



## Research Report

# Keeping Up With the Play: Practicum, Partnership and Practice

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This paper reports an inquiry into a Sport Management Program at Massey University. It provides program evaluation based on feedback from sport organizations and graduates related to their experiences of the Sport Management Practicum, a for credit double semester paper, normally undertaken in the third or fourth year of study or as part of a compulsory requirement of both undergraduate and post graduate Sport Management majors at Massey University, New Zealand. The research investigated the impact on the practicum organizations, and whether the practicum helped graduates in their current position. An open-ended questionnaire was sent to all 2004 organizational supervisors (n=25). A separate questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions was sent to all Sport Management and Coaching graduates between 2000 and 2003 (n=160). The responses were transcribed and then coded using the qualitative data analysis package HyperRESEARCH. Triangulation of the data findings provided further insight into the value of the Sport Management Practicum, benefits to the industry and transfer of learning to the work place. The findings suggest that graduates and practicum organizations valued the linking of theory to practice through the sport Management Practicum and regarded it as professional preparation for careers in the sport industry. The importance of managing both student and organizational expectations was also highlighted. The graduates and supervisors concurred on the key needs of practicum students, which were to be enthusiastic, organized, show initiative and make the most of their practicum opportunity. One implication from this research is that it is important to see work-integrated learning as part of a whole course of study involving the placement organizations, rather than as a stand-alone component. (Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2005, 6(2), 17 - 25).

Keywords: Learning; sport management; practicum; survey; New Zealand.

Boyatzis and McLeod (2001) argue that the educational bottom line for colleges and universities, with respect to management education, was to develop the whole person. Similarly, it has been suggested that management education can benefit from adopting an experiential approach enabling students to put into practice the theoretical concepts learned in the class room (Mailick & Stumpf, 1998; Mumford, 1991; Romme, 2003; Ruben, 1999; van Baalen & Moratis, 2001; Wankel & DeFillippi, 2002). In the field of management education, experiential learning has taken place for a number of years, and may include, in addition to outdoor activities, cooperative education, the analysis of case studies, role-playing, taking part in business simulations or management games (Hussey & Lowe, 1990; Mailick & Stumpf, 1998; McRae & Baldwin, 2005; Mumford, 1991; Romme, 2003; Ruben, 1999).

Despite the use of experiential learning in management education, it is still predominantly classroom based and focuses on learning the theoretical concepts associated with key management skills such as teambuilding, conflict resolution, strategy, planning, leadership and personal development (Boyatzis & McLeod, 2001; Whetten &

Cameron, 2002; Worrall & Cooper, 2001). This situation has led to management training being deemed too theoretical with the skills learned not transferable to the workplace on return from training (Flor, 1991; Reed & Anthony, 1992).

### Experiential Learning

Dewey's (1938) work provides a foundation for current theoretical learning models and educational practices (van Gyn & Grove-White, 2005). Just having an experience does not necessarily mean learning will have occurred (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Dewey, 1938; Roberts, 2002). Experiential learning promotes deep learning, as opposed to surface or strategic learning (Entwistle, 1996), and transfer of learning (Macaulay, 2000), with reflection being the crucial factor in facilitating this process (Dewey, 1933). Research by Moon (2000) and Seibert and Daudelin (1999) focuses on the importance of reflection in learning and professional development, reinforcing Schön's notion of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983), which is particularly applicable to cooperative education (Coll & Eames, 2005).

Kolb's (1984) model is most commonly used as a basis for discussion of the experiential learning process in

cooperative education (Eames & Cates, 2005). In Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, reflection is seen as the second stage in the cycle followed by conceptualization and then action. He characterizes learning as "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Roberts (2002) argued that reflection is the means through which experience and theory are transformed into knowledge. Boud, Cohen and Walker's (1993) model for promoting learning from experience highlights the points emphasized by Roberts (2002) (Figure 1). During the event, being aware, noticing what is happening, and intervening to bring about change are all parts of the process of reflection. Following the event, returning to the experience (metaphorically), and focusing on feelings and emotions can enhance (or inhibit) further reflection and learning (Boud & Knights, 1996). The model also illustrates the process of cooperative education discussed in this research, in which the relationships between preparation, experience and reflective processes are highlighted.

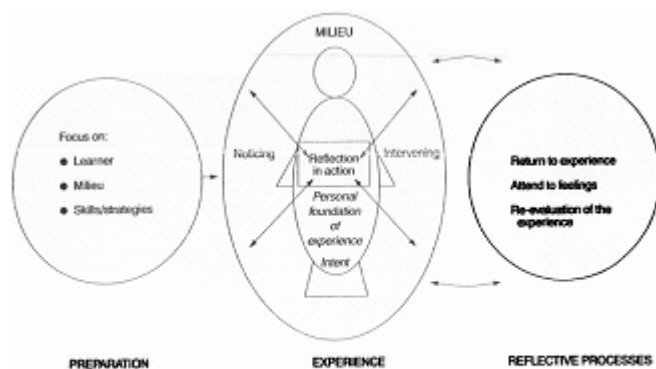


FIGURE 1  
Model for promoting learning from experience (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993, p. 7).

### Personal Development

The importance of personal development in the area of management education is increasingly being recognized (Hager, 1999; Leberman, 1999; Reynolds, 1998; Whitaker, 1997). Hager (1999, p. 72) states that "learning from experience is fundamental to individual personal growth and development", and that "in a rapidly changing world successful and competitive enterprises require workers who have certain broad generic skills". Leberman (1999) concluded that personal development was crucial to the work of case managers working for the Accident Compensation Corporation in New Zealand. The findings from her research suggested that the development of self-confidence during the training of these managers enabled them to transfer their learning from the classroom to the workplace. Managers require not only job-specific skills, but also finely tuned interpersonal skills for dealing with a range of situations encountered on a daily basis (Leberman, 1999). Management education must therefore assist in preparing managers for the challenging work environments they are likely to encounter as professionals working within often complex and changing organizations (Reed &

Anthony, 1992; Reynolds, 1998). These points are clearly summarized by Whitaker (1997, p. 21) who stated that "managers and organizations will need to accept that professional development will have to place personal goals alongside professional ones to help in the creation of a more integrated and holistic self-concept".

### Sport Management

The area of sport management is part of management education and over the last ten years has seen the professionalization of sport and leisure services throughout New Zealand and other parts of the world. The contemporary demands on sport and leisure managers require the development of specialized management knowledge and skills (Trenberth & Collins, 1999). A special feature, run over two issues of the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, focused on adding rigor to sport management internships (Cuneen, 2004; Kelley, 2004; Moorman, 2004; Peretto Stratta, 2004; Verner, 2004; Williams, 2004; Young & Baker, 2004). The articles highlight key issues applicable to cooperative education in general, including justifying the educational value of linking theory to practice (Young & Baker, 2004); criteria for selecting appropriate organizations to place students in (Verner, 2004); standards and practices for maintaining consistency between student placements (Kelley, 2004); legal issues to consider (Moorman, 2004); students expectations of work-based experiences (Peretto Stratta, 2004) and organizational expectations and concerns of providing internships (Williams, 2004). However, none of the articles discussed the role of the internship from multiple perspectives involving graduate experiences of the internship and its value in terms of professional preparation, organizational perspectives and current student issues, which is the focus of this paper. This current research, set in a New Zealand University context, focuses on the professional preparation benefits of the sport management practicum from graduate and supervisory organization perspectives.

There has been a proliferation of tertiary level sport and leisure programs in New Zealand since the early 1990s (Grant & Stothart, 2001). Many of these programs offer work-based or cooperative experiences as part of their programs, which in the New Zealand context tend to be called practicum or work placements. The development in New Zealand of tertiary curricula and cooperative education programs in sport studies is recent compared to the United States and the United Kingdom, for example. Despite the number of cooperative programs offered in the area of sport management, little has been published specifically on the topic of graduate or organization feedback in the academic literature, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region (Ferkins & Fleming, 2005). Ferkins's (2002) empirically based study presented the views of the New Zealand sport industry when offering work-based placements to sport studies students. Her findings suggest that most organizations value the input of new ideas provided by the students, and identified that ensuring the student matched the organization was crucial for a successful experience for everyone concerned. New

Zealand research with graduates majoring in sport management between 1994 and 1999 by Leberman and Martin (2004a), suggested that the sport management practicum was an important part of their Business Studies degree in terms of preparing them for work in the sport industry.

### Context of the Inquiry

This paper presents the findings from graduate feedback on undergraduate and postgraduate courses majoring in Sport Management at Massey University. Undergraduate major requirements include sport management, event and facility management, outdoor recreation management, sport marketing, sport sociology, sport psychology and leadership, as well as a sport management practicum (see Figure 2). Postgraduate requirements also include these topics.

In particular, this paper focuses on feedback by graduates and organizational supervisors on the practicum experience. The practicum is a compulsory full year paper, where students are based at a sport organization and work on a specified project for a minimum of 180 hours. A learning contract is agreed upon by the student, the supervisor within the organization and the lecturer responsible for co-ordinating the practicum at the University. This contract provides the detailed overview of the practicum, including expectations, responsibilities and assessment. Student objectives specifically are:

- To understand the structural, organizational and operational aspects of a sport organization
- To plan, implement, and evaluate independent projects that benefit the organization
- To formulate goals and measurable objectives to be accomplished, and
- To understand the relationship between theory and sport management practice necessary for managerial or supervisory positions.

The practicum provides an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge gained in academic studies to the ‘real world’ and to prepare the student for a career in the sport industry by providing an opportunity to develop relevant professional skills. Parkhouse (2001) argued that practica and internships provided discrete educational experiences, which enhance the transfer of learning (Macaulay, 2000). The practicum also provides an opportunity for the student’s reflection on management learning, as a result of their sport organization experience (Reynolds, 1998). This reflection is undertaken by setting objectives, maintaining a reflective log book throughout the practicum experience and then formally evaluating the experience in terms of personal and professional learning in a final report.

The specific objectives for the supervising organization are:

- To establish a cooperative working relationship with the University
- To participate in the preparation of future sport and leisure management professionals

- To increase awareness of new and innovative ideas in the sport and leisure management field, and
- To develop and/or create new programs or projects.

Students can study internally (on campus) or extramurally. This latter group of students adds an extra challenge in terms of cooperative education, as they can be based any where in the world. From a University perspective it is vital that good relationships are developed with supervising organizations via telecommunications extramurally and reliance is placed upon strong support structures with the respective supervisors in these sport organizations. This situation is highlighted by Ferkins and Fleming (2005) in relation to ‘out of town’ students in Australia.

### Methodology

A questionnaire consisting of 17 questions was sent to all Sport Management graduates between 2000 and 2003 (n=160). The questions were both open and closed in nature, including both demographic questions as well as questions about current and previous employment since graduating, useful aspects of their course, the practicum, and relevance of the course to their current position. Similar questioning had been used in previous research by the authors (Leberman & Martin, 2004). Eames and Cates (2005) indicate that although most studies in cooperative education have been quantitative, future research should focus on the use of qualitative inquiry. They suggest that qualitative research facilitates a deeper understanding of learning in the workplace, and provides insight into what the experience means to students - aspects which are difficult to highlight with quantitative research. Merriam (1998) argued that the transferability of qualitative findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) is enhanced by the detailed description of the context, method and research findings. For the purposes of this paper only the open questions relating to the student’s practicum will be discussed.

1. What did you learn from your practicum experience?
2. How has the practicum helped you in your current position?
3. What insights would you share with a sport management student who is pursuing a practicum placement?

A different questionnaire consisting of 17 questions was also sent to all supervisors of 2004 students at their practicum organizations. The questions were also both open and closed in nature, including both demographic questions as well as questions about their involvement and experiences of supervising the practicum. For the purposes of this paper only the open questions relating to the following questions will be discussed.

1. How does your organization benefit from the sport management practicum?
2. How do you see the practicum experiences benefiting students in gaining future employment positions?

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Year 1	Introductory Accounting	Fundamentals of Finance	Introduction to Organizations & Management	Principles of Marketing	Introduction to Business Law	Introductory Business Statistics	Principles of Macro-economics	Introduction to Business Communication
Year 2	Contemporary Management	Sport Business	Outdoor Recreation Management	Sport in the Social Context	Elective 100 or 200 level paper	Elective 200 or 300 level paper	Elective 200 or 300 level paper	Non-BBS Elective 100, 200 or 300 level paper
Year 3	Sport Facility & Event Management	Sport Management Practicum		Sport Psychology & Leadership for Managers & Coaches	Elective 100 or 200 level paper	Elective 100 or 200 level paper	Business Elective e.g. Sport Marketing	Non-BBS Elective 100, 200 or 300 level paper

Notes:

Year 1 papers are compulsory; Year 2 and Year 3 papers other than electives, represent papers for the major.

FIGURE 2

The sport management program at Massey University.

3. What insights would you share with a sport management student who is pursuing a practicum placement?
4. What are the key skills/competencies required for working in the sport industry?

The following comments are representative of the views expressed in this present study specifically about the value of the practicum experience and working with the organization's staff.

All the responses were transcribed and then coded using the qualitative data analysis package HyperRESEARCH (Dupuis, 1994). HyperRESEARCH enables text to be coded and retrieved, allowing the generation of descriptive statistics in terms of numbers, as indicated (in words and in brackets) in the next section of this paper. The process involved both researchers initially separately coding the data, then reviewing the codes generated before agreeing on the final list of codes and then grouping these into themes. The codes used emerged from the data.

### Research Findings

Thirty eight graduate responses were received (24% response rate), 20 from male graduates and 18 from female graduates. Seventeen organization responses were received (68%). The low graduate response rate is not surprising given that some students had graduated four years previously and may have changed address from the one held by the University and used for mailing the questionnaire. Interpretation of the data and the possibility of transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) from one setting to another should be cautioned due to this low response rate.

#### Benefits of the Practicum Experience: Graduate Views

Seventeen graduates indicated that the practicum had been the most useful part of the course of study, as indicated by the following typical responses:

I found the practical classes and sessions most relevant as it was hands on theory and practice as opposed to learning things but not being taught how and when to use them and use them with confidence.

The practicum is probably one of the best aspects of the course, with it providing students the opportunity to apply some theories as well as confronting them with the practical realities that their future employment will bring. A great deal, it was probably one of the most enjoyable and worthwhile parts of my study at Massey.

The practicum paper was the most useful for me as it gave hands on experience in an organization. This was very beneficial when I started working in the sport management industry.

Loved the practicum paper, was so worthwhile and gave a real insight into the working world of sports administration and made great contacts.

Although the practicum was the most rewarding aspect of my study I felt that all sports papers were relevant as together they provide a comprehensive grounding in the sports management industry.

I was given an enormous amount of control over my own work and freedom to implement aspects of management, marketing and media relations as I saw fit, which let me show my creativity... I had a great relationship with my supervisor which made the experience all the better and he was keen to pass on any knowledge he could.

I have gained valuable experience and felt comfortable exploring new management ideas and systems... I received support in the form of my mentor - great to have someone to bounce ideas off, who encouraged and guided me.

It gives students the chance to put into practice some of the things learnt in the classroom. Being given the chance to undertake a real-life project with a sports organization is a very valuable learning tool and means of progression into the industry.

Working with [supervisor] who was really great in letting me take part, guided me through tasks and let me feel like I was making a big help...The whole organization was really supportive of me and helped me with tasks I was unsure about or worried about.

Seventeen of the graduates in the current study indicated that they had benefited from business skills applied in their practicum and nine students specifically identified event management skills.

#### Benefits of the Practicum Experience: Organization Views

Fifteen of the supervising organizations also indicated benefits of the practicum by being able to delegate work and projects, but also in maintaining standards, enthusiasm and new ideas, as highlighted by the following responses:

Staff don't want to be shown up...lift in work standards... Enthusiasm, a lending hand, eagerness to learn, fresh ideas.

Exchange of ideas with some fresh and often innovative thinking from the student. The supervision process allows frequent assessment and evaluation of my own programs.

See [the student] grow in confidence and derive pleasure from organizing something. She became really involved in the process and knew that what she was doing was for the benefit of others.

### **Relevance of Practicum to Current Position: Graduate Views**

The graduates indicated that they had gained a range of skills as a result of the practicum experience, in particular general skills (7) networking (6) and increased confidence (5):

Skills developed - applicable to a lot of situations. Quite a key element of a practicum paper.

Although not currently working in the industry it has helped me in my current management role. Although the practicum is geared towards sports there are a number of overlapping features that apply across all industries.

Certainly gave me a great grounding in analyzing situation and obtaining a number of key contacts which I have used working.

The practicum gave me a lot of confidence in dealing with people - being answerable to 'higher powers'.

### **Relevance of Practicum to Current Position: Organization Views**

The organizational relevance of the practicum was mentioned by 12 of the supervisors, as the opportunity to provide real experiences, which may lead to future employment.

We have employed the student. Definite advantage of employment seeing the strengths of the individual.

I am sure that the quality of work he produced would be beneficial when viewing study results in a work CV.

Supervised experience in the business environment. A huge benefit to a young person. Gives them confidence to move ahead.

Can closely observe and implement practical working programs; hands on organizational experience; ability to brainstorm, synthesize, implement and evaluate a complete program while under experienced supervision.

### **Insights for Future Practicum Students: Graduate Views**

Eleven of the graduates indicated that when undertaking the practicum there was a need to research the organization and have clear expectations established with the supervisor.

Talk to previous students (if possible) about their practicum experience. Go for organizations that value your contribution and give a good practicum experience. Ask what they got out of their experience and what could have been done to improve it.

Talk to a few organizations and see what they have to

offer. Once you decide who you are going to do your practicum with, sit down with them and talk through your expectations and what you want from the experience.

Be proactive and don't be afraid to go and talk with the organization about what they are doing and trying to achieve. Clear the rest of your workload so as you can focus solely on the practicum when it comes to crunch time. No matter how planned you are things always pop up that will require time - make sure you have plenty available.

Make sure you work hard - clarify the role you are meant to be fulfilling with the organization before you start.

Be clear with your mentor about what your background/existing experience is and what your objectives are, i.e. to learn or to play an active role.

In addition, the graduates in this current study indicated that the practicum student needed to be proactive and totally involved (18) with the organization and to be well organized (11).

Do more preparation so that [you] can undertake tasks with ease i.e. make [your] own event checklist and then add to it as more things crop up. Enjoy yourself, although it may be stressful leading up to the event and on the day, all your hard work will be rewarded with happy smiling people! Do as much as you can, take on as many roles as possible so that you get more insight into the organization and the way things work and why?

Plan, plan, plan! Then do it and do it well. You've got to make it different and just use all your initiative! Work hard! Choose carefully what event you want to do. Ensure it covers all the elements in the process and gives you as much learning possibilities as possible. Enjoy it! It is a great experience and gives you so much prep for life after Uni!

Choose something you are interested in as much as possible. There is a lot of work involved and skills to learn, so being excited about the project is important.

### **Insights for Future Practicum Students: Organization Views**

The supervising organizations concurred with the graduates views. They indicated that practicum students needed to be enthusiastic (13), make the most of their practicum opportunity (10), organized (9), and show initiative (8). Good business (13) and communication (10) skills were also identified as important. These points are illustrated by the following typical supervisor's responses:

Passion for industry with clear personal and business vision.

Strong organizational capacity. Ability and desire to develop systems that clearly allow for all contingency coverage.

Be prepared to experiment with new and old ideas to see what combination suits the situation the best.

You should be thinking about how you can 'add benefit' to the organization. Leave a mark/make an impression. You will never know where it could lead.

Practicum is a good intro to people in the industry. Having good people and relationship building skills is a huge asset in the industry so choosing a project with people contact is an advantage. People skills - people are the base of the industry.

## Discussion

The findings of this research have highlighted the importance of the three elements, preparation, experience and reflection, advocated by Boud, Cohen and Walker's (1993) model for promoting learning from experience. The preparation in terms of the generic business skills learned as part of the degree and the initial setting up of the cooperative experience, were mentioned by the graduates. The value of preparation was also noted by the supervising organizations, particularly in terms of having good business and communication skills. On a personal level, both graduates and organizations indicated that students needed to be enthusiastic, well organized and show initiative.

Graduates indicated that the cooperative experience, in this case, the sport management practicum was the most useful part of the course of study. Many respondents of McGlothlin's (2003) study on the internship experiences of occupational safety and health graduates in North America also commented that the internship was the most valuable and important part of their degree as it provided the opportunity to put theory into practice. These current responses support the findings of Leberman and Martin's (2004) previous research on the sport management program at Massey. The graduates also indicated the importance of workers having certain broad generic skills in a rapidly changing world of successful and competitive enterprises as highlighted by Hager (1999). The examples the sport management graduates provided of transfer of learning support the research findings of McGlothlin (2003), which suggested that graduates rated learning from experience, interaction with management, confidence in technical skills and career-related experience as most important in terms of their internship experience.

The value of the experience was also emphasized by the organizations. The responses from the supervising sport organizations support Ferkins's (2002) New Zealand based findings that most organizations value the involvement and input of new ideas provided by the students. These current findings highlight the importance of selecting appropriate organizations to place students (Verner, 2004), and reinforce the view that internships or co-operative education experiences are important in linking of theory and practice

and providing professional preparation for careers in the sport industry (Ammon, 2000; Chouinard, 1993; Parkhouse, 2001; Pitts, 2001; Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). These findings also emphasize the importance of managing student (Peretto Stratta, 2004) and organizational expectations (Williams, 2004). In addition, there is a need for students to take responsibility when selecting their internship and clearly establishing their roles and learning outcomes (McGlothlin, (2003). Ferkins (2002) highlighted the importance of matching student and organizational expectations. The development of the learning contract is an important way that the sport management practicum formalizes student and organization expectations by establishing initial project objectives, which relate to areas of both personal and professional development.

The reflective processes which facilitate the learning from cooperative education are incorporated in the sport management practicum as discussed above. Based on the authors' previous research we suggest that an extension of this reflection has been the research itself (Leberman & Martin, 2004b). The very nature of the questions asked of graduates and organizations encouraged a reflective return to the experience in order for participants to respond to the questions. The authors have argued elsewhere that structured reflection post experiences can enhance the transfer of learning (Leberman & Martin, 2004b).

## Conclusions and Implications

The findings of the research suggest that the Sport Management Practicum was of value to graduates and supervising organizations, with the business and communication skills also being important. The graduates and supervisors concurred on the key needs of practicum students, which were to be enthusiastic, organized, show initiative and make the most of their practicum opportunity. Current students are advised to complement the sport management and coaching major with a second area in business, such as marketing or human resource management, to increase their chances of gaining employment in the industry following graduation. The research also highlights the value of educating the whole person through cooperative education particularly in the area of management education. Managers by the very nature of their employment operate in an ever changing environment, which requires graduates to be able to have had opportunities for both personal and professional development during their course of study.

The main implication for cooperative education programs from this research is the importance of seeing work-integrated learning as part of the whole course of study involving the placement organizations, rather than as a stand-alone component. However, most of the research in the sport management area has focused on the internship itself rather than on the context within which it is situated. Further research in this area, as well as graduate and organizational feedback would assist in designing academic courses which maximize the use of co-operative education in terms of the theory to practice link and relevant professional preparation for students in their chosen career.

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