EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

Enhancing Student Employability:
A New Zealand Case Study of Cooperative Education in Sport

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Summary
This paper provides an insight into two cooperative education courses offered as part of three-year degree programmes in sport and recreation. Based in Auckland New Zealand, Unitec and Auckland University of Technology have been found to exemplify effective cooperative education strategies that compare favourably with current research into good practice in this field. Using a case study approach, the paper first establishes the context within which the cooperative courses operate, and then describes specific aspects of the courses that enhance student employability. The placement process, supervision, learning outcomes, assessment of learning and employment and career pathways are discussed in turn. These aspects are related back to relevant research on good practice and used to illuminate how student employability is embedded within these courses and across the degree programmes. It is concluded that students who undertake cooperative education as part of their degree programme have a competitive advantage in the employment marketplace.

Objectives
The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how employability is embedded and made explicit within two tertiary degree programmes in sport and recreation in New Zealand, through the use of cooperative education strategies. Cooperative education has been defined by the National Commission for Cooperative Education (2004), as “a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a students’ academic or career goals”. Work and learning are integrated through the development of partnerships between the tertiary institution, the student and a sport or recreation organisation. This case study will demonstrate how cooperative education facilitates student learning and increases the opportunity for meaningful employment at the conclusion of the three years of degree study.

Rationale
The study of sport at the tertiary level has responded to the expansion of employment opportunities in the sport and recreation sector. The two programmes used in the
case study have been identified as those that exemplify good practice in the preparation of students for employment in sport and recreation. However, the models that they illustrate are consistent with many operating in the sport sector globally (Fleming and Ferkins, 2005). Through sharing good practice we hope to demonstrate the efficacy of such programmes and encourage other tertiary providers to include cooperative education as a learning strategy for their students.

Context
New Zealand is a "proud" sporting nation with a considerable history and tradition associated with its achievement and participation in sport (Collins, 2000). A small nation of four million people on the world stage, the impact of sport on our society and economic system is a phenomenon that is experienced by individuals and organisations alike. New Zealand, for example, has a trading and political presence in the global community due in no small part to its sporting brands such as All Black rugby, Olympic Games and World Championship achievements and the successes of Team New Zealand's America's Cup Yachting Syndicates. Domestically, the growing business of sport within New Zealand contributes significantly to the domestic economy. An assessment in 1998 determined that the sport sector output, per day, was $4,800 million, while direct and indirect employment contributed to 31,000 jobs (Frater, Miller and Harris, 1998). With a population of around 4 million people, New Zealand also has one of the highest participation rates in sport and physical activity, globally. Almost all New Zealand adults (98%, approximately, 2.67 million) enjoy some sport or active leisure over the year and on a weekly basis, 68% of the population over 5 years old are considered to be active (engage in a minimum of 2.5 hours of activity per week) (van Aalst, Kazakov and McLean, 2005).

The important place of sport in New Zealand society and the growing number of employment opportunities in the sector have been recognised by tertiary education in New Zealand. A growing number of sport and related programmes which incorporate study in sport science, sport management and sport coaching from certificate to degree level through to postgraduate qualifications have been established over the last ten years. By comparison to the early 1990s, most universities, institutes of technology and polytechnics in New Zealand now carry one or more sport qualifications.

The industry that supports graduates with such qualifications is also in an early stage of evolution (Hindson, 1999). As the professionalisation of sport takes hold in New Zealand, there are increasing opportunities for paid employment in sport related discipline areas. The sport industry in New Zealand in the 21st Century, although still public sector driven, is now a mix of commercial interest, government involvement and non-profit organisations.

Description
Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and Unitec situated in Auckland, New Zealand both offer sub-degree, degree and postgraduate programmes that are focused on applied and vocational learning. This case study will focus on cooperative education components of two degree programmes in sport within these institutions.

Cooperative Education in Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at AUT
The BSR is a three-year programme that was first developed in 1997 to prepare students for careers in the areas of sports science, sport and recreation management, coaching, fitness, physical education or outdoor education. There are currently 100 students enrolled in the third year of this degree. During their final year all BSR students must complete 600 hours of cooperative education, where work and learning are integrated through the development of partnerships between the university, the student and a sport or recreation organisation. The cooperative education component constitutes half of the students’ total work load for the academic year.
Cooperative education papers\(^1\) (Cooperative 1 and Cooperative 2) are structured so that the student spends the equivalent of two days a week during the two semesters of the academic year within one organisation. During Cooperative 1 the students complete 200 hours of workplace activities and 100 hours is allocated as academic time for the students to reflect on and critically analyse their experiences as well as to design a project that is beneficial to their organisation. During Cooperative 2 the students are required to complete 150 hours in the workplace and the remaining 150 hours allow time for the students to complete, evaluate and present their industry related project.

Recent research (Fleming and Eames, 2004) has shown that the structure of the BSR cooperative programme was appropriate for student learning and that there was sufficient time in the workplace to build relationships and develop trust. In addition the flexible structure was able to accommodate the demands related to the seasonal nature of the sport industry. A key feature of cooperative education is that the students will integrate their learning between the classroom and the workplace. In the non-continuous or part-time structure of the BSR cooperative, the students are still undertaking academic courses within the University. The knowledge and capabilities the students are learning in the workplace can then be applied directly back in to the classroom and vice versa. A student exposed to the realities of the industry may then have a greater motivation for classroom learning (Burchell, Hodges and Rainsbury, 2000; Weisz, 2000).

Cooperative Education in Bachelor of Sport (B.Sport) at Unitec

The B.Sport with majors in management and coaching, is a three-year, full-time qualification offered at Unitec, West Auckland, New Zealand. The programme was first offered in 1999 and has prepared students for a wide variety of roles in “sport” that include ski instruction, strength and conditioning coaching, school sport co-

- ordination, physical education teaching (following one-year postgraduate study), fitness instruction, sport management and marketing roles in national and regional sport organisations, commercial product management, event management and facility management and marketing.

B.Sport students choose their major focus at the beginning of their second year of study and are required to undertake 80 hours of “practicum” work experience in their second year. This compulsory course plays a vital role in preparing students for an elective cooperative experience in the third year should they select this course, or offers an insight into the type of role they may choose upon completion of their degree. During the third year optional course, students spend approximately 120-140 hours within an organisation, with the remainder of the 180 hours spent on academic activities such as assessments and in-class seminars. Students can choose to undertake the course within one semester (fourteen weeks) or across two and each year about 25 students opt for it. This creates greater flexibility to accommodate industry organisation needs as well as offering the opportunity for longitudinal immersion for the student within the work environment.

Seminars scheduled throughout the course focus on maximising learning from the experience by making connections with other course work undertaken concurrently or completed throughout the three years of academic study. The cooperative course constitutes one of ten courses the students usually complete in their final year of study.

Placement Process

The students in both programmes are required to find and negotiate their own cooperative placement. This is a deliberate strategy tied to the development of job seeking and communication skills for the students. In the BSR, preparation for this process begins during the students’ second year when they are required to undertake two different practicum experiences of forty hours each. In the B.Sport students are required to undertaken one practicum of eighty hours. This provides the students with an introduction to the sport and recreation industry and a chance to identify

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\(^1\) This term is used in New Zealand instead of the more widely used ‘module’.
potential cooperative placement opportunities for the following year. Another strategy used to identify suitable organisations includes the students listening to presentations by the industry organisations that are seeking students. These presentations often broaden the students’ perspective of the sport and recreation industry by highlighting a range of different contexts in which they may undertake their learning experience. Other strategies available to students include reviewing advertisements placed on noticeboards and attending the final cooperative presentations by graduating students. After the students have selected their favoured options, they then individually approach the industry contacts. Through imitating the job seeking process, students are able to develop capabilities that can be utilised when seeking employment in the future.

Students can undertake work integrated learning opportunities in a broad range of settings in commercial, government and non-profit organisations. Industry placements include national, regional or local sports organisations, community recreation facilities, private and public sector health and fitness clubs, outdoor recreation or tourism operators, schools (physical education and sports departments) regional sports trusts, sport performance and sport science organisations, sports marketing and event management companies (see Appendix).

It has been established that matching and managing expectations from both the student and industry perspective is critical for optimising the success of the cooperative experience (Coff and Eames, 2000). A key strategy we use is the development of the student learning contract. This agreement outlines details of the cooperative requirements, a description of the negotiated work activities and general details relating to supervision and feedback. In addition the students develop specific learning objectives that relate to their own professional and academic development. Other strategies to help achieve a successful experience include a three way meeting set up between organisation, the university and the student where the learning contract is signed, as well as written guidelines and handbooks for the industry supervisor and other staff within the organisation.

Supervision
Effective supervision and mentoring is a critical part of the learning experience and has been shown to result in greater educational and career success for cooperative students (Ricks and Van Gyn, 1997). The students are supported during their cooperative placement by an academic supervisor from the tertiary institution who provides regular one-on-one mentoring. The communication between student and academic supervisor is generally face to face, however some students are now located at a distance from the institution and therefore email and website communication is used as an alternative.

An important part of the supervision process includes communication with the industry supervisor and site visits. Generally the academic supervisor will visit the workplace at least twice during the academic year. It is important to establish a sound framework for supervision as many students are involved in small sport organisations with poorly defined management structures. This is often a result of the reliance on volunteers, who have minimal management training (Shibury and Deane, 2001). Involvement in a cooperative education partnership assists staff within the industry to develop an understanding of the nature and concepts of the programmes currently available in our tertiary institutions. This enables potential employers to be more familiar with the skills and attributes that our graduates are equipped with.

The links developed with industry supervisors and staff within the organisations have had the added benefit of providing feedback on the relevancy and currency of course content. This has enabled our tertiary programmes to keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of the sport industry.

Learning Outcomes
The cooperative experience allows students to learn through a variety of experiences that result in changes in their actions and behaviours and enhances employability. The
The key aim of cooperative education is to apply and integrate theoretical concepts to the work environment. More specifically, it provides opportunities to:

- Analyse the role of the organisation and its relationships within the industry.
- Enable students to work in a professional manner and in a team environment.
- Enable students to critically reflect on their own practice.
- Develop generic skills such as communication, time management, planning, critical analysis, reflective thinking, initiative, and creativity.
- Develop problem solving, research, project design, and management skills relevant to the industry.

It has been shown in a study undertaken within the BSR that students developed a range of practical and technical skills relevant to their specific work activities. Students, through their experiences, develop a sense of what will be useful to them in their chosen career path. BSR students highlighted the importance of the development of soft skills and felt that “they are the things that you can carry over into anything, they are the things that make you better in the workplace” (Fleming and Eames, 2004: 4). Students gained confidence, improved oral and written communication skills, as well as developing capabilities related to reflective thinking, critical analysis, initiative, teamwork, and problem solving. In particular, improving time management was highlighted as a critical learning outcome.

A study of job advertisements that were placed in New Zealand print media during a three-month period identified competencies required to gain a position in sport and recreation. Soft skills such as communication, customer service, motivation, passion, and enthusiasm, as well as practical work experience were highlighted as being important requirements for employability (Wiersma and Bradbury, 2004). The inclusion of the cooperative education experience within our degree programmes facilitates the learning opportunities for our students to develop these capabilities that are not taught within the classroom.

As employment opportunities in some areas of sport, such as sport performance and exercise science are limited, transferable skills are essential for creating expanded opportunities in related vocations. In addition, there is considerable diversity within the sport and recreation industry such that a full range of skills can not be covered in any one degree structure. A graduate with specific knowledge may have an advantage with some employers but more often this knowledge is better learned in the work context where it will be used.

A critical part of the learning experience for the students from both programmes is the design and implementation of a project that is considered beneficial to the organisation. Students may design and implement physical activity or training programmes within a school or the community. Some projects may include market research, customer satisfaction surveys, or programme evaluations. Other projects include reliability and validity studies for equipment or fitness testing protocols with athletes or members of the community.

The project provides the opportunity for students to apply a range of technical skills and knowledge that have been learnt during their studies, yet also develop a wide range of new capabilities. Undertaking the project facilitates personal development by providing an opportunity for the students to take responsibility, which develops confidence and the use of initiative. BSR students have commented that by undertaking the project they have learnt “the importance of planning, the need to be organised, to set goals and objectives and to allow time because they often had to rely on others” (Fleming and Eames, 2004: 4). The involvement in a ‘real life’ project is a valuable strategy that enhances student learning and prepares students for the demands that they may encounter in the workplace. As many of the projects involve people, the students are able to develop, through their own experience, an understanding of the principles necessary to undertake projects in an ethical manner in...
the sport and recreation industry (Fleming and Walton, 2004).

The skills and capabilities that are developed through the cooperative learning strategy in our programmes are underpinned by findings from research in other discipline areas (Eames, 2003; Rainsbury et al., 2002). Jones and Linn (2004) summarise the following capabilities as being important for employability in any discipline area: academic skills, that is, the ability to learn, think critically and communicate effectively; personal skills, such as self confidence, positive attitude to learning, initiative, ability to plan and manage time, and teamwork.

Assessment of Learning
Cooperative education is not just ‘work experience’. Academic credit is given for the learning that results from the experience. Students in both programmes are required to keep a reflective journal throughout the whole period to reflect on and critically analyse their activities. In the BSR, for example, learning is assessed in the form of a reflective essay which allows the student to summarise their progress in terms of achieving their learning outcomes and comment on critical incidents. Personal learning can be unforeseen and unpredictable and is maximised from reflection on experiences. Therefore it is important that there is flexibility in assessment of the individual learning outcomes identified by the student in the learning contract, so that the learning derived from the experience is not constrained.

In the BSR the first reflective essay is submitted half way through Cooperative 1. A second reflective assessment forms part of the final report and the students are expected to reflect on and critically analyse their whole cooperative experience. In the B.Sport, the reflective journal is formally assessed at the end of the experience.

A key assessment of student learning occurs through the project proposal and subsequent project report. This strategy of project based assessment links the real-life application with academic theory. Communication skills are developed and assessed through the process of formal report writing and the presentation of the student projects to industry and academic staff.

In an attempt to prepare the students for employment, a component of the assessment includes an analysis of the organisation and its relationship with the sport and recreation industry. This encourages students to further contextualise their work with an in-depth understanding of the structure, operation and culture of the organisation. Other assessment tools which provide feedback on student performance include industry supervisor evaluations and student self-evaluations. These often identify personal and professional strengths that are valued by future employers. In addition, they highlight areas for further growth.

Employment and Career Pathways
Cooperative education aims to help students understand aspects of the real world by exposure to authentic work that is related to their career aims (Coll and Eames, 2004). Career pathways in sport are often not well defined (Hayes and Gunson, 1999) and therefore the placement experience is a vital stepping-stone to career guidance and future full-time employment. The cooperative experience exposes the students to a wider variety of options that they may not have considered previously. Students are able to discover what type of work they are passionate about and this can be used either to confirm or eliminate career options.

Careers in sport in New Zealand until recently have centred around physical education teaching or fitness instruction. However, as an outcome of their cooperative education experience students may instead find themselves prepared for a wider range of positions than were available ten years ago. Many positions in sport and recreation or postgraduate training courses will not even consider applicants unless they have experience to add to their qualification. Therefore, the cooperative experience they have gained provides a valuable component to their CV.

Many sport and recreation organisations use our cooperative education programmes to
identify potential employees. As employees, students who have undertaken a cooperative experience as part of their degree have been shown to have a better understanding of the demands of the industry, are more willing to volunteer for new roles and learn new skills that lead to advancement and success (Calway and Murphy, 2000). Employers recognise that there is considerable cost (financial and emotional) associated with managing an appointment that does not work for either the employer or employee. In addition, research has shown that cooperative students in many discipline areas are more likely to be hired than graduates who had not undertaken a cooperative experience (Braunstein, 1999; Ricks and Van Gynn, 1997). Cooperative graduates usually remain longer in their first job and tend to progress faster. Tertiary qualifications in sport are relatively new and therefore employers are often unaware of the knowledge and skills the graduates are equipped with. Therefore employers' involvement in the cooperative partnership, gives them a “feel” for the quality they should expect from new graduate employees.

**Conclusion**
This case study has established the benefits of work integrated learning for the employability of students in the sport and recreation industry. Overall, from our experience, which is supported by research in other disciplines, students who have undertaken cooperative education have a competitive edge in the employment marketplace (Hayward and Horvath, 2000). In addition, during the cooperative experience, students develop the desirable capabilities, beliefs and attitudes that make them valuable employees. This case study has highlighted the structure and processes necessary to achieve successful outcomes for the student, tertiary institution and the sport and recreation organisation.

**References and URLs**


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