EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

UWIC Academy of Athletics: A Case Study on Addressing Employability within the Total Student Experience

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Summary
This case study looks at how one institution is in the process of addressing the practical issues associated with the delivery of sports related degrees that, by definition, assume a vocational outcome. This objective has been approached partially through establishing sports academies. For the purposes of this article, the academy examined will be that of Athletics. The University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC) Academy of Athletics includes a Junior Academy currently involving some 180 children, who are coached by students from UWIC Athletics Club (the Senior Academy). All the students involved in this scheme are studying on one of four BSc (Hons) undergraduate programmes from within the School of Sport, PE & Recreation (School of Sport).

Currently there are 15 student coaches and one student Head Coach involved in working in the Junior Academy, all of whom are mentored by the Academy Director. Increasing numbers of these students are now pursuing employment related to their undergraduate programmes and are specifically using their Academy experience to assist them in securing such appointments.

Whilst the coaching and mentoring process within the Academy links directly to specific modules and particular programmes within the school’s portfolio, the possibility for embracing the opportunities for student placement and the associated employability consequences is not as yet embedded. Recent programme restructuring that also encompasses other curriculum and sports coaching/sports development issues on a national scale is attempting to take these considerations on board.

Rationale
The Higher Education Academy’s Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT) has reported that higher education should work at enhancing students’ ability to acquire and retain graduate jobs, and that the potential contribution of graduates to national prosperity is far-reaching. They indicate that in the UK the business of enhancing student employability is a policy priority that higher education should take seriously. ESECT (Higher Education Academy, 2005) highlight the fact that employability is a government concern for at least two reasons. First, it is important to the widening participation strategy because if the latter succeeds there will be more graduates looking for jobs. Secondly, the Government believes that a good supply of highly skilled employable graduates is essential for national economic and social well-being.

ESECT (Higher Education Academy, 2005) indicates that it is generally accepted that work-based learning, i.e.: ‘learning that is derived specifically from doing a job of work and taking on a workplace role' will assist students in their quest for meaningful employment that is related to their area of study.

The 1999 Bologna Declaration emphasised the need for courses to have a relevance to the labour market, for degrees to have a vocational purpose and
Those students whose undergraduate experience includes relevant work-based learning schemes which are embedded in the curriculum in the way ESECT suggests, will experience activities similar to the Context case studies and materials (http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/casestudies/). This will enable the academic curriculum to be developed in ways which enhance not only the students’ knowledge and understanding of their subject, but also their employability.

Curriculum change has continued unabated over the past several years. In fact Higher Education has been asked to respond to an increasing number of external pressures ever since the Dearing Report (1997). As Bloxham (2004) indicates, these various imperatives have been reflected in, “a plethora of policies such as Progress Files, Benchmarking statements, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and programme specifications with a focus on ‘outcome-based curricula’ and specifically identifying generic or transferable skills.” It is clear that a number of institutions providing sports related programmes are taking on board the need to embed skills and employability within the curriculum framework. UWIC is one of these.

Context

UWIC’s School of Sport has approximately 1300 students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate sport-related programmes. In recent years the school has initiated a policy of developing sport-specific academies. The directors of the academies are members of the school’s academic staff and part of their remit is to lead these academies and to pursue the elements of the school’s strategic plan that relate directly to their activities. The current designated academies are in athletics, basketball, football, gymnastics, netball, rugby and squash.

The school has adopted a ‘From the Playground to the Podium’ philosophy to encompass the activities of the academies. Currently this involves children from the local community, between the ages of 8 to 16, attending the Junior Academy of Athletics and being coached by students from UWIC Athletics Club who, in turn, form part of the Senior Academy of Athletics. Extended elements of this Senior Academy include the senior

for higher education to develop transferable skills that are relevant to subsequent employment. As a consequence, in higher education across Europe there has been a move to ensure that the link between sports related courses and employability is made more effectively.

In 2003 the European Network of Sport Science in Higher Education (ENSSHE) changed its name to the European Network of Sport Science, Education and Employment (ENSEE), and its mission reflected this change in emphasis. Subsequently, the European Union (EU) has clearly taken on board the importance and enormous growth of sport related employment across Europe by funding recent ENSSEE projects such as the European Observatoire of Sports Employment (EOSE), the study of the relationship between vocational training and employment in sports in Europe (VOCASPORT), the European Observatoire for Sport Education and Employer Network (EUROSEEN), and Building the Social Dialogue in the Sports Sector (BSDSS), (ENSEE, 2005). In each of these projects, European HEIs have been core to development and progress, and project outcomes are likely to have long-term effects on EU policy in relation to the sports industry. As a consequence, it is probable that this will also affect course content and student experience for those undertaking sports degrees of a vocational nature.

Within the UK, particularly since the recommendations of The Coaching Task Force – Final Report (2002), the government has also developed policies that are being implemented by the governing bodies of sport, and national and regional sports councils. Therefore, within England (and in equivalent developments in Wales), the growth of posts such as generic and sports-specific development officers, School Sport Coordinator partnerships, and the more recent Community Sports Coach posts has a particular resonance. It should be assumed that other developments (such as the UK Coaching Certificate) will continue to provide improved employment opportunities for our graduates, particularly in relation to sport-specific posts such as Coach Development Officers and Performance Coaches.

Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Network, December 2005
coaches who are appointed by the Athletic Union through the Academy Director to coach the student athletes. Also associated with the Senior Academy is the UK Athletics’ High Performance Centre for Wales, which is managed by the UKA Wales High Performance Coach who has responsibility for the ‘World Class’ and ‘Elite Cymru’ athletes including Olympic medallists who train at the same facility. Some of these elite athletes are also students from UWIC Athletics Club, a few of whom also operate as coaches in the Junior Academy.

The school has recently undertaken the process of reviewing and restructuring its undergraduate scheme and in the process has taken on board the need to embed student employability more effectively into its courses, particularly degrees in Sports Development and Sports Coaching.

**Description**

Part of the UWIC School of Sport’s Strategic Plan addresses the development of its sport-specific academies. It indicates that one of the aims of the academies will be to “utilise, structure and operate academies in a manner that attracts high quality students from a variety of communities, supports their sporting and career aspirations, and enhance the sporting excellence profile of UWIC.”

In 2000, through a combination of Lottery and UWIC funding, the National Indoor Athletics Centre (NIAC) was opened at UWIC. In 2002, the UWIC Academy of Athletics was instituted and became based in NIAC. The Athletics Academy is used as an exemplar of the UWIC academies of sport for the purposes of this case study, and will be referred to as the Academy.

Extracts from the Academy’s Mission (UWIC, 2002) include the following:

- To provide students with the optimum conditions to support training, competition and career aspirations.
- To create and develop initiatives with local, national and international groups covering the areas of education and training, research, strategy and student employment.

Sponsorship was acquired and as a consequence a Lottery Sports Match grant was also successfully obtained. This helped the Academy provide an athletics experience for children from schools in the more disadvantaged areas of the local community. Using the Sports Match grant, student coaches from the athletics club were given the task of ordering, organising and operating student union minibuses to collect children and their teachers from selected local primary and secondary schools so that the children could experience the athletics courses in the same way as the other clientele. The responsibility for managing this process was given to the Junior Academy Head Coach (also a student), and with the guidance of the Academy Director, they undertook all the communicating and liaising between the various parties.

Whilst there are a number of athletics award schemes and programmes that are available the Academy Director established the Junior Academy of Athletics Proficiency Awards (JAAPA), based on his perception of a need to pursue a more specific programme of athletics skills for children. These were developed based on the work of a colleague whose research work is centred on motivation and pedagogy, and more specifically, motivation in athletics lessons. As a consequence, the JAAPA course was based on the content of his book, *Athletics Challenges: A Resource Pack for Teaching Athletics* (Morgan, 2002).

All prospective student coaches have to achieve at least the UK Athletics Level 1 coaching award, and attend a two-day course delivered by the author of *Athletics Challenges*. The Sports Facilities division of the School of Sport is responsible for the operational aspects of all of UWIC’s sports facilities, and in conjunction with the local authority and Welsh Athletics, they also mount a number of coach education courses in a whole variety of sports for the benefit of the local community, as well as specifically for our students. Through this process, the Junior Academy coaches were able to pursue UKA Level 1 athletics coaching awards and beyond. As part of the Academy’s coach development plan, these coaches are provided with financial support with their fees. All coaches are students who are in either year 2 of their degree programmes or above.
The JAAPA course operates across five levels of progression: Level 1 (Year 4, age 8-9); Level 2 (Years 5&6, age 9-11); Level 3 (Years 7&8, age 11-13); Level 4 (Year 9, age 13-14); Level 5 (Years 10&11+, age 14-16+). It operates each term in ten-week blocks. The Academy promotes week long athletics camps for primary and secondary school children during the Christmas, Easter and summer holiday periods. These are also organised and managed on a daily basis by student coaches, and include the running of a mini-Olympics on the final day. Tasks for the children prior to the mini-Olympics include choosing a theme and designing a uniform for their particular teams. The day involves team march-pasts to music, competitions, invitations sent to parents to support their children, and award giving ceremonies using our contacts between the student coaches and real Olympic competitors and medallists who train in NIAC. Not only is this enjoyed greatly by the children but it also takes careful planning and organisation by the students to ensure that the whole week goes smoothly. This again applies directly to their academic and performance module experiences.

In September 2004, approximately 1600 children per week were involved in various sports activities at UWIC. Whilst these activities did not all involve the academies, a considerable proportion of them did, and all the children were coached by students from within the school. Clearly, this involves large numbers of students. Given that the organisation and opportunities within other academies are similar to those that exist within the Academy of Athletics, then the potential for work-place experiences that enhance student employability is substantial. This, coupled with the opportunity within their academic and performance modules for the students to give feedback on their work-based experiences, acts as an invaluable source for reflecting on the application of practice within the context of more theoretical concepts.

Throughout its history, UWIC’s School of Sport has ensured that performance modules have been central to its degree programme curriculum. This greatly enhances the experience of the student working in the various sports academies. The back-up theoretical elements of both performance and academic modules allow students the opportunity to make connections far more effectively. For example, when student academy coaches are asked to conduct a knowledge experience and skills audit of themselves in one of their core modules, they have the advantage of being able to report on their own experience of applying theoretical and practical concepts to a real work-place situation. In another module, students are able to use this experience to help them produce an action plan for the future based on such an audit.

All student coaches within the Academy are mentored by the Academy Director, and this process includes keying into the student academic experience. Therefore, when the Academy Director talks to the coaches about theoretical concepts (such as the reflective coach, coaching goals, planning, management and organisation, communication, personal coaching evaluation), or the practical application and outcomes of these concepts in relation to their own coaching, they are able to relate them to their academic experience from within the theoretical and performance modules of their degree programmes. They will also have had experience of coaching, observing, analysing and providing feedback in either their sports performance or sports technology modules. Naturally, this is a complementary process, in that their academy experiences inform the theoretical concepts within their taught modules.

Beyond this level of mentoring, there is also the mentoring that occurs at the Head Coach level. The Head Coach is also a student and has to take on a number of management, administrative and organisational roles, particularly when the camps occur during the school holidays. As part of this work place role, the Head Coach liaises with the Junior Academy coaches on a day-to-day basis, ensuring that all sessions are fully covered, and conducts meetings with them from time to time in order to pursue any issues that arise as a result of feedback from the Academy Director or from the coaches themselves. The Head Coach is also responsible for ensuring that all coaches complete their weekly returns for payment and liaises with the Sports Facilities section of the school over coach-related matters. Again, all this involves the practical application of modules within
areas such as Sports Management, Sport Administration and Sport Development.

In 2004, the School of Sport received the Investors in People (IIP) award and this included the Sports Facilities section in which the Junior Academy Coaches and Head Coach are located. The staff development and mentoring processes that are applied to these coaches within the Academy of Athletics were examined and found to be very effective.

The Sports Facilities process reflects the type of monitoring and mentoring that occurs within the industry. Consequently, as with all Head Coaches within the UWIC Junior Academies, the Junior Academy of Athletics Head Coach is charged with maintaining a personal development file. To some extent, this pre-emptsthe proposed personal development planning files and includes specific sections on:

- Academy Director’s aims, objective and action plan.
- Personal information – Job description, person specification, CV.
- Induction, probation, progress checks.
- Mentoring, coaching.
- Reflective learning logs – daily, weekly, monthly.
- Reflective learning logs – course approval and course evaluation.
- Training records.
- Records of certificates, achievements.
- Evidence of the above.

The Head Coach and the Academy Director meet on a regular basis, normally several times during the week, in order to discuss operational matters and feedback from meetings with the coaches. This reflects the types of middle management meetings, mentoring and monitoring processes that occur within the industry and are referred to within degree courses.

Organisational and administrative activities are integral to the coach’s role within the Academy. Coaches become involved with these, as well as the coaching process itself, when they have gone through the various aspects of athletics coaching courses and qualifications, the mentoring process and experience of role-play in the relevant theoretical and performance based modules within their courses.

The Academy works on a ratio of around 10-12 children to one coach. There is a syllabus based on the 5 levels of the JAAPA award derived from the materials supplied from the Athletics Challenges resource pack. As the children get older, they may wish to concentrate on their skills in specific events. Coaches have the opportunity to cover coaching and training for specific events as well as more general athletics skills. This enhances their ability to offer potential employers evidence of more advanced coaching skills.

Currently, a child’s progression involves moving either between levels from one year to the next (the norm is that the children tend to stay within the Academy from year to year) or, if their age precludes them from moving to the next JAAPA level, they become involved in more advanced activities for their particular level.

At the end of each term or block, every coach is given the responsibility of completing a report card for each of their athletes that addresses areas such as effort, attainment, improvement and attitude, together with an indication of key areas for improvement as well as the coach’s general comments on the young athlete. Each child also receives a customised certificate relating to the JAAPA level attained within a particular block of activity.

The plan for the near future is that children who reach the age where more specialisation is appropriate, and who clearly have more advanced abilities within a particular event grouping, will be invited to become part of a fast-track group. These children have the option of attending extra sessions during the week, with a view to competing within athletics development meetings for children that are held in conjunction with the Athletics Association of Wales (AAW) during the winter period in the NIAC facility. The development of this group and the current Level 4 and 5 JAAPA groups will allow the coaches to use more advanced elements of knowledge gained from athletics performance modules and their personal performance experiences, in order to enhance and record experience of specific event coaching. The intention would be to
then try to encourage these children from the fast-track group to join a local athletics club to promote an active career within the sport.

The athletics development meetings referred to tend to be very relaxed and informal affairs and any child from within JAAPA is able to participate and is encouraged to do so. Academy coaches are encouraged to help and support the AAW in the organisation and running of these athletics meetings, thus improving their knowledge of event organisation and officiating. There is a direct link here for those students undertaking Level 3 athletics modules in which they are required to organise all aspects of a sports day using the whole of the first year student cohort as part of their assessment process.

As the Junior Academy coaches progress over their time at UWIC they are encouraged to pursue higher level coaching qualifications. The Academy supports them by contributing to the payment of the fees for these awards. These more advanced qualifications, along with the experience gained from their degree programme Level 2 and 3 theory and performance modules, allow the Junior Academy coaches to practise their coaching skills with the more advanced groups and at the same time to develop their own event specialisms.

Over the last two years, the Academy Director has been a member of the Cardiff Athletics Development Working Group. This group also includes representatives from UWIC’s Sports Facilities Unit, Cardiff County Council, Sports Council for Wales, the Amateur Athletics Association of Wales, and Cardiff Amateur Athletics Club. The purpose of this group is to develop a structure within Cardiff whereby children will experience the sport of athletics in a constructive and enjoyable manner both inside and outside the school curriculum. As a result of this experience it is hoped that they will wish to join their local club and participate in the sport of their choice on a long-term basis.

The group has promoted various initiatives with local primary and secondary schools, the local authority, the local athletics club and the AAW development meetings. It is hoped that these initiatives, along with the JAAPA courses in UWIC, will mean that a considerable number of interested and motivated youngsters will wish to join their local club. However, this is where the problem begins, as there are rarely enough qualified coaches available to deal with such an influx, even for major clubs like Cardiff AC.

It has been proposed by the Academy Director that the various parties (particularly the local club) could utilise the many student coaches who have specific event expertise, through liaison with the Director and promotion of the coach development programme by the UWIC Academy of Athletics. These students who are gaining further coaching awards and coaching experience by their final year through the Academy and their Level 3 modules, could perhaps be involved in taking on these older, interested children on behalf of the local club. This would certainly link very effectively with the Junior Academy’s proposal to provide a fast-track group for the older and more able children and give the student coaches additional vital experience and enhanced employability.

One or two more mature student coaches (usually postgraduates or recent graduates) who have gained level 3 and 4 UKA coaching awards are now working within the Senior Academy. They are coaching and developing groups of student athletes who operate at quite an advanced level, some of whom are international athletes in their own right. These young coaches have shown that they are now very able to undertake the responsibilities involved in the planning, administration and coaching performance associated with working with athletes at this level, all areas that they have experienced within the curriculum and the Junior Academy. Many people have commented that the nature of the operational ethos that the Academy Director has created within NIAC means that the whole process is far more co-operative than normal. It is almost a team-coaching approach, whereby expertise from various coaches is called upon to support a number of athletes. Indeed, the Academy Director has called upon the expertise of one of the former Junior Academy coaches to monitor certain elements of his own athletes’ training programmes and, in turn, the Academy Director continues to mentor that coach. The author believes that the young coaches who have gone through this
whole academic, professional and experiential process, should be the ones who form the basis of the next generation of UK Athletics' high performance coaches and, indeed, the professional elite coaches who will ensure success with our elite athletes in the major athletics championships of the future.

As an example of the progression of some of these Junior Academy coaches, it may be appropriate to note the experience of one of them. The coach concerned had been involved in coaching in the Junior Academy during her second and third years at UWIC and she gained the UKA Level 3 coaching qualification. During this period she also coached on the UWIC Christmas, Easter and summer athletics camps and used this experience to apply for and successfully become involved with various local authority junior athletics coaching schemes in the South Wales area during term time and vacation periods. This coach not only achieved a 2:1 in her Sports Development degree but as a successful athlete was selected to compete internationally for Great Britain in the under-23 team during the same year. She was then successful in her application to become a full time Community Sports Coach, a position she continues to hold. The Academy Director has provided a reference for her, and for an increasing number of Junior Academy coaches over the last 2 years.

Evaluation

It is hoped that all that has been described thus far underlines the fact that there is a well-structured athletics academy operating at a variety of levels, including the areas of student coach education and development. There is a direct link with the content of the students’ course experiences, thus enhancing their employability. Indeed, the success of this student experience can be measured by the fact that in 2003 UWIC Junior Academy of Athletics was one of the four Junior Academies that formed UWIC’s winning submission in Sportsmatch Wales’ 2003 ‘Local Sports Programme of the Year Award’ category. This success was repeated in the 2005 UK Athletics ‘Clubs Future Awards’. UWIC Academy of Athletics was the recipient of the ‘Club Innovation’ award for the Wales region. This is largely due to the work described in this case study.

However, as yet, the Academy link with the student’s academic experience has not been integrated within the curriculum in a manner that could allow it to be described as formally embedding employability within the curriculum.

Discussion

Recently, the school has reviewed and restructured its undergraduate sports studies scheme (UGSSS). As part of this process, Student Progress Files have been introduced to form part of Personal Development Planning (PDP). Students working within the Academy will be required not only to record their activities, but also to reflect on these activities in terms of their personal development.

Students will have the opportunity in the near future to access their Progress files through work in the Academy of Athletics. Their Academy experience will allow them to provide concrete evidence of the ability to build and reflect in their PDP. There is a strong link between PDP and employability (Higher Education Academy, 2005).

At Level 3 in the restructured Sports Development and Sports Coaching degrees (the latter also takes into account the demands of the UK Coaching Certificate), will be a 30 credit ‘Work Experience’ module. This will, for example, allow the activities of a student within the Academy of Athletics to be recognised in a more formal manner. The module aims to:

“allow students to benefit from interacting with employers from organisations directly related to their programme of study and engage in reflective critical analysis of their experience and the organisation they have been placed with.”

In terms of their work experience within the Academy, students should be able to:

- Develop and enhance the theoretical knowledge and skills acquired within their degree programme.
- Develop core transferable skills within the confines of a monitored Academy working environment.
- Experience and perform within the Academy to the standards
required of an employer within the sports development and coaching industry.

- Understand and critically review the range of management processes used within the various elements within the Academy and the allied Sports Facilities unit.

- As a result of the Academy experience, develop a critical understanding of the issues related to the sports development and coaching industry.

Students undertaking this module and working within the Academy of Athletics will be required to produce a 6,000 word portfolio incorporating evidence of these outcomes as part of their assessment.

These informal structures, which are highly effective in producing employable graduates by involving students in both Academy and course experience, will in future be greatly enhanced through the restructuring of these two degrees.

It is anticipated that the future will also involve at least one Academy Athletics Development Officer placement becoming available for a student undertaking the Sports Development degree. This would certainly key into some of the proposed developments described earlier regarding the Cardiff Athletics Development Working Group. Also being considered for the future within the Senior Academy is the implementation of posts for students from the Sport and Exercise Science degree specifically for the purpose of supporting the student athlete performers. Such work placement experiences would undoubtedly enhance the employability prospects of these students.

This case study has attempted to describe the structure, activities and practices that permeate the Academy of Athletics, how they link informally with the academic experience of the students on courses and how this experience enhances student employability. What it has also attempted to show is that, with the school’s link to the Academy of Athletics (and other academies) now formally written into the restructured courses, particularly through the PDP and Work Experience modules, it is anticipated that student employment prospects will be greatly enhanced. The outcome will be a more effective response to embedding the concept of employability within the overall experience of sports students at UWIC.
References and URLs


Context Case Studies http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/casestudies/


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