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An evaluation of the transition from an amateur to professional culture within Hong Kong's Elite Rugby Programme

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ABSTRACT

Currently little is known about the development of high-performance cultures in emerging nations. This study is the first of its kind examining an emerging rugby nation's transition from an amateur to a professional full-time fifteen-a-side programme. Eleven full-time professional male rugby union players, the Head of the Hong Kong Rugby Union's (HKRU) Elite Rugby Programme (ERP) and the HKRU's peripatetic sport psychologist were interviewed. Inductive thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data revealed four emerging themes, namely; 1) an amateur environment that required change; 2) ERP's professional culture building blocks; 3) leadership strategy and managing key stake holders and 4) managing on-going challenges in the ERP's professional culture. Theoretical and applied implications for practitioners and programme leaders responsible for driving cultural change in their respective environments are discussed.

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Introduction

Considering the associated cultural, economic and political significance of sporting success (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2011; Wang, Pyun, Li, & Lee, 2016) many emerging nations – those residing outside of their respective top 20 world ranking – have invested in their individual sporting programmes vying for their place on the global sporting map (Bennett, Vaeyens, & Fransen, 2019; Elling, Van Hilvoorde, & Van Den Dool, 2014; Koski & Lämsä, 2015). It may be argued that emerging nations are unique in that they fall between high performance and Talent Development Environments (TDEs) (Hall, Jones, & Martindale, 2019) and may experience context-specific challenges in striving for

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success, such as smaller populations impacting the talent pool, less financial and logistical resource, weaker domestic competition, dual-career performers, geographical location, seasonal variance and even the political bias towards certain sports (Bennett et al., 2019; Halldorsson, 2017; Kasale, Morrow, & Winand, 2020; Koski & Lämsä, 2015; Telseth & Halldorsson, 2019).

A consequence of driving for sporting success for emerging nations, is the transition from an environment focusing on amateurism to one that focuses on professionalism and the development of a robust high-performance programme. This transition has shown to be challenging both at an organisational level and from an athlete's perspective. For example, in the organisational context, the traditional beliefs and ideals of amateur sports, such as sport for sports sake, fair play and humility, are viewed by some as outdated and a hindrance to the financial growth and progress associated with professional sport (Clausen et al., 2018). There are also the organisational considerations of replacing volunteer staff with full-time paid employees, professionalising governance structures and procedures as well as investing in high profile performers and coaches in order to compete (O'Brien & Slack, 1999; Sharpe, Beaton, & Scott, 2018). The transition into professional sports has also proved challenging for individual performers. For example, there are differences in the meaning of sport for amateur performers, who seek fun, enjoyment and health, to that of professionals who are driven by performance and personal achievement (Piermattéo, Lo Monaco, Reymond, Eyraud, & Dany, 2018). Specific challenges to life as a professional athlete include changes in financial status, pressure to progress and learn new skills, managing new training demands, as well as adaptation of their existing self-identity and relationships (Sanders & Winter, 2016).

As a result of this particular transition there may also be a need for a change in goals, expected behaviours and general way of operating in order to meet the demands of professional performance. These behaviours, forming the foundation of a team culture, would need to align with the expectations of a professional high-performance environment such as work ethic and consistently meeting measurable performance markers. Team culture has been shown as a central component associated with achieving sustained sporting success (Cole & Martin, 2018) and is defined as, "a dynamic process characterized by the shared values, beliefs, expectations and practices across the members and generations of a defined group" (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, p 340). While research has highlighted the importance of team culture across multiple domains (Fletcher & Streeter, 2016; Henriksen et al., 2011; Pim, 2016; Warrick, Milliman, & Ferguson, 2016), we know very little about the unique challenges emerging nations have when managing the transition from amateur to professional domains and developing an effective team culture.

Given the increase in the number and aspirations of emerging nations within the global sporting context, further examination of this under-researched milieu – into the development and management of a high-performance team culture – is warranted. Furthermore, how these specific nations plan and crucially strategically manage their leap onto the global sporting map is a vital consideration. The importance of a *strategic* approach encourages teams to create a future by searching for ways in which they can improve thus helping them to compete more effectively to achieve sustained success (Crook, Ketchen, & Snow, 2003; Williams, 2009). Consequently, the aim of this research is to examine an emerging nation's rugby team through the theoretical lens of Performance Management and the Resource Based View. Specifically, exploring the team's transition from amateur to professional team culture through the eyes of those clearly responsible for sporting performance (e.g. coaches, the players and support staff).

Theoretical framework

Although an array of interacting factors may influence elite sport performance there is growing evidence that for sporting organisations to achieve success at the highest level they need to be more intentional and comprehensive in their planning – in other words, to be more strategic (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009; Green & Houlihan, 2005). In striving for such success, two complimentary strategic frameworks, that can help organisations develop and sustain a competitive advantage, will be tools for this research, namely Performance Management (PM) and the Resource Based View (RBV) (Pavlov, Mura, Franco-Santos, & Bourne, 2017; Won & Chelladurai, 2016).

PM is defined as “a continual process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and align performance with the strategic goals of the organization” (Aguinis, 2013, p. 2). Traditional views of PM focused at an individual level (Kloot & Martin, 2000) with the first examples dating back to the third century and the Emperors of the Wei Dynasty who rated the performance of official family members (Coens & Jenkins, 2002). In more recent history, the PM was utilised in the early stages of the industrial revolution to monitor the performance of workers within the cotton mills of Scotland (George, 1972, as cited in Brudan, 2010). Over time, PM approaches have evolved, driven predominantly by the military, public administration as well as industrial companies and within the last 30 years has broadened its scope by critically integrating individual performance with strategic and operational factors (Brudan, 2010).

While PM has been readily used across multiple high performance and high-risk domains, there has been a lack of research exploring the concept in elite sport (Molan, Kelly, Arnold, & Matthews, 2019). Subsequently, Molan

et al. (2019), in examining PM across multiple contexts, identified four key PM processes that could be applied to elite sport. The first of these processes was strategic PM. Strategic PM is the direction the organisation chooses to pursue its long-term objective and the process that steers them towards this objective (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). The process begins with the leader establishing the vision of the organisation followed by effectively communicating the vision to internal and external stakeholders. As an antecedent to this process, it is critical for a leader to contextualise their vision (Arnold, Fletcher, & Molyneux, 2012) and for this to occur they would need an understanding of the internal resources at their disposal. As such, we identify the RBV as a complimentary construct of strategic PM. RBV is well established in the strategic management literature (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, & Ketchen, 2011) and has also been an invaluable means to evaluate sporting organisations (Truyens, De Bosscher, Heyndels, & Westerbeek, 2014). Its central tenet is a competitive advantage derives from the recognition and integrated deployment of rare and valuable resources, under an organisation's control, that are not perfectly imitable or substitutable by competitors (Gerrard, 2003). The resources are split into four categories with the first, and arguably most important (Amabile & Kramer, 2011) being human capital resource that values the experience and knowledge of individuals within the organisation. Secondly, physical capital resource refers to the geographical location as well as the technology and equipment available to the organisation. The third factor, occasionally grouped with physical capital resource (Won & Chelladurai, 2016), is financial capital and includes the debt, equity and retained earnings of the organisation. Finally, organisational capital describes the formal reporting structures and planning systems, as well as intangible elements such as organisational culture and relationships.

Having an understanding of the resources available is only one aspect. Understanding how to *operationalise* and deploy them is a critical step to achieving a sustained competitive advantage (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). An organisation's readiness to exploit the full competitive potential of its resources (Anderson & Birrer, 2011) is closely aligned to the second process of PM; operational PM. Part of operational PM is understanding the context that includes how internal and external situations may impact organisational decisions. For example, establishing a high-performing programme within an emerging nations environment means the athletes could be at a younger training age compared to seasoned professionals and, as such, training protocols may have to be carefully managed. Addressing the performance environment is another aspect of operational PM and is concerned with creating the optimal conditions for athletes, coaches and staff. Internal processes and procedures are an additional element of operational PM and refers to the systems, structures and the management of policies

and regulations that aid performance planning. Adapting the culture in a further component of operational PM and is concerned with shaping the values, behaviours and attitudes within the team. An example of these three elements of operational PM were encapsulated during the cultural change of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team. For instance, the players' previous antisocial binge drinking behaviours were no longer accepted (performance environment). The players were also empowered with leadership roles (internal processes and procedures) as well as agreeing to behaviours that demonstrated their expectation of excellence culture (Hodge, Henry, & Smith, 2014). The final theme within operational PM is debriefing, feedback and learning that identifies current performance levels and areas of improvement across both playing, coaching and support staff.

The third and fourth processes of PM are individual PM and leadership of the performance team. Individual PM involves the evaluation of people's performance using appropriate measures as well as enhancing the capacity of people through the provision of development opportunities (Molan et al., 2019). A successful PM approach is underpinned throughout by effective leadership (Arnold et al., 2012; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). This is modelled through displaying interpersonal skills and a flexibility in leadership styles depending on the context for example, transformational, transactional or darker leadership traits (Molan et al., 2019). Another critical consideration for the leader is ensuring PM practices are aligned with the organisation's culture (Molan et al., 2019). These two important factors also further reflect the complimentary nature of PM and RBV. For example, the leadership style will govern how an organisation's resources are deployed, which in turn will affect the culture. To elaborate, if an organisation is human capital focused then it is more likely to have collaborative culture (Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011). There may also be a need to *change* the culture of the organisation with the leader responsible for demonstrating the existing culture being no longer functional with the new culture holding greater reward and appeal (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). For instance, if the leader wishes to change to a more collaborative culture then their leadership style and resource deployment would be steered by this, with both PM and RBV being invaluable tools through this change (Gerrard, 2003; Molan et al., 2019). PM for example highlights the processes and layers that need to be considered during change, while RBV identifies the constituent parts of these processes and layers. Both theories are important, their combination however affords a deeper understanding of the environment and the scope of change required.

Given the lack of rigorous research in both PM and RBV in elite sport (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Won & Chelladurai, 2016) and their complimentary relationship highlighted above, both will be uniquely combined to examine the emergence of Hong Kong's Elite Rugby Programme (ERP) and

its transition from an amateur to professional culture. The dual deployment of the two theoretical frameworks aims to advance the understanding of the strategic considerations teams within the emerging context should consider. The manner with which the frameworks were deployed is discussed further in the data analysis section.

Methodology

Context

The Elite Rugby Programme (ERP) is the Hong Kong Rugby Union's (HKRU) first professional 15's platform. Established in 2015, according to the HKRU's strategic plan, its aims were to maximise Rugby World Cup qualification for 2019 and in 2023. At the time of the research, the ERP players and staff had begun their qualification journey to the Rugby World Cup 2023 after failing to qualify for the 2019 competition. The players within the ERP are centrally contracted to the HKRU and train daily together as part of a typical full-time professional programme. The domestic Premiership season, in which all ERP players participate for their respective (semi-professional) clubs, runs from September through to March with one game a week. ERP players come together as a team through international competition windows in November and June if selected for Hong Kong. As Hall et al. (2019) illustrated, with the early-career nature of many of the ERP players, in a programme based in an emerging rugby country, the ERP is aligned more to talent development environments than many other elite programmes.

Given the unique nature of the ERP's context as an emerging nation and to examine the transition from an amateur to full-time professional culture, an instrumental case study design was utilised. A fundamental characteristic of case studies is their *boundedness* and refers to the exclusive membership of a specific group (i.e. the ERP), in a delineated location (i.e. Hong Kong), over a delimited time frame (i.e. 2015 to 2018; Yin, 2009). An *instrumental* case study is used to provide insight into an issue, to provide generalisations and thus advancing understanding within of an issue of interest (i.e., emerging nation's transition from an amateur to professional culture; Hodge & Sharp, 2016). The first author, at the time of the research, was an assistant coach within the ERP and had worked at the HKRU for 8 years. As such he was able to secure day-to-day access to this specific group.

Participants

The sample consisted of 11 full-time professional male rugby union players centrally contracted by the HKRU to the ERP. Player demographics, nationality and previous rugby experience are broadly presented in Table A1,

rather than identifying specifics, in order to maintain a level of anonymity. The Head of the ERP (HoERP) and a peripatetic sports psychologist (SP), who worked with the ERP's playing and coaching group for 2 years leading into the Rugby World Cup repechage, also participated in the study. The HoERP had a professional coaching experience of 25 years and a level five standard coach in his Tier One home union. During the research period the HoERP was also head coach of Hong Kong Men's National Fifteens Team. The SP (58 years of age) was a Super Rugby team psychologist (11th campaign at the time of the interview) and for 10 years had provided psychological support across teams and individual sports at international and Olympic level. Due to the timeline discussed within the research both the HoERP and SP could be identified (Van den Hoonaard, 2003) and although they are not named, through explicit discussions with the first author, the SP and HoERP were happy with the level of this contextually contingent anonymity (Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015). Maintaining total anonymity is a significant challenge – perhaps an impossible task (Van den Hoonaard, 2003) – and in certain cases, involving potential criminal activity, protecting participants identities could result in researcher prosecution (Clough & Conigrave, 2008). In this current research, there has been a concerted attempt to balance the need of protection of the participants' identities with maintaining the value and integrity of the data (Saunders et al., 2015).

Data collection

Due to the nature of the research aims and our need to produce practically relevant knowledge, a pragmatic research philosophy was adopted. Using this approach methods are chosen with the aim of providing real-world solutions to context-specific problems without being driven by a definitive epistemological approach (Giacobbi et al., 2005). A semi-structured interview procedure was selected enabling participants the opportunity to provide rich and detailed accounts of their experiences within the ERP (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). There were three distinct interview guides for the playing, HoERP and SP participants respectively in order to elicit the specific retrospective perceptions of the ERP's transition. Due to the lack of previous research into emerging teams/nations and the need to understand this context more fully, interview questions were designed to examine the broad number of potential influences during the ERP's transition using organisational culture and culture change literature as well as themes the first author deemed appropriate (Rapley, 2011). This broad exploration avoided leading the participants and limiting the research to one specific theory. General themes within the three interview guides examined the team culture from the ERP's inception and how it developed over the four-year

World Cup qualifying period. The process of change through this period was also explored. In addition, participants were asked to consider what further improvements were necessary as they embarked on their next World Cup cycle. Questions were open with probes and prompts used within each theme to encourage the participants to expand their answers providing rich responses (Gray, 2009).

Player interviews and that of the HoERP took place at a mutually convenient time in private meeting rooms at the ERP's training centre. The interview with the SP, who was based in New Zealand, took place via Skype and was arranged through email. The use of such video conferencing technology has increased in qualitative research over recent years and is a valid method to obtain data when face to face opportunities are not possible or practical (Weller, 2017). Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 min and was recorded on a digital voice recorder.

The participants were purposefully chosen and all were known to the first author, through his workings within the ERP, which helped facilitate a more relaxed conversational tone to the interview process (Weller, 2017). In keeping with the pragmatic research philosophy where the researcher is viewed as a co-constructor of knowledge (Giacobbi et al., 2005), the first author's insider status was seen as a critical component of the research (Greene, 2014). Although the first author's tacit knowledge was a key aspect to the research, to mitigate the impact impression management (Gray, 2009), the participants were reassured that any information shared was confidential, would not influence decisions around selection and/or contracting and in fact the players' open and honest insight might be used to improve the ERP's environment. Prior to the participants being identified for interview, ethical approval was gained. The players, HoERP and SP were recruited via personal contact and, in keeping with basic ethical considerations; informed consent was obtained (Willig, 2008) to take part in a one-on-one interview with details of the voluntary nature of their participation explained.

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Data analysis

Firstly, inductive analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the data emerging from the interviews. The opening step was for the first author to familiarise himself with the data by transcribing the interviews and through multiple readings. The second stage of analysis involved creating codes across the entire data set and then grouping the data into themes. The themes were then refined, assessing for coherent patterns of meaning, and then the entire data set was reviewed independently by the first author and two of his co-authors ensuring a consistent message across all themes. Finally, clear definitions of each theme were generated ensuring each concisely gave the reader clarity through the overall story. Following this process, as shown in Table A2, four high-order themes were generated, each with a group of associated lower-order themes, all based on quotes or “tags” from the data (Cote, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993).

After the inductive analysis was completed the themes that were generated were deductively examined through the theoretical lens of PM and RBV. Where connection between the themes and theory were deemed evident, discussion and referencing were used to exemplify these points within the results-discussion section.

Quality of the research

A potential issue with the data is its retrospective nature. As Wenk (2017) highlighted, recalling past experiences can lead to distortions as the brain adds new experiences into existing memory. However, there is also evidence that indicates when memories are sought from the episodic systems of experiences of the self – the Self Referencing Effect – then these recollections, while not infallible, are potentially more accurately remembered (Symons, College, & Johnson, 1997).

In contrast to the criteriological approach of judging the quality of qualitative research (see Lincoln & Guba 1985 and Tracy, 2010), Sparkes and Smith’s (2009) relativist approach was considered. Rather than applying *universal* criteria in the judgment qualitative research, the appropriateness of which has been questioned (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), the relativist approach uses *contextually suited* criteria, specific to the research (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Therefore, criteria that were deemed appropriate in evaluating this research include; substantive contribution, coherence, credibility and transparency (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

Substantive contribution refers to the extent with which the research contributes to our understanding of social life (Smith & Caddick, 2012) and in this instance points to advancing the knowledge of developing a high performing

team culture within an emerging nation. Coherence refers to the way in which the research creates a complete and meaningful picture (Smith & Caddick, 2012), for example, examining the ERP's transition from an amateur to fully professional programme with the associated challenges and considerations.

Thirdly, credibility refers to the time spent with the participants and the extent with which the participants reflected on the researcher's interpretations (Smith & Caddick, 2012). In this case, prolonged engagement was achieved given the first author's indigenous insider status within the ERP from the programme's inception to the "present day". Member reflections were also sought as part of these criteria where participants and the first author engaged in discussion surrounding the interpreted data. This corroborative process has been shown to enrich the understanding of the data and where it might be developed (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Finally, with regarding transparency – the extent with which the findings were scrutinised (Smith & Caddick, 2012) – the first author engaged with critical reflexivity, specifically intersubjective reflection. Through this management of self, he considered his insider status in relation to the participants within the ERP (Brackenridge, 1999; Finlay, 2002). In addition, a process of investigator triangulation took place where the primary- and co-authors, with over 40 years' collective experience in qualitative research, employed an intercoder agreement strategy where codes and themes were critiqued through the entire inductive process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Data triangulation was another strategy used where three independent sources of data – players, HoERP and SP – were drawn upon it to build themes (Bush, 2012).

Results and discussion

Through inductive analysis five themes emerged: 1) an amateur environment that required change; 2) ERP's professional culture-building blocks; 3) leadership and managing key stakeholders through change; 4) evidencing and reinforcing a positive transition to professionalism and 5) managing the ongoing challenges associated with the ERP's professional culture. The sections below describe these themes, underpinned by exemplar quotes to support the findings.

An amateur environment that required change

Amateur behaviours and lack of quality personnel

It was apparent in the data that the standards and understanding of what a "professional elite" environment looked like was lacking. For example, players who had previously experienced professional

environments elsewhere were not initially impressed with Hong Kong's answer to professional rugby. In particular, the social element was perceived to be too dominant, with players seemingly unaware of the standards required.

Bit of a shambles - it was more of a social thing rather than a performance setting as much as we try to make it a performance setting. (P7)

The cultural ideals of Hong Kong rugby's amateur past seemingly transitioned into the new professional programme and in a similar conflict previously identified by Clausen et al. (2018) was at odds with certain players who knew what professionalism should look like. Operational PM processes were clearly lacking at this stage with the need to address the environment (i.e., the expected behaviours of a professional player) and to adapt the culture away from amateur standards.

In addition, the quality of the initial cohort of players was again questioned by players with previous professional experience, "Some of the players didn't deserve to be there" (P3) and "if they weren't in Hong Kong, they wouldn't be on a professional contract." (P11). The ERP's human capital resource – so pivotal for successful high-performance environments (Wagstaff, 2019) – was somewhat deficient in the early stages of the ERP.

Lack of vision

There was a reported rudderless approach in the early stages of the ERP that did not go unnoticed by the players with comments of a programme "finding its feet" (P8) and being "disjointed" (P5). As the player quote below outlines, a coherent direction at this stage was lacking.

Because it was so new I don't think there was a significant driving goal - there are procedures and rules that guys stuck to - but not the driving goals everyone wanted to achieve and the centralised training around that goal . . . I found it more group of individuals or club players pulled together but not seeing themselves as a team so not really giving their all. (P5)

Having a clear vision is the foundation of building a high-performance culture and of cultural change across sport and organisational domains (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014; Warrick, 2017; Yukelson & Rose, 2014). It is also a central process within Strategic PM and a key organisational capital resource, without which shaping the expected behaviours and galvanising a group is not possible to achieve.

Lack of professional facilities

Reinforcing the amateurish nature of the ERP during the initial months was the physical environment (i.e., the facilities in which the athletes trained and work). Both of the former and new professional players voiced their disapproval of the gymnasium that they shared with the general public, as well as lacking a specific space for their exclusive use.

Having never been in a professional environment I'd always imagined an elite kind of area but in those first few months you'd be gymming in the public gym and resting between sets and a little old lady would come past and put her towel down and at times I thought is this what professional rugby is? (P3)

The operational components of the ERP, specifically their physical capital resource, was clearly inadequate in the early stages of the ERP and is a critical consideration for elite professional teams (Cruickshank et al., 2014). In addition, the operational failings also impacted the human capital with frustration clearly evident from the player's quote.

ERP's professional culture building blocks

Establishing a vision

A key component for Strategic PM is establishing a vision and this was one of the first tasks of the newly appointed HoERP. The outcome goal for the ERP group was to gain qualification for the Rugby World Cup 2019. By ensuring an understanding of the team's direction through an articulated vision, the HoERP demonstrated best practice for cultural change (Cruickshank et al., 2014). The key process for achieving their outcome goal was simple – the ERP was all about hard work.

This is our end goal and how we going get there. I need you to work hard - this is how we potentially can get there, but I need your buy in (HoERP)

The simplicity of the HoERP's vision was particularly significant for the ERP when considering the multinational makeup of the squad with the HoERP recognising the need for "all the guys to be on the same page, pulling in the same direction". The central hard work ethos in particular has been previously recognised as a foundational pillar in a number of other elite sports and TDEs (Fletcher & Streeter, 2016; Henriksen et al., 2011; Hodge et al., 2014) that according to Wagstaff (2019) should be prioritised ahead of relying too heavily on the myth of individualism. This was a critical step for the ERP in addressing its previously inhibiting organisational capital resource by explicitly identifying the non-negotiable behaviour of a professional culture.

Educating and demonstrating what professionalism looked like

An important element of HoERP's vision was to educate the inexperienced professionals as to what was expected of them as professional player as he illustrates below.

So going back to the directive approach first thing we had to do was to get them (the players) used to working hard, understanding what hard work was and understanding that there was a basic requirement for a professional regarding time keeping, dress code that everyone had to buy into.

This necessary education was a means with which the HoERP sought to improve the capability of his players through individual PM and an example of him demanding more from the human capital resource of the ERP. The players soon experienced these demands firsthand with a significant shift in the expectations and physical requirements as one of the new professional players graphically accounts.

There was just a sudden spike in what we were doing, and the players were mature enough to know that the holiday was over so to speak. That was the turn. It was a Thursday morning and we saw 'habits.' And we thought it was a presentation on how we could be better professionals. Forty-five minutes later, three of the lads were throwing up on the roof! (P3)

The balance of hard work with well-being and holistic development

Well-being

In a further example of individual PM and maximising the human capital resource, the HoERP stressed the importance of balancing the need for driving the players towards performance outcomes with care and well-being – a challenge according to the Competing Values Framework that argues by driving performance, well-being would be hindered (Choi, Martin, & Park, 2008). The care shown to the ERP players was particularly important given the number of players who originated outside of Hong Kong, subsequently lacking the close support networks of their home country, and those players who were transitioning into professional rugby. The two quotes below highlight the importance of these points respectively.

When I first moved here it was hard . . . Training a certain way but then playing in a different set up. I've found it tough initially missing my family - but I wasn't the kind of guy to reach out . . . For my first 2 years I did miss home so much and at the start it's a strain financially. (P8)

Like a sit down with the coaches and tell the players why they've been brought into the programme and not to get too fussed with being a professional athlete. Just go out there and do your job on the weekend. If I had heard that from the start . . . not to get too caught up and trying to do everything. (P11)

Referring to the first quote isolation from family and friends – identified by the player – may lead to a “culture shock” where, combined with the impact of learning unfamiliar training and playing philosophies, can result in the athlete feeling overwhelmed (Schinke, Yukelson, Bartolacci, Battocchio, & Johnstone, 2011). In contrast to the recommendations of Schinke and McGannon (2014) there were no defined strategies within the ERP to help mitigate the impact of cultural shock, rather more informal fact finding and communication from both the HoERP and the playing group. A similar relational gap in the individual PM was also identified with a lack of role clarity identified in the second quote. The transition from amateur to professional can be turbulent and fraught with uncertainty (Sanders & Winter, 2016) so ensuring players have clarity in their role can help mitigate the negative impact of this transition through a boost in job satisfaction, self-confidence and commitment to the group, for example Benson, Evans, & Eys (2016).

Holistic development

The care for the ERP players also extended through the holistic approach of the HoERP who promoted an “earn or learn” philosophy where players were encouraged to engage in further education, part-time work or similar continued professional development outside of their core hours as a professional rugby player.

And then the personal things they ‘earn and learn’ - the development of the players outside. That comes back to my personality as a coach - I describe myself as a directive coach, but I’ve also got that holistic welfare at heart as well. So, within that driving concept of working hard and striving we need that balance outside in terms of their CPD and general well-being.

Articulated in the above quote the HoERP displays a caring element to his coaching, or a “driven benevolence” (Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016, p. 233) as he aims to develop the whole person, a strategy recognised as one that can enhance athletic performance (Fisher, Larsen, Bejar, & Shigeno, 2019).

Evidencing and reinforcing the change

Developing the ERP’s physical environment and the use of symbols

Arguably the most significant symbol for reinforcing the change of culture within the ERP was a stark improvement in its physical capital resource with relocation to a purpose-built training facility. Previously identified as an aspect that was stifling the progression of the ERP’s high-performance culture, the players were far happier with their new surroundings as one of the players comments.

Everything was on one site. One thing I thought was better was you got there and that was our base. You had your food there, we have meetings there, the officers were there, the physios were there. The gym was well equipped. Once you were there it paved the way for a more professional environment. (P5)

Having access to their own facility significantly reinforced the new professional ethos of the ERP with one of the players further commenting how the switch to the new facility signified the real start on their World Cup journey, “For me that was when it (clicks fingers) right then, we’re giving this a good old crack now” (P3).

An important resource for the HKRU in this context is the substantial financial capital resource created through the HKRU’s running of the annual Hong Kong Sevens event. The monies from the event – reportedly nearly US\$30 million (Careem, 2019) – would have been essential for the improvements made to the ERP’s physical capital resource.

The use of symbols to reinforce the change were utilised throughout the facility as the following player recognised.

The keywords around the gym, all the keywords on the wall - you’re probably bloody reading that everyday subconsciously without even realising it at the time. (P10)

These trigger phrases and messages around the gym and training areas, as part of the improving operational performance of the ERP, reinforced the hard-working ethos of the group and a tactic successfully utilised in another high performance and development environments (Martin & Eys, 2019; Pim, 2016).

Positively reinforcing the change

As the quote below from one of the players indicate, in the faces and strong results there was belief in the group that the changes implemented had worked.

I think if you looked at the results in the buildup to the repechage there were games that we won fairly comfortably, be it Korea or Malaysia, and then the Cook Islands and they were games where we completely blew people off the park (P6)

The ultimate purpose of change is improved performance with the ultimate measure of successful change being performance outcome (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). The victories described by the player are perhaps the strongest indications that the individual PM of the ERP had improved with the collective improvement in players’ capabilities and capacity. Also, the organisational and human capital resources were seemingly aligned – coach and player – in producing the much-needed victories.

Leadership strategy and managing key stakeholders

Transactional and coach driven

The HoERP was the primary architect for change in the first 12 months and initially adopted a transactional approach in driving the vision. This was recognised by the players with the following quote reinforcing a perceived top-down approach.

Coaches were the key drivers at the start. There weren't many players taking ownership at the start. (P10)

Some researchers report a preferred leadership approach would be transformation in nature, where players are inspired and empowered (Northouse, 2010). In reality, multiple leadership styles may be necessary, adapting a suitable style to the given situation (Arnold et al., 2012). In this instance, a “bright and positive” transformation approach (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011) was arguably inappropriate for a group of players who had lacked direction for 6 months and for a group, that in the HoERP's own words, required galvanising. Instead a more transactional approach was perhaps the more prudent in early stages at least.

Transitioning to dispersed leadership

The switch initiated by the HoERP to a dispersed leadership approach, where leadership skills and responsibilities are shared between the leader and follower (Gordon, 2010), occurred in the final 12 months leading into the Rugby World Cup Repechage where the HoERP facilitated the anonymous election of a peer-selected group. This switch was an important landmark in the transition to a professional culture and has been shown as a valuable tool for coaches (Fransen et al., 2017; Gulak-Lipka, 2016; Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014) supported also in the quote below from team's PS.

The coach can't keep driving it – it has to become men led really quickly. The coach might have to jump in and challenge people occasionally, but you want a good leadership group that's prepared to die more than anybody else. The other men will follow. But if the leadership group don't go there, then you're f****d.

The shift to a more shared leadership approach may have reflected the HoERP's opinion that the human capital resource (the players) was ready for this responsibility. Each of the selected leaders were responsible for between six and eight players on field performance as well as off-field well-being – a critical focus in recent high-performance culture research (Wagstaff, 2019). Using this leadership format is an important process in relation to change and team culture development. Through the integration of individual and leadership elements of PM the dispersed leadership approach potentially learnt itself to personal disclosure, mutual

sharing and social connections that may have engendered a further sense of psychological safety, reducing the potential of seeing the cultural change as a threat and reinforcing buy-in towards the vision (Stragalas, 2012).

External stakeholder support

One of the key factors in driving the change was garnering support from external stakeholders regarding the long-term validity of Hong Kong Rugby's first professional programme.

There's a reality – you've got to get the results first ... winning gives you some leverage. Couple of good wins and the perceived image that the professional game was the right thing to do in Hong Kong and we could then start to look at longevity as well. But you've got to get the short term right first. (HoERP)

The quote above refers to the positive perception assumed by Hong Kong Rugby's Board of Directors – many of whom were sceptical of the programme and its projected spend – as a consequence of the ERP's early success, and with it a more flexible budget with which to operate.

Managing the ongoing challenges associated with the ERP's professional culture

An interesting feature of this study was the ongoing emerging challenges within the ERP as the culture evolved from an amateur to professional. The four challenges were a) performance pressure; b) player leadership group's message disconnect; c) the lack of competition and d) management of troublesome players.

Performance pressure

In the pressure of the World Cup Repechage high levels of stress were reported by five of the players that may have negatively influenced the organisational capital of the ERP as described by the team's PS.

What I felt, I thought that everyone was working really hard to try to be perfect and not f**k it up. It was an environment where I felt there was tension and maybe some anxiety about not wanting to f**k it up or not lose or not perform and look like we weren't functioning.

The pressure to perform was palpable with feelings of anxiety, detected by the SP, typical of high-stake situations (Nieuwenhuys & Oudejans, 2017). The stress experienced by coaches – also detected by the SP – can impact the players too through the emotional contagion effect (Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012). This was evidenced by one of the playing squad who commented, "I think the emotional stress people were under

eventually took away from performances” (P9). This perhaps reinforces the need for coaches to be aware of their emotional state and its interdependency in coach-coach and coach-athlete relationships (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

The experiences outlined through this period by players and the SP strongly suggest the pressure of competition affected coach behaviours. An important consideration however is the impact of failing to qualify had on the playing group’s reflections of this time. While it would be imprudent to completely dismiss the perceptions of the players, the extent to which the reflections are a true representation of the ERP’s environment during this phase may have been impacted through the performance-cue effect (Lord, Binning, Rush, & Thomas, 1978) where followers tend to rate leaders’ behaviours based on outcome. The HoERP was acutely aware of this.

The one thing that never fails to amaze me is form and results within a professional environment. Winning has so much of an impact on the mood and on people’s perception - perception is very time based. If you’re winning everything is great, if you’re losing everything is crap.

Player leadership group’s message disconnect

According to the HoERP, there was a disconnect between the messages from the coaching team and their dissemination, through the player leaders to the other players.

The other thing we learned was the selected leaders needed educating too on how to communicate with the rest of the group. There was real clarity among the coaching staff and leadership group, but they weren’t conveying the messages back to the wider group, so the level of clarity perhaps didn’t exist to the level I thought because I didn’t realise the guys (*leadership groups*) were not conveying the message. (HoERP)

Through the PM framework this indicates a breakdown in the leadership of the performance team and a further reminder of the early-career nature of the ERP’s players – a fact noticed by the SP who, while applauded the way in which the ERP promoted players to drive the culture endogenously, also observed the limitations of the ERP’s human capital resource, “You just haven’t got 10 All Blacks in your crew that you can ask to be surrogate coaches and coach the players through peer coaching”.

A lack of competition

A potential destabilising source of the ERP’s hard work culture was the lack of playing numbers in Hong Kong and subsequently the ease with which some players were selected for the national team. This was highlighted by over half of the playing participants – articulated in one of the player’s quotes below.

You also lose the honour of the jersey itself. It's too easy to get the jersey - you don't have to beat anyone to get the jersey - like me, straight into it. (P8)

Slight improvements had already begun however, an indication of much needed improvements in human capital resource. Three of the playing participants, for example, acknowledged that pressure for places were starting to increase with more quality players with previous professional experience becoming eligible for Hong Kong and more quality Hong Kong qualified players being sourced.

Management of troublesome players

It also emerged from the players' perspective that a small number of "troublesome players" were not conforming to the ERP's professional behaviours.

A few people's behaviors in the group are going to be difficult to change but the union needs them more than they need the union. (P7)

The quote makes reference to the challenging demands of managing players who may have particular performance value to the team, but who are also potentially disruptive. This is especially challenging in Hong Kong with a lack of playing numbers and while short-term performance benefits may be experienced the long-term implications of a troublesome player on group cohesion can be destructive (Leggat, Smith, & Figgins, 2018). Looking at this challenge from another perspective, there is a clash of an individual potentially holding high human capital value but also diminishing the organisational capital resource due to their inconsistent compliance.

Conclusion

In responding to the need for a greater understanding of how emerging nations might create a high-performance culture, the transition of Hong Kong's ERP from an amateur to professional programme was examined. The research has unveiled several significant and original advances in the theory not least the unique combination of PM and RBV frameworks. The complimentary nature of PM and RBV that identifies key components of a high-performance environment (i.e., strategic, operational, individual and leadership) as well as the key sub-sections beneath (i.e., human, organisational, financial and physical capital resources) proved invaluable in identifying the strengths of the ERP and determining where improvements could be made.

Notwithstanding the contribution of this research, it was not without its limitations. Firstly, although a benefit of the research was the first author's insider status as an assistant coach within the ERP, his dual role may have

led to impression management. While every effort was made to mitigate this impact it would be imprudent to dismiss the notion that the first author's role working relationship with the players may have impacted some of the players' perceptions. Second, the financial capital resource made available to the HoERP from the HKRU's central funds made certain elements of the transition "easier". Paying for the customised training facility, for example, as well as the ongoing costs of monitoring systems such as GPS units and not to mention the expertise of the coaching support staff all had significant impact on driving the successful change to professionalism. Other emerging nations might not be able to boast such a resource so finding more cost-effective ways to drive the culture is fundamental. Finally, only a selection of ERP players were interviewed and caution must be made in generalising the opinions of the 11 players as a representation of the entire ERP squad. Obtaining the views of board members to examine how they perceived the process of change would have also been a useful element to the results.

Future directions in this line of research may wish to consider further use of the theoretical constructs Performance Management and the Resourced Base View in *combination* as a lens through which to examine sporting domains. Specifically building on the findings of this research and to determine the extent with which they can be generalised across similar milieus, future research may also wish to broaden the understanding into the unique aspects and specific challenges of the emerging context, in other rugby programmes as well as across differing team and/or individual sports.

Finally, a number of applied implications emerged from the research that match those previously recommended for other high performance and TDEs. Namely, the importance of the leader setting a simple vision and steering the organisation towards the vision through non-negotiable behaviours; ensuring a balance of hard work and well-being; the holistic development of players and a leader who can vary their approach depending on the situation highlighting the adaptive practice of leadership. Crucially however, context-specific implications for emerging nations also emerged. First, regarding the human capital resource of emerging nations, there may be a need to carefully manage "troublesome players". Specifically, due to a lack of playing numbers and/or quality personnel, such as reported in Hong Kong, an emerging nation may have to assess the balance of the player's "on-field" ability, and subsequent positive impact on performance outcome, with their disruptive behaviour and the impact of team cohesion and culture. While a troublesome player might expect to be removed in a tier one context, in an emerging nation like Hong Kong, such behaviours may have to be pandered to if the player is performing on the pitch. Second, linked to a privation of playing numbers, in emerging nations there may be a lack of competition leading to complacency in performances with

selection being assured. There may also be deficiencies within the competition structure that potentially stagnates the continued improvement of the group. Mitigating these effects are challenging and may include strategies such as the ERP's public display of effort and GPS scores from games and training helping to drive competition, accountability for progression and standards. Finally, recognising the destabilising effect performance pressure can have on the environment is a vital consideration. For the ERP it was the final qualification stages of the 2019 Rugby World Cup. While the reports on the ERP players from this time may have painted a darker picture than the reality there was arguably sufficient evidence to alert future coaching behaviours to the importance of promoting effective relationships between coach and athlete – relationships that appeared strained at times due to the performance pressures. Further reminders too for the coaches to be more aware of the inevitable stress that they will face and its impact on their personal behaviours. This is specifically challenging for an emerging nation who may not have the opportunity to experience high-stake performances in high-pressure tournaments on a regular basis.

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Appendices

Table A1. Player participant demographics.

Age	Nationality	Professional Playing Rugby Experience
Range: 24 to 35 years old	New Zealander	From 1 to 4 years in Hong Kong
Mean: 28.5	British	73% of the participants had previous professional experience outside of Hong Kong – not exceeding 4 years
(σ 3.5)	Hong Kong British	27% of the participants had no prior professional experience
	South African	
	Australian	

Table A2. Higher and lower-order themes.

Higher order themes	Lower order themes
An Amateur Environment that Required Change	(1) Amateur behaviours and a lack of quality personnel (2) Lack of a vision (3) Lack of professional facilities
ERP's Professional Culture Building Blocks	(1) Establishing a vision (2) Education and demonstrating what professionalism looked like (3) The balance of hard work, well-being and holistic development (4) Evidencing and reinforcing the change
Leadership Strategy and Managing Key Stakeholders	(1) Transactional and coach driven (2) Transition to dispersed (3) External stakeholder support
Managing Ongoing Challenges in the ERP's Professional Culture	(1) Performance pressure (2) Player leadership's group message disconnect (3) Lack of competition (4) Management of troublesome players