

## **The student journey, skill development when appraising graduate destination data**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will examine the findings of a project which tracked the career journeys of sports graduates from 2000-2015 but from a student researcher and now postgraduate research student's perspective. While a final year undergraduate, one of the co-authors was employed to collect and organise the output for an employability transitions project. This paper will consider some of the output from the project, as the co-author is also now a sport graduate, but will more specifically focus on personal skill development and preparedness for the transition to postgraduate study.

### **Keywords**

Postgraduate study, transitions, student as researcher

### **Introduction**

An increasing body of literature is emerging regarding the concept of the 'student as partner' in educational projects. This recognises the value of involving those affected by education strategy but also acknowledges the skills, knowledge and experience that they can contribute (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Bovill & Felten, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2016). Annually, Abertay University invites bids to its Teaching, Learning and Enhancement Fund (ATLEF) – one of the criteria for funding is that a student must be engaged as a researcher in the project. This paper outlines a student's experience of being employed as a research assistant on a Student Transitions project and considers this in the context of their own 'next steps' to employment and postgraduate study.

Graduate employability is considered by some as a marker of the efficacy of the university experience and is a metric built into the newly launched Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data is used to populate Key Information Sets for prospective students, in the knowledge that graduate employment will govern choice of programme and place of study for more than half of university applicants

(Nicoll, 2016). Debate exists about whether it is the role of universities to produce employable graduates (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Schomburg & Teichler, 2006; Cranmer, 2006) – however, despite embedded curriculum initiatives in many programmes to address this there are some in the business world who believe that universities are failing to prepare students for employment (BIS, 2015). Business representatives have stated that students are not work-ready (BCC, 2016) and in this context of employability, universities are being questioned about skill development (UUK, 2013). Employers recognise that subject specific knowledge is important – however, transferable skills particularly those of communication, reliability and team work are also valuable for the workplace (Bevitt, 2015; Shah, 2013).

Literature in relation to transition – whether this to be into a study environment or employment – focuses on the theory of adjustment (‘honeymoon’, ‘culture shock’, and ‘adjustment’ (Risquez, Moore & Morley, 2008)) with ‘navigating change’ viewed as critical to successful transition (QAA, 2015). An increasing number of students are enrolling for postgraduate (PG) study with access to the professions, enhanced employability and increased earning power considered as the drivers influencing this trend (Morgan, 2014; Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013; Hoffman & Julie, 2012). Postgraduate students represent almost a quarter of the student population (HESA, 2017) however, little is written about transition to this stage of study, in the assumption that it is a progression point that studying for an undergraduate degree prepares students for (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013; West, 2012). Postgraduate study can be ‘complex’ and ‘challenging’ with the capacity to be ‘independent’ and autonomous central features (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013), this is particularly so if a postgraduate research (PGR) programme is chosen. Enrolment on PGR studies is influenced by career progression goals and personal motivators for example, intellectual satisfaction, but prior research experience also informs the decision to pursue this route (Guerin, Jayatilaka & Ranasinghe, 2015). There are inherent challenges with this mode of study particularly in regard to funding, balancing other commitments and not feeling isolated but those with prior part-time research or teaching experience have heightened familiarity with the expectations of this stage of study (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013).

### The Abertay project

A successful bid was made by the research team to ATLEF to progress a study which would:-

- track Abertay sport degree graduates from a 15 year historic period, 2000-2015
- compare Honours graduates’ destination data with those who graduated on completion of the unclassified degree stage

- collect data beyond first destination employment and gain an insight into the career trajectories of Abertay Sport degree graduates
- explore graduates' preparedness for the workplace and use this data to inform curriculum development
- utilise demographic data to contextualise the career destination findings.

### Project Methodology

An advert was circulated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year sport students for the post of research assistant for one day per week for a period of seven months to support the project. Following a competitive recruitment process a 4<sup>th</sup> year student was successfully appointed to the role.

The first stage of the project required the research assistant to generate a list of Abertay sports' graduates from 2000-2015 from the student record system. The demographic characteristics of the alumni in relation to age, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, route of entry and exit point were also extracted and transferred to the graduate database. The next stage was to establish if valid e-mail addresses existed for the graduates, such that they could be e-mailed a visible 4-item questionnaire that the Ethics Committee had approved. The questions asked details of employment (and location) since graduation, additional qualifications, and also asked about preparedness for the workplace, as well as about the parts of the curriculum which had had most utility in their employment.

Responses were matched with demographic data in order that graduate outcomes could be analysed in respect of entry, exit points and socioeconomic status. The Standard Occupational Classification system (ONS, 2010) was used to categorise employment as a graduate role.

### Project Results

The research assistant established that 924 students had graduated from an Abertay sports degree programme in the period 2000-2015. Of this, 452 had valid e-mail addresses, and approximately a third (n=135) responded to the e-mail survey. Departmental records also provided some first destination data for a broader group of students (n=350).

Data analysis revealed that socioeconomic status, gender or disability had no impact on graduate outcome in relation to whether an alumni was in graduate and/or sports employment or whether they had progressed to postgraduate study. A significantly higher proportion than the sector average progressed to postgraduate study ( $\chi^2=54.2$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and substantively higher levels of the sports graduates were in teaching (27% versus a sector

norm of 18.6%). Students who enrolled from a FE college were significantly more likely to exit with an unclassified degree award ( $\chi^2 = 84.7$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and significantly less likely to enrol for postgraduate study ( $\chi^2 = 6.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). When benchmarked against the sector, graduate employment matched national trends but higher proportions of the alumni were in work and further study, and more were employed in the sports industry (Figure 1).

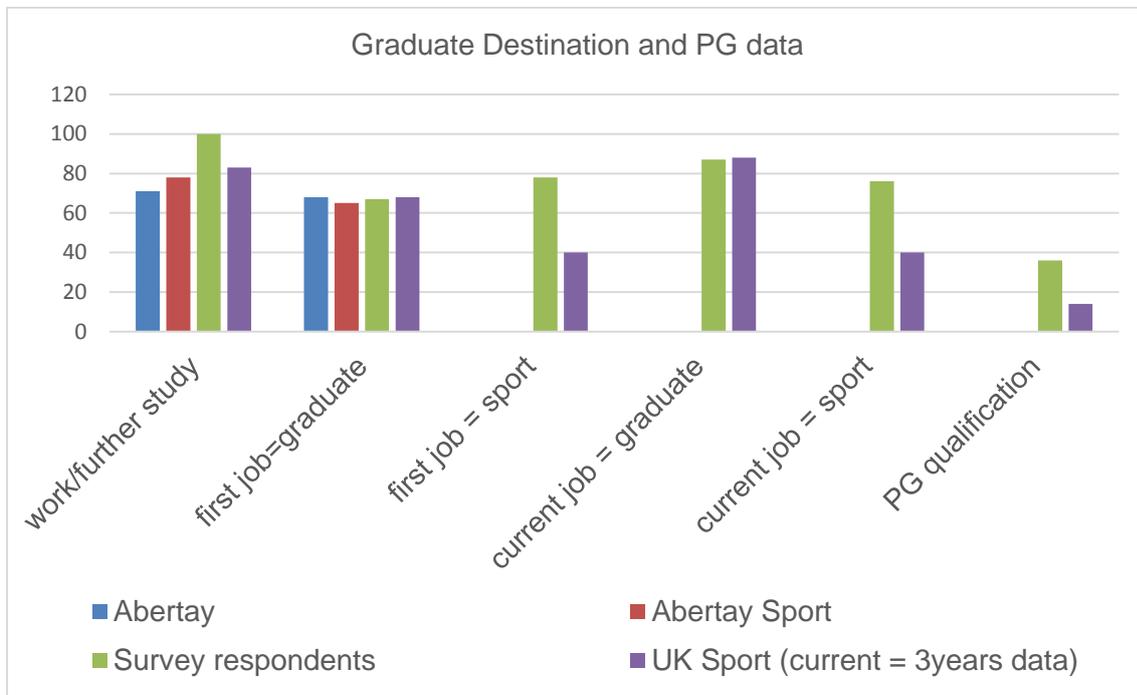


Figure 1. Abertay sports students' destination data following graduation

Three quarters of the respondents (77%) felt prepared for their first job, and the majority had felt prepared for working life in general (87%). Coaching, knowledge, practical experiences and skills were considered instrumental in this preparedness with placement and research methods considered to be the most useful parts of the curriculum. The alumni also commented about the maturation and development which had taken place during their time at Abertay and how this had prepared them for employment.

The research assistant applied N-Vivo analysis to the employment data provided by the graduates and this resulted in a graphical representation that the sports division have been able to use in recruitment materials (Figure 2).

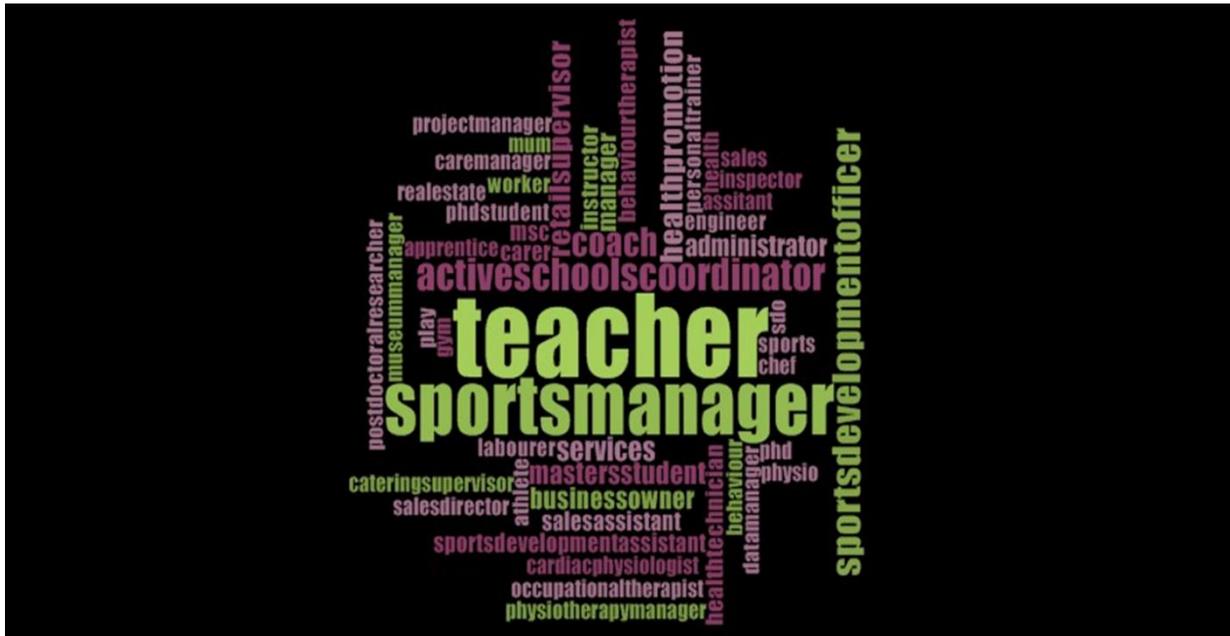


Figure 2. Abertay sports' graduate employment destinations

### The Research Assistant experience

The student had been considering pursuing a postgraduate research degree and applied for the post as a means of exploring whether this type of work interested her. She understood what the requirements of the role would be and was quickly able to navigate her way round the Abertay systems in order to data mine the information. She appreciated the flexibility afforded her with regard to hours spent on the project, particularly as she was also trying to complete her own undergraduate dissertation, submit final pieces of coursework and study for exams. This was alongside her external commitments to coaching, as well as her pursuit of other employment opportunities.

Time management was critical to undertaking this role and the student soon discovered that she would be required to be quite autonomous and self-directed but appreciated this. She felt that this conveyed a trust in her capacity to progress the study but also it mirrored how she would be required to work if she pursued PGR studies. She felt a valued member of the team and that while her title was 'assistant' she felt a partner in decisions made.

In terms of skill development, her management of databases was refined, and she felt that her organisation and management skills were improved, particularly in relation to prioritisation of tasks. Her experience prior to the project had been in the quantitative research domain but the project required her to use qualitative data analytic tools, and to this end she taught herself to use the N-Vivo software package. Engagement with the project

increased her confidence in her research capabilities and confirmed to her that applying for a PGR programme was the correct next step for her.

One of the interesting aspects of conducting the data analysis specific to this project, was that during the study, the student also made her own transition to sports graduate – consequently, there was a sense of personal investment in the output generated by the project. Immersion in the data also heightened her own self-awareness with regard to how to articulate the knowledge, skills and experiences obtained during her sports degree to prospective employers. On completion of her undergraduate studies, the student gained a part-time project co-ordinator role with British Blind Sport. This post required her to prepare research-informed reports, to keep databases and to analyse a range of information – she credits the confidence that she had in applying for this role as attributable to her research assistant post. She was able to extend her skill set during this employ and has been able to transfer this to her most recent role of Regional Development Manager with Scottish Disability Sport.

The student notes that the mentorship provided by the staff members on the research team was particularly valuable in preparing for PGR study in that she was able to draw on their lengthy experience to explore ways of analysing and presenting the data. Working with a database extended her skillset beyond that inherent in her undergraduate programme and extended her confidence in her capabilities as a researcher. The time management aspects in relation to organisation and prioritisation aided the transition to PGR study as did the opportunity to present findings at conference to an audience of academics.

## Discussion

A key characteristic of the UK Higher Education system is its capacity to create ‘independent learners’ (QAA, 2015) – however, the literature acknowledges that it should not be assumed that all entering PG study will automatically have mastery of this (Tobbell, O’ Donnell & Zammit, 2010) or that they will readily be able to ‘generate, adapt and apply new knowledge’ (Shaw, Holbrook & Bourke, 2013). Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013) report that those who have prior experience as a researcher are more familiar with the expectations of PGR studies. The student employed on this project confirmed that the experience gained more readily enabled her to make the transition to PGR study particularly in relation to managing a range of commitments (Hoffman & Julie, 2012; West, 2012) and being self-directed (Tobbell, O’ Donnell & Zammit, 2010). The level of independence required to progress PGR study has

resulted in students reporting feelings of 'isolation' (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013; Shaw, Holbrook & Bourke, 2013) – however, not a sentiment voiced here.

It is of note, given the topic of investigation within the project – graduate employment – that the student gained her first graduate role while the project was ongoing and could use her project experience to reflect on her preparedness for her new employ. Confidence and enhanced research skills being the attributable features – aligning with the broader graduate data where the alumni had commented that 'research methods' had been one of the most useful parts of the curriculum in relation to the workplace. This also adds weight to the belief that it is often these more generic aspects of knowledge that employers' value (Bevitt, 2015; Shah, 2013). The volume of graduates who felt prepared for their first post and for working life in general as a consequence of their Abertay sports degree potentially highlights the very real efforts that colleagues have made to embed a range of practical employability initiatives within the curriculum.

Analysis of the sports graduate data flagged the significantly higher proportion of students progressing to postgraduate study and in the knowledge that 80% of PG students will at some point feel overwhelmed by the demands of this level of study (Cluett & Skene, 2006) it does challenge the programme team at Abertay to consider activity and/or events that can be embedded in the latter stages of the curriculum to enable students to make this transition.

### Conclusion

Opportunities for students to take on a research role, akin to the Abertay ATLEF study described here, are beginning to gain prominence as the value of student partnership projects and/or research volunteer schemes are recognised (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Bovill & Felten, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2016). The capacity to enhance analytic skills while collaborating on a live project (Lee & Murray, 2013) not only positively impacts on the student's employment prospects, it can, as in this case, also inform graduate's future career choices.

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