

Tracking career destinations of sports graduates 2000-2015 – a longitudinal exploration of destinations and preparedness for the workplace

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Employability, Transition, Mobility

Introduction

Historically graduates are more likely to be in work and with significantly higher earning capacity than their non-graduate counterparts. Post-graduate study is noted to further increase earning power (BIS, 2015). HESA (2015) data reveals that 6 months after graduation 76.6% of graduates are in work, and 11.6% are in further study. Three years on from this survey point, 87.9% of graduates are in work and 6% are engaged in further study.

It is widely acknowledged that universities have a responsibility for producing employable graduates (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Schomburg & Teichler, 2006) who have the ability to adapt and manage their future careers (Bridgestock, 2009). However, there is some debate about whether these skills can be developed in the classroom (Cranmer, 2006). Whilst some note that teaching and assessing employability skills does not impact on performance in the labour market (Mason et al., 2009); others feel that providing an opportunity for formal and informal feedback enhances skill development (Treleaven & Voola, 2008).

The advent of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the benchmarking that will derive from employment destination, occupational classification and widening access data means that increasingly universities, and disciplines, will be expected to evidence the impact of their curriculum interactions on graduate destinations and social mobility.

Sport is viewed as a vehicle by which to attain European Union social and economic goals and there has been a notable increase in employment in this sector in 21 of the 28 EU member states (Eurostat, 2016). While more than a third of sport employees are graduates there is a lack of evidence charting their career journeys (Minten & Forsyth, 2014). Studies

which have been undertaken reveal that many job changes are a feature of these graduates' early careers, with roughly 40% being sports employees, though not all in graduate jobs. However, many are successful in finding graduate level employment in a range of occupations. This may not be driven by a lack of options but by personal choice and should be viewed as a positive outcome (Minten, 2007; Minten & Forsyth, 2014). Therefore, it could be argued that university curricula should not be governed by the skill set demands of a particular employment sector but instead develop a broader set of transferable graduate attributes.

HESA data for 2013-14 reveals that 65% of Abertay sport graduates are in a professional or managerial job 6 months after graduation and 20% are participating in further study. Placement has been a key feature of the Abertay sport provision since its inception in 1999. Sport students participate in a placement experience at each stage of study, developing accompanying personal reflective practice portfolios (PDPs). Colleagues within the department have published and presented on curriculum employability initiatives and gathered anecdotal data about graduate destination however, they have not tracked career pathways in a formal and systematic manner.

Abertay is one of Scotland's leading Higher Education (HE) centres for wider access (SFC, 2016). The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is used as a national marker to indicate poverty. The lower two quintiles (SIMD20/40) are those most associated with deprivation and postcode is used to identify students entering HE from this background. In the 2014-15 academic session, the university achieved the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) outcome agreement target of 27% of undergraduate entrants articulating from college with advanced standing and had 15.7% of its enrolments come from a SIMD20 postcode. Stage three of the Abertay sport programmes constituted 72% articulating students in 2015-16. The subject discipline has from the outset had a diverse student body and currently increased emphasis is being placed on the learning gain and social mobility associated with a university education (UUK 2016; Macmillan & Vignoles, 2013).

This study's key objectives were to:-

- 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.

Method

The research team were awarded some internal grant monies to undertake the investigation and employed a final year student as a research assistant on the project. The student researcher established that 923 students had graduated from the Abertay sport programmes in the timeframe of the study –though valid e-mail addresses were only available for 452 alumni. A personal e-mail message was sent to those with functioning electronic addresses, from two team members who had been in long-term employ in this subject area, inviting the graduate to complete a short 4-item survey, embedded and viewable within the e-mail. The questions asked the graduate to summarise their employment (including locality), to list any further qualifications they had gained, and to comment on the utility of their studies for employment as well as indicating what had been the aspects of the programme that had been most useful in terms of transitioning into the workplace. Responses were matched to the demographic characteristics of the graduate in order that any emergent trends in graduate outcomes could be identified. The Standard Occupational Classification system (ONS, 2010) was used to determine whether respondents were in graduate level employment.

Results

Approximately a third of those e-mailed responded to the survey (n= 135), however, departmental records allowed first destination data to be gathered for 350 graduates. The characteristics of the respondents are illustrated in Figure 1 benchmarked to sector as well as Abertay data.

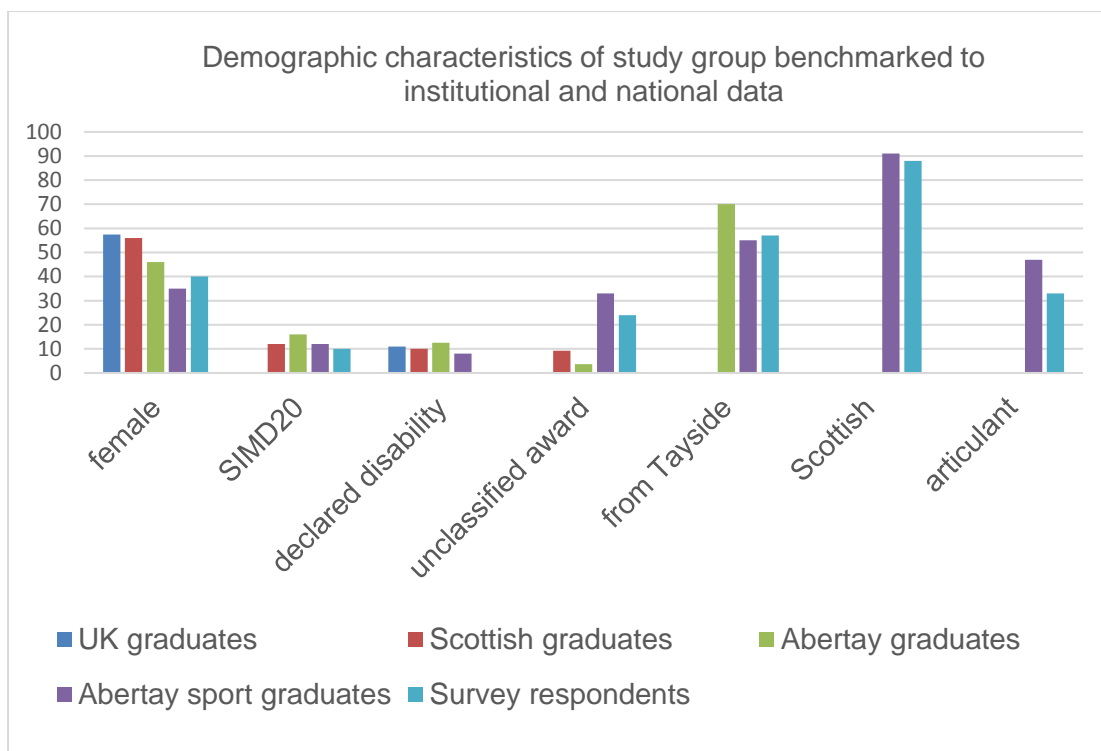
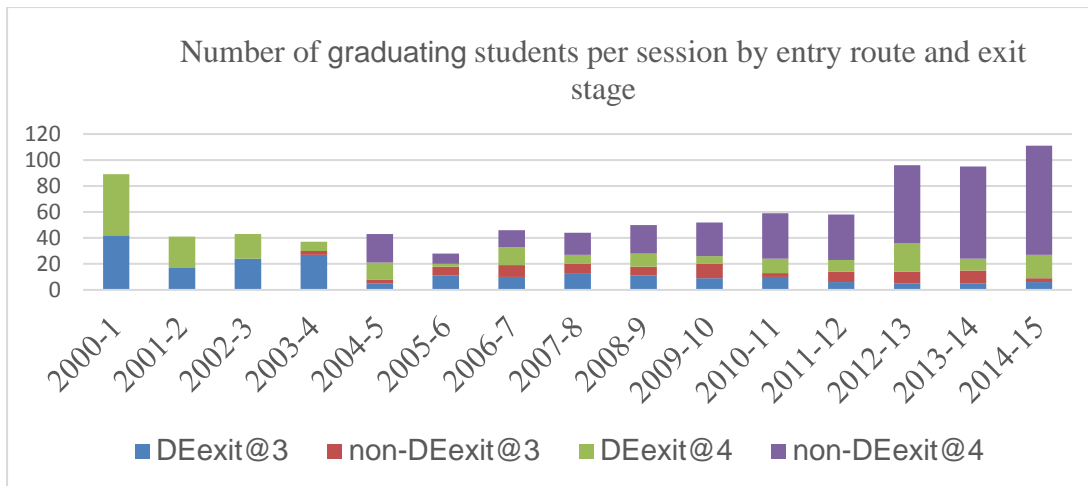


Figure 1. The demographic characteristics of the sports graduates from 2000-2015

Across the study period just under a quarter of all student enrolments (23%) came from an SIMD20/40 postcode and significantly more of these were direct entry graduates (29.5% versus 20% of non-direct entry students, $\chi^2 = 6.9$, $p < 0.01$). 'First in family' students were also significantly more likely to come from an SIMD20/40 postcode ($\chi^2 = 10.5$, $p < 0.01$).

Over the study period it was evident that increasing proportions of students were completing the Honours stage of study, and the likelihood of this enrolment was not determined by socioeconomic status, gender or disability. Those students who had articulated from FE were significantly more likely to exit with a non-Honours degree ($\chi^2 = 84.68$, $p < 0.01$) and this exit pattern is visible in the data illustrated in Figure 1.

The Abertay sport degree programmes commenced in 1999 when two degree routes were offered to students articulating from college. In 2001, the university expanded the offering to three sport degree pathways and students could commence their studies in year 1 or articulate in from college at a later stage. The portfolio of programmes was further expanded in 2007 when nine degree titles were offered within the discipline. The impact of these changes on entry route and exit point is illustrated in Figure 2.



(DE = direct entry/articulating graduate; non-DE = graduate enrolled from first year).

Figure 2. Abertay sport graduates exit point in relation to route of entry

Abertay sports graduates' outcomes when benchmarked against sector destination data revealed higher proportions in work and further study (Figure 3). Applying the Standard Occupational Classification system to define graduate level roles revealed that Abertay data aligned with national trends for graduate employment however, more were employed in the sports industry than the sector average for those with sport degrees. The demographic characteristic of the graduate had no impact on whether they were in graduate or sports employment.

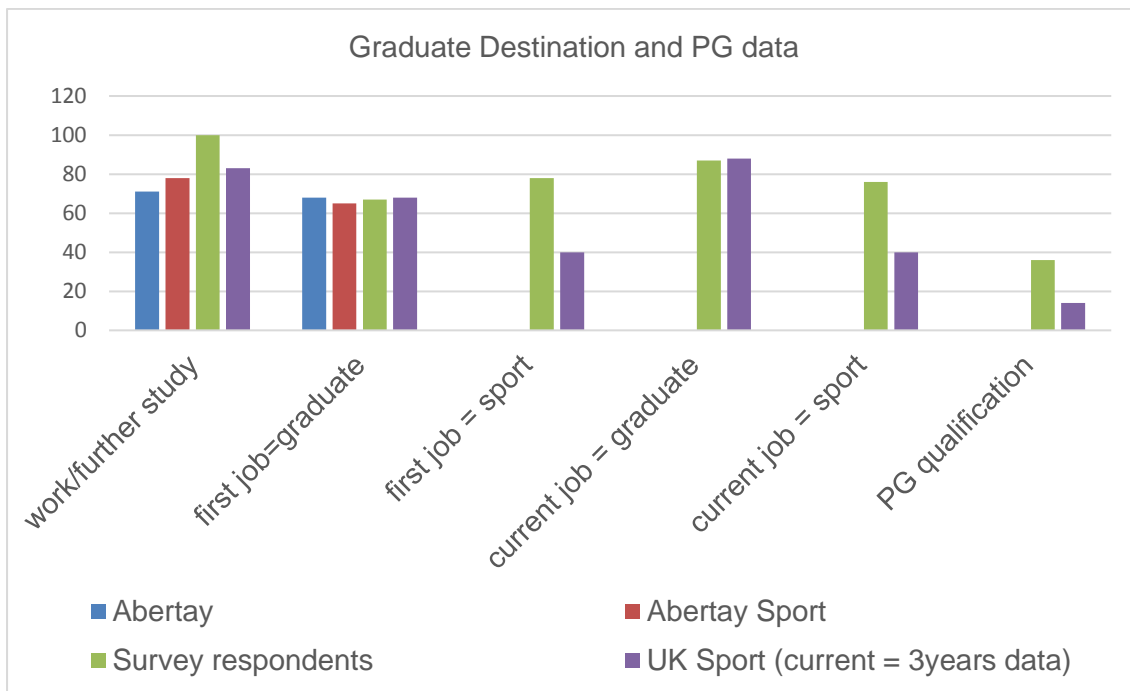


Figure 3. Abertay sports students' destination data following graduation

Significantly higher proportions of the Abertay sport graduates completed postgraduate qualifications ($\chi^2 = 54.2, p < 0.01$), many of these were with regard to teaching. Postgraduate study was an increasingly common feature for those students who had graduated more recently and socioeconomic status had no impact on the likelihood of progressing to postgraduate study ($\chi^2 = 0.75, p > 0.05$). However, those who took an unclassified award were significantly less likely to do a PG qualification ($\chi^2 = 3.64, p < 0.05$) but this was not the case for teaching within the sampled timeframe.

Few students engage in exchange opportunities during their Abertay sport programme ($n < 2$ per year) however, this had not hampered geographic mobility on graduation with many having either worked or still working abroad. However, 55% of graduates derived from Tayside and 55% remained in Tayside. Those originally from Tayside were significantly more likely to remain in Tayside both for their first and current posts ($\chi^2 = 74.3$ and 47.9 respectively, $p < 0.01$); they were also significantly more likely to take an unclassified degree award ($\chi^2 = 6.03, p < 0.05$).

Figure 4 gives an overview of the employment destinations of Abertay sports graduates. 27% of the sports graduates were in teaching posts and 18% in sports manager positions.



Figure 4. Abertay sports' graduate employment destinations

The majority (84%) of those who responded were identifiably in graduate level jobs, with teaching being the predominant occupation. Sports development positions also featured

heavily in the employment data. For those students who had industry experience prior to graduation there was a trend toward their first post being at a graduate level and/or them being in a managerial position. Those students who didn't have industry experience at the point of graduation were more likely to have been in a 'grassroots' type of post for their first position, then obtain a graduate level job.

77% felt prepared for first job, and year of exit had no significant effect on this. Those who had not felt prepared (n=26) were either in a non-graduate job or felt that they already had the necessary skillset before enrolling on the programme. Coaching, knowledge, experience and skills were the predominant responses when graduates were asked to explain what features of the programme had prepared them for their first job (Figure 5).

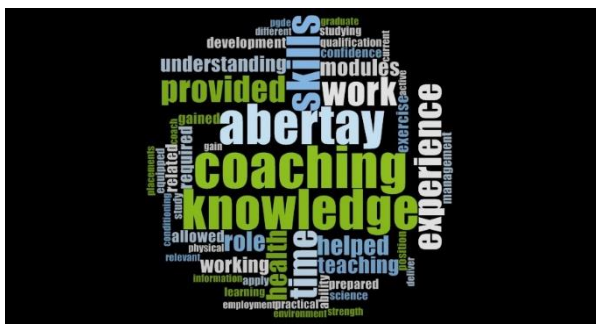


Fig. 5 Did your Abertay degree equip you for your first job post-graduation

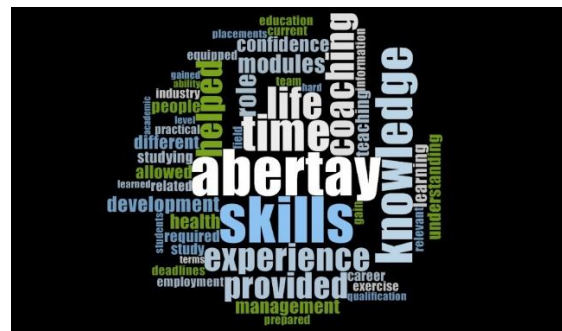


Fig.6 Did your Abertay degree equip you for your working life in general

87% felt prepared for working life in general, and whether the student had exited with an unclassified or an Honours degree had no significant effect on this. Knowledge, skills and the time spent at Abertay on their degree studies were the key contributory factors to preparation for working life (Figure 6). When invited to comment on what aspect of their programme had been of most benefit, 'placement', 'peer-led practicals', 'dissertation' and 'research methods' were the frequently cited responses. However, many graduates also stated that growth in confidence and the developmental maturation that had occurred during their years of study were key aspects of preparing them for the workplace for the short and longer term. Student comments included '*I have put myself forward for things and tried new things that I might have hesitated at before*', '*I developed and sustained crucial skills*', '*I have continued with this (work) ethic.....and..been able to achieve success in each of my posts*'.

Those who were more distant from the point of graduation and who had stayed in sports jobs were more likely to be moving into management; however, there was less evidence of those in teaching moving into promoted posts within the sampled timeframe of the study.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that by focussing on graduate outcomes there has been no examination of completion, progression or retention rates relative to the diversity of the Abertay sport degree programme population. The research team were also conscious that it was a self-selecting population that opted to respond to the e-mail questionnaire, and that this may be skewed by those who felt that they had a 'good news' graduate story to tell.

Discussion

The findings align with existing data in relation to the dynamism of the graduates' early employment (Minten, 2007) and also the HESA (2015) graduate statistic that 76% agree that 'HE prepared me well for my career or helped me progress my career aspirations'. The significance of placement supports HE drivers to ensure that there are curricular opportunities for work-based learning particularly for those coming from widening access backgrounds, as for this study population (UUK, 2016; Waller and Bradley, 2016). It is acknowledged that many of these students will not have the social networks that can help foster graduate employment – therefore embedded curriculum opportunities can enable professional networks to develop (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Hawkes, Cagliesi, DeVita & Sarabi, 2016).

The capacity to articulate the learning gained whenever embedding employability initiatives in the curriculum is key. The sports programme team have built-in a number of assessment modes (reflective accounts, oral presentations, case studies) as well as a 'Linked-In' webfolio assignment for students' post-placement, to test capacity to articulate their skills on a professional networking platform. These interventions can have positive employer outcomes and our graduates have earned praise for their 'ability to do'. Therefore it is of merit to note the high levels of graduate employment in the sports' graduates independent of demographic characteristics or route of entry. Business representatives have stated that students are not work-ready (BCC, 2016) and in a 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). The importance attached to research methods skills gives credence to the notion of developing skill sets which have transference beyond the curriculum.

Significantly more of the Abertay sport graduates progressed to postgraduate study and it is noted that for some this will be a route to a professional career with consequent impact on earning power and social mobility (BIS, 2015; Hoffman & Julie, 2012). HEFCE (2016) report that 18.6% of all graduates progress to teaching, however, substantively more (27%) of the Abertay sport graduates had made this career choice. It is unknown why so many had specifically opted for a career in teaching.

More than half of the Abertay sport student population come from the neighbouring local authorities and 90% are from Scotland with few exercising the opportunity for a study abroad option when enrolled on the programme. It is recognised that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate in study abroad opportunities (Little, 2011). The high proportion of graduates who remain in the local area for employment is likely to reflect the historically larger volume of students who articulate from college. However, there was emerging evidence in the more recently graduated cohorts of alumni living and working abroad. Thus affirming the wider higher education initiatives to internationalise the curriculum and ensure graduates are prepared to work on a global stage (HEA, 2014).

Higher Education in the United Kingdom is increasingly focussing on widening access so it is of note that gender, disability and social class were not barriers to completion of the Honours stage of study, to progression to postgraduate study or to graduate or sports employment, particularly knowing that university education can positively impact on social mobility (Macmillan & Vignoles, 2013).

Conclusion

The TEF has an embedded requirement for universities to evidence student employability; however, HESA data only surveys at 6 months and 3 years. It is recognised that the first sample point may be too early to capture evidence of graduate level employment, and with increasing trends toward postgraduate study it may become increasingly important to demonstrate the long-term impact of enrolment in higher education. The data collection method applied in this study gave a greater than 25% response rate which for a survey distant to the point of origin is above average. Longitudinal career data for graduates can be limited in some disciplines and as the questions used here were not subject-specific, the methodology may have utility for other studies.

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