

Exploring Appropriate Assessment Methods for Postgraduate Sports Management

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Introduction

Assessment is a key process that impacts on almost all those involved in higher education, yet the meaning and purpose of assessment is often unclear and the resultant experience less than positive for those involved (Joughin & Macdonald, 2003). As University lecturers, it is easy to be so involved in the day-to-day responsibilities and commitments of teaching that we can lose sight of the importance of assessment and whether the various components of a particular course or module's assessment is 'fit for purpose' or whether other instruments and methods might be more appropriate.

In a higher education setting, assessment exists in many different forms and serves a variety of purposes. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, in its Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards (QAA, 2006), describes assessment as '*any process that appraises an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills*'. But while the purpose of assessment is to make judgments; to identify strengths and weaknesses, what is good, what is bad, what is right and what is wrong its core function is to support and improve student learning.

Assessment is at the very heart of the education process. It determines much of the work students undertake, affects their approach to learning and may offer an indication of which aspects of the course or specific module are valued most highly (Rust, 2002). As stated by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2006), '*Good assessment practice is designed to ensure that, in order to pass the module or programme, students have to demonstrate they have achieved the intended learning outcomes*'. Students are, of course, continually being assessed for a wide range of different reasons – motivation, creating learning opportunities, to give feedback (both to students and staff), to grade, to distinguish between a cohort of students, to aid recruitment and selection, to assure ourselves that the learning outcomes of modules have been met, and as a quality assurance mechanism at an internal and

external level (Rust, 2002). The problems often occur when these functions are not separated and assessment is used in an attempt to achieve all these objectives, to varying degrees.

In order to test a wide range of intended learning outcomes, the literature recommends providing a diversity of assessment practice between and within different subjects to require and enable students to demonstrate their capabilities and achievements within each module or programme. As assessment can be used for diagnostic, formative or summative purposes, it is vital that students should be given clear instructions as to which of these purposes apply in a particular assessment component.

Instruments of Assessment

The purposes and principles of assessment are delivered in individual modules through the design and use of a variety of assessment instruments or tools that are relevant and appropriate for the material, the level of the students, and the particular aim/aims and learning objectives to be achieved. These include: written assignments, data handling assignments, case studies, oral presentations, integrative curriculum projects, tests – in-class, multiple choice, short answer, etc., examinations, reflective learning assignments, portfolios, business plans, group presentations, dissertations, and many more.

When considering how to design and select instruments and methods for assessment to suit the subject area of Sports Management, the Quality Assurance Agency's benchmark statements for Sport (2008), located within the Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism section, are an appropriate starting point. Such subject benchmark statements provide a way of describing the type of programmes in a specific subject, express the general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level, and enable review of learning outcomes. They also give guidance on internal quality assurance and provide the skills and knowledge that a person with such qualifications should possess and be able to demonstrate.

To understand what the most appropriate learning outcomes are for the study of sports management in general, and to assess what skills and abilities will aid students in terms of employability, an analysis of the current state of the sports industry and its academic study is essential.

According to the QAA (2008): *'Sport has emerged as one of the largest areas of academic interest across the UK, with a broad-based body of knowledge and an increasing interest in the development of new knowledge. Sport and related subjects are now well-established as credible academic areas of study and research within UK HE.'*

The study of sport at the tertiary level has rapidly increased throughout the world over the past twenty years (Ferkins, 2002). However, higher education programmes in sports management are still relatively young in the UK, with the first dedicated degree programme introduced in 1991. According to the author's research, 35 of the UK's 116 universities (www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/UKHESector/) presently offer a bachelor's degree in sports management (or related courses) and 15 offer the programme at postgraduate master's level.

Learning Outcomes for Sports Management

Professional sport at the highest levels has developed into a business that demands nothing less than specific, professional preparation (Mills, 1994; Westerbeek et al., 1995; Westerbeek and Smith, 2003). Subsequently, a more systematic and serious approach to the management of sport has emerged with a growing emphasis on studying business practices in the management of sporting organisations.

Some university programmes take '*a strong vocational approach to sport management education, de-emphasising theoretical learning and moving towards practical tools and operational thinking*' (Smith & Westerbeek, 2003). This trend, strongly encouraged by the sports industry and manifested in experiential learning such as work experience and internships, and revised content, encourages a definitively outcomes-oriented approach to education. So the philosophical approach taken by academic administrators and their universities not only impacts on the students they attract but the curriculums they offer to meet their criteria and even to the employability opportunities of their graduates.

At London Metropolitan University there is a generalist approach to the sports management undergraduate programme with a course that aims to relate analytical theories and concepts to management practice. The three-year BA programme examines the strategic and operational management of sport and recreation and the social, political and economic context within which the industry operates, giving students a solid basis for a career within the industry. The one-year MA programme is more intense and focuses almost equally on the business and services-end of sport with the priority to provide skills and expertise that will be reflected in the ability of students to find work quickly once they graduate and to be able to make an immediate practical contribution. The learning outcomes for these programmes have been derived and adapted from the QAA's benchmarking (2008) and other documents, (notably the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Codes of Practice for H.E., 2006), and are designed to be broad and rigorous with the aim of differentiating student abilities. However, in the light of the fact that these learning outcomes may well be out-of-date and that inadequate input was provided from sports management educationalists and the industry itself, they may need review and modification.

In regard to making learning outcomes appropriate for employers within the sports industry, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2008) reported that

'employers value academic programs that place an emphasis on learning outcomes addressing essential skills and abilities that will lead students to subsequent success within the marketplace....(such as) teamwork, critical thinking and reasoning skills, and the abilities to (a) locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources, (b) be innovative and think creatively, (c) apply knowledge and skills to realistic settings, (d) solve complex problems, (e) collaborate with others in diverse group settings, and (f) work with numbers and understand statistics.'

From the writer's own experience in sports management, these learning outcomes would be relevant for sports management studies. The AACU make the key point that *'employers support those assessments that permit students to demonstrate their ability to apply their learning to real-world challenges'* (AACU, 2008).

Assessment in Sports Management

When considering assessment instruments and methods for the MA programme in sports management, an appropriate starting point would be to consider the purpose of the modules; what skills, knowledge, qualities and attributes are being sought to engender in the students, and to then ensure a suitable mix of assessment methods and instruments within the programme. It is also critical to ensure that the assessment protocol addresses cultural and equity issues and that the students have clear expectations about the requirements and indeed the purposes of assessment.

A critical issue that needs to be addressed in the teaching and assessment process is the percentage of international students in the programme. At London Metropolitan University more than half of the present postgraduate students come from outside the UK. In the writer's teaching, he draws on a number of different countries for concepts, examples and issues in order to avoid disadvantaging those who do not share and cannot draw on Britain's cultural background and knowledge. It is appreciated that foreign students may be disadvantaged if assessment is overly British-centric and adjustments should be made to recognise this reality, whenever feasible.

In considering the present assessment components for the five core modules in LMU's MA Sports Management programme, excluding the dissertation, there are a total of twelve assignments using six different assessment instruments; namely, one unseen exam, two reflective essays, two critiques, a dissertation proposal, three group presentations, and three reports/essays. The literature recommends a diversity of assessment practice between and within different modules so that

students are able to demonstrate their capabilities and achievements within each module. On evaluation, it seems that there is a reasonable spread of assessment instruments and methods incorporated into the programme, although perhaps the two group presentations and associated reflection pieces are too similar and another instrument should be introduced, such as placing the emphasis on, and grading, the group presentation, and including peer assessment in the process. Such a revision would continue to effectively assess the learning outcomes of the module and be in line with the overall objective of the module.

Group work and appropriate assessment methods can play a leading role in preparing sports management students for employment in the industry and the writer would recommend retaining the three group presentations. Sports management is a people business and whether a graduate is selling membership or hospitality packages in a professional sports club; or working in a development role in a local authority's sports department; or as an event manager of a professional Tour, or marketing sponsorships and advertising to the corporate sector, or a multitude of other positions, the ability to operate effectively in a team/group environment will be critical.

As an outcome of this fact, the more industry-related group work that sports management students participate in during their degree programme, and the more the assessment process can reflect real-life scenarios, the better equipped students will be to secure a position that interests and excites them, and according to Smith & Westerbeek (2003) they will be '*adequately armed with practical competencies, and prepared to engage in the world of operational management with all the tools and techniques they need to survive.*'

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Bibliographic Note

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