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The role and working conditions of Movement Science students employed in sport and recreational facilities: An Italian multicenter study

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THE ROLE OF MOVEMENT SCIENCES STUDENTS: AN ITALIAN MULTICENTER STUDY

Abstract

In order to analyze the role of movement sciences (MS) students in the present Italian occupational system and to analyze their employment opportunities in relation to their professional education, a questionnaire was administered to 4,217 students of 17 Universities. The investigation was aimed also to obtain information about structural features and management of sport facilities, including the adopted safety policies. The results show a massive enrollment of MS students in sport facilities without any formalization of their employment contract and an inadequate level of communication of the basic behavioral rules aimed at a health risk minimization to both users and personnel. Differences regarding the employment level and the safety training among the different areas of our country are also reported.

Keywords

Movement Sciences graduation, job market, safety regulations, sport facilities.

Introduction

In Italy, the Legislative Decree 178/1998, turned off the Higher Institutes of Physical Education and established the University Degree in Movement Sciences (MS), lasting 3 years, and the following biennial Master-level Courses (Repubblica Italiana, 1998). To date, however, the role of MS graduates in the Italian job market has not been defined clearly. Unlike physical education teachers, who have a rather linear career path towards all school levels, those who decide to become athletic trainers in sport, fitness or recreational facilities go across some difficulties. These are mainly represented by the great number of other professionals who can compete for the same positions,

such as graduates in other disciplines, federal technicians, and also persons without any educational qualification, among which just the MS students.

Furthermore, sport facilities are not only recreational places but also occupational environments. The Italian law 81/2008, actuation of several European Community Directives, represents the main document for occupational health and safety (Repubblica Italiana 2008). This law is applicable to every working process, including professional sport activities. The full application of the document to sport facilities has not been yet investigated. In particular data are missing for recreational/leisure sport facilities where no professional activities are performed.

In order to know the general employment situation of the Movement Sciences students and to evaluate the safety policies of sport facilities in Italy, the working Group of Movement Sciences for the Health (GSMS) of the Italian Society of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene (SItI) carried out in the years 2011-2012 an investigation among students attending the MS degree and master courses of 17 universities on the whole national area.

The primary aims of this study were to evaluate the role of the MS students in the present Italian occupational system and to analyze their employment opportunities in relation to their professional education. This investigation aimed also to obtain some structural and management information about sport facilities, where MS students and graduates are employed. Finally, the communication and education policies about hygienic and safety issues were assessed.

Methods

The investigation has been performed by a questionnaire (attachment 1) divided in three sections and administered to MS students. The first section included some demographic data, such as gender, age, and education/training received. The second section comprised questions about the past and present work positions of the interviewees, and the type of their employment relationship. The third section was addressed only to those who were employed, and was focused to obtain some information about the sport facilities where they worked, along with some personal judgment about

structural, logistic and organizational issues. This section included also questions aimed to assess the adoption of specific hygienic regulations and the presence of safety training programs organized/proposed by the employer.

The questionnaire was refined after testing on a convenience sample of 100 students, and then it was administered during the academic year 2011-2012 to the students attending the Hygiene teaching of Bachelor Degree (BD) and Master Degree (MD) courses in the 17 participant universities (8 from northern, 4 from center and 5 from southern Italy). The questionnaire was self-completed. At the time of the interview, a researcher explained the purpose of the study, emphasizing that the responses would have been managed as aggregated and anonymous data. The local Ethics committee approved the protocol.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 19.0 (IBM SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA). The chi-square test was used for the comparisons between the BD and MD students (here also indicated as first and second group, respectively) and among the different Italian areas. The F-test was used to compare the mean age of the two students groups. A p value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

The results of the descriptive analysis regarding interviewees and their employment position are reported in Table 1. On a total of 4,217 students interviewed, 3,661 (86.8%) were completing a triennial bachelor degree and the remaining 556 (13.1%) were attending courses of the biennial master degree.

Within the first group (60.4% males; mean age 21.7, range 18-49), 33.8% declared to hold further training certificates or licenses, and 46% worked in sport or recreational facilities in the past, mainly for less than one year (27.4%). At the time of the investigation 32.9% of the BD students were employed: most of them (64.9%) were working in facilities authorized by the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI), in most cases as trainer (77.9%). The vast majority (93.3%)

considered their current job congruent with their education. There was a not regular employment contract in 60% of cases and 90.5% of the employees were part-time workers. The results concerning the facilities for the first group are showed in Table 2. The majority of BD students reported the presence of safety regulations for the staff (60.6%) and for the users (63.1%). An easy access to the regulations was declared in 76.4% of cases. A safety training was stated by 55.2% of the respondents. The judgments on the structural and hygienic characteristics of the facilities, and the education provided to the staff were good/excellent respectively for 71.1%, 70.9% and 78.1% of the workers. The most frequently reported issue to be improved was the regularization of the employees (31.7%).

Among the MD students (60.6% M; mean age 25.3, range 20-55), 60.2% declared to hold additional certificates or licenses and 77.8% worked in a sport or recreational facility, mainly for less than three years (52.4% - Table 1); all these results differed significantly from those of the first group (<0.01). More than half of those who worked were employed at the time of investigation, a higher number than what registered among BD students (<0.01). But, accordingly, MD students worked mainly inside CONI authorized facilities (58.6%), in the role of trainer (75.2%), and part-time (90.6%). Although the percentage of workers without contract is still high in this group (43.1%), the situation is significantly different from what described by BD students ($p<0.01$). Most of the MD students (88.8%) considered their job congruent with their education. They declared also a higher availability of safety regulations for staff (71.2%) and users (75%) compared to that declared by BD students (<0.01). Regulations were indeed easily accessible for 70.1% of MD respondents (Table 2). As the bachelor students, the greater part of the second group considered good/excellent the structural (66.8%) and hygienic (68.2%) characteristics of the facilities. The education provided to the staff was considered good/excellent by 70.8% of the employees, while the safety training was given only in 50.1% of cases. Also among these students, the main change they desired was the regularization of the employment relationship (40.9% - Table 2).

The comparison among the three areas of the Country showed a geographical gradient of the employment status: the percentage of employed BD students decreased from northern to southern cities (47% northern; 32.2% middle; 20.4% southern) ($p \leq 0.01$); and among the MD students, the proportion of workers was much higher in northern (65.8%), rather than in middle and southern Italy (40% and 46.3%, respectively) ($p \leq 0.01$). Moreover, the training on safety showed also significant geographical differences, although with inverse trends with respect to the degree: BD students showed a decreasing trend from South to North, with 71.6% of them having received training on safety in the South, and only 48.5% in the North; MD students were more frequently trained in northern (56.5%) than in the middle and southern centers (41.1% and 42.3%, respectively – all $p < 0.05$).

Conclusions

The present investigation was carried out in order to analyze the role and the employment opportunities of MS students in sport and recreational facilities since the introduction of the MS degree in Italy. To our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to narrow how and how much MS students are actually employed in these structures before the achievement of graduation, and to identify possible differences in the employment status related to the place of origin or the course of study. Furthermore, we also investigated the true application of safety regulations in sport/recreational setting.

The survey showed some critical aspects regarding the role of MS graduates in the country. First of all, in the occupational setting, a massive enrollment of BD and MD students in sport facilities emerged without any formalization of the employment contract. This is, indeed, the main claim of the interviewed.

Since 1998, the Italian interuniversity consortium “AlmaLaurea” is collecting information from graduates about their employment conditions after one year from the completion of studies. The last report deals with the interviews carried out in the year 2012. Concerning MS graduates, the report

shows a high percentage of employed individuals (64% for the graduates of the bachelor degree; 75.3% for the master degree), but it confirms the widespread use of non-structured working relationships, even following the graduation (20.9 and 13.4% for the two groups, respectively).

In addition, the last survey on graduates occupancy levels provided by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) reported a percentage of employees among MS graduates above 70%, which is similar to that reported by AlmaLaurea. However, only 64.9% of the graduates with master-level qualification and 58.3% of the graduates seem to be employed in areas where a degree is a requisite (ISTAT 2009 e 2011).

Our findings demonstrate that the levels of employment among MS students are lower, but considerable: the widespread use of different unqualified professionals in sport and recreational facilities results also in a considerable employ of students without a graduation (about a third of our first sample), probably on the base of other types of qualifications.

Furthermore, in our study the congruence between job and education seems to be high, especially among the Bachelor Degree students. AlmaLaurea reports that the majority of the graduates continue the activity that they practiced during the course of study, and many of them declare an improvement in their job status following their graduation. However, the salary of the MS graduates seems to rank among the lowest reported by all graduates (AlmaLaurea 2013). Thus, it seems that in Italy the employment conditions of MS students could be enhanced by graduation from a professional point of view, but not from an economical perspective.

The comparison between the two student groups showed a different availability of regulations in the facilities, which is probably related to their different employment status. In fact, the higher number of formalized workers among MD students could stand for their greater engagement by employers, also in the field of regulations.

Furthermore, as regard the management of the facilities, the communication of the basic behavioral rules for health risks reduction seems to be inadequate, at least in part, for both users and personnel.

Accordingly, the training on safety appears to be offered to the staff in about half of the facilities, which cannot be considered a satisfactory level.

Finally, in our survey, the situation of the different areas of the country seems to be very heterogeneous, with a higher occupation rate in northern cities, which is consistent with the general situation of the Italian job market. The different gradients registered for the training on safety between undergraduates and master students is to some extent unexpected and may deserve further investigation. Anyway, this heterogeneity is in line with data of another survey performed on Italian MS students by Scapigliati et al., which underlined the different offer of basic life support and defibrillation trainings during the study career (Scapigliati *et al.* 2013).

In conclusion, this study highlights the problems regarding the employment opportunities related to MS graduation in Italian sport and recreational facilities: it seems that MS students are easily employed in these structures, but in most cases this imply the acceptance of a job non-formalized, underpaid and not safe enough.

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Table 1. Demographic data and employment of the two student's samples (BD and MD).

	Bachelor degree		Master degree		p value
	n.	%	n.	%	
Students	3,661	86.8	556	13.1	
Male gender	2,212	60.4	337	60.6	<0.01
Mean age in years, range	21.7	18-49	25.3	20-55	<0.01
Certificates / licenses	1,238	33.8	335	60.2	<0.01
Previous work in sport facilities	1,687	46	433	77.8	<0.01
Time in years					
– <1	693	38.2	113	25.0	<0.01
– 1-2	608	33.5	124	27.4	
– 3-4	265	14.6	97	21.5	
– > 4	246	13.5	117	25.9	
Present work in sport facilities					
– yes	1,170	32.9	316	55.1	<0.01
– no	1,756	49.5	158	27.5	
– I'm looking for	620	17.4	99	17.2	
Type of facility					
– authorized by CONI	807	64.9	203	58.6	0.12
– complementary structure	209	16.8	74	21.3	
– wellness centre	36	2.8	13	3.7	
– spa	4	0.3	3	0.8	
– swimming pool	101	8.1	24	6.9	
– other	86	6.9	29	8.3	
Job					
– technical manager	56	4.4	24	6.7	0.02
– trainer	985	77.9	267	75.2	
– motivational coach	20	1.5	2	0.5	
– personal trainer	68	5.3	30	8.4	
– facility owner	13	1.0	3	0.8	
– facility manager	8	0.6	1	0.2	
– courses advisor	7	0.5	0	0.0	
– supplements advisor	0	0.0	0	0.0	
– events advisor	9	0.7	0	0.0	
– marketing clerk	4	0.3	1	0.2	
– lifeguard	42	3.3	5	1.4	
– other	52	4.1	22	6.1	
Congruence with education	1,173	93.3	303	88.8	
Employment contract					
– fixed term contract	238	20.2	84	27.9	<0.01
– open-ended contract	58	4.9	11	3.6	
– VAT holder	21	1.7	12	3.9	
– no contract	705	60.0	130	43.1	
– other	153	13.0	64	21.2	

Working hours					
part-time	1,046	90.5	280	90.6	0.93
full-time	109	9.4	29	9.3	

Table 2. Features of sport facilities and personal judgments of the students

	Bachelor degree		Master degree		p value
	n.	%	n.	%	
Regulations for the staff	695	60.6	230	71.2	<0.01
Regulations for the users	640	63.1	225	75	<0.01
Access to regulations	613	76.4	193	70.1	<0.01
Structural features					
– poor	57	5.2	27	8.2	0.17
– sufficient	258	23.5	81	24.8	
– good	606	55.2	171	52.4	
– excellent	175	15.9	47	14.4	
Hygienic features					
– poor	57	5.0	21	6.4	0.26
– sufficient	270	24.0	82	25.2	
– good	582	51.7	174	53.5	
– excellent	216	19.2	48	14.7	
Education of the staff					
– poor	54	4.8	23	7.1	0.02
– sufficient	187	16.9	71	21.9	
– good	580	52.5	164	50.7	
– excellent	283	25.6	65	20.1	
Safety training	663	55.2	178	50.1	0.91
Desired changes					
– no change	298	25.9	46	13.4	<0.01
– regularization of employees	365	31.7	140	40.9	
– training of employees	275	23.9	95	27.7	
– structural upgrade	210	18.2	61	17.8	