



## Research Report

# Sporting Best Practice: An Industry View of Work Placements

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This paper reports on an investigation into the current practice of student work placements in sport studies in Auckland New Zealand. It identifies the scope and range of student and sport organization involvement, and reports on the industry perspective of the process. The study also identifies recommendations from employers to improve the placement process and to assist in developing best practice guidelines for industry organizations involved in learning via cooperative education (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 3(2), 29-34).

**Keywords:** New Zealand; sport; employer; best practice; evaluation; industry

The study of sport at the tertiary level has seen a rapid increase in the breath and depth of programs both in New Zealand and internationally, over the last 10 years (Grant & Stothart, 1998). By comparison to the early 1990s, most universities, institutes of technology and polytechnics in New Zealand now carry one or more sport qualification. This study of sport in New Zealand arguably has as its parent disciplines physical education, recreation and leisure studies (Grant & Stothart, 1994). In 2002, many institutions now have a focus on sport studies with curricula that incorporate a range of traditional disciplines. UNITEC Institute of Technology in Auckland, for example, has a Bachelor of Sport that includes science-based subjects such as exercise physiology and biomechanics; education-based subjects such as sport coaching and pedagogy; sociology and social psychology-based subjects such as sport psychology and sport and society; and management-based courses such as sport management, sport marketing and financial management. Table 1 provides a summary of sport qualifications in the Auckland region.

The industry that supports graduates with such qualifications is also in an early stage of evolution (Hindson, 1999). As the professionalization of sport takes hold in New Zealand, there are increasing opportunities for paid employment in the range of discipline areas noted above. The sport industry in New Zealand in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, although still public sector driven, is now a mix of commercial interest, government involvement and non-profit organizations. The type of vocational options available to students with qualifications in sport include event management for sport management companies, sport facility management, sport development for national and regional sport, fitness instruction at commercial centers and public recreation centers, sport coordination in schools or the

coaching of teams or individuals (Table 2 contains a detailed list).

### Work-based Learning for Sport

As sport qualifications at the tertiary level have been developed primarily for vocational purposes, the integration of work-based learning is therefore considered a natural focus (Cunnen & Sidwell, 1994). For the more applied orientated institutions, the integration of industry practice occurs throughout the sport curriculum via the use of case study work within the classroom or practical sessions in field, and work-based learning is considered an extension of these teaching methods. Quality and definition issues in work-based learning programs are regularly raised. Finch (2001) is an advocate for global "quality factors" (p. 22), while Gibson (2001) seeks to categorize cooperative education into four categories.

For the domain in question, the lead is taken by the *National Association for Sport and Physical Education* and the *North American Society for Sport Management* (1993) who have an approved curriculum for the study of sport. This curriculum includes an experiential component and provides minimum guidelines for undertaking courses relating to "field experiences." In their discussion of these guidelines, Cunnen and Sidwell (1994) define "field experiences" as credit bearing and distinguish between "...practica, which constitute part-time placement at external agencies and internships, which are full-time job commitments" (p. 5). Many of the tertiary sport courses in New Zealand (e.g., Massey University at Albany, UNITEC and Auckland University of Technology) have utilized these guidelines to develop practica or work-based courses. The terminology for these courses in sport studies varies across

**Table 1**  
Work-based sports courses provided at Auckland tertiary institutions

<i>Tertiary Institution</i>	<i>Major Qualifications</i>	<i>Nature of the Work-Based Course</i>	<i>Field Hours</i>
Auckland University of Technology, Akaranga Campus	Bachelor of Sport & Recreation Diploma in Recreation	Experiential & research based, compulsory Research component, project based, final year, full year, compulsory	120 400
Massey University, Albany	Bachelor of Business in Sport Management & Coaching	Integration of theory & practice, final year, one semester, compulsory	150
UNITEC, Auckland	Bachelor of Sport (Management) (Coaching) Diploma in Sport & Fitness Education	Investigative, experiential, task based, compulsory Integration of theory & practice, project based, final year, one semester, optional	100 150
University of Auckland, Tamaki Campus	Bachelor of Science (Sport Science)	Optional	NA
Manukau Institute of Technology	Advanced Certificate in Applied Recreation and Sport	Experiential and reflective. Includes aspects of delivery. Three compulsory blocks of 5 weeks per year.	80

New Zealand and around the world, but includes titles such as *professional practicum, industry experience and Research, work-based cooperative practicum and sport practicum*. For the purposes of this paper the term ‘work-based learning’ is used to describe part-time placement within industry organizations.

**Purpose of the Study**

This investigation sought to gain an industry view of work placements within the Auckland region. It also sought to gather data on the nature and scope of work placements in order to determine the potential impact such courses are having on the sport industry in Auckland. This perspective was developed from the knowledge that an increasing number of sport organizations in the region are being approached by students seeking work-based learning experiences each year. There is significant potential for sport organizations to benefit from this opportunity and there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is the case.

As academic institutions have developed their curricula in sport studies, an emphasis has been placed on designing the program to maximize the student learning experience and in particular, the opportunity to apply theory to practice. In an attempt to achieve best practice and, in particular, to further strengthen partnerships with industry, the researchers identified a need to maximize the benefit to the sport organizations involved by first gaining an industry view of work placements.

**Methodology**

Academic staff from tertiary institutions within Auckland collaborated on a project where industry representatives were surveyed on their opinions of the work placement experience. In particular, organizations were asked to

identify their reasons for involvement, how they benefit, what concerns, issues or limitations they have experienced or would experience, and what improvement they would recommend in order to derive more benefit from the placements. A total of 12 organizations were surveyed using open-ended questions, conducted either by telephone or in face-to-face interviews. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and one hour in duration. The organizations were selected on the basis that they were currently involved with one of the five public tertiary institutions in practicum courses.

In addition to this phase of the investigation, information was also gathered about the nature and scope of practicum courses as designed by the five public tertiary institutions. These institutions are: Auckland University of Technology, Massey University at Albany, UNITEC at Auckland, University of Auckland and Manukau Institute of Technology.

Academic staff from the sport programs at UNITEC and Auckland University of Technology interviewed their colleagues at the three remaining institutions in face-to-face or phone interviews, using a mix of both open-ended and closed questions to build a profile of the nature and scope of such courses across the Auckland region.

**Research Findings**

*Phase One: The Nature and Scope of Work Based Sport Courses in Auckland*

As a result of the survey of institutions, it was estimated that there are 300-400 sport students per annum undertaking work placements within the Auckland region. It was also estimated that these students were spread across approximately 150 sport organizations within the region. The type of sport organization varied across the commercial, public and nonprofit sectors. Such

**Table 2**  
Overview of sports placements in the Auckland region

<i>Type of Industry Organization</i>	<i>Organization Example</i>	<i>Placement Example</i>
Sport Clubs	Takapuna Golf Club Herne Bay Squash & Tennis	Coaching Role Market Research Role
Regional Sport Organizations	Auckland Tennis North Harbor Rugby	Auckland Savings Bank Classic Marketing National Provincial Championship Promotion
National Sport Organizations	New Zealand Rugby League New Zealand Hockey	Coaching Development Role Member Database Review
Regional Sports Trusts	Sport North Harbor Sport Auckland	Have-a-go Day Co-ordination School Coaching Assistance
National & Local Government	Auckland Regional Council North Shore City Council	Bike Lane Promotion Leisure Services Assistance
Schools	Lynfield College Gladstone Primary School	Sport Co-ordination Soccer Coaching Role
Public Recreation Centers	Ellerslie Panmure YMCA Glenfield Leisure Center	Program Coordination Pool Promotion
Commercial Sport & Fitness Centers	Club Physical Millennium Center	Personal Training Sport Science Support
Sport Consultancies	International Management Group Sport Management Concepts	Ironman Event Assistance Sponsorship Co-ordination
Sporting Goods Companies	Nike Head Office Stirling Sports Head Office	Athlete Sponsorship Support Marketing Assistance
Sport Sponsors	Auckland Savings Bank Events Lion Breweries	Sponsorship market research Sponsorship evaluation
Sport Media	Auckland Savings Bank Lion Breweries	Sponsorship market research Sponsorship evaluation
Training & Education	Cliffhangers UNITEC School of Sport	Outdoor Education Support Sport Science Research Support

organizations included sport-specific national, regional and local bodies, community based organizations such as regional sports trusts or city councils; schools, sport facilities and fitness centers; commercial event organizers and sport marketing companies; training and education organizations; and sport sponsors and sport media. Table 1 provides an overview of the types of organizations involved in placements and details example roles undertaken by students.

All five of the public tertiary institutions within the Auckland region offer sport-related programs and all now undertake work-based learning in the form of a dedicated course or courses. Four initiated their courses from the inception of their qualifications (approximately 48 years ago) and one introduced its course two years ago. The level of qualification varied from level 3 (the lowest level for some certificate courses) to level 7 (the highest level for the undergraduate degree courses). While the investigation found some variation with regard to the specific objectives or learning outcomes, structure and assessment requirements of the courses, the data also showed relative consistency in this area. The broad aims across the courses are to:

1. Integrate theory and practice
2. Provide an opportunity for the student to experience work settings to assist in determining future career choices

3. Provide an opportunity for the student to develop 'professional' skills in the work setting including 'networking'
4. Provide an opportunity for the student to develop practical skills and other alternative methods of learning in the work setting which may be different from the classroom setting
5. Provide an opportunity for the student to evaluate her/himself while being evaluated by others

From these broad aims, the course structure and specific objectives across the five public institutions varied from those designed to be investigative with less emphasis on undertaking significant work tasks to those that were project-based requiring significant contribution by the student to the achievement of work outputs. Some also required a significant research component while others, by contrast, focused on the development of practical skills and 'learning by doing' (Table 1). The nature of assessment while varying at the specific level across institutions can also be summarized as set out below.

Assessment one comprised, a *proposal, job description, and report on intended action*. This included a brief three to five page document of intent, negotiated between the industry organization and the student. In some cases the written piece of work was accompanied by a three-way meeting between the student and academic and industry supervisors.

Assessment two comprised, a *journal, record of events, description, analysis, and reflection*. This included a more substantial piece of work based on reflection and analysis of the experience. In many cases a portfolio of fieldwork examples was also required.

Assessment three involved, *evaluation by the work supervisor, academic supervisor and student*. This included a written evaluation from the student prepared at the conclusion of the placement. Also required was a written evaluation form by the industry supervisor and in some cases a three-way evaluation meeting between industry and academic supervisor, and student.

The final category of information gathered from the institutions was the extent to which students were prepared by the institution before commencing the practicum, and the level of academic support provided during the placement. At the time the data was gathered, two of the five institutions organized student-training seminars prior to the placement starting. All institutions provided some degree of academic support during the placement, although this varied from one meeting with the student (in the case of two institutions) to two-weekly meetings with the student and three site visits (in the case of two other institutions). Table 1 sets out the courses offered by the five institutions.

These data suggests that such courses are having a significant impact on the sport industry within the Auckland region due to the number of students involved, the nature of the course requirements, and the period of time such courses have been running. In addition to being able to describe the scope and nature of such courses, another purpose of this research was to gain an 'industry view' of such courses so that the relationships between all parties involved can be strengthened. This formed phase two of the investigation process as set out below.

#### *Phase Two: Survey of Sport Industry Organizations*

As noted above, sport industry organization personnel were asked questions in three major categories; that is, benefits, concerns and recommendations for improvement. Under each category, up to seven themes emerged as a result of these interviews. These themes are now discussed in turn.

#### *Benefits Identified by Industry*

The first and most dominant theme relating to benefits identified by the industry was the input of fresh ideas by the student. Ninety percent of those surveyed cited energy and enthusiasm alongside a new perspective offered by the student joining their organization as the major benefit.

The second most cited benefit identified by industry was access to 'volunteers' who were partially trained in the work required of them. Most sport organizations are familiar with the utilization of volunteer support for the work of their organization. However, the organizations surveyed considered that the students, although only partially trained, brought qualities such as objectivity, technical skills (such as coaching of sport skills, planning techniques), and problem-solving skills and so on, not

necessarily found in all volunteers offering services to the organization.

Another significant benefit identified by industry was the accomplishment of important projects undertaken by the student that may not otherwise have been completed. This theme was considered to be 'value-added' work for the organization. In most instances this type of work was achieved through the project or research-based course structure.

The costs (financial and emotional) associated with managing an appointment which does not work for either the employer or employee are well documented in human resource literature (Chelladurai, 1999; Inkson & Kolb, 2000). Similarly, there are also 'costs' associated with the recruitment and selection of employees, even if an effective match is found. Seventy percent of the sport industry organizations surveyed noted that the student placements offered an opportunity to "get to know" potential employees.

Of the institutions 62% noted that the work-based course provided access to a nearby institution that they may not otherwise have contact with. Questions around this theme revealed a general awareness of the expertise and resources of the tertiary institutions that offer sport-related courses, but some uncertainty relating to access. This is not surprising, as many sport courses are relatively new to the market place (4-8 years old).

Another important theme cited by the industry organizations was the sense of contribution to the development of the sport industry. Seven of the 12 organizations emphasized the 'feel-good' factor in being able to "give something back."

Finally, three of the 12 organizations surveyed considered that where the placement has been successful, the organization could gain benefit from the student promoting the organization in the future.

#### *Concerns, Issues, Limitations Identified by Industry*

The number one concern cited by the respondents was the potential for variation in the suitability of the student. The industry organization personnel felt that the success of the placement was in large part dependant on the suitability of the student.

A number of organizations within the sport industry are event-driven or operate in a cyclic fashion according to the various competitions. The timing of the student placement (largely between February and November) does not always fit with the needs of the organizations.

While the respondents recognized that the placements are designed, in part, to provide experience for the student, a significant concern cited was the "lack of hands on experience" by the students. When questioned around this, responses revealed that the industry organization did not want to undertake close supervision of the students.

Another limitation cited by industry organizations was students who were unclear regarding their objectives for the placement. Similarly, a lack of clarity regarding the nature of the course and what was expected of the institution was also an issue cited by the industry organizations.

In most instances, the industry organization wanted to have some form of contact with the institution as well as the student. The lack of communication between these two parties was cited as a significant concern.

The need for the student to have on-going guidance from the institution was raised, and a lack of this guidance was noted as a concern.

### Recommendations

Finally, industry organizations were asked if they could make recommendations for future action. These recommendations fell into three categories; that is, recommendations for industry organizations, tertiary institutions and the student. Table 3 sets out a summary of these findings.

### Conclusions

At the time of this survey, up to 400 students from five public tertiary institutions are accessing 150 sport organizations per year in the Auckland region. Of these 150 industry organizations, representatives from the 12 organizations surveyed overwhelmingly considered the placement of students within their organization to be beneficial. There was no doubt that those surveyed were very supportive of the work-based learning programs in sport and could see considerable potential for further benefit. Between six and seven themes emerged from a survey of industry organizations when questioned about the benefits, concerns and recommendations. The most significant benefit was the 'injection' of fresh ideas and enthusiasm into the organization from the students. The most cited concern was the suitability of the student and ensuring that the 'right' student is matched with the organization. Results from this investigation indicate that course coordinators and students engaged in work-based learning courses can be assured of the benefits to industry. However, these parties must also continue to meet the needs of industry as detailed in the recommendations above, if a positive symbiotic relationship is to continue to be a feature of these programs.

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**Table 3**  
Recommendations identified by industry

Recommendations for Industry Organizations	Recommendations for Tertiary Institutions	Recommendations for Students
Get involved - overall, those surveyed were very supportive of the placement programs and saw considerable benefit to the sport industry.	Initial set-up is crucial - put measures in place to ensure that the initial set-up of the placement is carefully designed and that all parties understand their roles.	Use the opportunity - consider the course as an opportunity to impress and gain valuable future contacts and access to employment, rather than just completing credits.
Screen students - in order to negate the possibility of receiving an "unsuitable" student. Discuss placement objectives ahead of time and allow for an "out".	Guidelines & support for industry - ensure that there are adequate written guidelines for industry organizations and there is communication between placement organizations and the tertiary institution.	Be career focused - when selecting and designing the placement, factor in future career pathways and choices. Consider the placement as a potential for future employment. Choose relevant/worthwhile projects and roles.
Put time into student - in order to receive maximum benefit, the relationship needs to be mutually beneficial. Don't take on a student if you don't have time to work with them.	Regular contact - ensure there is regular contact with student and industry organization throughout the placement period.	Know objectives - consider objectives carefully and discuss these ahead of time with the industry organization. Be proactive and goal driven.
Became a partner in their learning - recognize the emphasis on learning for the student, in contrast to the need to achieve work output only.	Promote the student work - celebrate and promote outstanding work and research achieved by the student.	Present a C.V. - as part of the relationship building process, provide the industry organization with relevant information about background and expertise.
Learn from them - be open to the knowledge and experience the student brings to the organization. Consider them as an agent of learning also.	Prepare students - ensure students are adequately prepared to take full advantage of the opportunity within the industry organization.	Network - meet as many people as possible, ask for references, and keep in touch with positive relationships that have been developed.
Project/program based - in order to achieve the most benefit, work with courses designed around project or program work.	Be flexible, don't over regulate - due to placement timing issues and the complexity of the relationships, allow for flexibility within the course structure.	Act as a professional - be punctual, respectful, dress appropriately, show a willingness to learn. If necessary, modify "student" type behavior.