

The Sport Management Practicum @ Massey

Andrew Martin
Department of Management,
Massey University

Abstract

This paper will provide a background and description of the Sport Management Practicum at Massey University involving both internal and extramural students. The practicum involves a variety of projects over a double semester period. The type of projects involve strategic, event and programme management. The paper will describe the nature of the partnerships developed with national and regional sport organisations, the student's experiences, the transfer of learning to the work place, and employment opportunities.

Recent years have seen the professionalisation of sport and leisure services throughout New Zealand. The provision of public, commercial and voluntary sector sport facilities and events has continued to expand. The effectiveness of such provision, however, lies in the hands of volunteers and the sports and recreation managers and officers. Therefore, managers within the New Zealand sport and leisure sector require a knowledge base which allows them to deliver sport and leisure experiences effectively and efficiently. Although the scale of facilities and events vary enormously, the principles for effective facility and event management are the same. The contemporary demands on sport and leisure managers require the development of specialised management knowledge and skills.

This paper provides a background and description of the Sport Management Practicum (SMP) program developed and successfully implemented at Massey University for both internal and extramural students. The Sport Management degree program situated in the College of Business began in 1992 and was the first of its kind in New Zealand. The development of the SMP recognised the increasing requirement of employers emphasizing practical experience, in addition to a strong background in theoretical business foundations. The structure of the SMP has remained largely unchanged during the past decade.

Parkhouse (2001) argued that cooperative education and practica internships provided discrete educational experiences and that the application of an experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984; Henry, 1989) in these sport management settings was appropriate. Kolb (1984, p.38) characterizes learning as “a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. The transfer of learning is enhanced by the experiential learning process (Macaulay, 2000).

The linking of theory and practice through co-operative education experiences is an essential precursor for future sport management careers (Ammon, 2000; Parkhouse, 2001; Pitts, 2001). In addition, Southall, Nagel, LeGrande and Han (2003, p.28) argued that

“successful sport management programs should maximize experiential learning experiences before students leave university...The key element of experiential learning is that it addresses the needs and wants of the learner, allowing the learner to directly experience the reality being studied.”

The SMP is a for credit double semester paper, normally undertaken in the third year of study as part of a Bachelor of Business Studies or a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise, and a compulsory requirement in the Sport Management and Coaching major. The SMP offers a range of practical experiences in the sport and leisure management field. It consists of a period of supervised practical experience in an area related to the student’s disciplinary and professional interests. Students are able to specialise in various areas of sports management and administration with on site supervision provided by the sport organisation in conjunction with the university’s SMP course coordinator.

The SMP is a bridge for the student between the academic present, and the professional future. Students have the opportunity to merge their academic preparation with the practical experiences of the SMP. The SMP is a three-way partnership between the student, the practicum organisation, and the University. All parties in the relationship assume definite responsibilities, perform specific functions, and achieve benefits as a result of the involvement (Appendix A). This relationship has helped to produce an academic programme which is sensitive to the needs of organisations in the leisure industries, as recommended by Ferkins (2002). In turn, these organisations are more receptive to students of the course. The process is formalised by the first

piece of assessment, the Learning Contract (10%). This contract is a binding agreement between the student and the organisation, which includes a job description of the project, a detailed time line or critical path, personal learning objectives and evaluation methods. Some of the organisations have also introduced a formal induction process, recognising the importance of volunteers within the sport industry in New Zealand

The aim is for the student to be responsible for a particular practicum project, 'add value' to the organisation, and as much as possible, take work away from their organisation supervisor. Whilst the organisation is ultimately responsible for the project, the students are encouraged to take ownership of their projects. Examples of recent projects in Palmerston North are:

- Sports Events (Secondary School National Badminton, Basketball, and Hockey competitions)
- Special Events (Reuters CCF Games, KiwiSportacular, Active Age Games)
- Programmes (Primary and Secondary School Basketball and Small Black Rugby)
- Event series (Manawatu Triathlon)
- Conference (Secondary Schools Sport Coordinators)
- Awards ceremonies (Secondary School Sports Awards)
- Marketing (Lido Aquatics opening; Squash Palmerston North Gym opening)

About twenty students internally and extramurally find practicum placements. Most students find placements on their own and/or are assisted by the network of contacts from previous placements and former practicum students who are now working for sport organisations. Examples of the range of partner organisations linked to the Palmerston North campus students are:

- Regional Sport Trusts (Sport Manawatu)
- Regional Sport Organisations (Rugby Basketball, Netball, Cricket, Hockey, Soccer)
- Facility and Event Management (Arena Manawatu; Lido)

Extramural students are placed with a variety of organisations all over New Zealand and a few are placed overseas. These placements do present issues related to the level of organisation support, the level of the student's project involvement, and standards of on site supervision. A further issue is also the increasing number of international students and their level of English conversation and comprehension when placed in an unfamiliar work context and environment. There is also limited funding to assist the university course co-coordinator in visiting these students.

The SMP consists of approximately 180 hours of work experience, completed part-time over a double semester period, in the sport and leisure industry plus an academic evaluation component. The industry is defined widely to include sports clubs and associations, recreation centres, commercial and institutional fitness centres, consultancy work, swimming pools, park and reserve management, adventure recreation activities, activities for special populations, therapeutic recreation management, and outdoor recreational activities. The SMP aims to provide an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge gained in academic studies to the 'real world' and to prepare the student for a career in the leisure industry by providing an opportunity to develop relevant professional skills.

In order for transfer of learning to take place there also needs to be a strong focus on self (Butler, 2001). 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". The importance of personal development in the area of management education is increasingly

being recognized (Hager, 1999; Whitaker, 1997). “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” (Whitaker 1997, p.21). 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 (Reynolds, 1998).

Frontloading the SMP with prescribed specific objectives did not take place. The rationale for this is that each student comes with different experiences, reflective of their stage in life and therefore will gain different learning from the same experience. The SMP has broad general objectives that are reflective of the development of both personal and professional objectives for each student.

- Apply theories, concepts and skills learned from previous study/experience to a practical work situation;
- Discover individual strengths, limitations and suitability for employment in a particular field or occupation;
- Establish personal learning goals, objectives and performance criteria by which the student’s placement performance can be evaluated.

The assessment procedures, in addition to the learning contract (10%), for the SMP consist of the following components, which emphasise the role of the student as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987).

1. Analysis of a management issue related to the practicum management (20%) – this involves interviewing a manager within the placement organisation about a current management issue of significance, and then providing a report indicating recommendations.
2. Log book completed by students on aspects of the workplace and work experience (20%) – this diary records and reflects upon, duties performed, work behaviour, and linking management theory to practice.
3. Practicum evaluation report (30%) – this requires the students to reflect on key aspects of theory and practice, critically assessing the success of the project by reviewing objectives, tasks/responsibilities undertaken, evaluation methods, and final outcomes. It also requires the student to analyse how effective they were at achieving personal objectives and critically evaluate their overall performance utilising performance criteria from the learning contract. There is opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses, suggest areas for future professional development, and comment on how the SMP experience could be improved for the student and for the placement organisation.
4. Supervisor Evaluation (20%) - The final piece of assessment is the workplace supervisor’s assessment of the practicum performance. This is done formally through a written response and in discussion with the academic supervisor.

There has been a wide range of employment opportunities gained by students as a result of the SMP experiences. For example,

- Strategy and Management – National and Regional Sport Organisations
- Marketing - IMG
- Events – Rugby World Cup, City Councils
- Facilities – Arena Manawatu, Eden Park
- Programming – Regional Sport Trusts

The following comments from students are examples of how the linking of theory and practice through the co-operative education experiences has benefited them in their future sport management careers. Both these students had placements involving event management projects at a Regional Sports Trust, Sport Manawatu:

“I am now Arena Manawatu's full-time Bookings Facilitator; my job is to do part admin, and mainly bookings and relationship building with community users...Just what I studied my degree for. Thanks again for being such a great lecturer, my interest in wanting to work in a facility was mainly from your [facility and event management] paper”.

“I was offered the job as Sport Club Development Officer for Massey University. I'm very excited about the excellent opportunity...Both the Sport Practicum, and Sport Facility and Event Management papers will be of vital importance to my job. I enjoyed both these papers and found them to be among the most valuable of my time at university”.

Further research is currently being undertaken to support the anecdotal evidence related to personal and professional benefits of the SMP experience for the students and also the transfer of learning to the workplace. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interview and/or open ended questionnaires is proposed. Triangulation of these findings from work place supervisors and the researcher as a participant observer may enhance this research.

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Appendix A

Student benefits

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

Organisation benefits

- To establish a co-operative 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;
- To develop and/or create new programmes or projects.

University benefits

- To evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the course curriculum in relation to the current needs and trends of the various industry sectors;
- To provide university contact with professionals in the field;
- To inform organisations about the University curriculum, new ideas that are being generated, and the latest research development in the field.