of global culture, curricula, and learning. Rather than a host culture that students and staff are encouraged to fit into; glocal, or third culture approaches, value the coalescence of different cultures and learning styles because they empower students to

participate in, and *learn* about their subject in more diverse educational environments. This approach is a blind spot in much prior work in sport management, which prioritises learning about the sport industry as a global entity (Ströbel et al., 2020; Weese, 2020), rather than a coalescence of different cultures that form a global sport industry. There are exceptions, however, from scholars that have contemplated the different global and local pressures that comprise the sport industry and how cultural diversity might shape our academic and educational practices, which we discuss in the following section (Cuneen & Parks, 1997; Pope, 2010).

Sport management education and graduate outcomes

A key question facing sport management educators is what attributes *should* our students possess when they graduate? Existing research is equivocal on this point. Some scholars emphasise the importance of developing students that are ready to work in the global sport industry (Ströbel et al., 2020; Weese, 2020). It follows from this paradigmatic view that students should learn from curricula that are industry informed and driven. Other researchers prioritise cross-cultural learning, experiences, and critical analysis skills (e.g., Pope, 2010; Skinner & Gilbert, 2007). Yet, aside from points of divergence, each set of scholars acknowledge that students need to be knowledgeable about sport beyond their home culture (Masteralexis & McDonald, 1997; Ströbel et al., 2020; Weese, 2020). This point is brought into sharper focus by de Haan and Sherry's (2012) finding that many students do not possess a broader international perspective on sport (i.e., beyond their home culture). Therefore, making students aware (when they are not e.g., de Haan & Sherry, 2012) and incorporating various international examples, content, and experiences into teaching and learning (Weese, 2020) is crucial if we are to broaden the cultural horizon of learners in sport management.

Sport management educators have conducted studies seeking to develop student awareness of the globality of sport. de Haan and Sherry (2012) ran a shared Olympics Studies module for students at La Trobe University (Australia) and the University of Worcester (United Kingdom). This internationalisation at home (students were not required to travel) project involved students completing assessment items about the national context in which they studied, which were subsequently shared and evaluated by peers in the overseas institution. Through the three-part assessment process, students were exposed to different policy structures and foci, which were used as a basis to exchange knowledge about sport in Australia and the United Kingdom. As a cautionary note, however, both authors reflected that the workload required to deliver this international opportunity for students was substantial and inhibited by university structures.

Ströbel et al. (2020) presented results from a survey of sporting practitioners in Germany and the United States that was designed to develop knowledge about industry expectations of graduates in each country. Industry figures in the United States valued specific marketing and management knowledge (e.g., customer relationship management), while practitioners in Germany prioritised international experiences and cultural awareness. The cross-cultural differences in industry expectations of a double degree delivered across two countries adds some complexity to the notion of an *'ideal'* set of attributes that students should possess on graduation. In fact, it demonstrates that what might be considered a 'globally' ready student in one nation (i.e., with knowledge of marketing), may be viewed as culturally naive in another.

The drive to satisfy industry needs is not new in sport management. Weese (1995) argued for the inclusion of practitioners in the NASSM and that scholars should conduct research that meets industry needs. Countering Weese; Cuneen and Parks (1997) explained that academics

should critically engage with problems in sport management with the express aim of *improving* the industry. We tend to agree with both perspectives to a degree. While curriculum shaped by the needs of international sport practitioners is obviously a valuable point of reference; the industry – like the academy – is imperfect and prone to institutionalised patterns of thinking that require critical attention and disruption (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Blind adherence to the demands of industry practitioners and executives – who are not equally represented in discussions with programme leaders or educators (i.e., only some industry representatives are included in advisory groups and boards) – is, to say the least, problematic. If we educate cohorts of students to *reproduce* dominant logics in the sport industry – at the behest of practitioners – then our graduates will be lemmings prone to copying the industry as is, rather than young professionals with the critical skills to challenge problematic practices. This point is equally true of students that study sport management yet pursue careers in other industries.

In making this point, we draw from Zeigler (2007, p. 298) who posed two questions to the NASSM conference (and the sport management community more broadly): “what are we helping to promote.... And exactly why are we doing it?”. In prioritising industry relevance, we are potentially creating students that lack the critical capacity and insight to challenge dominant patterns of thinking and behaviour in sport. It is for this reason that scholars have cautioned against narrow industry-led programmes that privilege neo-liberal market forces and taken-for-granted ‘business’ aptitudes above critical thinking about the sport industry’s ‘inconvenient truths.’ For example: unequal labour conditions in the production of sportswear, equipment, and stadia (Doherty, 2013); sustainability and the environmental impact of sport (Ličen & Jedlicka, in press); racial ideologies that affect hiring and promotion practices (Knoppers, 2015); anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, and social justice athlete activism (Cunningham et al.,

2019); or pro-feminist critiques of male power in sport management education and practice (e.g., Humberstone, 2009). Paying attention to ‘inconvenient truths’ about the sport industry has scope to develop more culturally sensitive and aware graduates that are able to contribute to *changing* the industry. Developing students with critical thinking skills to confront difficult issues in sport, therefore, is a key agenda for educators (Skinner & Gilbert, 2007). To develop critical thinking skills, educators need to develop environments in which students can draw on their *own experiences and cultural background* to learn.

In this regard, agendas to internationalise seem, on a surface level, a successful route to enhance critical thinking and reflection. Yet, as Patel and Lynch (2013) make clear, internationalisation tends to lead overseas students to acculturate, rather than develop a blended understanding of their own culture in relation to the host’s. As we began by noting, sport is not played in a few countries, it is a global phenomenon. However, there are vast cultural nuances in relation to what sport means, and how it is structured and delivered in different countries (Houlihan, 2002). Pope (2010) draws on this point, recommending that sport management educators should place greater emphasis on cultural and theoretical depth. In doing so, efforts should be made to offer students a deep understanding of social and contextual issues in sport to develop knowledge of cross-cultural similarities and differences, such as those facilitated in prior collaborations (de Haan & Sherry, 2012).

Therefore, the curricula we design for students should be (i) relevant to the sport industry but taught with a focus on criticality, (ii) reflective of a variety of *cultural positions*, and (iii) informed by the *cultural positions* of the specific students that we teach at a given time. Such an approach aligns with what Pope (2010, p. 520) proposes as an academy with less “certainty about the established topics and benchmarks and more experimentation and conceptual

innovation which engages with cultural identities and praxis”. To achieve such a culture for learners in sport management, we next consider some of the challenges associated with creating and delivering curricula for students with diverse cultural identities and learning styles.

Learners in sport management

There is a tendency for existing research to concentrate on where and what students study (Rynne et al., 2012), rather than to explore the experiences, outcomes, and concerns of learners. Emphasising this point, we have found somewhat scarce insights into the experiences of sport management students. There are, however, insights from studies of large first-year courses in Australia that included sport management students (alongside tourism and hospitality students), which provide some insight. Researchers have explored the different learning outcomes, strengths, and psychology of international and domestic students. In this section, we first discuss issues associated with diverse student cohorts that *potentially* inhibit the rich sharing of different cultures - and the planned benefits of internationalisation. Then, we discuss the characteristics of domestic and international learners to reflect on the degree to which curricula are conducive to students learning about different sporting cultures and contexts.

In a study conducted in Australia – not in relation to sport – Arkoudis et al. (2013) reviewed evidence about creating multicultural learning environments. They found that rather than interact with a range of students from different cultural backgrounds students tend to form groups based on cultural similarity. This is unsurprising; entry to Higher Education is associated with high levels of uncertainty for students. To reduce uncertainty, students will gravitate towards others with similar category memberships (e.g., racial or ethnic groups) or shared identities (e.g., nationality; Turner et al., 1987). As a remedy, Arkoudis et al argue that educators

should plan and create environments for interaction, which enable students from diverse cultural backgrounds to discuss ideas and experiences together (i.e., with and without staff present). Such efforts need to be coupled with explanations about *why* cross-cultural learning enriches subject knowledge and understanding – rather than assuming students believe it to be the case.

Jon (2012) outlined further complexities when working with diverse student populations. Through a study in South Korea, Jon found that student language proficiency was associated with greater status, which created different groups in the cohort: Western students, international students from other Asian countries, domestic students that spoke English, and domestic students that did not speak English. Jon argued that South Korean students were likely to perceive international students from Western nations to be of higher status, while neo-racism was associated with perceptions that international students from Southeast Asian countries were of lower status (excluding Japan). This study demonstrated that in addition to groups forming due to cultural similarities, there may also be power and status dynamics (e.g., languages spoken) that prevent the sharing of ideas and culture in an internationalised Higher Education setting.

International and domestic students may also stay in Higher Education for different reasons. Haverila et al. (2020) sampled domestic and international students in a Canadian University to look at which factors led to student retention in each group. There were six factors on which the two groups differed. Domestic students valued quality instruction more highly than international students. International students, however, placed greater importance on “social integration, study skills, adjustment to college life, extracurricular activities, and housing arrangements” than domestic students (Haverila et al., 2020, p. 375). Issues concerning health and finance were experienced by both student groups; however, it is evident that international

students confronted greater issues in relation to socialising, academic skills (in the host culture), and accommodation.

Variability in relation to study skills have emerged in research conducted with first-year students in Australia (Bui et al., 2017; Kwek et al., 2013; Rynne et al., 2012). The authors of this work found differences in terms of student performance, strengths, and psychology. Rynne et al. (2012) compared Australian and Asian students in a large first-year course. They found that Australian students were more likely to score in the top-grade classifications, which reflected that assignments may have favoured skills and capabilities more suited to domestic students. In contrast, international students were less likely to fail the course than Australian students. Commenting more specifically on the different strengths of Australian and Asian students in the sample, Rynne et al. explained that Asian students possessed significantly better quantitative analysis and numerical reasoning skills, whereas Australian students performed better in tasks that required qualitative interpretation and critical reflection.

In additional work, Bui et al. (2017) found a similar pattern of international students scoring lower – on average – than domestic students in assessments. They explored students' self-efficacy and academic performance over time. Rather than splitting students into domestic and international cohorts for the analysis, Bui et al, used a clustering approach to create groups of high and low performing students that were tested at two time-points. At time one, all students displayed similar scores for self-efficacy. However, student self-efficacy improved at time two only for students with higher levels of academic performance. This created issues because most learners in the lower performing group were international students. Therefore, international students were more likely to experience issues with self-efficacy as the semester progressed. Bui

et al. argued that integration of content which reflected the *home cultures* of international students may be a productive path to improve outcomes for international students.

Throughout this section we have discussed issues and complexities that make achieving the ultimate aims of internationalisation difficult. Learners enter Higher Education with disparate cultural, life, and educational experiences (Rynne et al., 2012). If we are to offer a culturally pluralistic education to students in sport management that benefits from the diverse backgrounds of the people we teach, the issues discussed in this section need to be reconciled and considered in the design of units, programmes, teaching environments, and content.

Working in a diverse subject with diverse students

To this point, we have presented evidence that internationalisation, while prevalent in Higher Education, is not without problems (Altbach & Knight, 2007). At a basic level, we agree that sport management education should provide students with a rich insight into sport beyond national boundaries. We can see little argument to the contrary. However, concentrating on a '*global industry*' has the risk of foregoing attention and content surrounding cross-cultural nuance and difference, which are crucial to understanding the management of sport (Pope, 2010). We focus this section on some of the 'realities' that arise from the work we have discussed. In doing so, we seek to offer points for reflection, which may enable educators to realise some of the benefits of subject and cohort diversity in sport management learning environments.

We should challenge students to learn about and develop critical and reflective skills so that they can challenge 'inconvenient truths' and respond to changes in the sport industry. The processes of internationalisation and globalisation are associated with complexities, such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and economic inequalities. As Ličen and Jedlicka

(2020) highlight, in sport management programmes it can be difficult for educators and students to reconcile contradictions between thinking about sport-as-business and sport's social and environmental impacts, which may require radical reform in the future to be addressed in sustainable ways. For example, as we teach students about the marketing of sport, growth of leagues, or sport tourism, we should equally raise awareness of the needs to foreground increased behaviour and travel in relation to ethical business practices to ensure that developments in the sport industry are sustainable. This is a particular issue for sport management programs situated in business schools, which are foregrounded by 'market-driven curricula' and 'traditional areas' of management such as administration, marketing, finance, and revenue generation. While reflecting industry demands (e.g., customer relationship management), we need to develop sport leaders that are aware of, and responsible in relation to, major global issues such as climate change, social justice, and inequality. In this respect, any internationalised sport management education should consider how environmental, social, and economic problems shape the management of sport in different places and cultures.

We should not assume that internationalising practices lead to rich cross-cultural learning in Higher Education. As students do not necessarily possess awareness of a range of national and international sport management issues (de Haan & Sherry, 2012), at a basic level, the learning environment should be designed to draw students attention to a range of cultures, cases, and contexts to *broaden their awareness*. When possible, efforts to broaden student awareness of international and cross-cultural issues in sport should draw on the lived experiences of learners and educators. This might include domestic students and staff that have gained experiences of other cultures through exchange or other forms of mobility, or by empowering international students to value their home culture and *educate* other students about it. Doing so

achieves cross-cultural learning and enriches the experiences of students from different cultural positions.

We should not assume that students from different cultures will interact to share cultural learning. Attracting international students to a Higher Education institution or providing students with opportunities for mobility are not pre-ordained to enrich learning or cultural awareness. For example, we know that students gravitate towards others with shared cultural or group memberships. A salient question when devising a learning environment becomes: how can we create events, teaching environments, and opportunities that disrupt these completely understandable social and psychological reactions to uncertainty? Without encouraging students to value their home culture *in the host culture* and encouraging students and staff to be *accepting* of new cultures (in cases where they are not), cross-cultural learning will be stymied. Likewise, students that travel to other countries will only realise the rich experience of cross-cultural learning if they are encouraged to interrogate the cultural similarities and differences between the host and home situations during, and after, their experience.

We need to consider that the assessment items we use might favour the strengths of domestic students (unintentionally) and disadvantage international students (also unintentionally). The evidence we have reviewed demonstrates that there are significant differences in domestic and international student performance and outcomes (Bui et al., 2017). This should be cause for reflection, because as Rynne et al. (2012) demonstrate, students enter Higher Education with different educational backgrounds and experiences. If some students have greater skills in critical analysis and qualitative interpretation, while others have stronger statistical and numeracy skills; how can these cultural variations be addressed so that the

respective skills of each group are accommodated, stretched, supported, and exchanged in assessment schemes?

Conclusion

Sport is a globally popular pursuit, which attracts a diverse array of students that hope to pursue a career in the industry. In this Chapter, we have outlined how internationalisation agendas may offer students new opportunities for cultural enrichment and learning. However, it is also clear that many students do not benefit from internationalisation. If we are to obtain the benefits of cultural exchange in relation to a global subject with diverse cohorts, the factors that lead to *learners participating* in cultural exchange with a mixture of students from different counties, countries, and cultures need to be front and centre in our planning. In many ways, it is far easier to teach students about a general '*global sport industry*', than it is to educate students about the similarities and differences between different global cultures *in* the sport industry. A major route to achieving the latter is empowering students from different cultural backgrounds to be comfortable with, value, and share features of their own culture with academic staff and other students. Such exchanges can provide students with a more global awareness of sport management alongside a rich understanding of the varying cultural and social contexts in which sport is designed and delivered.

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