

INTERNSHIP AS A MECHANISM FOR PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION OF SPORT MANAGEMENT PERSONNEL: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The labour market in South Africa (SA) has been characterized by very high and increasing rates of unemployment and an acute shortage of skilled workers. Consequently, finding competent people who will fit in with an organisation's culture, vision and strategic goals has been challenging. As a result, the recruitment drives of many organisations currently focus heavily on attracting skills as well as experience. One of the ways in which the skills shortage and lack of experience could be addressed would be by including an internship in the curricula of different programmes offered at Higher Education Institutions. The current study seeks to articulate from a student's perspective the value of internship in the professional preparation of sport management personnel and attempts to contribute to research in education by providing empirical evidence on the usefulness of internships and make recommendations thereon. A 47-item questionnaire was administered to 300 interns at three universities which offered sport management programmes with internship as a compulsory component. Analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS – version 17). Principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the data. A final model consisting of seven factors which accounted for 77.80% of the overall variance in the scale item scores was produced. The factors were professional development (five items), personal development (five items), marketability (three items), adaptability (three items), relevance (three items), opportunity for growth (two items) and networking (two items). The study found internships to be a valuable component in the sport management curriculum. Emanating from the findings several recommendations were made.

Key words: Internship; Labour; Professional development; Personal development; Marketability; Relevance.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face diverse challenges in their effort to deliver the best possible educational experience to their students (Domask, 2007). Traditionally, higher education was delivered through a lecture-centric approach. However, in the current higher education scenario this approach appears to have limitations with regard to the preparation of

students for the workplace. As a result, HEIs are compelled to modify their approach to meet the demands of industry. One of the ways that this was addressed was by including an experiential learning component in their curricula. Experiential learning includes elements such as field-based coursework, internships, service learning, guest speakers and site visits (Domask, 2007). In the professional preparation of sport management personnel, experiential learning commonly exists as field experience in the form of internships (Verner *et al.*, 2001).

The increasing importance of practical work experience gained through internships cannot be overemphasized since, in recent times, there has been a significant reliance on acquiring practical skills in the workplace (Billet, 2001). Internships have become increasingly popular as a means to bridge the transition from the classroom to the work situation (Callanan & Benzing, 2004). They have long been an integral component in the educational preparation of students in disciplines such as finance (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2001; Callanan & Benzing, 2004), hospitality and tourism (Harris & Zhao, 2004; Lam & Ching, 2007), education and medicine (Jaschinski & De Villiers, 2008).

There are various definitions of internships. Knemeyer and Murphy (2001) describe internships as all work programmes that are designed to supplement a student's academic coursework. McMahon and Quinn (1995) define internship more specifically as a supervised work experience during which students are under special guidelines and attention while Taylor (1988) describes it as structured and career-relevant work experiences gained by students prior to graduation from an academic programme. For the purpose of this study internship is regarded as a process during which sport management students work as trainees to gain practical experience in sport management related activities in a sport organisation. The internship would normally be taken during the senior year of study, be of a minimum duration of three months in total and the student would receive credit for the completion of the internship. Sport management internships provide sport management students with an important introduction to their career paths (Moorman, 2004).

Verner *et al.* (2001) describe the internship as a triangular relationship entered into by three parties, namely the student, the university and the sponsoring organisation. All three parties help define the internship relationship in terms of the expectations of each party, the duration and the assessment criteria. Overall internships, which offer each party the potential to benefit from this unique educational opportunity, can be viewed as a win-win proposition for students, education institutions and employers. It assists in connecting the academic with the practice, evaluating the course content of curricula, linking students to work experience and job opportunities and engaging and empowering students (Domask, 2007). Greenhaus *et al.* (2000) posit that internships are the first formal introduction to the workplace for graduates. As such, internships contribute significantly towards shaping their careers and establishing a sound foundation in the workplace.

For students in particular, internship is an alternative learning method that helps them develop a realistic understanding of the profession that they have chosen and demonstrates the relevance of academic and technical skills needed on the job. It allows students to experience "real world" problem solving (Dodge & McKeough, 2003; Verner *et al.*, 2001) and increases the opportunity for possible full time employment upon graduation (Sharma *et al.*, 1995; Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2001). It increases their practical

knowledge and skills (Williams *et al.*, 1993), improves their self confidence, self concept and social skills (Knouse *et al.*, 1999), provides an opportunity to perform as a professional and experience an organisational culture (Verner *et al.*, 2001). In addition, Knouse *et al.* (1999) suggest that those students who have completed internships are placed more quickly in jobs than those without internship experience. Furthermore, students are more satisfied with their career choices and jobs (Hiltebeitel *et al.*, 2000; Ton & Hansen, 2001), experience greater job stability (Richards, 1984), experience improved performance (Tziner *et al.*, 2002), acquire job relevant skills (Garavan & Murphy, 2001) and receive job experiences that are valued by prospective employers (Callanan & Benzing, 2004).

From a university viewpoint, the university is able to help students reinforce the connection between theory and practice. The sponsoring organisation can help strengthen the profession by enhancing the workforce through developing more competent entry-level employees (Verner *et al.*, 2001). In addition, internship provides for the engagement of academics with industry. It creates opportunities for academics to collaborate with industry partners, build and strengthen relationships, develop research contacts with industry professionals and update information regarding the needs of industry as well as the community (Pauline & Pauline, 2008). For HEIs internship may be viewed as a positive strategy to compete for a larger intake of students by promoting a comprehensive curriculum with an attractive internship programme (Lam & Ching, 2007). Internships form an essential part of quality sport management education since it enables students to link the classroom to professional environments through observations, exploration and participation (Cuneen & Sidwell, 2007).

For employers, internship provides an excellent source for recruiting new employees (Maskooki *et al.*, 1998) and reducing uncertainty in the hiring process (Lam & Ching, 2007). It also provides the opportunity for organisations and interns to get to know each other better (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2001). It also helps organisations in their induction process and places them in a better position to retain their employees and foster their performance (Waryszak, 1999). Furthermore, it provides a 'tried and tested' method for organisations to evaluate prospective employees and to ensure a steady stream of motivated individuals who cost the organisation less than full time employees (Hodgson, 1999).

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The labour market in South Africa (SA) has been characterized by very high and increasing rates of unemployment and an acute shortage of skilled people (Kanye & Crous, 2007). Consequently, finding competent people who will fit in with an organisation's culture, vision and strategic goals has been a challenge. Statistics released by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2006 revealed that only 33.6% of graduates were successful in entering the job market (Umsobomvu Youth Fund, 2007), indicating merely obtaining an academic qualification does not always guarantee one a job. According to the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) which engaged with organisations, policymakers and government, skills shortage was one of the most common obstacles to growth in SA (ASGISA, 2006). Dias and Posel (2006) support this finding by commenting that firms identified skills shortage or the availability of technical and vocational skills as a constraint in individuals procuring employment. They concluded that the reasons for the high

and increasing unemployment in SA are often sought on the supply-side of the labour market. The supply-side of the labour market includes HEIs.

The Umsobomvu Youth Fund (2007) cited South Africa's past political and social imbalances, which denied most black graduates opportunities to gain life, professional and technical skills, as one of the reasons for their lacking access to economic opportunities. Akoojee *et al.* (2005) concluded that the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) focused too narrowly on qualifications, expecting this to bring about revolutionary change. This, however, had a negative effect on vocational training in the further education and training system in the country.

Pauw *et al.* (2006a) commented that evidence exists that large SA companies experience constant problems with the quality of graduates at all levels of the higher education system and that there are major labour market outcomes from the shortage of quality skilled individuals. Pauw *et al.* (2006b) are of the view that the majority of unemployed individuals possess limited skills while organisations increasingly demand highly-skilled workers. They posit that the pressure to become technologically more advanced have further increased the demand for highly-skilled workers. As a result the recruitment drives of many organisations currently focus heavily on attracting skills as well as experience. One of the ways in which the skills shortage and lack of experience could be addressed would be by including an internship in the curricula of different programmes offered at HEIs.

Many studies in South Africa have investigated the role of education in affecting the labour market (Dias & Possel, 2006). Among these were research on the relationship between education and earnings (Schultz & Mwabu, 1998), globalization and skill bias of occupational employment (Edwards, 2001), shifts in labour demands and youth employment and education (Bhorat & Hodge, 1999). More recently the focus has shifted to investigating the role of education in influencing the employment chances of graduates. At the 2008 South African Society for Cooperative Education (SASCE) Conference, the common thought was that HEIs in South Africa were failing to produce sufficient students who are adequately prepared for the working world, contributing to the growing skills shortage. Here it was suggested that one of the main reasons for increasing numbers of graduates struggling to find employment was the glaring mismatch between tertiary qualifications and the requirements of industry (Manganye, 2008).

The area of sport management has experienced the professionalisation of sport and leisure services throughout the world, including South Africa. This has created the need for personnel with knowledge and skills that are specific to the sport industry (Williams, 2004). The result was a proliferation of tertiary level sport and leisure programmes which, in turn, has placed increased demands on sport personnel in respect of specialized management knowledge and skills (Martin & Leberman, 2005; O'Shea & Watson, 2007). Despite an expanding body of literature and research in other disciplines there is a vacuum regarding research on the use of internships in sport management, especially in the South African context. Most of the studies conducted in the past on experiential learning were conducted in disciplines other than sport.

An examination of the sport management curricula of the different universities in South Africa that offer sport management revealed that the curriculum is made up of three components, namely academic coursework providing subject-matter knowledge, field practicals and work experience during internships. Most universities used the logbook system to monitor the progress of interns.

Limited research regarding the usefulness of internships for sport management personnel in the South African context has been conducted. It is expected that recommendations emanating from this study could in some way address the significant skills gap in the sport industry. The perceptions of interns were used to make suggestions to improve both the undergraduate as well as the internship experiences of students. Although internships and other forms of experiential learning have grown in popularity among different universities in different programmes, there is limited academic literature and research that reports empirically on the contributions of such approaches to academic and employment goals. This study has particular relevance to the South African labour market which is characterized by a very high and increasing rate of unemployment and skill shortage. Inputs from students who have completed their internship may prove beneficial to HEIs, students, and prospective employers. The significance of this study is that it attempts to fill a void by exploring the perceptions of sport management students who have completed an internship and managers or mentors, who manage sport management students who have completed their internship, regarding the usefulness of internships in preparing sport management personnel for the workplace.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The current study seeks to articulate from a student's perspective the value of internship in the professional preparation of sport management personnel. This paper attempts to contribute to academic research in education by providing empirical evidence on the usefulness of internships and making recommendations thereon.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

A quantitative research design was used in the current study. A comprehensive study of the literature on internships both nationally and internationally was undertaken. Arising from the literature study, a 47-item questionnaire was developed. Items in the questionnaire were scored on a 5-point Likert scale anchored at 1 (strongly agree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), and 5 (strongly disagree). Items in the questionnaire focused specifically on the perceptions of sport management interns who had completed their internships. Senior sport management lecturers at three different South African universities who coordinated Sport Management internships were invited to review the instrument for content validity and comment on the items in the questionnaire. Cronbach alpha was used to assess the reliability of the instrument. The instrument returned a Cronbach α value of 0.949 indicating high internal consistency of the instrument. The questionnaire was pre-tested by six sport management graduates. Based on their responses no modifications to the instrument were necessary. Questionnaires were administered at three of the nine universities which offered a sport management qualification with internship being a compulsory component. Coordinators of the internship component administered the questionnaires to the interns. Participants were

informed about the purpose of the study and were told that completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and they could discontinue the completion of the questionnaire at any stage. They were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Of a total of 300 questionnaires that were administered 201 (67%) usable questionnaires were returned.

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used to select the participants for the current study. A purposive sample constitutes participants with specific characteristics (Patton, 1990) and is constructed to serve a very specific need or purpose. In the current study which, participants comprised students who had completed their internship at a sport organisation not more than three years prior to them completing the questionnaire. This approach was used to ensure that the data collected was current and relevant.

Data Analysis

Analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS – version 17). All 47 items in the questionnaire were included in a principal component analysis to reduce the items to a smaller number of variables. Varimax rotation, which reapportions variance among factors so that they become relatively equal in importance, was used to simplify factors by maximizing the variance loadings across variables (Gillespie *et al.*, 2007). Principal component analyses were performed with items in the scale being removed until a simple structure in which several variables correlated highly with each other and only one factor correlated highly with each variable was achieved. Cronbach alpha coefficients were then calculated for each of the extracted factors to determine internal reliability.

RESULTS

Demographics

One hundred and eight (53.5%) male and 93 (46.5%) female interns completed the questionnaire. Most internships (65.3%) were of a three to six months full time duration. Majority of interns (81.7%) were completing a diploma qualification in Sport Management. The balance was made up of students studying towards the Bachelors degree in Sport Management (9.4%) and the Honors degree in Sport Management (8.9%). The main jobs that interns performed during their internship were administration, coaching, public relations and facility management. In many instances it was a combination of two or more of the aforementioned jobs. The different ways in which the internship was monitored included logbook entries, both logbook and telephonically, on site visits by university staff, field supervisor's written report, logbook and on site visits by university staff. In most instances (178, 88%) interns applied on their own for internship positions as opposed to being placed by the university. The majority of interns (125, 62%) did not go through an orientation or internship preparation before the internship. Most interns (178, 88%) did not get any financial assistance from the institution and were responsible for their own expenses for the duration of the internship.

Principal component analysis

Principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was applied to the 47 items. Previous studies (Bahia & Nantel, 2000; Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis, 2000; Dhurup *et al.*, 2006; Gillespie *et al.*, 2007) used varimax rotation in order to minimize the number of variables with high loadings on a factor and enhance the interpretability of the extracted factors. Using a minimum eigenvalue of 1, the PCA extracted 11 factors. An examination of the rotated component matrix revealed that 11 items that loaded within 0.20 of each other on more than one factor. These items were removed to reduce ambiguity in the interpretation of the factors (Tabachnick & Fidel, 2001). The iterative process was re-run a further three times until a clear factor structure was achieved. The final PCA was performed on 23 items producing a final model consisting of seven factors. These factors accounted for 77.80% of the overall variance in the scale item scores with two to five loadings on each factor. These factors included professional development (five items), personal development (five items), marketability (three items), adaptability (three items), relevance (three items), opportunity for growth (two items) and networking (two items). The rotated components matrix is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. ROTATED FACTOR LOADING MATRIX

ITEM	Factor 1 Prof. develop- ment	Factor 2 Personal develop- ment	Factor 3 Market- ability	Factor 4 Adapt- ability	Factor 5 Relevance	Factor 6 Opportunity for growth	Factor 7 Net- working	Means
Improved my job satisfaction	0.782							1.76
Helped me discover my professional self	0.783							1.81
Helped me build professional relationships	0.811							1.77
Helped me develop my professional self	0.539							1.87
Increased my commitment	0.693							1.62
Given me more insight of the sport industry		0.831						1.77
Improved my self confidence		0.878						1.72
Improved my self-concept		0.638						1.98
Improved my managerial skills		0.653						1.67
Taught me to		0.712						1.81

work in a team								
Made me more marketable			0.744					1.81
Developed in me an understanding of the purpose of work activities			0.813					1.70
Provided more extensive networks for finding jobs			0.856					1.84
Improved my performance				0.669				1.71
Improved my coping skills				0.811				1.76
Helped me to work under pressure				0.854				1.49
Helped me to evaluate the quality of my educational programmes					0.708			1.81
Helped me learn new skills					0.579			1.72
Given me greater job stability early in my career					0.747			1.69
Provided me access to increasingly complex tasks						0.791		2.05
Provided me with authentic learning experiences						0.655		1.96
Enabled me to establish an early professional reputation							0.811	2.07
Helped me launch my professional networks							0.816	2.23
Eigenvalue	8.106	2.468	1.806	1.674	1.508	1.194	1.139	
% of variance	35.244	10.729	7.850	7.279	6.556	5.191	4.954	

explained								
Cumulative %	35.244	45.973	53.823	61.103	67.658	72.849	77.803	
Cronbach Alpha	0.887	0.875	0.813	0.765	0.678	0.746	0.746	

Cronbach alpha was used to evaluate item reliability for each extracted factor. The factors' internal consistency ranged from 0.678–0.887, which were close to or greater than the recommended significance level of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) indicating an acceptable correlation of ranked values among parameters.

DISCUSSION

The benefits of a well-planned and executed internship are well documented (e.g. Parkhouse, 1987; Parks, 1991; Cuneen, 2004; Young & Baker, 2004; Ayers, 2007). The current study provided an opportunity to sport management students who had completed their internship the opportunity to evaluate and report on their internship experiences. Results from the study indicate that internship is an important pedagogical tool that contributes significantly to the holistic development of sport management interns.

There are indications that internships promote professional development, personal development, marketability and adaptability in addition to being relevant to the programme being pursued and providing opportunities for growth as well as developing networks and increasing the adaptability of interns. This implies that internships contribute to deeper learning.

Martin and Leberman (2005) highlighted the importance of personal development in the area of management education. Similar to the findings of the current study, Leberman and Martin (2004) found personal development to be crucial to the work situation. The findings suggest that, in addition to job-specific skills, individuals need interpersonal skills to deal with a range of challenges in the workplace. These interpersonal skills contribute towards the development of professional skills which in turn contributes to the holistic development of the individual. Mihail (2006) found that students who completed their internships were more optimistic and confident about their career prospects after they completed their internships. Jaschinski & De Villiers (2008) found that when interns are placed in a problem-based learning environment where they were allowed to apply their skills, they developed greater confidence since these situations called upon interns to recall theory learnt in the classroom situation.

The internship plays a pivotal role in assessing the applicability of the coursework to the positions that are available. It also provides the opportunity for both the intern as well as the academic (lecturer) to evaluate the programme during internship visits. Relevant placement is also important from the student's viewpoint in that the student is able to apply coursework rather than to go through a new learning process in the organisation. Internships create sources to impress potential employers thereby making it easier for students who have internships to get jobs after graduation than those without internships (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2001; Mihail, 2006). Harvey (2000) posits that potential employers prefer people who can

adapt quickly to the workplace culture and fit quickly into the job situation. The hands-on experience that interns gain help develop their adaptability and coping skills. Interns are able to understand the work environment and the pressures associated with the job. Within a relevant internship environment students are exposed to various problem-solving situations which contribute to the development of their coping skills. Zopedol (2007) comments that employability or unemployability is directly linked to the skills that one acquires at tertiary level, contending that graduates should not only acquire skills but that such skills should be relevant.

The current study identified developing the marketability of interns as a significant spin-off of internships. Having a job or internship creates value in the minds of prospective employers (Ayers, 2007), makes interns more marketable and enhances their chances of placement in appropriate jobs (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2001). This is because it contributes to interns having the essential ingredients – a general body of knowledge, a strong theoretical foundation and practical experience – sought by prospective employers.

Another important factor that emerged in the study was the development of networks by interns. Being in the job situation provides interns with access to various networks which assists in gaining knowledge about other organisations and making career choices. Networking also increases the chances of interns being better known by other organisations thereby increasing their employment possibilities. Sullivan (2007) identified networking as a necessary component in internship to gain access to employment and advancement in the sport industry. Similar findings were reported by Harris and Zhao (2004) in their study on industry internships.

CONCLUSION

This inquiry suggests that internship in Sport Management is of value to students. It provides the student with an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge gained in lecture-centric situations to practical job situations. It also creates the settings in which students are able to experiment in a professional environment under guidance and support. Under these circumstances students are able to critically evaluate their potential in the job situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Emanating from the findings of the study are several recommendations. The positive responses of interns suggest that internship should be an integral part of the Sport Management programme and should be included as a compulsory component of the curriculum.

The current study found that most interns did not receive any remuneration. Research (Parks, 1991) found that most interns in other countries were remunerated during their internship. It is therefore recommended that at least a stipend should be included in the internship contract to motivate interns. Harris and Zhao (2004) posit that financial rewards for participation in the internship could make it more meaningful and effective. The authors are of the opinion that local employers gain from the relationship, and should therefore compensate interns for their daily expenses at least.

Results of the study also indicate that there is scope for improvement regarding internship visits and feedback. These need to be developmental, structured, meaningful and consistent. It should also be well defined and cohesive (Lam & Ching, 2007). Internship programmes should be rigorously conceptualized and planned. It should encompass guidelines for expected outcomes and mechanisms for evaluation. In this way both the organisation and the intern could work towards common objectives. Jones (2006) opined that the design of the internship programme should allow interns to learn by doing and focus on personal career goals and objectives.

While it is important for students to experience the search and application for internship positions, internship coordinators should ensure that the internship position is relevant to the coursework studied. It is recommended that both interns as well as mentors undergo an orientation so that both parties are aware of each others' expectations of the internship. It is important for employers to be aware that interns are not a substitute for labour shortage but individuals who need to be structured and developed. HEIs need to form partnerships with industry so that students obtain market-relevant qualifications.

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