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Transforming the experiential learning of sport management graduates into transferable employability signals

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ABSTRACT

Graduate employability plays a critical role during job recruitment and selection. Practical experience provides a strong foundation from which sport management graduates can signal their employability. Our Australian-based mixed-method study explored signals that managers seek from sport management graduate-entry applicants during job recruitment and selection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 sport managers. Interview transcripts were deductively coded using the Experiential Learning Cycle and thematically analysed. An online employability survey, guided by Employability Dimensions, was distributed and gained responses from 166 sport managers. Analysis was conducted using non-parametric statistics. Findings revealed 10 observed signals: to assist sport management graduates indicate their employability during job recruitment and selection and for sport managers to recognise employable graduates. The observed signals comprise multiple signal indicators, developed to guide theoretical knowledge and practical application of the employability signals for graduate job applicants.

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practical experience; job
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Introduction

The significant rise of sport in Australia over the last 30 years can be attributed to globalisation and its influence on sport consumption, construction, technology, and producer and consumer connection (Hajkowicz et al. 2013; Hoye et al. 2018). Subsequent increases in the number of Australian undergraduate (UG) sport management (SM) programmes (9 in 1988 (Deane 1992) to 16 in 2022 [Hotcourses Abroad n.d.]) and respective enrolments highlight the necessity of higher education (HE) to produce work ready graduates and foster employability prospects of graduates in a competitive sport job market (Dinning and Ünlü 2017; Zimmer and Keiper 2021). Employers' perceptions of graduate requirements for the workplace and how they influence HE provision to UGs is a major consideration in research relating to graduate transition to the workplace (Dinning and Ünlü 2017; Pate and Bosley 2020).

In the discipline of SM, 80–90% of Australian SM employers prefer respective graduates to have a minimum of 2 years' practical experience, yet many are graduating with much less (Bradbury, Schwarz, and Linton 2021; Foster and Pierce 2021). In education, the investment associated with course practical experiences is the contribution it makes to the individual learning process (Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis 2014). Specifically, experiential learning gained from practical experiences

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is likely to produce work-ready, enthusiastic and committed graduates who can critically reflect, assess and apply their transferable skills and learning to the workplace (De Schepper and Sotiriadou 2018; Grant, Hanlon, and Young 2023). As such, the need to invest in embedding practical experiences into the learning process is essential to determine a strong industry and organisation fit of selected graduate employees (Cai 2013).

The perceived employability of job applicants by industry employers typically surfaces through job application assessment, job recruitment and selection processes, and on-the-job training (Cappelli 2015; Kinash, McGillivray, and Crane 2018). The general problem is the lack of literature and associated knowledge related to employer assessment and recognition of graduate employability (Briggeman and Bailey 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020). Ironically, the unknown element of how a new employee will perform in an advertised role is not realised until after role commencement, a decision which is based on sport employer assessment of the applicant at the time of job recruitment and selection (Hao and Liden 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020). Respectively, signalling theory (Spence 1973) considers the origins of signals, the resultant impact these signals have on graduate applicants, and how these signals are addressed by a graduate in their transition from education to the workplace (Drover, Matthew, and Andrew 2018).

As such, the purpose of our study was to explore the employability signals sport managers seek from graduate-entry applicants who have undertaken practical experience, during job recruitment and selection. The first research question is: What do practical experiences undertaken by graduate applicants reveal about their employability? To respond to this question we explored, via semi-structured interviews, sport managers' perceptions of employable graduates and their respective practical experiences. The second research question is: How are comprehensive employability signals formed? To respond to this question, an online employability survey characterising eight Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and the perceived ranking of importance to sport managers was administered. Data were then examined of required practical experience through the lens of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984), to identify which stage of the cycle each Employability Dimension was developed. Subsequent identification of observed employability signals will contribute to respective studies by defining and signifying employability to enable SM employers to interpret these signals and assess employable graduates during job recruitment and selection.

Literature review

The immense growth of SM as an academic discipline has occurred in a comparatively short time and has presented challenges (Bradbury, Schwarz, and Linton 2021; De Schepper and Sotiriadou 2018). Such challenges include the diverse and increasing UG SM cohort; rising expectation of HE to raise student achievement; and likelihood that UGs and graduates will saturate the SM job market, a reminder of the competitiveness of sport employment (Koo et al. 2016; Zimmer and Keiper 2021). Intensifying the competition for sport employment in Australia is the pursuit of highly qualified applicants sought from within and beyond SM, extending to academic disciplines in business and public health (DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove 2016; Seifried et al. 2021). Irrespective of the academic discipline, employers expect HE institutions to be accountable for developing employability and the student competencies required to perform jobs and prepare for a career post-graduation (Bennett 2019; Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012).

Employer perceptions of graduate employability

The heightened interest in graduate employability worldwide has been incited predominantly by government and industry needs (Oliver 2011; Williams et al. 2016). The choice by prospective students to study a higher education degree is largely influenced by the quest to secure quality employment, internships, industry engagement and employability (DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove

2016; Le et al. 2019). In HE, a graduate's employability refers to the achievements and potential to find employment by utilising transferrable skills, knowledge and personal attributes continuously throughout their working life (Yorke 2006). Industry employer perceptions and satisfaction with HE graduates' skills, and the necessity for business and education to collaborate, feature prominently in graduate employability literature (Kinash, McGillivray, and Crane 2018; Oliver 2011). Securing workers with the requisite industry skills traditionally occurs through job application assessment and on-the-job employee training (Cappelli 2015). Other indicators of potential graduate workplace performance include labour market awareness and work and life experience (Yorke 2006). In Australia, the Employability Skills Framework Stage One (Goodwin et al. 2012) was created and implemented as a cross-sectoral framework to address employability skills nationally. Respectively, a National Foundation Skills Framework 2022–2032 was implemented to improve the foundational skills (core skills/competencies that underpin job performance, productivity and social inclusion) of adults working in the vocational education and training sector (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment DESE 2022).

Employability models typically guide the development of graduate employability, extending guidance beyond the immediate employment outcomes of graduates, to how employability can be sustained over a career lifespan (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Yorke 2006). Two examples include the Key to Employability Model (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007) and the Decision Learning, Opportunity Awareness, Transition Learning and Self-awareness (DOTS) model (Law and Watts 2003). The importance of basic skills and attributes and self-reflection to form a perception of employability when seeking employment is a priority in an SM context (De Schepper and Sotiriadou 2018; Dinning and Ünlü 2017). Self-reflection serves as a powerful tool to acknowledge UG development, their understanding of industry requirements and the value of employability skills (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; De Schepper and Sotiriadou 2018). In the discipline of SM, accreditation, industry standards and job classifications, collectively, have not been formally recognised to strengthen alignment between the SM industry and HE sectors (Emery, Ruth, and Crabtree 2012; Foster and Pierce 2021). To assist, Grant, Hanlon, and Young (2023) proposed Industry Awareness and Self-Awareness factors to prepare UGs to undertake practicum and to complement and potentially enrich learning developed throughout these practical experiences.

Employability dimensions

Employment returns from HE courses are both unpredictable and not guaranteed, however, the development of attributes and capabilities that enhance graduate employment prospects are expected (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018; Tomlinson et al. 2022). The broad categories of desirable graduate attributes and capabilities formulated by HE institutions, employers and industry bodies that are associated with employability include communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-management, digital literacy and global citizenship (Dinning and Ünlü 2017; Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018). Associated graduate attributes and capabilities research relating to the development of graduate employability is abundant. For example, the employABILITY approach self-empowers the learner to create and sustain meaningful work (Bennett 2020); the Employability Skills Framework explores the rationale for adopting rubrics to measure employability skill attainment by HE students (Riebe and Jackson 2014); and the 'Graduate Capital Scale' facilitates HE students to gauge their own career readiness and to improve their employability (Tomlinson et al. 2022). As such, familiarisation with how the learner can develop their employability is clear; however, the ability of prospective employers to validate employable graduates is limited. The eight dimensions of basic employability skills (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) are one framework that gauges the depth and composition of basic employability skills required by graduates to perform their jobs. Eight dimensions of basic employability skills were identified that are consistent with desirable HE graduate capabilities and include literacy and numeracy; critical thinking; leadership; management; interpersonal; information technology; systems thinking and work ethic. Each is transferable with

core competencies representing practical knowledge, skills and abilities foundational to employment roles at all levels of the workplace (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012).

Although the eight Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) align with the common broad categories of desirable HE graduate capabilities, the difference lies in the depth of the context to which the Employability Dimensions can be observed. Graduate capabilities, broadly defined, are typically generic, regulatory, one-dimensional lists. Within each Employability Dimension, however, there are multiple, defined and aligned item descriptions illustrating the significance, context and depth of what constitutes each employability measurement. In addition, Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote (2012) developed and tested an Employability Dimensions questionnaire with corresponding employability items with HE and graduates from a respective business college and the employers of these graduates. The purpose was to distinguish the factors associated with employability of HE graduates in comparative industry settings and to identify additional training requirements.

Practical experience and experiential learning

A quality education should include learning through practical experiences and other forms of assessment to develop generic and specific industry competencies that enhance graduate employability and emotional intelligence skills (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018; D. Kolb 1984; O'Leary 2017). Quality measures in the form of experiential learning are what transpires from undertaking [practical] experience which, from an education perspective, 'cultivates people to meet the needs of the labour market' (Cai 2013, 457). The term 'experiential' in Kolb's (1984, 20) Experiential Learning Cycle provides a perspective on learning in two ways. First is to connect the experiential learning concept to its origin which reflects research (Dewey 1938, Lewin 1957 cited in D. Kolb 1984; Piaget 1970), in psychology, philosophy and physiology (D. Kolb 1984). Second is to highlight the considerable role practical experience, in conjunction with education, contributes to the learning process (typically occurring in a cycle) and how the learner can relate these experiences to graduate outcomes (Williams et al. 2016). The Experiential Learning Cycle (D. Kolb 1984) is depicted by a four-phase cycle of experiencing (Concrete Experience), reflecting (Reflective Observation), thinking (Abstract Conceptualisation) and acting (Active Experimentation).

Emotions derived from experiences including examinations, homework and achieving deadlines are varied and influence the ways in which individuals learn and memorise (Paolini 2020; Tyng et al. 2017). A study, however, of 25-year-old Australians explored positive outcomes associated with their part-time employment experiences (FYA 2016). Results revealed that although 60% held a post-school qualification, 50% had only secured full-time work through multiple jobs. A concern compounded by this age group was that 76% of respondents acknowledged they did not believe their practical experiences were relevant to gain full-time employment. Such is the significance of practical experiences that global companies Google, Apple and Oracle have removed the degree requirement of job applications in recognition of practical experiences and associated skill requirements (Marquardson and Elnoshokaty 2020).

Signalling theory and employability

Recognising employable graduates in any industry discipline is a difficult task, however, for several decades, the signalling theory (Spence 1973) has guided employers to address uncertainty in their assessment of business quality and employee productivity at the time of hiring (Cai 2013; Drover, Matthew, and Andrew 2018). Essentially, an applicant's organisational quality cannot be directly observed, hence the reliance on the signalling theory and information signals to correlate with quality (Drover, Matthew, and Andrew 2018; Piopiunik et al. 2020). In various studies conducted, education as an employability signal has been identified to distinguish capable and productive employees (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020) and to determine job offers or

higher employee wages (Pogatsnik 2018; Spence 1973) across varying industry disciplines including SM. Subsequently, signals serve to reduce the likelihood of communication breakdown between the two parties to enable the graduate applicant to be the signal sender and the hiring manager to be the signal receiver (Drover, Matthew, and Andrew 2018; Spence 1973). Prior to the 1990s, researchers tended to recognise signalling as the first employment after graduation (transition from education to the workplace) as the point of observation of higher education outcomes and graduate career success (Cai 2013). Such recognition has changed.

Research on graduate transition to the workplace has shifted to highlight consideration of employers' perceptions of graduate requirements for the workplace and how they influence higher education provision to UGs (Dinning and Ünlü 2017; Kinash et al., 2016). The process of transition from education to the workplace to indicate the career success of graduates has since become a key indicator to measure HE quality (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018). As such, industry and HE have an important role in assisting graduates to recognise and invest in their employability, achievement of graduate outcomes and career success (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018; Tuononen and Hyytinen 2022). In doing so, it enables these HE graduates to transparently signal their employability during job recruitment and selection (Piopiunik et al. 2020). The problem is, a lack of research exists generally, let alone specific to SM, that guides industry and HE on how graduate applicants can signal their employability related to their unique practical experiences, capabilities and knowledge.

Job recruitment and selection

Job recruitment and selection processes guide industry employers to attain suitable, prospective employees with many organisations reliant on their business reputation and employer brand to attract strong candidates (Cai 2013; Taylor, Doherty, and McGraw 2015). Literature focusing on SM graduate skills, knowledge and attributes sought by SM employers through job recruitment is available (Tsitskari et al. 2017). Job selection processes include interviewing, reference checking and testing, and are implemented to appoint the best applicants using effective, fair and equitable assessment activities (Australian Human Resources Institute, n.d.). Ultimately, it is the graduates who have an industry awareness of employment opportunities, preconceived workplace motivations and are drawn to job advertisements with criteria aligned to their fit for the job and organisation (Nicholas and Handley 2020, 71).

Traditional screening methods of prospective graduate employees are based on preferred criteria relating to formalised industry preparation and/or prior achievements (Loganesh, Yazdanifard, and Ismail 2014). However, minimal research exists on an employers' assessment of applicant skills, knowledge and attributes against job criteria, which are not directly observable from job application content or interviews during job recruitment and selection (Briggeman and Bailey 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020). To address the limited research, our study explored the employability signals that sport managers seek from SM graduate-entry applicants who have undertaken practical experiences, during job recruitment and selection.

Methodology

A mixed method was adopted for our research. In brief, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and an online survey was distributed. Data were analysed using deductive and inductive coding.

Semi-structured interviews

A stratified random sampling method of 200 job descriptions from the larger study (job advertisement audit) was used to identify sport managers to interview. The job advertisements collected comprised graduate-entry level positions which stipulated the prerequisites of 'practical experience' and a 'tertiary qualification' or specific 'degree', in conjunction with the terms 'sport' and 'recreation', to identify

appropriate SM positions. These terms assisted to identify titles that indicated entry-level positions and the identification of the supervisor (sport manager and potential participant in our study).

Participants

Ten participants represented organisations in state (4) and national sporting organisations (2); local government (1); secondary and HE sport services (1); elite athlete and marketing (1) and multicultural youth services (1). The main role of these managers was grouped against six SM job classifications (Grant, Hanlon, and Young 2023) including Administration/Finance/Operations; Coaching/High Performance; Customer/Membership/Athlete Services; Development/Participation/Programs; Events/Competitions; and Marketing/Media/PR/Communications. Interview questions were structured to determine employer requisites of graduates, their practical experiences, and the presence of employability (Barker 2014).

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, de-identified and sent to each interviewee for member-checking to endorse quality control and strengthen findings (Harper and Cole 2012). Deductive and inductive coding was used to organise the themes using NVivo 12 for analysis. The four Experiential Learning Cycle phase themes: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation (D. Kolb 1984) became the deductive codes under which the inductive codes were organised into sub-themes via thematic categorisation (Bryman 2016). Transcript coding determined data saturation of themes, new information or insights, and consequently, the number of interviews conducted (Bryman 2016).

Online survey

Respondents

The respondent criteria were sport managers who performed a management role in at least one of the six job classifications and were involved in the recruitment and selection of graduates to roles within the six job classifications, hence the respondent list was not pre-determined. To recruit respondents, managers from Australian Sports Federations, non-profit community sport and leisure providers, professional associations, peak sport and recreation industry bodies and local government, distributed the online survey link to members using respective social media, newsletters and websites including LinkedIn and industry LinkedIn groups, and Twitter.

Measures

Our online survey comprised 66 items across three sections. Section one comprised demographic and job role information: age-range, income range, employment status, gender, postcode and context of employment, e.g. sporting club. Permission was gained by authors (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) to embed their 'Human Resources Manager (HRM) Survey – Retail CPP questionnaire' into section two of our online survey. The questionnaire measured the Eight Dimensions of Basic Employability Skills. In addition, nine sport-specific items were embedded from the inductive themes that evolved from the semi-structured interviews. These included training and qualifications, referees, practical experience, extra-curricular activities and the complexities of sport organisations' operations and procedures. Section three comprised an open-ended question to gain further insights on a range of respondent considerations not addressed by the pre-existing online survey items.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected over a 10-week period and analysed using the four Experiential Learning Cycle (D. Kolb 1984) phases as deductive codes. Subsequently, this approach aimed to a) define each of the four Experiential Learning Cycle phases in which the Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) items were evident; and b) forecast where the development of these Employability Dimensions occur as indicators within signals in the learning process. A power analysis was used to calculate a minimum sample size of 60 participants.

The data analysis process included screening/cleaning data, assessing the shape of distributions and testing the sub-scale reliability of the Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012). Data were screened/cleaned by removing all respondents who had not provided any responses following the demographics and job role items, and who had completed less than half of the [66] items in Section 2 (Eight Dimensions of employability sub-scale items). Cleaned data was analysed using IBM SPSS 25 and presented using descriptive text, frequencies and percentages. Variable scores were allocated to 5-point Likert response options, 1 – ‘not at all important’ to 5 – ‘extremely important’. Mean and total sub-scale scores were calculated from the item scores for each Employability Dimension sub-scale (Bryman 2016; Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012). The dependent variables of the eight Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and four Experiential Learning Cycle phases (D. Kolb 1984) were checked for normal distribution using the Shapiro–Wilk test (Guarnieri 2017a, 329). Levene’s test was implemented to verify whether to conduct parametric or non-parametric analyses and box plots to detect extreme outliers (Field 2009; Guarnieri 2017b, 113).

Sub-scale reliability and validity

The internal reliability and validation for the sub-scales of the Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and Experiential Learning Cycle phases (Kolb 1984) were tested using Cronbach’s alpha due to smaller sample sizes (Bonett and Wright 2015; Field 2009). Inter-Item Correlations reflecting positive values signified items likely to gauge the same underlying characteristic, while the Corrected Item-Total Correlation implied the degree to which each item correlated with the total score (Kelly and Daughtry 2018; Pallant 2013). To inform the selection of parametric or non-parametric testing, survey respondent numbers (sample size) were closely monitored and by 8 weeks the overall sample size was determined insufficient, not randomised, nor was multivariate normality met, hence, non-parametric testing was chosen (Field 2009; Pallant 2013). Accordingly, the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis H test was selected to determine statistical differences among the six job classification groups and works on the principle of ranking data (Field 2009; Pallant 2013).

Despite some small groups (≤ 30), the total, ‘cleaned’ sample of 92 was large enough to warrant a Monte Carlo Exact test for accuracy in testing the statistical significance of the differences among the job classification groups (Field 2009; Gavilanes and Michael 2020). Themes from the open-ended question (text) were categorised via coding in NVivo 12 and checked by a secondary coder for analytical rigour (Bryman 2016).

Results

The results of our study are presented in two sections. These sections relate to the method applied Semi-Structured Interviews (qualitative) and Online Survey (quantitative). Data from the semi-structured interviews assisted with addressing the first research question, What do practical experiences undertaken by graduate applicants reveal about their employability? The online survey assisted with addressing the second research question, How are comprehensive employability signals formed?

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 sport managers (five male and five female). Interview data were organised into the four deductively coded themes/phases of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984): Concrete Experience; Reflective Observation; Abstract Conceptualisation; and Active Experimentation. Data content was organised into inductive codes or sub-themes to present the results.

Concrete experience

Concrete experience refers to what a prospective employee [graduate 'applicant'] brings to job recruitment and selection (Kolb 1984). Four sub-themes evolved focused on the importance of a referee perspective, application of theory to practice, experience in terms of applicant performance and a demonstrated commitment to industry.

Applicants needed to provide suitable listed referees aligned with the respective sport sector and informed their referees about their application. Referee checks provided insight into an applicant's characteristics, experiences and potential job expectations of the applicant, not visible from a written application, yet observed over a period. As typified by Nicholas, 'I am looking for their referees to provide evidence of their [applicant] "fit" in terms of their practical experience'.

Theory gained at university was perceived by participants as insufficient without practical experience. These experiences brought theory and its application into practical perspective. Shannon explains this application in the workplace, 'You learn a lot in the classroom but unless you actually have that practical experience sitting beside it . . . you pretty much get lost'.

Applicants who demonstrated the success of their performance during practical experiences and how this experience could be an asset to the organisation and complement the advertised role were favoured by participants. Jacinta explained how many interns capitalised on their experiences by demonstrating a sound work ethic and performing strongly in a team environment to gain employment, 'The promptness of [the interns] to respond to [completing] an additional workload is vital; they're making it easier for the business and if there's extra work, there's a job there for them'.

Applicants who volunteered were considered by participants as proactive, passionate about what they do and committed to the industry. Mark associated his own voluntary sport experiences and how these fostered an organisational understanding that could be applied to paid employment, 'To understand how a sports club operates you will be able to serve them much better when you [are paid to] work, that's why we give it [voluntary experience] such a high rank'. Such experiences were viewed to provide UGs with an understanding on the broader industry operations within the levels of sport and appreciate the non-traditional nature of the industry.

Reflective observation

Reflective Observation refers to an applicant's reflection of experience and outcomes to assist in their preparation and performance in an interview (Kolb 1984). Three sub-themes evolved on an applicant's experience: complementing the role requirements; pre-interview preparation; and practical experience outcomes.

Graduates who recognised the presence of transferable skills gained from their practical experience were favourably regarded by participants. So too were graduates who used examples that demonstrated how their sport-specific knowledge and experience related to the advertised role. Specific understanding of how sport operates from community to elite level by applicants, was critical to participants from popular mainstream sports. David acknowledged how applicants can demonstrate this knowledge, 'I ask our candidates to prepare a one-minute PowerPoint presentation on what their understanding of the sport is and what they think our priorities should be'.

The preparation for interview by an applicant was a key consideration recognised by participants when selecting a candidate for employment. Preparation included written applications, verbal responses and overall presentation in an interview. During an interview, Shannon sought passionate presentations, 'I'd rather get someone that has passion and a love for what they're going to do because you can teach them the practical side of the role'.

The fundamental expectation of participants is that applicants articulate their competencies through examples denoting practical experience outcomes. Specifically, participants expected applicants to apply their experience to adapt to client needs; understand the gains from and importance of their experience and apply their experience to provide interview examples. Participants highly regarded applicants with an ability to reflect on each practical experience and translate their knowledge from these experiences into job applications and interview performance. Angela explained an applicant's recognition of placement outcomes is likely to transfer into an understanding of the role they played in workplace outcomes, for example, 'that they created a new kids' game that is now included in a booklet'.

Abstract conceptualisation

Abstract Conceptualisation refers to participants' collective responses relating to how applicants translate practical experiences and suitably address the requirements of the applied position (Kolb 1984). Two sub-themes emerged related to the content of the articulated message and clarity of message.

Every participant reported the need for applicants to outline practical experience roles that detailed their level of responsibility and work ethic. The outline could be in the form of using examples and expressing role satisfaction. To gauge the suitability of applicants to the advertised role and their potential satisfaction in completing the role, Jacinta asks applicants 'to elaborate on what their role was, what they enjoyed, what they didn't enjoy'.

The visual appeal, layout and structure of an application were noted by half of the participants as essential in job applications to enable quick assessment and shortlisting. Keighley justified this importance, 'I like to see in the application more information about it [experience] because reviewing can be tedious when you've got 120 for one job. Applications that are easy on the eye and to read, certainly get looked at'. Verbal articulation of practical experiences in an interview was another form of evidence to demonstrate applicant ability and was an expectation identified by participants.

Active experimentation

Active Experimentation refers to applicants who demonstrate their capacity to adopt new knowledge and skills formed during practical experiences to make decisions and solve problems (Kolb 1984). Three sub-themes identified the need for graduates to apply practical experience to the advertised role within an interview context that demonstrated leadership, self-marketing and an ability to commit and contribute to the role while presenting the applicant's point of difference.

The demonstrated leadership of applicants occurred in a range of settings. The settings include university social events and university and community leadership opportunities. Voluntary experiences of applicants signified to participants the leadership attributes and capability of applicants to perform a range of tasks. As noted by Keighley, 'It just shows someone's a bit more open to take on new challenges/unconventional experiences, as it highlights leadership attributes in a different light, namely initiative, willingness to take on new responsibilities and tasks'.

Applicants were highly regarded by participants who could self-market and articulate their suitability to the advertised role. The provision of specific examples by applicants of their involvement in similar roles or tasks, and from extra-curricular activity was one example. During interviews, Nicholas probed for associated responses including 'Can you talk about when you did this or how you did that?'

Applicants who demonstrated a commitment and ability to contribute to a workplace were highly sought by participants. Essentially, applicants were considered a good 'organisational fit' when they exhibited an ability to work with existing workers and understood the nature of the business and clients. David explained 'organisational fit' referred to the diversification of staff (age, gender and skills) and whether applicants have the capacity to assist colleagues with other roles. Jacinta highlighted the alignment of 'fit' to organisational values, 'Our core values are respect, excellence, accountability and passion, so showing us those through actions, not just words, then they are already a tick'.

Online survey

Responses to the online survey were received from 166 sport managers. After post data cleaning, the final sample size was 92. The survey comprised three components. The results will be reported accordingly: sample size and demographics specific to the online survey respondents (sport managers), sub-scale analyses from the adapted HRM Survey – Retail CPP Employability Dimensions questionnaire (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and deductive coding of the open-ended questions.

Sample size

Prior to data cleaning 166 respondents began the survey. Post-cleaning the final sample size was 92. Statistical analysis was reliant on the sample sizes of the six job classifications (Grant, Hanlon, and Young 2023) to allow for inter-group comparisons, requiring at least 10 for every estimated parameter (Iyer and Loxton 2008). Four of the six job classification groups had below 10 respondents, hence amalgamation of the existing groups was required to boost group numbers to allow group comparisons. To retain the greatest number of groups, new group headings were validated based on grouping similar job functions and role outcomes. The six groups were reduced to three. The words in bold in Table 1 were used to form the amalgamated groups; the Administration/Finance/Operations group remained the same.

Respondent demographics

In terms of gender distribution, only a slightly higher representation of males (55%) to females (44%) and other (1%) was identified. Regarding location, the state of Victoria represented 77% of respondents, followed by substantially smaller numbers residing in five other states and territory, with no respondents residing in Tasmania or the Australian Capital Territory. Respondents were primarily aged between 24 and 44 years (67%), were full-time employed (83%) and received an annual income between \$AUD 60–90,000+ (77%). Respondent age, income and type [context] of organisation are outlined in Table 2 with the corresponding job classification (Groups 1–3) percentages (rounded up).

Table 1. Job classifications: sample size.

Job Classifications (6)	Number of respondents	Newly formed Job Classifications (3)	Number of respondents
Administration/Finance/Operations	51 (55%)	Administration/Finance/Operations	51 (55%)
Coaching /High Performance	4 (5%)	Development/Coaching/Programs	28 (31%)
Development /Participation/ Programs	24 (26%)		
Customer/ Membership /Athlete Services	1 (1%)	Marketing/Membership/Events/ Communications	13 (14%)
Events /Competitions	10 (11%)		
Marketing /Media/PR/ Communications	2 (2%)		
TOTAL	92	TOTAL	92

Table 2. Demographic results matched with job classification groups 1–3.

Categories		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
<i>Age Range</i>	%	#/51 (%)	#/28 (%)	#/13 (%)
18–29	18	14 (27)	6 (4)	4 (30)
30–39	32	11 (22)	9 (32)	5 (38)
40–49	31	11 (22)	3 (11)	4 (30)
50–59	13	4 (2)	4 (14)	1 (8)
60+	6	4 (2)	2 (7)	0 (0)
<i>Annual Range of Income (AUD)</i>	%	#/51 (%)	#/28 (%)	#/13 (%)
\$0–29,000	2	2 (4)	2 (7)	1 (8)
\$30–59,000	21	11 (21)	9 (32)	3 (23)
\$60–89,000	36	14 (27)	17 (61)	6 (46)
\$90,000+	41	17 (33)	6 (4)	4 (30)
<i>Organisation Type</i>	%	#/51 (%)	#/28 (%)	#/13 (%)
State Sporting Association	24	12 (23)	5 (18)	5 (38)
Sporting Club	14	4 (8)	5 (18)	4 (4)
Local Government	13	5 (10)	7 (25)	0 (0)
National Sporting Organisation	11	6 (12)	3 (11)	1 (8)
Venue/Facility Management	11	8 (16)	2 (7)	0 (0)
Corporate	4	3 (6)	1 (4)	0 (0)
Education	3	1 (1)	2 (7)	0 (0)
Fitness	3	2 (4)	0 (0)	1 (8)
State Government	3	3 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Higher Education	2	2 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Other	10	6 (12)	1 (4)	2 (15)

The 'other' category within Organisational type represented 10 respondents. These managers were from organisations within non-profit (3%) aged care/homeless (2%), Peak Sporting Body (2%) and international/national tourism/sport events (<1%).

Employability dimensions

Survey sub-scale analysis results

Results for each of the eight Employability Dimensions sub-scales with additional items identified from the semi-structured interviews were analysed. The eight Employability Dimensions and four Experiential Learning Cycle (DKolb 1984) phases were not normally distributed, and one outlier was detected and adjusted to the results (Field 2009). The internal reliability testing process calculated means, standard deviation, inter-item correlation and scale totals. Strong internal consistency was detected among the sub-scale Cronbach's Alpha values (>.78) and corrected item-total correlation scores for all sub-scales were between .32 and .70, suggesting a strong correlation with associated sub-scales. Findings revealed Groups 1 and 2 similarly ranked importance of each Employability Dimension and Group 3 had minor differences (Table 3). All three groups ranked Work Ethic and Literacy and Numeracy Skills as first and second in importance. The number in brackets in Table 3 identifies the ranked order of each dimension from highest to lowest. Additional items identified from themes gained from the semi-structured interviews were added to the original online survey items to the Employability Dimensions indicated by (ED#)¹. These additional items predominantly related to an SM context, for example, 'gain additional, relevant training/qualifications' (ED2)¹.

The mean scores for the four sub-scales representing the phases of the Experiential Learning Cycle were ranked in order of importance (in brackets) in Table 4. Job classification Groups 1 and 2 list the four phases in rank of importance in the same order and there is almost uniformity between the three groups on rankings for the Employability Dimensions (Table 3) and Experiential Learning Cycle Phase sub-scales (Table 4).

Table 3. Employability dimensions with additional items rank order by job classification.

Employability Dimension (ED Number)	Administration/Finance/Operations Group 1	Development/Coaching/Programs Group 2	Marketing/Membership/Events/Communication Group 3
(1) Work Ethic (ED8) ¹	4.22	4.25 (1)	4.25 (1)
(2) Literacy and Numeracy Skills (ED1)	4.22	4.09 (2)	3.92 (2)
(3) Interpersonal Skills (ED5) ¹	3.97	3.79 (3)	3.80 (4)
(4) Leadership Skills (ED3) ¹	3.89	3.77 (4)	3.92 (3)
(5) Information Technology Skills (ED6)	3.87	3.72 (5)	3.76 (5)
(6) Critical Thinking Skills (ED2) ¹	3.65	3.60 (6)	3.47 (6)
(7) Systems Thinking Skills (ED7) ¹	3.58	3.48 (7)	3.51 (8)
(1) Management Skills (ED4)	3.44	3.33 (8)	3.58 (7)

Table 4. Mean scores for experiential learning cycle phases.

Experiential Learning Cycle Phase	Number of items	Total Mean score	Administration/Finance/Operations Group 1	Development/Coaching/Programs Group 2	Marketing/Membership/Events/Communication Group 3
1	13	4.02	4.34	4.27 (1)	4.25 (2)
2	9	3.84	4.33	4.21 (2)	4.31 (1)
3	13	3.75	3.80	3.70 (3)	3.64 (4)
4	18	3.67	3.70	3.59 (4)	3.66 (3)

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore the employability signals sport managers seek from graduate-entry applicants who have undertaken practical experience, during job recruitment and selection. Both research questions were addressed, highlighting a positive association between UG practical experiences and the development and signalling of employability.

Graduates must be prepared for every practical experience (DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove 2016; Grant, Hanlon, and Young 2023) and understand how to translate and market their newly gained capability into observable signals. Respectively, the results from our study address signalling theory (Spence 1973) to uncover the origins and composition of these observed signals and how they can be adopted by graduate applicants to assist with their transition from education to the workplace. More specifically, the semi-structured interviews prompted the exploration of the skills, attributes and experiential learning most desired by sport managers. Subsequent alignment of these with each of the four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) depicts the stage in which these skills, attributes and experiential learning are typically developed/originate as recognised by industry managers of UGs undertaking practical experiences. The online survey identified the importance, by sport managers, of the eight Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and respective sub-scale items that graduate applicants should possess from having 1 to 2 years of practical industry experience. A subsequent reveal of the observed signal indicators arose from exploration of the Employability Dimensions and their alignment to the Experiential Learning Cycle to determine in which of the four stages these [employability] signal indicators are developed.

Typically, employability literature highlights the skills required to address industry needs (Dinning and Ünlü 2017; Grant, Hanlon, and Young 2023); however, the descriptions and definitions of industry skill lists exclude specific information to assist employers assess the

presence of these skills (DESE 2022). Addressing this limitation and identified from our study, are 32 indicators, which combine to form 10 observed signals that will assist employers to assess graduate applicant employability skills. Collectively, these are the first group of signals in Australia and potentially globally, with a set of indicators to signify the employability of an SM graduate and recognised by prospective employers during job recruitment and selection. The 10 observed signals include experienced industry referees; referee check: alignment of applicant and referees; voluntary experience(s); unpaid experience as a pathway to employment; practical experience related to advertised role; practical experience outcomes; presentation; articulation (content); leadership attributes and self-marketing. Our study expands on employability and employee recruitment and selection literature and provides a new framework to guide higher education and industry to support student articulation of their employability, transparently, during job recruitment and selection.

The indicators in each observed signal pinpoint the aspects of employability that employers expect, and this finding expands limited research on how employers assess a job applicant's employability (Briggeman and Bailey 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020). Common signals typically identified from previous research focused only on one-dimensional/single indicator that produces an assumed outcome (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2011; Saar et al. 2014). Single indicator examples include the notion that reputable education institutions produce productive and high-quality students (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2011; Saar et al. 2014); and Grade Point Averages implies the level of an applicant's cognitive ability (Piopiunik et al. 2020; Pogatsnik 2018). Implying an applicant's employability is further complicated by the notion that applicant skills, productivity and work ethic are not directly observable during job recruitment and selection (Briggeman and Bailey 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020).

Observed signals indicators

Within the 10 observed signals, corresponding indicators exist that signify potential evidence of an applicant's ability. These indicators divulge new knowledge in terms of how employers can recognise employability in graduate-entry applicants during job recruitment and selection. For example, 'Unpaid experience as a pathway to employment' is one observed signal with three indicators relating to the applicant: experiences afford familiarity of sporting industry; realistic expectations gained; and development of requisite skills to demonstrate capability. These indicators signify a graduate applicant's employability connected to their practical experience(s) and can reduce the likelihood of inaccurate applicant impressions that are often formed quickly and with limited information, by prospective employers (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2011; Gillath et al. 2012). The 32 indicators in Table 5 have been summarised.

Each indicator within the observed signal is observed during job recruitment and/or selection. These indicators recognise multiple Employability Dimensions (Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and align to one of the four phases of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984). Collectively, the indicators within each observed signal address the complexities of recognising graduate employability as faced by SM managers during job recruitment and selection (Briggeman and Bailey 2011; Piopiunik et al. 2020). The dimensions and phases are connected according to where these signal indicators are developed, then converted into observable employability signals (by applicants) during job recruitment and/or selection (Table 5). The Employability Dimension numbers (1–8) that appear most evident in each observed signal are indicated in Table 5, and these numbers represent:

- (1) Basic Literacy and Numeracy Skills;
- (2) Critical Thinking Skills;
- (3) Leadership Skills;
- (4) Management Skills;

Table 5. Observed signals and indicators from graduate applicants.

Observed Signal	Observed Signal Indicators	Employability Dimensions	Experiential Learning Cycle Phase	Recruitment 1 and/or Selection 2
Experienced industry referees.	Reputable industry employers are selective when acting as a referee; through experience these referees can recognise hard-working practicum students.	8	1	1 & 2
Referee check: alignment of applicant and referee.	Direct observation by referees of interpersonal communication and critical thinking; occurring over a period; in which they provide mentorship and industry preparation. Referees in similar roles to recruiting managers can articulate their observations to address the alignment of the applicant to the role.	1, 5	1	2
Voluntary experience(s).	Indicate proactivity, passion, leadership, commitment to the industry; contributes to sustaining the social and economic wellbeing of communities; and experiences enhances systems thinking skills related to industry and operations.	3, 7, 8	1	1
Unpaid experience as a pathway to employment.	Experiences afford familiarity of sporting industry; realistic expectations gained; and development of requisite skills to demonstrate capability.	2, 8	1	1 & 2
Practical experience related to advertised role.	Recognise and articulate: transferable skills; related skills and knowledge from practical experiences to an advertised position; demonstrate communication and critical thinking.	1, 2	2	1 & 2
Practical experience outcomes.	Recognise learning has occurred using thorough reflection; values the SM workplace; confirms an interest in the industry and what it has to offer.	1, 2, 5, 8	2	1 & 2
Presentation.	Articulate capability through all forms of communication including: written documentation; use strong verbal presentation to demonstrate intrapersonal skills; and the leadership traits required to maintain and nurture business relationships.	1, 3, 5, 6	3	1 & 2
Articulation (content).	Communicate experience and connections to advertised roles; articulate working relationships; display confidence levels required to work in teams, manage tasks and learn new workplace technologies and systems.	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7	3	1 & 2
Leadership attributes.	Forge close working relationships; display initiative and self-motivation to undertake new tasks and make decisions; complete mundane and exciting tasks and projects to exhibit leadership.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8	4	1 & 2
Self-marketing.	Provide evidence through examples; seek organisational outcomes; demonstrate ability through writing, verbally, and in interviews; to reflect suitability to position; confirm point of difference.	1, 5, 8	4	1 & 2

- (5) Interpersonal Skills;
- (6) Information Technology Skills;
- (7) Systems Thinking Skills;
- (8) Work Ethic.

Conclusion

The significance of UG practical experience to the development of graduate employability was identified in our study. In addition, how and at what stage do observe [employability] signals that sport managers seek from SM graduate-entry applicants during job recruitment and selection, develop. The significance of employability development through direct industry practical experience

is reinforced theoretically through employability frameworks (e.g. Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote 2012) and an Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984). The results from our study were translated into 32 indicators that collectively formed 10 observed signals. These signals can be observed by [hiring] employers during job recruitment and selection to assist with applicant assessment of employability.

The prominent rise in sport in Australia and subsequent enrolments in UG SM programmes have placed pressure on HE to foster work ready and employable graduates amid heightening employer expectations of graduate job applicants (Deane 1992; Dinning and Ünlü 2017). To strengthen the work readiness and employability of graduates, our study identified the need for observed signals to guide UG SM students. Identified from our study, the observed signals (Table 5) aims to enhance graduate knowledge to be aware of the industry, their own point of difference and how to transparently signal employability during job recruitment and selection.

A limitation of our study relates to the low national response rate to the online survey ($n = 92$) following data cleansing. In Australia, sport managers represent a range of sports across the three SM sectors, commercial, non-profit and public; however, there is no central system to directly target and correspond with employees from these sectors (Emery, Crabtree, and Kerr 2012). Consequently, directing the online survey to sport managers in the first instance to participate in the online survey was extremely difficult. Subsequent low response rate and corresponding sample sizes compromised the inter-group comparisons for four of the six job classification groups, resulting in the amalgamation of job classification groups from six to three for data analysis purposes. To create a centralised system, future research could explore the unification of Australian SM academic associations such as Sport Management Australia and New Zealand with industry associations, for example, SportAccord and the Australian Sports Professionals Association. A unification could provide an avenue to streamline the dissemination of information, resources and support to the SM industry across the commercial, non-profit and public sectors while also representing these sectors.

Data gained from our Australian-based study present another limitation, this time from a global perspective. The findings are specific to the SM industry sector in Australia, which could constrain the transferability of the representation of the SM sector on a global scale.

Expectations of graduates from the SM industry sector exist, specifically related to general employability skills and enhancing marketability (Zimmer and Keiper 2021). None, however, provide distinct signals that sport managers seek from graduate-entry applicants during job recruitment and selection. Globally, our findings provide a key opportunity for future research to pilot the observed signals identified in our study with a potential to adapt to industry organisations external to sport.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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