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# **European perspectives on qualifications in sport**

Stefan Walzel, Ruth Crabtree, and Karen Petry

## **Abstract**

From an economic and political perspective, the sports sector is of particular importance and provides many opportunities for sports education. The general transformation of the education sector in European countries represents likewise challenges and opportunities for sport. This book chapter aims to systematise the qualification landscape in sport and to discuss the challenges and opportunities of the sports qualification systems with the focus on sport management and coaching. The authors identified three dimensions for systematising the sport qualification landscape: (1) job category, (2) occupational level and (3) qualification provider. Following this approach, they discuss the challenges and opportunities for the sports qualification systems. The book chapter also deals with the employability of sport managers and coaches and concludes with future developments and challenges for providing high quality qualifications in sport.

## **Introduction**

According to the European Commission (2018), education is the largest sport-related sector in the European Union (EU) with nearly 1.1 million employees and a monetary volume of 51.2 billion euros. In addition, the sports industry accounts for a large and expanding sector of the European economy, contributing approximately 3% of Europe's total GDP (gross domestic product) and 3.5% of employment in the EU (European Commission, 2016). The European Commission (2018) suggests that, due to the labour-intensive nature of the sports industry, a 1% increase in GDP can result in a 1.35% increase in employment. Hence, from an economic

and political perspective, the sports sector is of particular importance and provides many opportunities for both sports education and training providers.

An essential component regarding sports education within the EU is the Europe-wide recognition of qualifications, diplomas, and certificates within education and is considered a central element of the European unification process. On top of that, both in the university and non-university sector, transformation approaches are becoming apparent which pursue the goal of a Europe-wide education and labour market in sport. The European Commission's political management tools are fundamental to the development of an overall strategy for sport-related study and training programmes. The transformation of the education sector in the European countries represents likewise challenges and opportunities for sport, particularly regarding the interactions between the labour market and education. These arise from two questions:

- Are the existing training and higher education systems within EU countries of central importance for the promotion and development of the workforce in the EU?
- Are they properly adapted to social and economic requirements?

In this transformation process, one of the most important tasks is to ensure that sports education is enveloped within the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Between 2017 and 2020, the EU Expert Group on Skills and Human Resources and Development in Sport (XG HR) was initiated by the European Commission under the EU Work Plan for Sport. Issues addressed included coach education, development of skills through sport, qualifications in sport, and dual careers of athletes. EU policy in the fields of education and training is designed to support action at the level of member states, which remain responsible for these competence areas, to help address common challenges including ageing societies, skill deficits, technological developments, and competition at the global level. Resulting from

the growing importance of education and training within Europe, a variety of European organisations have been established in recent years, focusing on the European dimension of (higher) education in sport, the European labour market, and the internationalisation of sports science disciplines (Tokarski *et al.*, 2009, p. 97 ff.).

The university and non-university education systems in sport differ greatly between European countries according to the respective education and sports system. The remaining chapter will provide a status quo of the sports education and training panorama, followed by focusing on the sports management and coaching sectors, including employability. The authors will conclude with some future developments and challenges.

### **The Sports Education and Training Panorama in European Sport**

Over the last few years, around 3.9 million coaches, 3.7 million sports managers, and 1.5 million referees have become qualified in the EU on a yearly basis (European Commission, 2016, p. 8). The qualifications obtained were offered by various institutions, on different levels and with different occupational purposes. Therefore, it is not surprising that the period of time, content, levels of performance, entrance requirements, educational standards and scope and level of examinations of the individual qualifications vary greatly within and between individual European countries, as well as the qualification providers. This is compounded by the recognition and acceptance of degrees between different educational institutions and between different countries as still fragile, acknowledged by the European Commission (2016, p. 6), who stated that the “EU sport education and training panorama is highly fragmented”. The mutual recognition of qualifications from different providers within a national qualification framework and at European level (European Qualification Framework) has not yet been implemented in all EU-countries and requires further efforts from all parties involved

(European Commission, 2016), particularly to ensure the comparability and recognition of qualifications across national borders. This also entails systematic monitoring for the long-term success.

Europe-wide, three dimensions can be used to systematise the qualification landscape in sport:

- Different job categories, such as coaches, referees, managers, physiotherapists, and sports journalists.
- Different occupational levels, such as voluntary work, part-time employment, or full-time employment.
- Different qualification providers, such as sports organisations, vocational training providers and universities (see Figure 8.1).

[Please insert figure 8.1 about here]

While the latter two qualification providers offer formal qualifications, sports federations often cannot. Whilst non-formal qualification have evolved over time through various sports organisations, mainly due to increased recognition and importance placed on such formalised requirements and the lack of being able to study such qualifications within higher education. This is still true today for the training of referees, as, according to the authors' knowledge, there is neither vocational training nor a university programme for this profession due to the high degree of specialisation. This is partly because only some sport (e.g., football) and a few countries employ full-time referees. As a result, the sports organisations have a monopoly on refereeing, which also applies to a certain extent to coaching. However, some sports organisations have established formal links with universities to provide formal qualifications, for example the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Academy with the

University of Lausanne (Switzerland) or the European Handball Federation (EHF) with the German Sport University Cologne. However, even in those cases, sports federations still autonomously determine the requirements for obtaining and for renewing a coaching licence, for example, the problematic aspect here is that whilst students may potentially study for years to obtain a bachelor's or master's degree in sports coaching, this does not automatically allow them to work as a coach at a certain sporting level (e.g., head coach of football Bundesliga team), because sports federations require a specific coaching licence (e.g. A-level), issued by themselves. While contrary, sports federations have not defined so far minimum qualification requirements for sports managers.

Even if sports organisations are not perceived and recognised as formal educational institutions, they play an important role in the further development of sport and the sports concerned, as well as regarding employment opportunities within European sport. The former is provided above all by the permanent training of referees, instructors, and coaches. In accordance with the hierarchical sports system, the requirements for referees and coaches increases with the level of performance. Similarly to athletes, referees and coaches are developed over several years of training and further education at local, regional, national, and international levels, which is expressed by the hierarchically structured licence levels. Through this systematic qualification, sports organisations make a significant contribution to increase the quality of sporting competitions. In addition, the sports organisation's systematic qualification system also enables access to a part-time or full-time employment in sport, especially in the upper licence levels. For career changers as well as former elite athletes, the qualification system provided by sports organisations offers a valuable and important pathway to employment in the sports sector.

On closer inspection, two weaknesses in the sports qualification system become apparent:

- While minimum qualification requirements are defined regarding further training and education at regular intervals (usually every one to three years) for volunteer, part-time and full-time referees and coaches to renew their licences, there is nothing comparable for elected or appointed voluntary board members in sports clubs and federations.
- This also applies almost without exception to the part-time or full-time managers in sports clubs and federations.

Hence, closing these two gaps in the sports qualification system would be an important step towards the long-term and sustainable development of sports organisations in Europe and the mitigation of ethical misconduct in European sport.

## **Employability of Sports Managers and Coaches in Europe**

Considering the highly fragmented EU sports education and training sector, in addition to the increasing number of various sports educational institutions, the sports education and training sector can be characterised as increasingly competitive due to the number of institutions that offer education and training. Hence, employability is one of the key performance indicators for sports qualification providers, as well as an important selection and decision criterion from the individual's perspective (Dinning, 2017).

In this context, employability applies to the individual who wants to obtain a sports qualification and can be defined as “having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations” (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p. 280). From an educational and training provider's perspective, employability refers to the ability to adapt qualification programmes to new conditions and forms of work and to implement lifelong learning principles (Cumming, 2010;

Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010; Cole and Tibby, 2013).

According to the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Sports and Active Leisure (ESSDCSL) (2016, p. 2) in cooperation with various partners, the following barriers to employability were identified that apply to the entire sports sector:

- “Short-term employment and high turnover especially in coaching professions;
- Physically and mentally demanding job profiles negatively impacting the health and the longevity of workers;
- Skills gaps and skills mismatches;
- Discrepancies between national skill levels that impede mobility;
- Lack of strategic financial management which hinders sustainable employment.”

As outlined in Table 8.1, the individual sports sub-sectors hold specific barriers to employability. Education and training providers are not able to reduce and remove these employability barriers completely by themselves because it also requires efforts from employers, sports organisations, and politics.

[Please insert Table 8.1 about here]

As has been discussed, the qualification of coaches and managers is critical, hence, the following section will focus on this issue.

### *Employability of sports managers*

Since the turn of the millennium, the demand for sports managers has risen dramatically, resulting in increased provision of sports management programmes (Pitts, 2001; Petry, Froberg



and Madella, 2006; Yiamouyiannis *et al.*, 2013) and a subsequent surge in the requirements of sports managers (Wohlfart and Adam, 2019). Due to general social changes, the rising commercialisation and professionalisation in sport, the successful Europeanisation (Radaelli, 2003), globalisation, and digitalisation (Guilianotti and Robertson, 2007; Danylchuk *et al.*, 2008; Mathner and Martin, 2012; Miragaia and Soares, 2017), the requirements of sports managers' employability also changed (see also chapter 2). Even though differences in quality and scope in the individual European countries due to distinct levels of development (Wohlfart and Adam, 2019), changes and shifts in the competencies of sports managers can be observed.

Research suggests that sports managers need to possess a diverse set of competencies beside the professional competencies, including better soft skills. More specifically, those are personal, socio-communicative, activity and action competencies as outlined in Figure 8.2 (Wohlfart and Adam, 2019). "It is interesting to observe that the majority of the core competencies include generic skills (e.g. socio-communicative competencies) rather than (or on top of) sports management specific methods and professional competencies" (Wohlfart and Adam, 2019, p. 13). Concerning the special competency of sports managers, digital marketing emerged as an important skill. Research also revealed that whilst the first seven core competencies do not differ significantly in the various sub-sectors (managers in sports clubs, sports federations, public sector and private sector), a different set of competencies was identified for the competencies ranked eighth and following (for more details please see Wohlfart and Adam, 2019, p. 16).

[Please insert Figure 8.2 about here]

Based on the findings, Wohlfart and Adam (2019) provide twelve key recommendations for

curriculum development within sports management education. They suggest to focus more on developing soft skills, digital competencies, the integration of compulsory internships, the development of sales, relationship and financial management skills, the inclusion of entrepreneurship and innovation management, and to promote foreign language courses and international exchange. In addition, they emphasise that the employability of future sports managers will increase if business and education work together to develop their own interests.

### *Employability of sports coaches*

As discussed, coaches play a central role in the sports system as they have a decisive influence on the quality of sporting competitions via their athletes, with ripple effects on the entire sports system. The demand for coaches at different performance levels remains high and, in some cases, the demand cannot be met. Therefore, the recruitment and retention of coaches is a challenge both in high-performance sport and in the leisure sector (Breuer, Wicker and Orłowski, 2017; Breuer and Feiler, 2019). The reasons for this situation are very diverse. For coaches in high-performance sport, fixed-term employment contracts, low remuneration, and high pressure to perform are only some issues (Digel, Burk and Fahrner, 2006; Breuer, Wicker and Orłowski, 2016; Breuer, Wicker and Orłowski, 2017).

Another factor associated with the unmet demand for coaches is the increasing specialisation of coach profiles, such as athletics coach, mental coach, goalkeeping coach, technical and tactical coach, offence, and defence coach. In addition, there are specialised activities and job profiles at the interface of two different disciplines, such as a nutrition coach or a sports director, who are increasingly establishing themselves at the interface of sports science and management (Parnell *et al.*, 2018).

A recent report by the European Commission (2020) identified that in terms of sports coaches' employability across different sports levels and sports, the following skills are the most important ones: sport specific knowledge and skills, clearly communicating instructions, ensuring health and safety of the participants, planning coaching sessions and programmes, and ability to work in compliance codes of practice/ethics (p.13). The report also identified five competence weaknesses including: working with people with disabilities, using information/communication technology (ICT) skills, using the right marketing and selling skills, organising activities and events, and working with different participants (p.14). The European Commission also suggested that today's coaches should promote the principles of athletes' dual careers and their importance to act as a mentor.

## **Future Developments and Challenges**

Whilst substantial developments have been fostered with regards to sports education and the training of people who wish to work in the sports industry, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. There has been a huge increase in the number of educational institutions that provide courses within sports programmes across Europe. The question remaining is: do the courses provide the right outcomes to ensure that graduates enter the sports sector with the best skills to pursue their dream job (Jiang and Alexakis, 2017)? Researchers have acknowledged that many sports programmes fail to identify which skills and competences are needed within the industry, resulting in graduates who cannot fulfil the roles required by employers (Fahrner and Schüttoff, 2020). Other concerns regarding sports programmes relate to their generic outline and the lack of addressing specific needs required for a particular field or geographical area (Tsitskaria *et al.*, 2017; Pereira, Vilas-Boas and Rebelo, 2019). For example, the skills needed for a sports management graduate within Europe may differ from the specific skills required for a sports management graduate within Africa. Often, programmes are compiled of

generic modules that do not consider who the students are, what area of sport they wish to pursue a career in and where that career may take place geographically.

In the process of designing sports education and training programmes there is clear evidence that institutions need to be aware of the changes within the industry and how these impact the requirements that graduates face in the work environment (Baird and Parayitam, 2019). Often, educational institutions, when designing sports programmes, will work with many stakeholders to determine the optimum programme that benefits the students, institution, community, and industry (Palheta *et al.*, 2021). They may liaise with industry employers, alumni, sport governing bodies, as well as must adhere to government policies depending on which country they operate in. That many stakeholders involved in the process may bring in differing needs which can lead to conflict, depending on who has the most “power, control or often finances” within the decision-making process.

Linked to this challenge is the dramatic change of the student population within the past decade (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2017; Jahn *et al.*, 2017). Educational establishments need to be aware of this to ensure that sports programmes they are providing take into account the changing needs of the diverse student population. For example, the average student in the past who studied a degree level sports programme was predominantly single, 18 to 21-year-old, and studied full-time without having a job on the side. Today, many students are mature adults who may study part-time, have families, work part-time whilst studying and may study overseas. Hence, education providers need to be fully aware of the changing student demographics and react to the subsequently changing needs to ensure that the growing sports industry is provided with a constant stream of graduates who can fulfil the required roles. This may mean that institutions need to be flexible in how they offer sports programmes, whether they offer

blended learning, distance learning or part-time options. They also need to be conscious of cost implications associated with studying and the impact this may have on potential students.

Furthermore, ethical issues, social responsibility, and gender equality are critical subjects that should be further addressed in sports management and coaching education and research. Evidence of gender discrimination is still mentioned significantly in the literature, particularly of women in managerial positions. Analysing these phenomena is crucial because human values may be compromised in several sports contexts, and higher education institutions have an extremely relevant role in promoting cultural change that breaks through some stereotypes and unethical behaviours. The impact of explicitly incorporating these issues in sports programmes on students' behaviour during the training process, when they enter the labour market, and even when they are in their employers' charge should be investigated. Miragaia and Soares (2017) also suggest that educational institutes should include international experts when designing curriculum content to ensure that an international overview is provided within the programme, addressing the issues of globalisation and helping to produce graduates with skills transferrable to different countries. They also suggest that "the quality of organizations that receive students for experiential learning, service learning, and internship should be supervised to guarantee that the students' orientation is properly adjusted. This accreditation process is crucial in evaluating the students' learning outcomes and the results of experiential learning in terms of the positive partnerships formed between universities and companies (local, national, or international)." (Miragaia and Soares, 2017, p. 113)

The challenges identified are difficult but not insurmountable and it is clear from the discussion outlined within the chapter that working in partnership with key stakeholders is fundamental to success: to fully understand the situation, the required tasks, the stakeholders' individual

needs and the intended goals and outcomes. The effort put in this process will hopefully result in a sports industry that continues to grow and educational providers generating a rich, constant stream of graduates who can serve, enhance, and develop the sector for generations to follow, who are a benefit not only for the individual stakeholders, but for society as a whole.

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