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ORIGINALNI NAUČNI RAD / ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT OF SPORT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION WITH LABOR MARKET DEMANDS: INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

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Abstract: *This study addresses the critical misalignment between academic preparation and the evolving demands of the sports management labor market. While the industry undergoes rapid professionalization and technological disruption, a significant “skills gap” persists between graduate competencies and employer expectations. The primary objective of this research is to identify and analyze the determinants of professional readiness through the lived experiences and retrospective perceptions of the graduates themselves. Utilizing a qualitative research strategy, data was collected through two focus group discussions involving twelve sports management graduates. The findings indicate that while university programs provide a robust theoretical foundation and a broad disciplinary overview, graduates frequently encounter significant hurdles when transitioning into professional practice. The most prominent deficiencies identified include a lack of preparation for Human Resource processes, specifically regarding self-presentation and recruitment navigation, limited proficiency in advanced digital and technological tools, and a pressing need for rigorous training in business negotiation and formal communication. The research concludes that to bridge this gap, academic institutions must innovate their curricula toward greater practical relevance. Essential steps include the integration of project-based learning centered on real-world industry mandates, the expansion of structured and longitudinal internships, and the introduction of modern coursework reflecting current digital trends. Ultimately, only a strategic partnership between academia and the professional sphere can ensure that graduates transition from being theoretically proficient experts to confident, practice-ready managers capable of navigating the complex challenges of the 21st-century sports industry.*

Keywords: *Sport Management, Labor Market, Focus Group, Higher education, Career preparedness*

JEL Classification: M54, J2, Z22, I21

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary social science discourse, sport is increasingly conceptualized as a fundamental socio-economic and cultural construct. Progressive tendencies toward globalization and the institutional professionalization of the modern sporting environment have exerted mounting pressure on the efficiency of management processes, both at the organizational level and within the framework of international sporting events. As a consequence of this transformation, the role of sport managers has been significantly enhanced and redefined. Their competency profiles are currently undergoing rapid diversification, spanning from strategic planning and marketing communications to the integration of emergent technologies. This evolution necessitates a high degree of interdisciplinarity and a profound understanding of the idiosyncratic characteristics inherent to the sports industry.

A primary determinant of human capital development and subsequent professional mobility within this sector is the process of higher education. However, the current state of sport management education poses a significant challenge for academic institutions, driven primarily by high labor market volatility, progressive technological disruption, and the intensive commercialization of the sporting landscape. Although a gradual curricular transformation is observable, shifting from traditional models toward business-oriented management paradigms, there remains a persistent demand for educational content to remain relevant and responsive to the exigencies of real-world practice.

This discrepancy between academic preparation and the practical requirements of the industry constitutes one of the core specificities of the labor market in sport management. Graduates frequently exhibit limited transferability of theoretical concepts into the operational environment.

Although previous studies have explored employer expectations, graduate employability, competency development, and curriculum design within sport management education (Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Wohlfart et al., 2022), considerably less attention has been devoted to retrospective graduate reflections on the transition from higher education into professional practice. Existing research predominantly evaluates competencies from institutional or employer perspectives, while graduates' lived experiences of entering the sport labor market remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how sport management graduates retrospectively assess their preparedness for professional practice, identify competency deficiencies, and evaluate the alignment between university education and contemporary labor market expectations.

Based on the identified research gap, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which competencies and skills do graduates consider insufficiently developed during their university education?

RQ2: How do graduates evaluate the alignment between academic preparation and labor market requirements?

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

At its core, sports management is an inherently interdisciplinary domain, acting as a crossroads where general management, economics, legal frameworks, and sociology intersect within the unique ecosystem of sport (Çiftçi & Mirzeoğlu, 2014; Čáslavová, 2020). While the field remains firmly anchored in traditional managerial functions, namely planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and controlling (Koontz & Weihrich, 1998; Pedersen & Thibault, 2019), it is far from a mere carbon copy of corporate administration. Instead, it requires a nuanced application of these principles (Hoye et al., 2015; Masteralexis et al., 2015) to fit a sector that operates under its own set of “house rules.”

The distinction of sports management lies in several idiosyncratic characteristics that set it apart from traditional business sectors. These include the systemic necessity of maintaining competitive balance (where the success of one’s competitor is actually vital for the league’s health), the intricacies of unique league structures, and a heavy, often structural reliance on volunteerism (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Shilbury, 2012; Šíma, 2019; Čáslavová, 2020; Gammelsæter, 2021). Furthermore, the pervasive force of commercialization must be balanced against the reality that in sport (Dowling et al., 2014; Vamplew, 2023), organizational motivation is rarely driven by financial profit alone (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006). Success in this field is frequently measured through a complex interplay of social impact, competitive achievement, and community identity (Šíma, 2019), making the manager’s role as much about stewardship as it is about the bottom line.

The Evolving Labor Market

The contemporary labor market in sports management is characterized by robust expansion and an escalating demand for highly qualified professionals. This trend reflects a broader global shift toward the professionalization of the industry (Horgby & Ericsson, 2023; Vamplew, 2023), where traditional “gut-feeling” management is being replaced by data-driven strategy and sophisticated organizational structures. However, a significant tension remains at the heart of this growth: despite the concerted efforts of academic institutions to produce “practice-ready” graduates, research consistently highlights a persistent misalignment, often referred to as the “skills gap”, between the competencies offered by university alumni and the granular, evolving requirements of sports organizations (Schwab et al., 2015; Miragaia & Soares, 2017; Ventura, 2023).

Traditional pedagogical models, which have historically prioritized the transmission of a fixed set of theoretical “truths,” are increasingly finding themselves outpaced by the market’s volatility (Light & Dixon, 2007). In an era where information is ubiquitous but its application is complex, a static curriculum is no longer sufficient. Consequently, the focus of professional preparation is shifting away from pure content delivery toward the cultivation of cognitive agility (Light & Dixon, 2007). In today’s landscape, critical thinking, adaptability, and the capacity to navigate “wicked” or ill-defined problems have moved from the periphery to the very center of what it means to be a “qualified” sports manager (Skinner & Gilbert, 2007; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Zimmer & Keiper, 2021). The challenge for modern universities is thus not just to teach management, but to foster a mindset capable of managing under conditions of constant flux.

The Modern Competency Profile

The competency framework for sports managers can be conceptually divided into two primary categories: generic skills, such as organizational leadership and strategic communication, and sport-specific expertise (Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Teodora, 2020). Within this duality, interpersonal, social and communication competencies have emerged as the paramount “soft” drivers of success (Pedersen & Thibault, 2019; Giel et al., 2022; Guidotti et al., 2023; Opelík et al., 2025). Because sports managers act as the operational glue (Masteralexis et al., 2015; Retar et al., 2015) between a diverse array of stakeholders, ranging from elite professional athletes and dedicated volunteers to corporate sponsors and passionate fanbases, their ability to navigate complex social dynamics is non-negotiable. Furthermore, in today’s volatile organizational landscape, the modern manager is increasingly expected to serve as a catalyst for innovation (Masteralexis et al., 2015; Jiang, 2023) and a steady hand during periods of rapid structural change.

Parallel to these social requirements, the demand for digital literacy and technological proficiency has escalated dramatically (Hunjet & Kozina, 2014; Wohlfart et al., 2018; Pedersen & Thibault, 2019). It is no longer sufficient for graduates to possess a rudimentary understanding of office software; the market now dictates a sophisticated command of data analytics, digital marketing strategies, e-commerce platforms, and advanced social media management (Wohlfart et al., 2018; Teodora, 2020; Swim et al., 2023; Opelík et al., 2024).

With the maturation of Industry 4.0 and the pervasive integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, this pressure has reached a critical tipping point (López-Carril et al., 2020; Keiper et al., 2023; Milovanović & Novaković, 2025). These technological shifts are not merely incremental updates but represent a fundamental transformation of the industry’s DNA, compelling academic programs to undergo a radical revision of their curricula to ensure that theoretical knowledge remains synchronized with the digital reality of the 21st-century sports market.

The Theory-Practice Nexus and the Need for Graduate Reflection

A defining challenge in sports management education remains the ongoing debate regarding the optimal balance between theoretical rigor and practical application (Cunningham, 2013; Fink, 2013; Cunningham et al., 2021). Research consistently indicates that experiential learning, specifically through structured internships, is often perceived by students and employers alike as the most transformative component of the educational journey (Emery et al., 2012; Hawzen & King-White, 2024). The transition from the lecture hall to the professional arena is notoriously difficult without sufficient field exposure; consequently, the integration of industry practitioners and project-based learning (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Grant et al., 2023) has moved from being a pedagogical “bonus” to a strategic necessity for the field’s sustainable development.

Given these theoretical foundations, it is clear that academic programs must remain agile to survive in a volatile market. To stay synchronized with the industry’s pulse, it is essential to conduct retrospective evaluations of professional readiness (Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Wohlfart et al., 2022). Understanding how graduates reflect

on their own preparation and identifying the specific “missing links” they encountered upon entering the workforce, is vital for closing the gap between academic output and professional reality.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design, which is particularly suited for exploring the nuanced, subjective professional experiences of graduates within the specific socio-economic context of the sports labor market. This approach allows for the elucidation of underlying causalities in the theory-practice gap that quantitative metrics often overlook. Within the field of sport management, qualitative designs are increasingly employed to analyze specific labor market scenarios, stakeholder management processes and evaluate educational processes (Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Evans et al., 2021; Pitney et al., 2024; Hospodková et al., 2025). This approach transcends purely statistical data, providing insight into the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of labor market actors.

The primary data collection method employed was the focus group. This method was selected for its inherent dynamism; the interaction between respondents, subsequent follow-up commentary, and the opportunity for a confrontation of perspectives facilitate a more profound comprehension of the research problem.

Participants were selected via purposive, criterion-based sampling to ensure they possessed the necessary ‘lived experience’ to reflect on the transition from academia to the workforce. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be graduates of the specific Sport Management degree program, (2) have a minimum of one year of professional experience in the sports sector, and (3) represent a diverse range of organizational roles (e.g., commercial or non-profit). A total of two focus group sessions were conducted, each involving six participants ($N = 12$). While the sample size ($N = 12$) is focused, it aligns with established qualitative protocols for focus group research, where the emphasis is on data richness and depth rather than statistical representativeness. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no significantly new thematic categories emerged during the final stages of the second focus group discussion. Although the sample was homogeneous regarding the field of study, it exhibited internal heterogeneity in terms of graduation year, gender, and age.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol organized into thematic areas derived from the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1. The primary themes addressed were: curriculum and instruction, internships, career readiness, and job performance. Prior to data collection, the protocol was discussed and refined within the research team to ensure conceptual consistency and relevance to the research objectives. Each session consisted of three stages: an introductory phase (establishing rapport and ethical briefing), a moderated discussion on core topics, and a concluding phase for supplementary reflections. Each session lasted 90 minutes and was conducted in an in-person format.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Source: own data

Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA software and was based on verbatim transcription and subsequent coding. Thematic analysis was facilitated by MAXQDA software, utilizing a hybrid inductive-deductive coding approach. Initially, open coding was conducted, during which text segments were fragmented and assigned both in-vivo codes and theoretical terms. Subsequently, these codes were systematized, revised, and merged into higher-order categories and hierarchical structures. This procedure ensured a systematic and transparent interpretation of the findings. To ensure inter-coder reliability and trustworthiness, the coding hierarchy was cross reviewed by the research team to resolve any interpretive discrepancies. The study adhered to stringent ethical standards; all participants provided informed consent, and data were fully anonymized to preclude the identification of individual respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following results detail the outcomes of the qualitative investigation into the professional readiness of sports managers. To provide a comprehensive overview, the findings are categorized into thematic subsections according to the observed results and their mutual correlations. This structure highlights how various determinants interact to shape a manager's preparedness for the contemporary labor market.

Academic Development and Pedagogical Innovation

The focus group discussions clearly indicate that graduates place a high value on the theoretical foundation acquired during their studies. Theory provides them with a necessary macro-level overview of the sports management field and vital insights into organizational dynamics, which they perceive as an excellent professional "springboard." As one focus group participant noted: "It gave me a general overview of the field, which is incredibly beneficial to have."

However, a recurring theme is the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application. While students often master academic definitions, such as the conceptual framework of leadership, they frequently struggle to translate this knowledge into concrete skills and tangible outputs within a real-world corporate environment. Another respondent emphasized this disconnect: "Theoretical knowledge is definitely important because you need that foundation, but at the same time, you need

to know how to apply it in practice and not get stuck there.” According to the participants, a significant barrier is the occasional persistence of outdated teaching styles that rely on frontal lectures and rote memorization at the expense of critical discourse and argumentation.

Consequently, graduates strongly advocate for the integration of project-based learning into the core curriculum. They suggest implementing comprehensive, ideally semester-long projects (e.g., organizing a real-world sporting event) that simulate market realities, including budget constraints and crisis management. This need is underscored by a participant who argued that project-based activities must be implemented early in the studies, as “the sports world is essentially driven by project-based work. “ Furthermore, respondents identified a pressing need for modern, highly relevant coursework focused on digital marketing, online advertising systems, web optimization, and sponsorship. Finally, regarding the internationalization of the program, there is a clear demand for enriching the student experience through shorter, flexible formats such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP). These are seen as a vital alternative for students whose professional commitments prevent them from participating in traditional full-semester mobility programs.

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of experiential and project-based learning in sport management education (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Grant et al., 2023). Similar concerns regarding the limited transferability of theoretical knowledge into professional practice have also been reported by Wohlfart et al. (Wohlfart et al., 2022). However, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on employer expectations, the present findings highlight the retrospective experiences of graduates themselves, offering additional insight into how perceived educational deficiencies emerge after entering the labour market.

Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Stress Management

Soft skills emerged during the discussions as a cornerstone of successful professional integration. Organizations increasingly demand a high degree of critical thinking, particularly regarding the ability to retrieve, synthesize, and evaluate relevant information. To bridge the current gap, graduates suggest that the curriculum should place greater emphasis on the rigorous defense of their own propositions and ideas. While creativity is actively nurtured throughout their studies, for instance, through the design of teambuilding activities, respondents identified significant deficiencies in the areas of stress management and psychological resilience.

The data suggests that these psychological attributes are indispensable for sports managers operating within a volatile market environment. As one respondent noted, this specific aspect of professional readiness is “crucial for functioning effectively in the market.” Despite these identified gaps, participants expressed a retrospective appreciation for the overall rigor of their university studies. They noted that the demanding nature of the program taught them a sense of “tenacity” and the discipline required to see complex tasks through to completion. This inherent “grit” is perceived as a vital byproduct of academic experience, even if it was not explicitly taught as part of the formal curriculum.

Career Readiness

A particularly salient outcome of the focus group discussions is the perceived deficiency in preparation for Human Resource (HR) processes. Graduates expressed a significant lack of readiness regarding the job search landscape, viewed from “both sides of the table.” They highlighted a critical absence of training in crafting high-quality curricula vitae and mastering self-presentation during recruitment interviews.

Beyond the perspective of the applicant, however, one respondent emphasized the necessity of being prepared to manage the recruitment of subordinates from the position of a sports manager. This gap becomes most apparent during the transition into professional practice, as one participant reflected: “In the real world, I found myself in situations where I had no idea how to ‘sell myself’ to an employer or how to even begin negotiating my salary conditions. We had the theory, but we lacked the tools to navigate these professional interactions.”

Furthermore, participants noted a lack of comprehensive labor market intelligence, specifically regarding current salary benchmarks and the nuances of available professional roles, immediately prior to their graduation. The ability to maintain an up-to-date overview of the labor market’s state was identified as a core requirement for any manager. As one respondent poignantly stated: “Possessing a firm grasp on the current state of the labor market is, in my view, the most critical competency for functioning effectively in the 21st-century environment.”

The identified deficiencies in recruitment readiness, self-presentation, and labor market navigation support earlier findings suggesting that employability extends beyond technical competencies to encompass career management capabilities (Schwab et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2023). The present study expands these findings by demonstrating that graduates perceive this gap even several years after entering professional practice.

Communication and Technological Challenges

When evaluating interpersonal competencies, graduates confirmed a high level of preparedness in verbal and public presentation. However, a significant divergence was identified between general public speaking and the more nuanced requirements of professional business interactions. Respondents perceived a notable weakness in formal business correspondence and negotiation strategies. This gap is particularly critical because, as the participants noted, these interactions form the daily reality of a manager’s life. One respondent from the first focus group articulated this necessity clearly: “There is a pressing need for education in areas such as negotiating budgets or salaries. Every sports manager will inevitably face these situations in their career, yet we often enter the field without the tactical skills to handle them effectively.”

To address these deficiencies, participants recommended a more hands-on pedagogical approach, including practical training sessions focused on drafting formal e-mails to clients, conducting high-stakes business meetings, and mastering assertive communication with superiors.

In terms of technological proficiency, while graduates feel confident in standard “office software skills,” they argue that the contemporary labor market demands a more sophisticated technical toolkit. There is a clear call for deeper integration of enterprise resource planning and data management applications into the curriculum.

Furthermore, the findings reflect a growing awareness of the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Participants now perceive AI literacy and the ability to leverage automated tools not merely as an optional skill, but as a significant competitive advantage in a data-driven industry.

Professional Development

The final theme identified in the discussions concerns the imperative need for a synergistic relationship between academia and the professional industry. Participants unanimously agreed that such a connection is not merely beneficial but an absolute necessity. Internships are perceived as a pivotal phase in the educational journey, as they allow students to grasp the complex dynamics of the sports environment and facilitate a seamless transition into the labor market.

However, the findings also highlight a critical need for improved structural alignment and the temporal coordination of these practical placements. Rather than being sporadic or haphazard, respondents argued that internships should offer longitudinal exposure to various organizational models, encompassing both commercial enterprises and non-profit sports entities. The core issue, according to the participants, is the lack of immediate integration between classroom theory and its practical execution. This sentiment was captured by one respondent from the first focus group: “It should be standard practice for a student to learn the methodology at the beginning of the semester and then immediately apply that knowledge in a real-world setting during the second half. This direct linkage ensures that the learning is not just theoretical but deeply rooted in practice.”

Furthermore, there is a strong call for a broader inclusion of industry practitioners within the formal educational process. Respondents suggest that the curriculum would be significantly enriched by the regular use of real-world case studies provided by external stakeholders. This approach would allow students to tackle authentic market challenges under the guidance of professionals, further bridging the gap between university lectures and the demands of the 21st-century sports industry.

Consistent with previous research (Emery et al., 2012; Hawzen & King-White, 2024), internships emerged as a critical mechanism for bridging educational preparation and labor market expectations. However, graduates in the present study emphasized the importance of long-term and structured placements rather than isolated internship experiences, extending previous findings regarding the role of experiential learning in sport management education.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the richness of the qualitative data and the depth of the insights gathered, several inherent limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, the study’s qualitative design and sample size, while appropriate for exploring nuanced perceptions, preclude the broad generalization of the findings to the entire population of sports management graduates. Second, the data is derived from a specific institutional and geographic context, which may reflect localized labor market conditions and pedagogical traditions that differ from other regions or countries.

Furthermore, the research relies on self-reported perceptions of graduates, which, although vital for understanding their subjective professional experience, could

be further validated by triangulating this data with the perspectives of employers and HR practitioners within the sports industry. Finally, the rapid evolution of the digital landscape, particularly regarding Artificial Intelligence, means that the specific technological gaps identified today may continue to shift, requiring ongoing longitudinal assessment to remain fully current.

Potential Implications

The originality of this study lies in its exclusive focus on retrospective graduate experiences rather than employer expectations or curriculum evaluations. While previous research has predominantly examined competency requirements from institutional or industry perspectives, the present study provides empirical insight into how graduates themselves interpret the transition from higher education into the professional sport labor market. Furthermore, the findings extend current knowledge by identifying emerging competency needs associated with artificial intelligence, digitalization, and career self-management.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both academic curricula and strategic industry partnerships. For higher education institutions, the results serve as a framework for curriculum redesign, emphasizing the need to move beyond theoretical mastery toward a model of applied competency. By integrating practical HR workshops, digital literacy modules, and semester-long project simulations, universities can directly enhance the “employability” of their graduates.

For the sports industry and professional organizations, these insights highlight the value of becoming active stakeholders in the educational process. Strengthening the “bridge” between the classroom and the field, through structured internships and practitioner-led case studies, will create a more resilient and adaptable workforce. Ultimately, these implications suggest that a co-creative approach to education is essential for meeting the volatile demands of the 21st-century sports market.

CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in qualitative data from focus group discussions, provides a comprehensive analysis of how sports management graduates perceive their professional readiness for the demands of the contemporary labor market. The findings clearly indicate that while university education provides a robust theoretical foundation and a broad disciplinary overview, graduates encounter significant hurdles when translating these insights into professional practice. The most prominent challenges involve a lack of preparation for HR processes, specifically CV development and interview techniques, a deficit in advanced digital and technological competencies (including the strategic integration of Artificial Intelligence), and a pressing need for rigorous training in business negotiation and formal communication.

For the academic sector, these findings underscore an urgent necessity to innovate curricula toward greater practical relevance. The integration of project-based learning centered on real-world mandates from sports organizations, the expansion of structured and longitudinal internships, and the introduction of modern coursework reflecting digital marketing and AI trends emerge as essential steps.

Ultimately, only a close, strategic partnership between educational institutions and the professional sphere will ensure that graduates transition from being theoretic-

cally proficient experts to confident managers. Such individuals must be capable of responding effectively to the complex, multi-faceted challenges of the modern sports industry and meeting the evolving needs of the global labor market, both within and beyond the sports sector.

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