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Critical Perspectives

Employers' expectations of the employability skills needed in the sport and recreation environment

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to test the applicability of the Survey of Employability Skills Needed in the Workforce (SESNW) (Robinson, 2006) in Greek sport employers. One hundred ninety three employers from three sectors participated in the study. Consecutive EFAs led to six robust factors of employability skills, labeled Professional Behavior & Development, Leadership & Influence, Problem Solving, Organization & Time Management, Communication Ability and (Inter)Personal skills. All factors were highly rated by the employers were no differences occurred between employment sectors. By understanding the competencies expected by employers, Universities may better align undergraduate programs with industry needs, enhancing the graduates' employability.

1. Introduction

Sport and recreation business is a growing sector that relies on the continuous support by satisfied customers. Within a hard competition with other similar agencies and against other leisure habits, sport and recreation organizations should enhance service quality (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Howat, Crilley, Absher, & Milne, 1996) and promote their customers' satisfaction and commitment (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004).

Most sport and recreation services require multiple roles of their employees. These roles require a range of personal and interpersonal competencies. Therefore, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expected to develop a wide range of competencies and skills in order to enhance students' employability (Minten & Forsyth, 2014). In fact, enhancing students' employability skills has become a key aim for Sport HEI's (Butt & Rehman, 2010; De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011; Euriko, da Silva, & do Valle, 2015), while current trends even propose the matching of sport graduates' skills to sport employers' needs (Emery, Crabtree, & Kerr, 2012). This requires thorough understanding of sport employers' needs.

This study's purpose was to test the applicability of the *Survey of Employability Skills Needed in the Workforce* (Robinson, 2006) in the field of sport and recreation, in a Greek sample of employers. Moreover, it aimed to examine how the various groups of skills are valued and to what different extent in each sector of the sport market, in an attempt to test whether employers' needs differentiate according to their operating sector. This research may help sport HEIs to better achieve the aim of offering the kind of education that may meet the needs and expectations of the sport organizations/employers.

Three research questions were examined: first, whether the ten factor structure of the SESNW scale could be verified in a Greek sample of sport and recreation employers. Secondly, whether the factors would be differentially rated by the employers. Thirdly,

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whether there would be differences in the evaluation of graduate skills among employers of different sport and recreation sectors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Graduate employability

Graduate employability is a complex and difficult to define and measure concept (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Boden & Nevada, 2010). Early definitions of graduate employability focused on employment outcomes, i.e. getting a job after the completion of higher education, but also maintaining it or transferring to a new one (Aamodt & Havnes, 2008; Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012; Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Taking into consideration that employment or unemployment may be affected by a number of different factors, such as economic cycles, recent research has re-defined the concept of graduate employability as a characteristic of the individual (Azevedo et al., 2012; Yorke & Knight, 2007). According to Yorke (2006), employability skills, also called *soft skills,* are "*a set of achievements –skills, understandings and personal attributes- that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy"*. Thus, graduate employability represents a broad range of knowledge, skills and personal attributes (Cranmer, 2006).

With these in mind, "*Employability skills*" refer to generic or transferable skills, which along with the technical skills and knowledge are used in the workplace. These skills are not job specific, but appear to be important in all industries and jobs, at all levels. These skills include among others, problem solving, taking decisions, functioning in teams, managing time and stress, and learning new knowledge (Singh, Thambusamy, Ramly, Abdullah, & Mahmud, 2013). In line with Azevedo and her associates (2012), we concur that the cultivation of students' employability skills should be one of the key aims of HEIs. Moreover, we think that a set of soft skills should be defined for sport graduates. These skills can be used as learning outcomes of HEIs' undergraduate or lifelong learning programs. The systematic study of the employers' perceptions regarding the soft skills needed in the workplace, could significantly assist the HEIs to review and redesign their curriculum in order to address possible competency gaps in early stages of employment (Azevedo et al., 2012). Thus, this study aimed to test an evaluation tool with Greek sport and recreation employers in order to examine the importance they place to different skills.

2.2. Employability research

According to Hillage and Pollard (1998); Minten (2010), employability is defined as *"…being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (*e.g. *personal circumstances and labor market environment) within which they seek work"*. Although undergraduate programs offer to students highly valued academic qualifications (Yorke, 2006), they often fail to provide the key employability skills needed in order for graduates not only to gain but also to maintain employment (Cranmer, 2006; De La Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000). Research had indicated that graduates often lack the readiness needed to perform to the standards of the employers (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Carol-Joy & Cragnolini, 2004), as they fail to understand the implications of working together on a team, solving problems, and making decisions and because they have a misconception of what their job will entail, often expecting a structured, supervised environment similar to the one experienced in their collegiate courses (Candy & Crebert, 1991).

Based on a literature review, and qualitative and quantitative research with students, academic staff, graduates and employers of different companies in Canada, Evers, Rush and Bardrow (1998) defined 18 competencies/soft skills in which graduates needed to be proficient in order to succeed in the workplace. Four bases of competences and 18 soft skills (with 67 items) were identified: i) *Mobilizing Innovation and Change*, consisted of *ability to conceptualize*, *creativity, risk-taking*, and *visioning,* ii) *Managing People and Tasks* consisted of *coordinating*, *decision making, leadership and influence, managing conflict*, and *planning and organizing*, iii) *Communicating*, consisted of *interpersonal*, *listening*, *oral communication*, and *written communication* and iv) *Managing Self,* consisted of *learning*, *personal organization*, *personal strengths*, *problem-solving*. Robinson (2006) examining graduates' self-assessment of soft skills, confirmed the face and content validity and reliability of the Evers et al., (1998) instrument. The *Survey of Employability Skills Needed in the Workforce* (Evers et al., 1998; Robinson, 2006) (SESNW) has been used for research in different industries (Agriculture, Physiotherapy, others), cultures (Malaysia, U.S.A., Canada) and stakeholders (employers, graduates, students, professors).

By using an adapted form of SESNW scale, with 10 skills and 50 items, Ramli, Nawawi, and Chun (2010) investigated employers' perceptions of employability skills and competency levels of physiotherapy graduate employees in Malaysia. The authors concluded that seven skills should be further enhanced in the education of physiotherapists; *critical thinking, generating hypothesis and linking ideas, applying theory into practice, sharp analytical skills, prioritize problems, keep up to date, giving clear explanations about problems and treatments* and *recognizing the effects of decisions to be made*.

Evidence from a European multi-country study of employers and business graduates (Azevedo et al., 2012) suggested that key soft skills (i.e. *teamwork and relationship building, communication, self and time management, influencing and persuading, critical/analytical skills, ability to see the bigger picture, presentation, and leadership)* were regarded by business graduates as significant determinants for both current job performance and for their future career development. Employers, though, did not appear to be much confident on the graduates' capacity level in these skills. In another study, Singh and his co-authors (2013), studied how employers of Malaysian national and multinational companies and instructors from public Universities evaluated seven

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