Original Article

Implementing the European Sports Leadership Programme: A vehicle to help development graduate workplace competencies

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ABSTRACT

This research was part of a large intervention study implementing the European Sports Leadership Programme (ESLP). This paper reports the outcomes of the qualitative study that employed focus groups to assess the students' perceptions of the 15 competencies determined according to the Framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, before and after the ESLP. Focus groups were carried out at each of the five universities. The ESLP involved university students working as a sports leader for 24 months with the aim to engage more students in university sport, whilst they took part in a graduate employability programme. Each university recruited five sports leaders in their second year at university, to deliver 10 new sport and recreational activities targeting the wider inactive or semi-active student population. Findings highlighted that Organization and planning, Oral and written communication, Development of planning and decision making, and Teamworking, followed closely by Emotional control and Adapting to new situations, were the most commonly reported competencies. They affirmed that this programme had helped to develop these competencies. Use of information, communication and technology, Communication in a foreign language, Research and Emotional control were the most common competencies that students stated they needed to improve further. This research found that implementing the ESLP helped to develop students' perceptions of their workplace and career competencies. The ESLP is therefore, recommended as one approach to helping universities to develop student's workplace and career competencies.
Keywords: Graduate employability; Sport and career competencies; Extra-curricular programme; Leadership programme; Intervention and evaluation; Sport pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

The changing economic climate of European universities has placed employability at the heart of university education and business (European Commission [EC], 2016, 2017). Graduate employability has become one of the key university metrics linking to students' perceptions of value for money. A key message of the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe was the need to build a better future for European citizens. Central to this are graduate work-based skills that are a crucial part of the initiative "*Investing in Europe's Youth*" and what was the new skills agenda for Europe (EC, 2017). Higher education plays a unique role. There is an increased recognition and need for Employers having highly skilled and socially engaged people. Half of all jobs are forecast to require high-level qualifications, as projected up to 2025 (EC, 2017). This skills gap is already present with the digital technology needs playing a part. As stated in the communication by the EC update 2017 "*People's capacities to be entrepreneurial, manage complex information, think autonomously and creatively, use resources, including digital ones, smartly, communicate effectively and be resilient are more crucial than ever*". Therefore, it is plenty justified to promote intervention programmes that allow the students to develop these kinds of competencies in order to prepare them for the labour market.

The Bologna process seeks to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), to harmonise the European qualifications, foster the mobility of workers and students, the employability of graduates and assist the future development of Europe (Bologna Working Group, 2005). Accordingly, governments created the "*Framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*" (QF EHEA, EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). The QF EHEA curricular programme aims to organise national higher education qualifications into an overarching European-wide qualifications framework. Within this framework, descriptors were established in terms of competence levels, not learning outcomes, following five general components: knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, making judgements, communication, and lifelong learning skills (Bologna Working Group, 2005). According to the literature, in the QF EHEA Framework, the 15 competencies best aligned between the European curricula are: (i) theoretical education, (ii) practical education, (iii) written expression, (iv) oral expression, (v) teamwork, (vi) leadership, (vii) decision-making and problem solving, (viii) critical thinking, (ix) everyday reasoning, (x) creativity, (xi) learning ability, (xii) self-management, (xiii) documentation, (xiv) languages, and (xv) information and communication technologies (e.g., González & Wagenaar, 2008; Jæger, 2018; Serrano et al., 2015). Nowadays, the EU Competency Framework identifies these competencies as a key for promoting university students' employability (EC, 2016).

The meaning of employability has become increasingly complex and tends to vary based on subject discipline. There are many definitions and models for employability that add to the complexity of defining what is required of graduates to be ready for the workplace. The UK Higher Education Academic (now Advanced HE [HEA]) views employability as a range of factors including the development of "*knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes*" (HEA, 2016). Yorke's (2006, p. 8) definition of what employability is relates to:

> *"A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy".*

Pool and Sewell (2007) developed the CareerEDGE model based on a range of employability models and theories that provides a useful summary of five essential elements that could help students' employability: (i)

career development learning; (ii) experience; (iii) degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills; (iv) generic skills; and (v) emotional intelligence. Goleman (1998, p. 4) refers to emotional intelligence as: "*The capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships*" that is thought to be particularly important for awareness and success at interview and in developing effective working relationships. All five elements of the CareerEDGE model are essential in that missing one could considerably reduce a student's employability opportunities. Whilst each element is important, the combination of all five areas is seen as key and their inter-relation with each other.

Embedding employability into the curriculum or extra-curricular activities of students is important for many agents. For example, for students, given they invest on their formation; for significant others, such as family members, who may also invest and support students; for universities to help enhance their reputation; for the global economy and employers, who have specific needs requiring "*work-ready*" graduates to enter the industry. Ensuring that university education sufficiently meets these differing needs is key and one that requires on-going review to ensure it meets a changing environment. The availability of different occupations within a multi-disciplinary area such as sport is wide ranging. For example, covering exercise directors or managers, coaching professionals, and sports/recreation management professionals. Potential differences in the work conditions of sport professions require different approaches to preparing students for employment in this field.

Evidence supports the inability of the current education system to prepare employees for the ever-changing environment of sports related employment (Aldous et al., 2016; Bentley, 2012; Minocha et al., 2017). The importance of different parts of sport education are changing, and teaching practices and content need to follow a similar pathway to bring about the intended benefits. In particular, the role of skills and practical experiences is becoming more intertwined with motivation and attitudes (Johns & Saks, 2005). While skills and professional knowledge requires periodic improvement, attitudes and motivation remain a constant factor in competences (da Silva et al., 2016). Thus, the need to provide employers with a range of work-based competencies.

Academic sport courses are often considered as vocational programmes of study given their focus and application on specific jobs within the sports industry (Allen et al., 2013). There is, however, often a strong applied focus within sport degree programmes with coverage of practical sports knowledge. Nevertheless, evidence shows that skills, knowledge, organisation, cooperation and ability to manage people, are major factors in employers' requirements for a functional team member (Cappelli, 1999; Jackson, 2010). This is central to the importance of interdisciplinary competencies in a variety of sports related work environments, which is thought to often play a minor role in sports degree programmes (Schlesinger et al., 2016). Discussions on employers' expectations of competent employees could be stratified into social and specific skills, because of the importance of integrating both, subject specific knowledge with factors associated with work environments (Agran et al., 2016). However, the ever-changing work environment and organisational needs has made transferable skills and attitudes an important factor. The research on what employers expect remains active around the globe, with studies covering different professionals, branches, age and country specific groups and many other aspects of business needs. The importance of attitude and motivation has been established by many publications and empirical studies (Parvaiz & Ahmed, 2016). Several reports have shown that employers expectations are influenced by many factors including branch specific factors (Dhar, 2015), ownership of the business (Choudhury & McIntosh, 2013), country specific influence (Chung et al., 2014), and perspective of the managers (Clark et al., 2014).

Though, several reports and studies have investigated the dynamics of employability (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Finch et al., 2016), and graduate employability in particular (Pool & Sewell, 2007), there is a lack of studies specifically investigating employability within sport subject. One leading study in the UK sought to address this looking at "*The Impact of Engagement in Sport on Graduate Employability*" (Allen et al., 2013). The report helped to identify the benefits of any form of sporting activity whilst at university, alongside how important employers view the skills gained through these activities. The expectations of employers and the emerging potential of university sport require a change in higher education curriculum and teaching practices as well as extra-curricular developmental opportunities. Lately, five European universities implemented the European Sports Leadership Programme (ESLP) aiming to develop the university students' competencies to foster their leadership (Cánovas-Alvarez et al., 2020, *in press*). On the one hand, Cánovas-Alvarez et al. (2020) found an increase in their involvement in competencies as organization and planning, management of knowledge and information, emotional control, autonomous work, and adaptation to new situations. On the other hand, Cánovas-Alvarez et al. (*in press*) reported non-improvements in the students' perception regarding the 15 QF EHEA evaluated through a questionnaire.

In academic sport courses, only a strong knowledge in the subject of sports might not guarantee students' employability. In considering the range of employer needs, it is also important to understand the graduate competencies as well as their necessities and requirements in terms of such lack of training. Accordingly, it is necessary to spotlight the QF-EHEA competencies (EC, 2016). This study sets out to achieve this by evaluating the use of the ESLP project, designed as an extra-curricular opportunity for students to develop their graduate competencies. This paper reported the students' perceptions about their improvements regarding the QF-EHEA competencies after their participation in such leadership programme.

Research questions
i. How does the ESLP contribute to the development of students' perceptions of their workplace competencies?
ii. What are the key workplace competencies students feel strongest within following participation in the ESLP?
iii. Which competencies do students feel they need to improve most within at the end of the ESLP?

Definitions and purpose of study
Universities offer both competitive and non-competitive sports, in addition to the wider use of recreational and physical activity (European University Sports Association [EUSA], 2020; British Universities & Colleges Sport [BUCS], 2020). This paper focuses on both sport and physical activity including use of social sports participation also referred to as "*recreational*" sports or "*intramural*" sport whereby teams are made up of friends or halls of residence, or sports programmes that focus on social and informal activity where students can just turn up and play.

Physical activity is being used here to focus on sport and wider recreational pursuits rather than the full breath of the term used by the World Health Organisation ([WHO] 2020) that defines physical activity as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure – including activities undertaken while working, playing, carrying out household chores, travelling, and engaging in recreational pursuits. This research was an intervention and evaluation study of the implementation of the ESLP. This programme was designed with a dual purpose: (i) to help increase student sport and recreation at the participating universities; and (ii) to help increase students' graduate workplace and career competencies. The ESLP was implemented as part of a European funded project carried out at five different universities spanning five countries in southern Europe: Spain, Malta, Italy, Greece and Turkey (see Cánovas-Alvarez et al., 2020, *in press*, for a

further project explanation). The ESLP involved university students to take a sports leadership role working as a Sports Leader for the 24 months with the aim to engage more students in university sport, alongside taking part in a graduate employability programme. Each university recruited between 10 and 13 Sports Leaders to deliver 10 new sport and recreational activities, aiming at the wider university student population who were either inactive or active once in a while, as defined by Sport England (2015). The aim of the sports participation strand of the ESLP was for the sport leaders to organise, promote, encourage participation and deliver the sports activity sessions to help increase the overall physical activity of the student population. This paper analyses the qualitative methods that employed focus groups to assess the student perceptions of their career competencies before taking part in the ESLP and after.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants were 61 university students of mixed gender (29 females and 32 males) between the age of 18-25 (M = 23.28; SD = 5.06) in their second year at university. They were studying eight different degrees that lasted four years. All the universities involved were organized in academic years of two semesters. During the participation in the present investigation they did not participate in any other training activity, other than that of their undergraduate training. All of them finished their studies without failing a subject. The students were involved as sport leaders at each of the five universities within each country. The main author's University Research Ethics Committee approved the study, which was performed in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration.

The present study focus on the qualitative analysis of the leaders' perceptions, following the interpretative perspective (Lincoln et al., 2011). This perspective is useful for understanding and explaining how different country contexts might influence or impact the success of the ESLP. The design of the study was pre- and post-intervention because there was a first assessment of the participants' perception, continued by the intervention of the ESLP, and a final assessment after the intervention.

The programme included four facilitated careers workshops, to enable students to reflect on their work as a sports leader and in order to manage action plans with the aim to develop their career competencies. Two workshops were held at the beginning of the programme to provide training and the first careers workshop, followed by a mid-point reflection and action planning workshop and one post- ESLP. Workshops were coordinated by the Sports Coordinator/Manager at each university with employers and careers staff who were available to support the sport leaders. In addition, the sports leaders had an employer mentor to help, guide and support the students in their work, reflection, and action planning. Sport leaders were responsible to keep at least one meeting per month with the employers to encouragement their journey through the ESLP from the perspective of developing their workplace and career competencies. Students specifically were asked to reflect on the 15 QF-EHEA competencies during their work as Sports Leaders (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

The qualitative method used was focus groups. Focus groups were carried out at each of the five universities taking part in the programme. Focus groups were used to help explore the competencies via a more in-depth method and to allow explanations, views and opinions to be shared. The 15 competences that were central to the focus group were: organization and planning, oral and written communication, use of information, communication and technology (ICT), communicating in a foreign language, decision making, management of information, teamwork, social interaction, ethical and social commitment, emotional control, working autonomously, entrepreneurial attitude, adapting to new situations, motivation, research competence.

Five focus groups were run by an experienced moderator both pre and post ESLP (10 overall). These focus groups were run by moderators with knowledge of the ESLP implementation. They were guided by a moderators plan. This plan included the explanation of the activity, themes to discuss, possible questions to guide the conversations, and rules of participation. Participants did not feel pressure to say positive or negative reflections about the programme because they were asked to be sincere in order to improve the programme thinking in futures interventions. Therefore, the moderator generated a positive climate to favour all kinds of comments. The meetings lasted a maximum of 45 minutes, each with between 6-9 sport leaders in size that fits with the ideal group size of 6-10 recommended for running a focus group (Morgan, 1997). A post-it note exercise was employed following previous successful practice as illustrated by Brunton and St Quinton (2020). Particularly, students were shown the 15 competencies and asked to write three competencies they felt they were strongest at and three competencies that they feel they needed to improve the most. Students were requested to explain their perceptions of competence through their involvement in the ESLP. This was carried out to help provide the context for why students felt they were strong in particular competencies and to allow students to freely explore and for discussion to elicit whether the ESLP had helped to contribute to the competency development. The key aim was to allow the conversation to emerge rather than for students to be led towards any particular response. Discussion explored the responses to help understand why students felt the ESLP had helped improve particular competencies, where relevant.

Analysis

Data was recorded to produce verbatim transcripts and analysed following the comparative method and a thematic analytical approach, considered to be a particularly useful method for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All recorded interviews were coded and analysed inductively. Two authors independently transcribed the interviews, which were cross-checked against the original recordings to ensure accuracy. They read the transcriptions to get a sense of their scope and to detect recurring topics of emerging themes. Here, a process of categorizing and unitizing data was employed to produce themes and key quotes to help explain the experiences of the sport leaders. They wrote memos during the coding process, which highlighted recurring themes, inductively clustered within sub-themes. Data were open and axial coded line-by-line and incident-to-incident descriptively, in sub-themes, which were applied to text segments. The process followed Lincoln's et al. (2011) four criteria to help establish trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility – internal validity, transferability – generalisability, dependability – reliability and confirmability – objectivity. Credibility was ensured by the process of thematic analysis, being a well-established research method in addition to the use of a common Moderators Plan applied across each university; Transferability is sought by providing sufficient contextual information to allow the reader to relate the findings to their own experience and thus, it being conceivable to others, that is also aided by the richness gained from successive participant quotations; Dependability was aided by the detailed descriptions of the procedures carried out in methods and analysis to allow others to repeat the study as well as to increase the readers' confidence in the approach used. Pre and Post ESLP focus groups were compared for any similarities and differences in addition to comparisons across each university focus group through a process of intra-method triangulation (Patton, 2002) where the focus on confirmability was achieved by the triangulation of thematic findings with the research team.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section answers both, Research Question 1: How does the ESLP contribute to the development of student' perceptions of their workplace competencies? and Research Question 2: What are the key workplace competencies students feel strongest within following participation in the ESLP?

Following the ESLP, there were a range of competencies based on the 15 QF-EHEA competencies (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015) that the sport leaders felt they were strong at and provided their reasons and context through their involvement as a Sports Leader taking part in the ESLP. The post-ESLP focus groups were compared against the strongest competencies felt at the pre-ESLP focus groups to assess whether the students felt these were new strengths or existing strengths, that they felt they further developed through the programme or not. Students rated both different and similar competencies when comparing the pre and post-ESLP focus groups. The most common strongest competence raised just at post-focus groups across three out of five of the universities was Oral and written communication, Organisation and planning, Teamwork and Emotional control were only raised at two out of the five universities. Given students' reflections of their strongest competencies at the post-ESLP focus groups concentrated on the ESLP, whereas at the pre-ESLP focus groups reflections were general reflections of their competencies, some variation was expected. Therefore, to increase confidence in the outcomes to follow, the findings here focus on the discussions and illustrations in the post-ESLP focus groups across each university where Sports Leaders explicitly mentioned their participation in the ESLP in helping to apply and develop a particular competency. Whilst some of the competencies cited following participation in the ESLP were also cited as a strong competence at the start of the programme, it was clear where sport leaders felt that participation in the ESLP had helped to improve that competencies thus, these were illustrated in this section to follow with quotations to support. Furthermore, there were few dominant competencies at the pre-ESLP that emerged within and across groups with a spread of competencies discussed more generally, whereas the strength of feelings in discussions was more prominent within the identified competencies below, at post-ESLP focus group, hence again why the focus was on the post-ESLP focus group findings.

The most commonly discussed competencies where participants cited each competency as showing improvements from participating in the ESLP were: Organization and planning; Oral and written communication; Development of planning and decision making; and Teamworking. This was followed closely by Emotional control and Adapting to new situations; and then as the third most commonly cited to help with developing the competencies were Use of ICT and Motivation. This illustrates the ESLP in helping to meet the needs of employers as cited earlier in the introduction where employer requirements for a functional team member included strong organisational skills (Capelli, 1999; Jackson, 2010) and social skills, as developed through teamworking (Agran et al., 2006).

The competencies that students did not cite in the focus groups as their strongest competencies from their involvement in the ESLP at the end of the programme were: Research competence; Autonomous work; Management of knowledge and information. This does not mean to say that the students did not feel competent in this competence generally but in relation to development from participation in the ESLP, it was not listed or stated. Communication in a foreign language and Ethical and Social commitment were also competencies that only had a limited mention where an individual sport leader rated this strength to be developed through the ESLP. Some explanations were given, for example, some Sports Leaders stated that they already spoke many languages hence why they did not feel they had improved that competence through the ESLP (University 2 and University 4), where other reasons link to the competencies students said they needed to improve most within that are discussed later in this paper.

Organization and Planning; Oral and written communication; Development of planning and decision making; and Teamworking, as said, were cited most commonly as the strongest competencies at the end of the ESLP. Reasons to help explain how working as a Sports Leader was felt to have helped students to achieve this competency was explored. In organization and planning, sport leaders illustrated their competence by the following quotes:

Without planning it is impossible to achieve your goals; Being a sport leader helped me to organize and implement different tasks – sport leader, University 1.

Working as a sport leader and having contact with mentors helped me realize the importance of organizing and planning and mainly having a business plan – sport leader, University 1.

Having varied number of participants and different abilities, it is kind of forced our hand in to having to plan beforehand, just to make sure we that had a few different options of how to take the session… we had to have different ideas of how we would do it. – sport leader, University 2.

I realized that this side of mine was improved when I overcame the activities in the faculty of dentistry and with other communities – sport leader, University 4.

Students noted that some of the competencies overlapped with for example, organization and planning working also with team work as below:

We worked as a team to come to some sort of conclusion on how to make the sessions even more… rewarding for the participants. So, I think the planning needed teamwork in order for that to actually come together for sure. – sport leader, University 2.

Organisation and Planning also overlapped with planning and decision making, both cited as strong competencies and developed through the ESLP:

Our teachers told us that each group must make two activities every week and we, together with our group friends talking about organization; when, at which hour, how, in which way, to whom etc. and planned the organization. I believe one of the actual masterpieces of sport leadership is planning. These helped us in terms of planning. I felt powerful. sport leader, University 4.

Sport leaders felt their oral and written communication was enabled by interacting with other students in delivering sports activities but also in their work as part of a team of sport leaders:

…we need to write a petition to use the facility or the equipment in the facility. Of course, we need to send the petition a few days beforehand. We have learned the details about those. We have learned how we should communicate. – sport leader, University 4.

…the possibility to talk, talk and discuss with older people with much more experience, let's say "*freely*" beyond the time spent in the classroom, ... certainly I think this may be a factor that has helped everyone to improve oral communication – sport leader, University 5.

Definitely teamwork… The thing that helped me a lot was …the whole aerobic dance activity management helped me because now that there was this situation I'm experiencing again a lot of things that I did with the ESLP project team and I'm bringing it back to a group of girls I work with. So, it has been very useful to work with small groups, so working with the other leaders. – sport leader, University 5.

For some students, the competence development of planning and decision making was felt to overlap with the competence organization and planning, as illustrated in comments below where students illustrate both planning and decision making required in their role:

> We plan the preparation of how many and what kind of organizations we have, we talk about the time and place and make the materials of the poster – sport leader, University 4.

> We plan things like when we are available, which equipment we will use for this, at what time we will do it, how we can involve our friends to it, how we can attract their attention - sport leader, University 4.

Sport leaders at four of the universities felt that working as a Sports Leader had helped to develop their Emotional control where they specifically cited that "*Being a Sports Leader has helped me to develop this competency*" – Sport leader, University 1. Other comments further illustrate this for other sport leaders:

> In sports we have a quick exchange of emotions. Being a sport leader, it helped me to control my emotion.
> …it is a mandatory to have especially in the 21st century.
> If you are able to control yourself, you can then more easily control your environment.
> It is crucial that I manage my feeling and myself. I control my outbreaks, and this has result in making proper and most logical decisions - sport leaders, University 1.

> During the project, I met some difficulties. Even sometimes there were times when I was really busy, and I like to saw the session as kind of "*I have to go to University on Wednesday...*" but you learn how to control your emotions. Obviously, you cannot show the participants what you're really feeling, and I think it helped me in that way… to control and at the same time not to give up on the participants, on the project.… Because in reality then you go there and do the session and it's fun - sport leaders, University 2.

The university where the Sports Leaders did not discuss Emotional control as one of their strengths, reported that this competence had been said to have improved by one of their employer mentors thus, also showing the development of this competence by sport leaders at all universities taking part in the ESLP, as below:

> Our mentors have told us that we have improved in some although we have not realized it, such as EMOTIONAL CONTROL and if he says it, it will be true - sport leader, University 4.

Adapting to new situations was another competence stated and discussed as one of the strongest competencies developed during the ESLP. Discussion often linked this competence to planning and organisation given it was during the planning of activities that the sport leaders felt they had to make a lot of decisions that helped to develop this competence:

> …because we had several logistical and technical problems, we certainly developed a lot of adaptation to new situations - sport leader, University 5.

Discussion at University 4 also summarized the Sports Leader work as involving "*Adapting to people, environment and events*".

The third most commonly cited competencies at three of the universities were Use of ICT and Motivation. However, whilst ICT was often cited as a competence that they used during the project, it was not referred to as a competence that they had specifically improved on through the ESLP given some Sports Leaders had also cited this as a competence at their pre-ESLP focus group. In addition, ICT was one of the most commonly cited competencies that sport leaders felt that they needed to still improve on and when explored why, some acknowledged the 'digital age' as the reason why students felt they needed to improve further with ICT:

> …now more and more in the age we are in now like where everything is becoming more and more digital, it's becoming an even more important skill - sport leader, University 2.

This is particularly relevant when considering the EC update 2017 as highlighted earlier, as a key current and future workplace competence needed.

In answering Research Question 3: Which competencies do students feel they need to improve most within at the end of the ESLP, the most commonly cited and discussed competencies here were ICT, Communication in a foreign language, Research and Emotional control. Whilst Emotional control was also rated as one of the key strengths developed, with examples to illustrate from working as a Sports Leader, students felt this was a competence that brought challenging situations and thus, would benefit from further development, as detailed below:

> We have realized how important Emotional management is not only of ourselves, but also the emotional management of the group. It would be necessary to have more knowledge or techniques to improve this management - sport leader, University 3.

Entrepreneurial skills was also rated a number of times as something they needed to improve on where few students raised this competence as a strength similarly with little mention of Research nor Communication in a foreign language as areas developed in the ESLP. This recognition by students, as participants here, of key competencies they felt they still needed to improve on agrees with employer views cited previously that stressed the need for students to need to develop a range of professional competencies (da Silva et al., 2006). It also supports Allen et al. (2013), in their recommendations for a change in higher education curriculum and the need for more extra-curricular development opportunities to support the development of graduate competencies. Overall, the results of the present study were similar to those reported by Cánovas-Alvarez et al. (2020) because they also found an increase in their involvement in some QF EHEA competencies. On the contrary, the quantitative views of the participants were not corroborated by Cánovas-Alvarez et al. (*in press*).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore how the ESLP contributed to the development of student' perceptions of their workplace competencies, if at all, and to find out which workplace competencies students felt strongest within following participation in the ESLP. From the students' perspective of working as a Sports Leader, this research found that implementing the ESLP helped to develop students' workplace and career competencies. Organization and Planning; Oral and written communication; Development of planning and decision making; and Teamworking, were cited most commonly as the strongest competencies at the end of the ESLP. These were followed closely by Emotional Control and Adapting to new situations. A range of examples were given to illustrate how taking part in the ESLP as a Sports Leader help to develop their competencies, with some

such as organisation and planning already a strength but said to have been developed further through the process of working as a Sports Leader. With regard to which competencies students felt that they still needed to improve within, ICT, Communication in a Foreign Language, Research and Emotional Control were most frequently reported, recognising that they either had not had the opportunity to develop these competencies during the ESLP or that they had but were still competencies that were recognised as needing further improvement.

The ESLP is therefore, recommended as one approach to helping universities to develop student's workplace and career competencies given the positive student comments found here and their perceptions of student experiences in relation to supporting career development. Work based learning and other forms of experience-based learning such as this programme, should be considered as essential rather than optional components to university student life or degree programmes to better meet the needs of employers and in turn, enhance graduate outcomes. As summarised by one Sports Leader about the ESLP:

> It was very hands on, very practical, as you would have in the real world basically, that's why it was good - sport leader, University 2.

The added value of this research is, therefore, that the ESLP is one model that could help universities towards achieving their strategic objectives to enhance graduate employability. It illustrates an extra-curricular activity that could be embedded also as a co-curricular approach to enable more students to gain additional opportunities to enhance their graduate competencies beyond the core curriculum. A unique strength of the ESLP is the dual approach of enabling students to take part in sport and engage others in sport, thus, helping promote student wellbeing, whilst students as sport leaders gain an additional benefit of taking a leadership role through sport that has been shown through previous research to help enhance their graduate employability as well as increase their earnings capacity (Allen et al., 2013), and now here with this research providing further support of Sports Leadership helping to develop workplace competencies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AS-P and JAB conceptualized and AS-P and JAB designed the study. AS-P was the Principal Investigator. JLA-E, LM and FJC-A carried out the statistical analysis. EI, AD, CS, AY, YID, AF, OM and AK recruited the participants from the different countries. EI, EC, AL, OM, CS, AY and FJC-A collected the data and carried out the interviews and focus groups. FJC-A, JAB, LM and JLA-E organized the database. JAB and FJC-A wrote the first manuscript draft, the final manuscript draft, conducted the English proofreading, and reviewed and edited the final version of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the manuscript revision and approved the final version.

SUPPORTING AGENCIES

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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