

Career paths in sport management: trends, typology, and trajectories

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Abstract

Problem Statement Higher education is one of the most significant steps in preparing students for entry into the workforce in sport management. To understand the nature, trends, and trajectory of career paths in the modern landscape of sport management, the authors reviewed the literature and analyzed empirical datasets to define career paths, understand and explain current trends, and propose dimensions to classify career pathways in sport management. **Approach** A set of unstructured hand-written essays was collected in December 2021 on the topic “My career pathway in sport management” (N = 45; M = 90 min) from M1 students from the sport management program at the University Paris Saclay. Data analysis was performed after data collection. First, the authors evaluated the literature to provisionally define themes and dimensions for the analyses and read the essays several times. Second, we perused all the data, synthesized the literature, and collected the data (essays, N = 39). The authors deductively coded essays using profound in-line analysis with color highlights and by systematizing the data. Then, we manually iteratively analyzed the observed literature, preliminary findings, and full dataset to build typology and get insights. **Purpose** This study has three main aims: (1) to understand and describe how sport management students understand and foresee their career pathways and outline main trends; (2) to develop a typology of career paths in sport management and propose the classification dimensions, relying on the students' vision; and (3) to propose guidelines for sport education management based on the typology of student paths in order to straighten learning environments in sport management higher education institutions. **Results** This study extends the body of literature on career development and education in sport management, and the obtained findings can be also applied to other fields (e.g., management, tourism, finance, and marketing). Further, this study helps to understand sport management students' current needs and adjust education methods, programs, and strategies. **Conclusions** For sport management students, there are different reasons to choose this field as a career path such as passion for a particular sport, general interest in management, participation in sports (professional or amateur), background, motivations, and experiences that may lead students to consider working in the sport management industry. The authors propose dimensions to classify the sport management career path: sport vs. management; clarity of path; work modes and lifestyle as a career determinant, roles, fields, functions; dependency on external circumstances; and geographical map for a career path.

Keywords: career path, career development, sport management, student, typology, professional orientation

Introduction

In the framework of career development and education, defining a career path is crucially important for a students' professional future. Concerning the importance of career pathways, Schulte et al. (2017) state that the concept of career pathways should be understood as a system-wide approach that assists students in identifying, selecting, and completing a credential that leads to a well-paying, widely recognized career development (Young & Domene, 2018; Robertson et al., 2021). Both employers and employees would benefit from understanding the career paths available within educational institutions or companies. For instance, in this regard, Haster (2022) mentions that a well-defined career path increases an employee's likelihood of staying with an organization. It is also motivational for employees to grow within a company if their career path is well understood. In the context of education, when students understand how academics, career and education plans, and achieving their own career goals relate, they become more motivated, self-directed learners. Therefore, having a career pathway vision and understanding can be beneficial to students in many ways, notably, to help students become more engaged in academics and school; students can gain social capital through pathways; pathways can build modern “21-century” skills (Hester, 2020).

A growing number of colleges offer sport management majors (NASSM, 2012), which makes it necessary to investigate both how many and what types of careers exist within the sport industry, as well as the kind of job preparation graduates, receive (Schwab et al., 2015a). Several researchers have pointed out that there is a lack of promising careers in sports management (e.g., Edwards & Peachy, 2010, Gibson, 2008). A fact that

highlights the need for research in the sport management field and sport management administrators to understand what career opportunities exist for sport management students.

In general, higher education is one of the most significant steps in preparing students for entry into the workforce in all fields of life, including sport management. Graduates should have qualifications that are recognized by industry and society. Consequently, every institution of higher education should consider ways to assist students in their academic performance (Sodanil et al., 2019) at any point in their career pathway. In order to understand the nature, trends, and trajectory of career paths in sport management modern landscape, in this paper, we review relevant literature and analyze empirical datasets to define career paths in the field, understand and explain current trends, and propose dimensions to classify career pathways in sport management. This article extends the body of the literature about career development and education in sport management, and findings can be applied to other fields (for example, management, tourism, finance, and marketing) as well. Further, it will help to understand sport management students' current needs and adjust education methods, programs and strategies.

Theoretical Background

Defining career pathway

There are many ways to define career pathways (paths). However, these strategies tend to share some key design elements, which have evolved organically in communities and states over the past several decades (Kazis, 2016). In this line, Fein (2014, p.24) defines a career pathway approach that seeks to build more 'coherent and easily navigable systems providing skills training, credentials, supports, and employment. According to the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor (2012), career pathways are defined as: a series of connected education and training strategies and support services that enable individuals to secure industry-relevant certification and obtain employment within an occupational area and to advance to higher levels of future education and employment in that area.

Career pathways encompass a variety of programs and services geared toward developing students' academic, technical and employability skills; providing them with continuous education and training; and placing them into high-demand, high-opportunity jobs (Caroline Jefferson, 2021). Moreover, the College and Career Transitions Initiative (CCTI) defines a career pathway as "a coherent, articulated sequence of rigorous academic and career courses, commencing in the ninth grade and leading to an associate degree, an industry-recognized certificate or licensure, or a baccalaureate degree and beyond. A career pathway is developed, implemented, and maintained in partnership between secondary and postsecondary education, business, and employers. Career pathways are available to all students, including adult learners, and are designed to lead to rewarding careers" (CCTI, 2005).

Career pathway in sport management

The number of undergraduate and graduate programs in sport management has increased worldwide. In light of this growing number, it is evident that many sport sciences students are interested in working in the sports industry (Hancock & Greenwell, 2013). Some studies examine the sport management students' perceptions about their future careers by considering different factors. For example, the purpose of Barnhill et al. (2018) study is to examine a diverse sample of sport management students before taking their first course in the discipline. Students studying sport management programs are examined for their demographics, backgrounds, and expectations. In terms of demographics and performance, the results showed that sport management students were less diverse and had lower grade point averages compared to the general undergraduate population. Likewise, the results showed that students were unclear on the possibilities of a career in sport management. Another study by Mathner and Martin (2012) find that sport management students pursue sport management degrees and probably pursue careers in sport management. The reason for this is a general interest in sport and a desire to work in the sport industry. Walmsley (2012) studied the career pathways of twenty undergraduate students in tourism and hospitality from five UK universities and discovered that tourism students encounter tourism in three distinct ways along their career paths: through work experience, pre-university education, and when they decide what to study at university.

In the field of sport management, Schwab et al. (2015) surveyed alumni of five universities that offer undergraduate programs in sport management in parks, recreation, and tourism departments. Specifically, the survey aimed to determine where alumni are currently employed and how they feel about their career choices and undergraduate education. Their results showed that the majority of respondents found employment in sports-related fields following graduation, however, less than half of them were still employed in sports-related fields at the time of the study. Furthermore, they noted that low salaries and limited job opportunities were the primary reasons for leaving the field. Despite this, many respondents indicated that their entry-level experience enabled them to enter more lucrative careers outside of sports.

Various aspects of career paths in sports

A career pathway of an individual may consist of a series of jobs that enable the individual to achieve their career objectives. Career paths are typically characterized by vertical growth or promotions to higher-level positions, however, they can also involve lateral (sideways) movement within or across industries (Clarkson University, 2020). DeLuca et al., (2020) examined how sport management students conceptualize careers in the field of sport. A thorough analysis of the data provided insight into both the reasons students entered the major

and the potential career paths they see within the sport industry. The authors classified motivations for choosing the sport management major into three categories: (1) interest in business and management, (2) general passion for sports, and (3) participation in sports. Concerning the relationship between sport and business, Seifried et al., (2021) suggest that colleges and schools of business should consider adding sport management programs as an innovation that highlights a new interdisciplinary configuration many institutions support. Additionally, their study provides evidence that sport management can contribute to the development of business schools and colleges. The conclusion of two studies, Schwab et al., (2013) and Hancock & Greenwell, (2013), is that students are attracted to sport management because of their passion for sports, rather than managerial aspirations or a career goal. Luca et al. (2020) argue that such findings clearly suggest that recent generations' expectations of sport management success may be unfounded.

Gender can also be considered as a theme in sport management career paths (Saffari, 2022). Regarding the male and female sport management students' perceptions about the existing barriers, Hancock et al. (2018) use the Career Pathways Survey (CPS). The survey indicates that female sport management students perceive barriers to advancement in the sport industry, whereas male students do not. In this line, Harris et al. (2015) results also show that women enrolled in a sport management academic program were concerned about job discrimination based on gender stereotypes. They also said that they faced barriers to entry into sport professions, such as difficulty networking, job market constraints, low pay, and long working hours.

Morris et al., (2019) believed that in university sport management programs, female students are underrepresented. So, the purpose of their study was to understand the experiences of female students in this male-dominated field. Their research revealed that the female students had strategies to overcome barriers, were aware of the reality of gender dynamics within sport management and understood the value of networking. In this line, according to Sauder et al., (2018), it appears that males are more likely than females to major in sport management at undergraduate levels, which suggests that gender stereotyping may exist within the industry. Therefore, the purpose of their study was to better understand the barriers that female students face and the sources of support they receive in their pursuit of this academic field. These researchers identified four themes - otherness, roles and credibility, prior experiences, and people of influence that shed light on the lived experience of gender bias among women in sport management and provide suggestions for creating inclusive environments that encourage persistence.

Kane et al., (2017) investigated why students major in sport management. They noted that sport management has grown steadily. And they believe that in recruiting, advising, and developing programs, it is imperative to understand why this is happening. In their study, five distinct motivations emerged: 'Motivated to Have Sport Be a Continuing Influence, Motivated by the Business of Sport, Motivated to Help Others Develop Through Sport, Motivated by Concrete Career Opportunities in Sport, and Motivated by Desirable Vocational Characteristics in Sport'.

Methodology

Aims

This paper embraces three main aims: (1) to understand and describe how sport management students understand and foresee their career pathways, outline main trends (2) to develop a typology of career paths in sport management, propose the dimensions to classify, relying on the students vision (3) to propose guidelines for sport education management based on the typology of students paths in order to straighten learning environments in sport management high education institutions.

Data Collection

A set of unstructured hand-written essays collected in December 2021 on the topic "My career pathway in sport management" (N=45; M= 90 min) of M1 students from the sport management program (Master Level, first year) at the University Paris Saclay. Five essays are not relevant, consequently, we have 39 essays for further analysis. All essays are anonymous, thus, we use numbers to identify them.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was launched after data collection. First, we observed the literature to provisionally define themes and dimensions for the analyses provisionally and read a few times all the essays. Second, we perused all the data, synthesised literature and collected data (essays, N=39). At this stage, we deductively coded essays, using profound in-line analysis with colour highlights and systematizing and summarizing key data using a table (see results). Later, we manually iteratively analysed the observed literature, preliminary findings and full dataset in order to build typology and get insights.

Results and Discussion

Results and discussion sections are united together, since the discussion section interprets the results immediately for readers and provides the significance of the findings.

'Sport vs Management' scale

Since the discipline of sport management embraces and unites sport and management aspects together, data shows that it can also be seen as a dividing factor. Generally speaking, there are two main paths: (1) focusing primarily on sport, seeing management as a form of involvement in sport industry (often, professional

athletes, players and people with sport-related backgrounds belong to this category) and (2) focusing primarily on management, seeing the sport just as a prospective market to apply their management skills. Typically, there are motivated and self-determined students with particular professional visions and plans. However, they have broader professional plans and they are not limited by sports industry only. Being open to new opportunities, they see sport industry as a prospective market but they feel flexible to change an industry, sometimes drastically. For the “management-centered” students obtaining transferable to other field knowledge and skills is important, as well as understanding management as a whole, from a general and holistic perspective.

Clarity of pathway

Also, study participants’ pathways can be classified by the clarity of their professional plans and intentions. Thus, a few of them exactly “know” in detail when, where, and how they will work, previewing their professional pathway as a scenario. Contrary, there are a few absolutely uncertain students or even participants who have not thought about their future in sport management. Typically, purposive motivated students clearly see their professional future in sport industry (see 5.1.). Often is explained by a sportive background (DeLuca et al., 2020). Often an understanding of own pathways requires the work of a student and the support of human resources/ psychology professionals.

Digital vs Traditional

In today’s digitalized world there are two opposite directions (rare existing in a pure form): digital and traditional. Nowadays, many students demand the development of skills and knowledge applicable to the market of informational technologies. Furthermore, the market of esports is rapidly growing, raising interest among sport management students as well. At the same time, many participants foresee their career in the traditional sport only, without any information technology influence.

Digitalization of all fields of life inevitably reshapes sport (Glebova et al., 2020; Glebova & Desbordes, 2021) and the management landscape and brings high demand for cutting-edge technological skills, including data analytics and programming. These disciplines should be included in sport management programs to help graduates better fit the job market and be effective.

Work modes and lifestyle as a career path determinant

Surprisingly, the majority of students (more than half of the sample) prefer to be freelancers. They see it as an opportunity to constantly travel and it seems close to modern digital nomadism philosophy and lifestyle (Hensellek & Puchala, 2021; Stumpf et al., 2022), trendy nowadays and largely promoted through social media. They are not interested in a permanent (or even temporary) work contract and traditional employment relations. This attitude let them think about digital skills and remote professions (notably, digital marketing is the most trendy and commonly mentioned among the participants) to be able to work distantly. From this point of view, pathways can be classified by the type and form of work: freelancer, entrepreneur, contractor (short/long term or permanent).

Roles, fields, functions

Typically, plans of students are related to particular roles, and fields of functions. This approach may divide pathways into sport performance, evaluation, spectating, training, governance, and policy. An understanding of the entire sport ecosystem and stakeholder/ organizational approaches are crucial to determine own career path and effectively communicate in the field in the future.

Dependency on external circumstances

Some students directly put their own career vision in dependence on the current context. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most common example (Glebova & Lopez-Carril, 2023). Another factor is parents’ or community opinion influence. In contrast, some students don’t depend on anything. Summarizing these points, there are “circumstances-centered” paths and “purpose-centered” paths. This should not be confused with the clarity of purpose (see 5.2.). Since it concerns the psychological side of career development, it emphasizes the importance of professional psychological support accessibility for students during their studies. It may include collective or individual pieces of training in order to educate students to understand and manage categories of self-concept, self-esteem, communications, and stress, especially in extraordinary circumstances and uncertain environments.

Geographical map for a career path

Every participant has their own unique vision of where he/she will be working. Basically, their paths can be classified as local, inter-city, national, international, global, expatriate, mixed, and nomad. This dimension is often interrelated with work modes and lifestyle as a career path determinant (see 5.3.) since the workplace has an impact on lifestyle and culture. In this regard, we cannot neglect the international nature of sport management, including global mobility, international relations, and events on the global scale. Foreign language skills and international public relations pieces of knowledge are strong points and crucial competitive advantages for all sport management students but especially for those who see their career paths within international organizations, or following digital nomads or expatriates (Melo et al., 2022) lifestyles.

Conclusion

A construct of a career path is crucial for career development in all fields, including sport management. It must be considered and be taken into account for high education professionals to better adjust programs and

methodologies to students' professional plans and job market needs. To this end, the understanding of different career pathways in each field (for example, sport management) can be beneficial for students, education and human resources professionals to make the education process, career orientation, and development more smart, effective, efficient, and industry-friendly.

For sport management students there are different reasons to choose this field to study, they choose sport management as a career path for a variety of reasons: the passion for a particular sport, general interest in management, participation in sports (professional or amateur), background, motivations, and experiences are examples. These reasons (often overlapping) lead students to consider working in the sport management industry. However, the vision of the future and own career pathway differs a lot. In this article, we propose six main dimensions to classify the sport management career pathways nowadays (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Career Paths Dimensions in Sport Management

| # | Theme/ Dimension | Possible Pathways' types | Suggested Education Recommendations/ Specific Approaches |
|---|---|--|--|
| 1 | Sport vs Management | (1) focusing primarily on sport, seeing management as a form of involvement in the sport industry (2) focusing primarily on management, seeing the sport just as a prospective market to apply their management skills. | For the "management-centered" students obtaining transferable to other field knowledge and skills is important, as well as understanding management as a whole, from a general and holistic perspective. |
| 2 | Clarity of pathway | A scale is divided into several levels reflecting how certain and determined is the pathway | Often an understanding of own pathways requires the work of a student and the support of human resources/ psychology professionals. |
| 3 | Work modes and lifestyle as a career path determinant | freelancer, entrepreneur, contractor (short/long term or permanent) | Development of digital skills and deeper understanding of sharing economy, remote/ distant work professions |
| 4 | Roles, fields, functions | sport performance, evaluation, spectating, training, governance, and policy | An understanding of the entire sport ecosystem and stakeholder/ organizational approaches |
| 5 | Dependency on external circumstances | circumstances-centered; purpose-centered | Emphasizes the importance of professional psychological support accessibility for students during their studies; collective or individual pieces of training to educate students to understand and manage categories of self-concept, self-esteem, communications, and stress, especially in extraordinary circumstances and uncertain environments. |
| 6 | Geographical map for a career path | as local, inter-city, national, international, global, expatriate, mixed, and nomad | Advanced learning of foreign languages and international public relations |

Limitations and future research directions

Career pathways in sport management is an important topic, but it seems to be under-researched. We have faced a lack of literature, theoretical and empirical. The sample for this study has been limited to 45 essays, moreover, 6 of them have been found irrelevant. At this stage, we believe that this size and quality of data is sufficient to achieve the study purpose. For further research, the larger sample is projected to be studied qualitatively and quantitatively as well (mixed approach). Since essays are anonymous and we have not asked to mark the participant gender (by mistake), unfortunately, in this paper, we cannot analyze the dataset from a gender perspective. However, the literature demonstrates it can be an interesting research direction.

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