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Ensuring employability by degrees

Successive governments have reduced the tertiary education sector to a marketplace where young people buy degrees at an increasingly expensive rate. Mike Collins and Stephen Robson explain how a new degree endorsement scheme will make sports and leisure degrees work harder for graduates and employers alike.

As a key sector in a modern service-led economy, sport and physical activity needs creative graduates in leadership positions, and never more so than at present when savage public spending cuts are happening and the economy appears to be struggling out of recession. However, sports-related employment actually grew between 2007 and 2009.

The higher education (HE) sector is working with SkillsActive (the employer-led sector skills council), Sportscoach UK and IMSPA (the new institute formed with overwhelming membership support from the two predecessor bodies and hoping shortly to be awarded a royal charter) to develop and recognise the skills of graduates. The promotion of the concept of 'graduateness' to employers a key aim of the work.

Employers in the sector complain not about the quality of knowledge of their new graduate workers but the need for better generic skills, especially in the confident presentation of self and of projects and causes. They also identify insufficient industry orientation in many of the several hundred sports-based HE undergraduate courses in UK universities and colleges as a problem. The importance of both generic and sector-based skills is emphasised by employers' groups and in new initiatives such as the National Skills Academy employer protocol.

The predecessors to the new professional institute (ISPAL and ISRM), along with SkillsActive and Sportscoach UK, have over the past two years designed and piloted an endorsement programme for undergraduate degrees in three streams: sport and leisure management; sports development; and sports coach education. The endorsement scheme is a key outcome of the professional development board for sport and recreation, which is housed in SkillsActive and brings together industry partners to enhance professionalism and look at employability development. The endorsement scheme is constructed around the relevant national occupational standards (NOS) for each stream along with other professional standards, a crucial factor in bridging the gap between higher education and employment. This lends credibility and quality assurance to the programme, although it must be said that the use of occupational standards across the sector is inconsistent and redolent of the lack of a universally accepted notion of professionalism, particularly in sports development.

The endorsement scheme is made up of three main stages, the first of which is paper-based and requires the applicant institution to demonstrate how its programme enables students to develop their employability against the core requirements of the relevant occupational and other benchmark standards. This stage includes a mapping exercise in which the applicant institution identifies how individual modules of study develop particular knowledge and technical, cognitive, presentational and relational skills. In addition there is a requirement to produce testimonials from employers and placement partners, along with evidence of industry experience and the professional membership and involvement of staff. It is well known among HE institutions offering sport and leisure management, sports development and sports coach education degrees and their external partners that the 'better' courses are designed and led by staff with industrial experience and connections. The endorsement scheme presents an opportunity for this to be formally recognised, and the traffic-light scoring system used in stage one includes a 'gold standard' to enable innovative and best practice to be identified and disseminated. Two evaluators, trained by the steering group, review the application against the endorsement criteria and decide whether it should progress further.



Are graduates properly prepared to scale the heights once in employment?

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At stage two the primary evaluator makes a visit to the HE institution to confirm, clarify and follow up answers by talking to staff, students and industry partners. This visit can be integral to the developmental nature of endorsement and can lead to enhancements of the provision.

At stage three the evaluators produce a report to the steering group to endorse (without conditions or with conditions to be met in a specified timescale) or reject (with advice about what is needed for a resubmission to succeed) the application. In the case of coaching the report goes to Sportscoach UK's HE advisory group which seeks ratification from their internal coaching standards group.

This is a rigorous procedure, going beyond the normal academic reviews and focusing on enhancing employability. Evaluators look closely at: how students' own skills are developed through personal skill profiles, personal development plans and CVs; how they take part in compulsory visits, projects and placements with joint HE/industry assessments; and how guest speakers and advisers enrich the teaching.

The endorsement lasts for five years or until a revalidation. The process is obviously not costless to the partners. However, if an estimated £3,000 covers three cohorts of 50 or more students it can be seen that the unit cost is low. The HE institution has the right to present an endorsement logo on all promotion and publicity materials, handbooks and media coverage. In an increasingly tight job market this will, we believe, be an important assurance to intending students and their parents, their schools and careers officers, as well as intending employers. There is also an agreed benefits package for endorsed institutions.

We make three collective statements. First, Professor Mike Collins agreed to chair the pilot group (and will be happy to continue in the main phase for a while) because, as an HE teacher and researcher for 22 years, a founder member and regional chair of ILAM/ISPAL, and a companion of and policy adviser to ISRM, he has tried consistently to address the undoubted gap between academia and the industry, a gap a mature profession must close. Other members of the steering group are similarly committed advocates for HE to be seen in its true light as a viable breeding ground for future professionals in sport and leisure management, sports development and sports coaching.

Second, HE teachers must do more to demonstrate commitment to the industry as well as their research and teaching rankings. They can do so by joining the new IMSPA and its advisory groups, writing for its journal and seeking to get under- and post-graduate students to do applied final-year projects of help to individual public, commercial and voluntary organisations, and, if innovative, to the profession more widely. The partners will be happy to showcase and publicise innovative work.

Third, having asked for this endorsement scheme, employers, especially in commercial sport, leisure and fitness, cannot take it for granted. They must play a more active role in advising HE institutions on courses, doing guest lectures and, above all, offering to host and co-assess placements with universities and colleges. Employers will be encouraged to recognise graduates who are from endorsed courses more favourably than those who are not. It is well known that after longer placements of six months or more one in three students is offered a job, since both student and host have got to know each other and the business. The suspicion and anti-intellectualism with which HE courses are viewed by some employers are largely unwarranted and it is to be hoped that the endorsement scheme will do much to eradicate them.

In due course it seems likely that we should extend the process to certificates and diplomas and to master's courses, and even to other SkillsActive sub-sectors. SkillsActive already offers a similar endorsement scheme in the fitness industry. Meanwhile HE institutions and the industry must work together to ensure that courses fit graduates – who pay substantially for their courses – and employers – who pay substantially in recruitment and induction processes.

In the pilot phase 13 evaluators were used to evaluate 13 course submissions from institutions from England, Wales and Northern Ireland with two evaluators assessing each course. Endorsement is not a 'gimme' and, while the majority of applicant courses received endorsement (often subject to conditions), a number were rejected and will need to undertake remedial action before reapplying.

We look forward to a steady flow of applicants, and will need to select and train more evaluators. People interested in doing this job for a modest fee or wanting more information should contact Debbie Arrigon at SkillsActive. HE institutions

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that would like to discuss submitting a course in sports and leisure management, sports development or sports coach education should also get in touch to receive the submission documents.

Mike Collins is visiting professor at the University of Gloucestershire. Stephen Robson is course leader in sport and recreation development at Leeds Metropolitan University. They write here on behalf of the Active Endorsement, HE Endorsement Steering Group

Contact Debbie Arrigon at SkillsActive at debbie.arrigon@skillsactive.com

The Leisure Review, April 2011

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