

WHEN LIFE AND JOB SKILLS MEET: TOWARDS A MODEL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTS SCIENCES STUDENTS' CAREER

CLAUDIA MAULINI^{1,*}, ESPEDITO LATERZA², ALESSANDRA FAZIO²,
MASCIA MIGLIORATI³, ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ-PATO⁴, EMANUELE ISIDORI²

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ABSTRACT. The development of soft skills and critical-reflexive skills for the design and implementation of sport activities that respond to the new challenges of the sport labour market is fundamental for the expert in Sport Sciences. The paper presents the results of the implementation of the ESLP project at the Foro Italico University in Rome, which aimed to develop the necessary soft skills for leadership in future experts in sport sciences.

Keywords: *University of sport, Soft skill, European Sports Leadership Programme.*

Introduction

Data on the current labour market show how important it is to know how to match technical skills (hard skills) and behavioural skills (soft-skills), considering the latter as the most strategic to develop and manage competitors among enterprises. More specifically, the World Economic Forum Report (2020) highlights the importance of problem solving, self-management, working with people, technology use and development skills.

¹ *University of Naples "Parthenope"*

² *University of Rome "Foro Italico"*

³ *University Niccolò Cusano*

⁴ *UCAM Catholic University of San Antonio Murcia*

* *Corresponding author: claudia.maulini@uniparthenope.it*

The sports labour market has changed profoundly over the last few years, evolving around a new model of contemporary sport, which is, in the words of Marcel Mauss (1923), a *social fact*, diversified in terms of the aims it sets out to achieve, and therefore in a complex whole of activities that encompasses different areas, ranging from the purely sporting activities to the political ones. These changes inevitably entail the need to rethink organisational models and to develop workers' skills so that they can be able to accept and meet the challenges of the new sports sectors.

For this reason, it is important that university sports curriculum and courses focus on training transversal, flexible, adaptable and specific knowledge to prepare students for the actions of sports professionals (Isidori, 2015). Despite the fact that sport degree programmes mainly focus on the development of hard skills for sport professional as well as on technico-practical sport activities and biomedical skills (Isidori, 2017; Aldous, Sparkes, & Brown, 2016), it is widely agreed that it is important for experts in sport sciences to develop transversal skills, soft skills and critical-reflective skills (Schön, 1999; Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003; DeRue, Sitkin, & Podolny, 2011; Dugan, Torrez, & Turman, 2014; Cappelli, 1999). The European Sports Leadership Programme (ESLP), developed through the European Erasmus+ programme, had the opportunity to pilot interventions to develop specific competences for university students to promote their leadership (Sánchez-Pato, Brunton, Leiva-Arcas, Isidori, & Decelis, 2020; Cánovas-Alvarez, Meroño, Arias-Estero, Leiva-Arcas, Ortiz, Brunton, Isidori, Decelis, Samantzis, Balli, Fazio, Mallia, Koustelios, Ekmekçi, Sánchez-Pato, 2020). Nine student leaders from the Foro Italico University of Rome joined the ESLP project on a voluntary basis. They were in charge of organising and implementing specific courses related to more "unconventional" sport activities (breakdancing, calisthenics, self-defence and evolutionary aerial exercise) which were not included in the university curriculum. Such courses provided student leaders and participants with a personal experience that goes beyond traditional courses offered by the university. A sample of 70 students from the University of Foro Italico participated in the courses/activities on a voluntary basis. The activities were monitored by four mentors who provided their expertise and professional experience to guide the leaders in the development of soft skills and leadership.

The development of the project and the different phases of ex-ante, in itinere and post-evaluation were conducted by the University of Foro Italico research unit in collaboration with the project partner universities. A questionnaire was administered to all the participants. Focus groups and workshops were also delivered in person for the professional development of the participants. The aim of this work was to show the leaders' perception of the soft skills they believe they have developed or improved through their participation in the ESLP project carried out at the University of Rome Foro Italico.

Method

In order to monitor the progress of the actions planned in the project and to carry out a final evaluation of the training intervention implemented through the European Sport Leadership Programme (ESLP), a qualitative-quantitative methodology was applied. Regarding the collection of quantitative data, the Questionnaire for the Evaluation of the Transversal Competences of Graduates by Martínez and González (2018) was administered. The questionnaire, adapted from Spanish to English (Cánovas-Alvarez et al., 2020), was structured on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) and consisted of 58 items aimed at investigating the degree of development, dominance and relevance of instrumental skills, personal skills and systemic skills in the pre- and post-intervention phase.

For the statistical analysis of the data the SPSS 26.0 programme was used, with which the average of the scores given by the leaders on the Likert scale was calculated with respect to the development, domain and relevance for each descriptive item of each sub-dimension of competence, in the pre- and post-intervention phases. The questionnaire was administered to the 9 student leaders (7 females and 2 males) of the project. The 9 student leaders also participated in the 3 focus groups (Krueger, 2014) that were specifically devoted in the research design to the qualitative part of the survey. The first focus group was run during the pre-intervention phase, the second in itinere phase and the third in the post-intervention phase, e.g. at the end of the actions planned for the ESLP programme development.

Results and discussion

The intervention determined an increase in the participants' development of most of the soft skills on which the ESLP was structured. In this paper, we synthetically report and discuss the sub-dimensions that showed more significant increases in quantitative (Table 1) and qualitative (Table 2) data.

Amongst the competences shown in the previous tables (Table 1 and 2), the dimension of *instrumental skills*, the perception related to the organisation and planning of activities shows a greater importance than the ability to take the initiative. In fact, one of the activities developed for the ESLP programme was the involvement of the student-leaders in planning and promoting courses for their peers (Sánchez-Pato et al., 2020). This action of empowerment, with respect to organisational components, made them aware of the importance of this skill for their own employability pathway and allowed them to develop expertise in the post-intervention. The action of empowerment and awareness, as stated during the post-intervention focus group, must be constantly "trained".

Table 1. Quantitative results

Dimension	Sub-dimensions	Items	Development		Domain		Relevance	
			Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Instrumental Skills	Organization and planning	Taking the initiative	4,1	4,4	3,9	4,4	4,3	4,9
		Discern what is important and what is a priority	4,2	4,4	4,0	4,3	4,4	5,0
Personal Skills	Teamwork	Willing to compromise and identify with other points of view	4,2	4,3	3,9	4,6	4,4	4,7
		Being able to respect and tolerate the ideas of others	4,3	4,3	4,1	4,7	4,8	4,6
		Being able to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation	4,3	4,6	4,3	4,6	4,9	4,7
		Being able to inspire and motivate groups	4,0	4,4	4,0	4,4	4,9	4,6
	Social interaction	Being able to express own ideas with confidence	3,8	4,3	3,8	4,1	4,2	4,9
	Emotional control	Being able to work under pressure	4,2	4,3	3,7	4,1	4,7	4,9
		Being able to manage stress	4,4	4,4	3,8	4,0	4,6	5,0
		Being able to tolerate frustration and adversity	3,9	4,3	3,8	3,9	4,7	4,9
	Systemics Skills	Autonomous work	Knowing how to access available and necessary resources	4,0	4,1	3,8	4,1	4,4
Being actively involved in continuous learning and improvement			4,3	4,7	4,0	4,4	4,9	4,9
Motivation		Having a desire to overcome difficult situations	4,3	4,4	4,3	4,6	4,6	4,9
		Having a positive attitude towards work	4,4	4,4	4,0	4,7	4,8	4,9
		Being involved at work	4,2	4,6	4,3	4,6	4,7	4,9
		Being committed to achieving quality	4,6	4,7	4,3	4,6	5,0	4,9

Table 2. Qualitative results

Results of pre- and post-focus groups: competences that leaders feel they have mastered or need to improve	
PRE – FOCUS GROUP	POST – FOCUS GROUP
<p>Emotional control: “If I am emotionally distressed or have a big emotional change, or something emotional going on, it is difficult for me to concentrate on what I am doing while maintaining 100% as I normally do”.</p> <p>Social interaction: “Understanding other people and communicating in a way that other people can understand what you want to do... also listening to another person”.</p>	<p>Working autonomously: “The ability to work autonomously has grown, the project has allowed me to challenge myself as an instructor, I also proposed and organised the course activities and I realised that you can work well on your own if you are confident in your abilities”.</p> <p>Emotional control: “Loss of patience is something we always have to work on because maintaining a positive atmosphere makes us cope better with the situation in general”.</p> <p>Organisation and planning: “This is a skill that always needs to be improved. In the field of sport, the more precise you are, the more you get results”.</p>

Regarding the dimension of *personal skills* through group work, the participants reported that they developed a greater awareness of the importance of being open to confrontation and recognition of other peers' viewpoints. This allowed participants to perceive they have greatly improved their personal skills thanks to their direct and autonomous involvement in the project and in the management of groups where they had to motivate and engage less active students in the “unconventional” sports courses mentioned above (Connaughton et al., 2003; DeRue, 2011; Dugan et al. 2014; Cappelli, 1999). Moreover, the co-management of activities by two leaders certainly fostered respect and the ability to tolerate the ideas of others in order to be able to face the different challenges together. This dimension is enhanced by the perception of having developed and mastered skills that are significant for the smooth functioning of group work in which respect for others, motivation and the ability to solve problems together through dialogue and negotiation are crucial. Regarding

social interaction, leaders have become more aware of the importance of expressing their own ideas, a skill they felt they developed and mastered through constant discussion with mentors and other leaders and which in the pre-intervention focus group they indicated as a fundamental skill for building positive relationships. The importance of emotional control, already perceived in the pre-intervention phase, as can be seen from both the qualitative and quantitative data, was further strengthened. The leaders became more capable and aware of the values of being able to tolerate frustration and adversity in the professional domain, as well as of being able to work effectively under pressure and manage stress. They became aware of the importance of developing these aspects, as also indicated in the post-intervention focus group data.

Regarding the dimensions of *systemic skills*, qualitative and quantitative data show that leaders learned to work autonomously. They became aware of the importance of this skill as well as mastering how to access resources and being open to continuous professional development and continuous learning. These skills are also crucial for the necessary adaptation to new situations where participants show increased development, expertise and perception of the importance of flexibility in coping with change and uncertainty, being able to transfer information and apply knowledge to practice. The challenges faced by the leaders in implementing the project and the ESLP programme, as revealed by the focus group conducted in the post project phase, encouraged the development of this competence. Participants in the ESLP project felt that they were more motivated. The value of motivation, which was already high in the pre-intervention phase, was further consolidated as leaders recognised it as a factor in overcoming difficult situations, having a positive attitude and greater involvement and commitment to work activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can claim that the ESLP programme has achieved the objectives for which it was conceived and designed, proving to be a positive experience for the students who took part in it and who, with their feedback, contributed to the implementation and application of the competence model identified for the development of soft skills.

The University of Foro Italico, intends to further develop the ESLP project by including the activities of the Programme in the official academic offer in the coming academic years, by involving leaders in the activities of some University services and by activating courses related to counselling and sports coaching professions, in order to widen the opportunities of insertion in the labour market.

Authors' Contribution

All authors have equally contributed to this study and should be considered as main authors.

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