Sports graduate capabilities and competencies: a comparison of graduate and employer perceptions in six EU countries

Colin Baker, Elizabeth A. Loughren, Tabitha Dickson, Marios Goudas, Diane Crone, Michal Kudlacek, Michal Petr, Lucie Petrova, Lilian Pichot, Jean Claude Frery, Anne Benoit, Sandrine Knobé, Jürgen Schröder, Alfonso Valero Valenzuela, Ernesto De la Cruz Sánchez, Miguel López-Bachero, Diego Villarejo, Fran Serrejón, Craig Mortiboys, Tom Sparks & Rowena Tassell

Abstract: The graduate employment market faces ever-increasing socio-economic and political pressures. Higher Education Institutions and the sport sector in the EU have an important role in contributing to graduate employment. The aims of the study were: (1) to assess general perceptions of employability, and (2) to assess sports graduates' and employers' perceptions of specific capabilities and competencies in order to identify possible improvements for sports graduate employability programmes. A cross sectional survey of sports graduates and employers was administered in six EU countries including the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Greece and the Czech Republic to assess graduate and employer perceptions. A graduate capabilities and competencies framework was devised to assess personal, interpersonal, cognitive, role-specific and generic skills. Responses were elicited from 1,132 sports graduates and 327 employers. There was generally a wide difference of opinion between employers and sports graduates in terms of the importance and possession of a number of capabilities and competencies. There is a need for the Higher Education sector and employers to take responsibility in ensuring that work experience, work placement and volunteering opportunities are embedded in curricula and to ensure the fitness of purpose of what and how graduate capabilities and competencies are assessed.

Key Words: Employability, sports graduates, skills, work placements, work experience

Introduction

A university education provides graduates with greater earning potential and provides insurance against unemployment (Eurostat, 2014a; Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2012). However, the graduate employment market faces ever-increasing socio-economic and political pressures and young people under the age of twenty-five are facing significant employment challenges. Data show that the youth unemployment rate in the EU-28 was more than double the overall unemployment rate in 2013, with more than one out of every five young people not employed and looking for employment (Eurostat, 2014a). In some southern European countries for example, Spain and Greece, recent graduate unemployment rates exceed 40% (Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014; Eurostat, 2014b). It is clear that financial and economic crisis in Europe has negatively impacted graduate employment. In 2014, the EU-28 employment rate for tertiary graduates was 80.5 per cent, 6.4 percentage points lower than the relative peak in 2008 (Eurostat, 2016). The impact of the crisis has not been spread evenly across the European continent. Data suggest that the graduate labour market in Greece and Italy were particularly hard hit, witnessing a decline of almost 20 per cent, with significant reductions also being witnessed in Cyprus, Portugal, Spain and Ireland (Eurostat, 2016).

Even where graduate employment rates have been maintained above the 82 per cent benchmark there have been reductions in several countries including Luxembourg and the United Kingdom (UK) (Eurostat, 2016), suggesting a mixed fortunes across Europe with respect to the impact of the crisis.

The sport sector in the EU represents a labour-intensive growth industry and has the potential to lead to additional employment growth (EC, 2012a). The value of the sector to the EU economy is significant, for example the share of sport in the EU economy, expressed in Gross Value Added (GVA) is 1.76% while the share of sport in employment amounts to 2.12%, equal to 4.46 million employees (EC, 2012a). While these figures may appear small they are comparable to agriculture, forestry and fishing combined. The sector therefore has an important role in contributing to graduate employment and meeting the goals defined in the European Employment Strategy of developing highly skilled individuals and closer links between employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (EC, 2014b; 2014c). However, the extant economic and financial crisis is likely to affect how value is created in the sector, the graduate labour market facing challenges from persistently high unemployment rates and the compulsion to take on employment for which they are over-qualified or unqualified (Eurostat, 2016)

Defining employability is challenging. It is a multidimensional concept that can involve perspectives of what HEIs consider are important for graduates to obtain work, what employers perceive as important for their organisations, and individual graduate qualities (Fleming, Martin, Hughes, & Zinn, 2009; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2002; Sleap & Reed, 2013). Employability therefore includes reference to both individual attributes, factors within labour markets and organisational structures, and the interaction between the two (Minten, 2010). Significant research surrounds the concept of employability (cf. Hesketh, 2000; Hinchliffe, 2002; Knight & Yorke 2004; Minten, 2010; Morley, 2001; Sewell & Dacre Pool, 2010) which is indicative of the importance and complexity attached to understanding what factors are important to the development of graduates who are inherently work-ready. Contemporary conceptions of graduate employability are complex, and move beyond the notion that specific skills are sufficient for acquiring a graduate level job, for example, communication and problem solving (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011). This makes a distinction between factors that are relevant to obtaining work and those relevant to the preparation for working life (Little, 2001). Hence, employability relates to graduates' state of preparedness for work and capability for being employed, rather than mere job acquisition (Harvey, 2001; Knight & Yorke, 2002). Employability is therefore an ongoing process that includes acquiring skills, developing understanding, and personal attributes (Yorke, 2006), and the ability to gain, maintain, and find new employment (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). For the purposes of this study, employability is defined as

> *a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy (CBI, 2009, 8).*

Employability involves developing capabilities (i.e., the capacity to realize potential long term) and competencies (i.e., the ability to perform) (Stephenson, 1998;

Tomlinson, 2010). Lowden and colleagues (Lowden et al., 2011) suggest that the qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge that constitute employability are broadly understood, highlighting that graduates need to demonstrate specific discipline-related competences but also a broad range of broader skills and attributes for example, critical thinking, problem solving and communication. These broader capabilities represent the "soft skills" or qualities that extend beyond technical skills required to perform specific jobs or tasks. These include imagination and creativity, attitudes, notions of citizenship, linguistic proficiency, communication and teamwork that are considered essential for productivity in the workplace (Jackson, 2009; Mishra, 2014; Sewell & Dacre Pool, 2010). As sets of soft skills, capabilities essentially represent attributes that provide graduates with the flexibility to function as competent employees in contrast to specialist technical skills and subject-specific knowledge (Singh, Thambusamy, & Ramly, 2014). Research suggests that early career success depends on a number of soft skills including computer literacy, time management and the ability to manage stress (Allen, Pavlin, & Van der Velden, 2011). The precise categorization of graduate capabilities is invariably context-specific. For example, a graduate sports therapist who is inherently involved with close physical contact with clients is likely to require qualitatively difference capabilities than a sports marketing graduate who is engaged in commercially-oriented activities for the promotion, marketing and advertising of goods and services. Consequently, specific definitions of employability may be less important than approaches which help promote transferable skills and develop graduate attributes that help them to find work and contribute to the success of their employer (Lowden et al., 2011). Whilst the precise mix of capabilities varies between graduates and between professions it is possible therefore to argue that the multiple personal and interpersonal capabilities are conceptually relevant across diverse contexts. For example, both a sports therapist and a sports marketing graduate will likely require the ability to communicate effectively, understand their role in the workplace and the wider community, and to contribute to a positive working atmosphere.

Graduate competencies represent technical skills (Turner, 2004) or the specialized knowledge and experiences that are necessary to perform specific tasks (Downing, 2014). Referring once again to sports therapist and sports marketing graduates, these might entail specific knowledge of practices, procedures and regulations that ensure services are of a particular consistency and quality within each respective field of work. While each profession will naturally involve a set of related competencies, as with graduate capabilities, it is possible to argue the conceptual relevance of role-specific for example, subject or professional knowledge, and generic competencies for example, computer skills across the diverse range of industries which graduates enter. In the present context, these might include competencies within physical education, strength and conditioning, sport management, and health. While various tools have assessed non-academic graduate attributes for example, the Thinking Skills Assessment (Fisher, 2005) and the Graduate Skills Assessment (Hambur, Rowe, & Luc, 2002), Singh et al. (2014) suggest that each is underpinned by four core skills including problem solving, critical thinking, interpersonal skills and communication. This, they suggest, is because they provide a feasible means of assessment and because of their conceptual relevance to employability (Singh et al., 2014). Competencies and capabilities provide graduates with a comprehensive set of characteristics which employers seek in order to ensure

graduates are able to fulfil the general and specific aspects of work-based roles (Lowden et al., 2011). As such, as a composite set of graduate skills, capabilities and competencies are critical for graduates to be able to position themselves successfully within the labour market and bring into focus the significance of higher education, particularly given that employers assess graduate potential on a range of criteria that extend beyond traditional academic learning to include values, intellect, performance and engagement (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011). In this respect, employability programmes play a pivotal role in helping graduates develop skills in order to ensure that economies are able to compete internationally (Leitch, 2006). The efficacy of employability programmes is drawn sharply into focus by concerns that HEIs are failing to develop graduates that possess capabilities essential for productivity and innovation. Recent data from the British Chambers of Commerce suggest that 54 per cent of businesses consider graduates not to be work-ready and lack capabilities and support to develop work-appropriate skills (British Chambers of Commerce, 2014). Hence, there is a need to both emphasise the role of HEIs in developing students' career management skills (Bridgstock, 2009). Furthermore, stronger links between businesses and education systems need to be developed in order to ensure learning outcomes are devised in collaboration between HEIs and industry (Baryniene & Krisciunas 2013; British Chambers of Commerce, 2014; Jackson, 2009).

In the EU, the sport-related economy has strong positive effects on the rest of the economy, with value added and employment effects exceeding average growth rates (EC, 2012a). However, harnessing the growth potential in the EU sport sector is likely to require a focus on the quality rather than the quantity of graduates. In this respect the sport sector faces two key challenges; firstly, there is a potential mismatch between the skills acquired at university, and the skills required for employment (Cranmer, 2007). The skills mismatch is a multifaceted concept referring to imbalances between employees and employers with respect to level of education and the skills possessed versus those needed for work (International Labour Organization, 2014). Data suggest that between 10 per cent and one-third of employed people in Europe are overeducated, and around 20 per cent are undereducated, although no standard system currently exists for assessing skills match which makes accurate comparisons difficult (International Labour Organization, 2014). Mismatches are also evident with respect to perceptions of undergraduates and those already employed in terms of the capabilities and competencies important for employment in the sport industry, for example technological skills and the importance of working with people (Mathner & Martin, 2012).

Further, many sports graduates do not obtain work within the sport sector, instead entering a wide range of occupations due to individual aspiration, opportunity, and structure of the industry (Minten and Forsyth, 2014). Sport graduate skills that are specific to the sport industry are therefore likely to be only one facet of a range of skills that enable sports graduates to obtain employment following completion of their degree programme. At a European level it is difficult to assess the short, medium and long term destination of sports graduates and the significant social, economic and educational differences between national systems across the EU are likely to make this extremely challenging (Thomas & Hovdhaugen, 2014). Nevertheless, if sports job-specific and generic skills are important requisites for obtaining work whether within or outside of

the sports sector, it is important that graduates develop a diverse range of skills to enhance their employability and ensure that they function effectively within the working world (Minten, 2010).

Secondly, it should be appreciated that the transfer of skills from one setting to another is not necessarily automatic (Gould & Carson, 2008). As a niche employer of graduates, the sport sector is characterised by jobs that are often location-specific i.e. based within a sport facility, which potentially restricts the ability of graduates to hone their developing skills within workplace settings (Minten, 2010). Consequently, there is a need to better understand the skill sets and career progression routes in the sport sector (Goodwin, 2012). Thus, whilst structured work experience is an important factor in helping students find graduate-level jobs (The British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences [BASES], 2014; Cranmer, 2007), so too are less formal opportunities that provide students with the platform to think more broadly about their own values, engagement, intellect and performance so that they are able to develop themselves as employable subjects (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011). This is particularly relevant at a time where students see a need to add value to their personal and professional credentials in light of their weakening currency (Tomlinson 2008), in a competitive market in which employability programmes are increasingly becoming an essential part of student offers from universities.

In response to the above concerns the purpose of the study was to assess sports graduates' and employers of sports graduates' general perceptions of engagement in employability programmes, and perceptions concerning capabilities and competencies required for employment in the sport sector. Conceptually, employability was operationalised in terms of the capabilities and competencies defined above with respect to the attributes, skills and knowledge needed to find and secure work, and flourish within their careers. As such, the focus was on assessing aspects which reflected role-specific and generic capabilities and competencies. The aim of this study was twofold: (1) to assess general perceptions of employability programmes, and (2) to assess sports graduates' and employers' perceptions of specific capabilities and competencies in order to identify possible improvements for sports graduate employability programmes. In recognition of the need to establish evidence across different institutions and countries (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010), the present study formed part of an European Commission-funded employability project that involved partners who represent both employers and HEIs from 6 EU countries including Spain, Greece, Czech Republic, France, Germany and the UK.

Methods

In response to the concerns regarding employability, the purpose of the study was to assess sports graduates' and employers of sports graduates' general perceptions of engagement in employability programmes, and perceptions concerning capacities and competencies required for employment in the sport sector. As an exploratory study intended to take a tentative step towards understanding differences between sports graduates and employers, the study was conducted as part of a wider project funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme entitled Employability of Graduates in Sport (EGS, 2013). As a consortium of partners from six EU member states including the UK, Greece, France, Czech Republic, Germany and Spain, the EGS project was concerned

with developing evidence concerning graduate employability in order to help inform practices that aligned higher education curricula to labour market demands. A core aspect of the project was a study to investigate graduate capabilities and competencies in order to develop evidence from which recommendations for employability practices within HEIs could be derived. The aims of the present study were twofold: (1) to assess general perceptions of employability programmes, and (2) to assess sports graduates' (target n = 1,500 i.e. 300 per country) and employers' perceptions (target n = 200 i.e. 40 per country) of specific capabilities and competencies in order to identify possible improvements for sports graduate employability programmes. Sports graduate and employer perceptions were captured on a range of factors using two self-reported questionnaires; one for sport graduates and the other with employers. The graduate questionnaire was administered to sports graduates from all disciplines. For the purposes of this study, the sport sector and sports related courses included the following: sport and exercise science, sport education, sport development, sports coaching, sports therapy and physiotherapy, strength and conditioning, physical education, exercise recreation and health, competitive sports, and sport management (of any type). The course classification system was determined via a consultation process between all study partners with input from an expert panel supporting the EGS project in order to ensure that the practical application of the questionnaire was made possible. For sports graduates, inclusion criteria were sports graduates at BSc/BA (or Licence), MA/MSc, and PhD level across all six countries in which the surveys were administered including graduates from the project partner HEIs in addition to HEIs not directly engaged in the project. For sports graduate employers, inclusion criteria were employers of sports graduates of any type. This was deliberately broad so as to include a diverse range of sectors and business types. A convenience sampling approach was adopted whereby the project partners identified domestic sports graduates and employers via a number of channels including university Alumni databases, graduate networks, social networks and forums, professional networks, and personal contacts.

Survey Development

The two surveys were compiled following a review of the wider employability literature, and in collaboration with the seven partners of the project. The scales, items and concepts deployed were derived, in part, from the Confederation of British Industry (2007); Hodges and Burchell (2003); Jackson (2009); Lowden et al. (2011), and Wilton (2012). Following pilot testing, the final set of questions were developed and agreed upon through consultation between the authors, and employer and HEI representatives. The first part of each questionnaire elicited demographic and background information from both graduates and employers including level of degree (e.g. BSc), employment status (e.g. employed), sector type (e.g. education), and graduate recruitment (e.g. planned recruitment in the next twelve months). This was in addition to general graduate employability experiences (e.g. whether they had undertaken a work placement) and the nature of employability offers from employers (e.g. whether they offered work placements). The second part of the questionnaire assessed 20 specific graduate capabilities for example, personal, interpersonal and cognitive skills, and competencies for example, role-specific and generic skills. These were assessed both in terms of the relative level of importance attributed to each item (rated on a 5–point scale ranging

from Critical (5) to Unimportant (1), and the relative level of possession of these as perceived by sports graduates and employers, rated on a 5-point Likert type scale from (Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). More specifically, graduates were assessed on the degree to which they felt they possessed the capabilities and competencies presented in the questionnaire. In comparison, employers rated the degree to which they felt that sports graduates possessed these capabilities and competencies.

Sports Graduate Employers and Sport Graduates Questionnaires

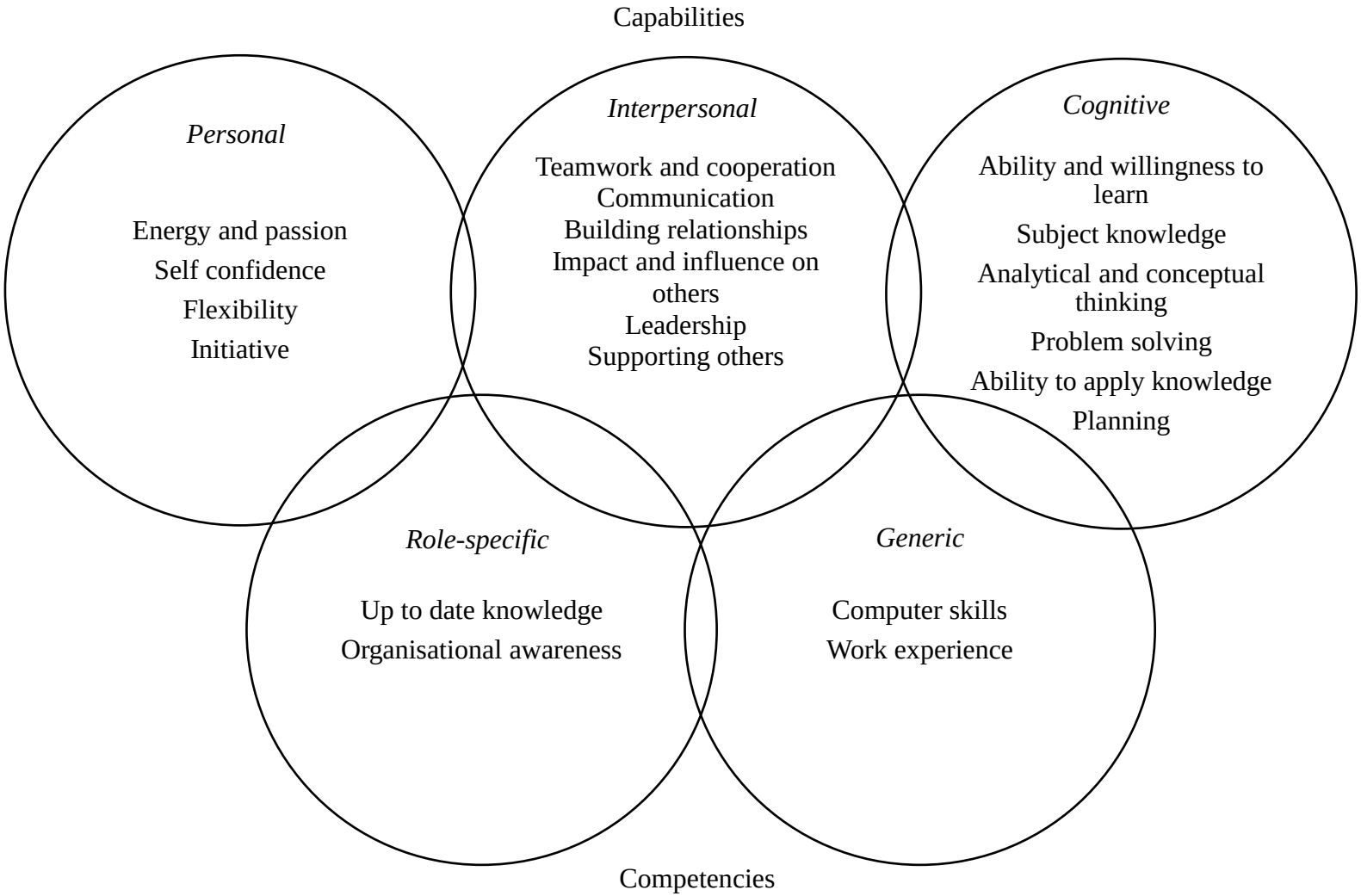
The questionnaires were administered by universities in six EU countries including the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Greece and the Czech Republic via Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) (BOS Surveys, University of Bristol, 2012). A broad sampling strategy was deployed in order to maximise response rates. Convenience sampling techniques (Bryman, 2012) were utilised to maximise the potential to identify and recruit sports graduate and employer participants who were able to respond to the respective questionnaires whereby each host university (n = 6) developed a multi-stranded strategy to invite sports graduates (alumni) using a range of resources. These included university databases, social media, and personal and professional contacts. Potential employer respondents were identified via local and national business networks, and personal and professional contacts known to university staff. The questionnaires were administered in the respective languages of the participating countries. The nature of sports graduate study area for example, sport education, were devised through consultation between the six HEIs involved in the study in order to develop a practical means of exploring the data. In each country individual URLs (unique internet addresses) were created for each questionnaire for sports graduates and employers (n = 13, i.e. sports one for graduates, one for employers), including an additional survey for Italian sports graduates which was created opportunistically in response to further participants being identified during the study. The surveys ran from February to April 2014, except for the Greek Employer Survey which was extended to run until May 2014 due to local practical considerations.

Data analysis

Data were entered into SPSS (v.20) for statistical analyses. Data analysis was guided by a conceptual framework outlining key graduate capabilities and competencies. The framework was derived from current contemporary employability literature (Scott, Chang, & Grebennikov, 2010; Vescio, 2005; Wells, Berbic, Krananburg, & Bygrave, 2009) (Figure A) to guide the data analysis process and to ensure transferability of findings to current literature in this area. Presented as five interlocking components, the framework identifies three overlapping professional capabilities including personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities which are underpinned by role-specific and generic competencies. The framework highlights the equal importance of generic and job specific skills alongside to social and personal emotional intelligence, an ability to 'read' situations, and plan for contingencies (Wells, Berbic, Krananburg, & Bygrave, 2009). Graduate data are filtered to focus on sports graduates with a degree from the past five years (i.e. since 2009) to ensure that the findings reflect the experiences of recent graduates. Non-parametric tests were run due to the ordinal data nature of the converted scores. Using the capabilities and competencies as dependent variables, Mann-Whitney U tests were used to compare ranked scores in order to assess

differences between the two groups. Kruskall-Wallis tests were used to examine whether there was a significant difference between sports graduates and employers in relation to perceived importance and possession of the five capabilities and competencies dimensions (Field, 2013).

Figure A: Graduate capabilities and competencies framework



Results

In total, n = 1,132 responses were received from sports graduates who had attended approximately 180 different universities, and n = 327 responses were received from employers (see Table 1 for country specific responses). For graduates, sport education (41.2%) was the subject most studied followed by sport management (29.5%), sport sciences (20.9%), retail and media (17.1%), sport prevention and rehabilitation (14.1%), sport development (8.1%), and leisure (7.8%). For employers, sport education (35.8%) was the subject in which sports graduates were most employed followed by sport management (34.6%), sport sciences (31.2%), sport development (30.6%), leisure (23.9%), sport prevention and rehabilitation (22.6%), and leisure (7.8%), retail and media (15.6%) (respondents could select multiple answers).

Table 1: Profile of responses by country

	Germany		France		Greece		UK		Spain		Czech		Italy		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Respondent profile															
Graduates	72	6.4	435	38.4	135	11.9	41	3.6	97	8.6	330	29.2	22	1.9	1132
Employers	11	3.4	103	31.5	127	38.8	36	11.0	41	12.5	9	2.8	-	-	327
Graduate gender															
Male	40	55.6	239	54.9	68	50.4	25	61	73	75.3	142	43	12	54.5	599
Female	32	44.4	196	45.1	67	49.6	16	39	24	24.7	188	57	10	45.5	533
Graduate course type															
Sport education	28	38.9	103	23.7	50	37.0	3	7.3	73	75.3	183	55.5	13	59.1	453
Sport science [a]	34	47.2	66	15.2	25	18.5	26	63.4	89	91.8	15	4.5	14	63.6	269
Sport prevention & rehabilitation [b]	12	16.7	106	24.4	0	0	5	12.2	16	16.5	65	19.7	12	54.5	216
Sport development [c]	1	1.4	19	4.4	13	9.6	5	12.2	51	52.6	21	6.4	3	13.6	113
Sport management [d]	16	22.2	209	48	8	5.9	2	5	38	39.2	60	18.2	0	0.0	333
Sport retail & media [e]	1	1.4	194	44.6	1	0.7	0	0.0	17	17.5	3	0.9	1	4.5	217
Leisure [f]	1	1.4	42	9.7	2	1.5	0	0	52	53.6	15	4.5	8	36.4	120
Other	5	6.9	42	9.7	11	8.1	5	12.2	1	1.0	8	2.4	0	0.0	72
Graduate employment															
Full time employed	51	71.8	305	71.1	68	50.4	25	61.0	18	18.8	202	61.2	4	18.2	673
Full time self employed	3	4.2	11	2.6	15	11.1	1	2.4	4	4.2	42	12.7	1	4.5	77
Part time employed	15	21.1	51	11.9	36	26.7	9	22.0	32	33.3	55	16.7	7	31.8	205
Part time self employed	0	0.0	7	1.6	6	4.4	5	12.2	1	1.0	5	1.5	4	18.2	28
Voluntary worker	0	0.0	2	0.5	1	0.7	1	2.4	4	4.2	1	0.3	1	4.5	10
Unpaid work	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	12.5	4	1.2	1	4.5	17
Unemployed & looking for work	0	0.0	31	7.2	6	4.4	0	0.0	20	20.8	13	3.9	1	4.5	71
Unemployed	2	2.8	22	5.1	3	2.2	0	0.0	5	5.2	8	2.4	3	13.6	43
In a sport-related job	55	76.4	293	72.9	104	78.8	24	60	56	60.2	138	42.3	17	77.3	683
Employer type															
Sport education	7	63.6	23	22.3	63	49.6	8	22.2	15	36.6	1	11.1	-	-	117
Sport science [a]	4	36.4	23	22.3	37	29.1	9	25	29	70.7	0	0	-	-	102
Sport prevention & rehabilitation [b]	2	18.2	26	25.2	29	22.8	3	8.3	13	31.7	1	11.1	-	-	74
Sport development [c]	2	18.2	0	0	57	44.9	22	61.1	18	43.9	1	11.1	-	-	100
Sport management [d]	3	27.3	46	44.7	16	12.6	15	41.7	24	58.5	9	100	-	-	113
Sport retail & media [e]	0	0	31	30.1	3	2.4	6	16.7	10	24.4	1	11.1	-	-	51
Leisure [f]	2	18.2	26	25.2	29	22.8	3	8.3	13	31.7	1	11.1	-	-	78

Notes: [a] including strength, conditioning, kinesiology, health, exercise, technology); [b] including therapy, massage, injury prevention; [c] including coaching, officials; [d] including events; [e] including sporting goods, fashion; [f] including gyms, swimming pools, outdoor/adventure sports.

Profile of Sports Graduates

Mean respondent age was 28.1 years (SD = 5.7 years, Mode = 25 years) and gender males = 52.9% (n = 599). Nearly half (45.8%, n = 518) held a BSc or BA degree, whilst 55.5% (n = 628) held an MSc or MA degree and 4.9% (n = 56) a PhD. Across all three degree levels the three most cited subject areas were sport education (40%, n = 453), sport management (including events) (29.4%, n = 333), and sport sciences (including strength, conditioning, kinesiology, health, exercise, technology) (23.8%, n = 269). The least cited subject area was sport retail (7.8%, n = 88) and other (6.4%, n = 72). Chi Square analyses indicated statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between male and female graduates for course type. More specifically, results suggested females preferred sport education and sport prevention and rehabilitation courses, while males preferred sport science, sport development and sport management courses.

Nearly half of all respondents (49.6%, n = 551) strongly agreed or agreed that their sport degree(s) gave them the confidence to perform job roles to a high standard, while 20% (n = 222) disagreed and 7.7% (n = 86) disagreed strongly. The majority of respondents indicated that they were full time employed (59.9%, n = 673) of which 64.2% (n = 430) indicated that they were in permanent positions. Chi Square analyses for gender highlighted a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) for those in a sport job. Education represented the largest sector in which graduates were employed (35.6%, n = 399) followed by health, medicine and social care (19.1%, n = 214) and retail / commerce (13.6%, n = 153). For respondents classified as full time employed or full time self-employed, sport education (39.7%, n = 298) and sport management (29.6%, n = 222) were the most studied courses. Respondents had been working in their current role for an average of 2.6 years (M = 32 months, SD = 79.3) and had spent an average of nearly 2.5 years (M = 31.1 months, SD = 49.6) working in sport in total. Comparing employed graduates of any type with unemployed graduates revealed significant differences ($p < .05$) for analytical and conceptual thinking, and supporting others with respect to perceived importance of capabilities and competencies. Significant differences ($p < .05$) were also observed with respect to perceived possession of capabilities and competencies for teamwork and cooperation, subject knowledge, self-confidence, work experience, up to date knowledge, and initiative.

Profile of Employers

In total, 327 responses were received, of which 70% (n = 228) were male employers. The mean respondent age was 42.5 years (SD = 9.9 years, Mode = 35 years). Senior staff (including senior manager / executive, senior academic) were the most represented (60.2%, n = 195) followed by managerial staff (any type, 26.5%, n = 86) and other (13.3%, n = 43) including sports instructor, sports coach, and Human Resources. Just over half of respondents indicated that they represented a private business (54.8%, n= 178). Overall, 90% (n = 288) indicated that they were a sport-related organisation. Retail/commerce (27.7%, n = 90) and health/medicine/Social Care (22.5%, n = 73) were the sectors most represented, while education and public services represented the sectors with highest recruitment (M = 7.3 to 35.1 sports graduates recruited since 2009). Health/medicine/Social Care, other, and education represented the sectors with the highest number of permanent jobs (>60%) while education/sport education (35.8%, n =

117), sport management (34.6%, n = 113), sport science (31.2%, n = 102), and sport development (30.6%, n = 100) represented the main employment areas.

Nearly three-quarters (64.1%) of employers offered work experience and approximately 60% offered student placement opportunities to enhance graduate employability. Less than half of education sector organisations offered work experience opportunities (46.5%). Spain and France demonstrated the highest levels of student placement opportunities and work experience offers at 92.1% and, 90.9% respectively.

Sports graduate and employer perceptions of employability programmes

In addressing the first aim of the study concerning general perceptions of employability, sports graduates indicated their overall agreement (agree strongly or agree) with a number of statements regarding the relative importance of self-reflection and self-awareness (i.e. the ability to recognize oneself as an individual). There was less agreement that volunteering in a sport role is important to employers (50.3%, n = 560) and in feeling they possess the skills and confidence to do any job (43.7%, n = 486). Nearly 40% (37.6%, n = 261) of those who studied sport education, 32.4% (n = 225) of those who studied sport management, and 28.1% (n =195) of those who studied sport science agreed (strongly agree and agree combined) that their curriculum needed improving. Interestingly, of the total number of employers who did not offer work placements, 94% (n = 102) strongly agreed or agreed that placements were essential to graduate employability. In addition, 80% (n = 71) of employers that did not offer work experience opportunities also strongly agreed or agreed that these were essential to graduate employability. Overall, 60.4% (n = 189) of employers agreed strongly or somewhat agreed that sports graduates met their expectations, and respondents agreed that sports graduates should undertake work placements (95.9%, n = 306), work experience (of any type) and sport-specific work experience (≈ 80%, n = 253) during their degrees.

Comparison of sports graduates' and employers' perceptions of capabilities and competencies

Addressing the second aim of the study exploring sports graduates' and employers' perceptions of capabilities and competencies, Mann-Whitney U tests revealed a significant difference ($p < .001$) between sports graduates and employers perceptions concerning the importance of personal capabilities (Table 2). This approach facilitated the exploration of the data with respect to assessing differences between sports graduates and employers and was not intended as a means for broader generalisation. Graduates within this study perceived energy and passion and self-confidence as particularly important capabilities, but employers consistently attributed greater importance to all items within the personal capabilities dimension. Responses relating to the interpersonal capabilities dimension also revealed that despite significant differences between sports graduates and employers for the perceived importance of teamwork and cooperation, communication, building and leadership, there was no significant difference for interpersonal capabilities overall. Analysis also revealed a significant difference between sports graduates and employers for the cognitive capabilities dimension ($p < .001$), with particular differences for ability and willingness to learn, energy and passion, analytical and conceptual thinking, problem solving, and

ability to apply knowledge. No significant difference between sports graduates and employers was revealed for the role-specific competencies dimension ($p = .129$). Here it could be assumed here that these capabilities are largely acquired on the job and thus are not such critical aspects for employers' assessments of sports graduates.

Table 2: Comparison of importance of capabilities and competencies

		Sports graduates		Employers				
Dimension	**Item**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**t**	**df**	**p**
Personal	Energy & passion	4.40	0.68	4.64	0.57	-5.61	1474	.000
	Self confidence	4.29	0.72	4.66	0.54	-8.52	1472	.000
	Flexibility	4.16	0.78	4.26	0.93	-2.05	1474	.000
	Initiative	4.08	0.72	4.18	0.72	-2.33	1475	.027
	Dimension overall	16.59	2.25	17.33	1.93	-5.34	1458	.001
Interpersonal	Teamwork & cooperation	4.29	0.72	4.66	0.54	-8.52	1472	.000
	Communication	4.16	0.78	4.26	0.93	-2.05	1474	.000
	Building relationships	4.08	0.72	4.18	0.72	-2.33	1475	.027
	Impact & influence on others	4.00	0.82	4.21	0.72	-4.06	1477	.591
	Leadership	3.70	0.85	3.97	0.78	-4.98	1473	.000
	Supporting others	4.36	0.71	4.44	0.70	-1.89	1478	.755
	Dimension overall	23.97	3.46	25.00	3.13	-4.78	1441	.126
Cognitive	Ability & willingness to learn	4.26	0.70	4.64	0.56	-9.16	1480	.000
	Subject knowledge	3.26	0.83	3.63	0.86	-7.00	1476	.253
	Analytical & conceptual thinking	4.40	0.68	4.64	0.57	-5.61	1474	.000
	Problem solving	4.29	0.72	4.66	0.54	-8.52	1472	.000
	Ability to apply knowledge	4.16	0.78	4.26	0.93	-2.05	1474	.000
	Planning	4.08	0.72	4.18	0.72	-2.33	1475	.027
	Dimension overall	24.03	3.19	25.15	3.31	-5.46	1442	.045
Role-specific	Up to date knowledge	4.03	0.81	4.17	0.84	-2.80	1476	.007
	Organisational awareness	4.11	0.81	4.27	0.73	-3.13	1478	.523
	Dimension overall	8.16	1.31	8.28	1.34	-1.35	1471	.219
Generic	Computer skills	3.26	0.83	3.63	0.86	-7.00	1476	.253
	Work experience	4.40	0.68	4.64	0.57	-5.61	1474	.000
	Dimension overall	7.05	1.31	7.17	1.46	-1.46	1472	.043

Includes responses from Italian sports graduates (n = 22) opportunistically identified during the study.

Table 3 demonstrates results from Mann-Whitney U tests which showed a significant difference ($p < .001$) between sports graduates' and employers' perceptions concerning the possession of all capability and competency items deployed in the questionnaire. Graduates consistently perceived that they possessed a high level of capabilities and competencies, particularly work experience, ability to apply knowledge, organisational awareness and flexibility. This contrasted sharply with the extent to which employers perceived that sports graduates possessed the same capabilities and competencies, which were consistently and significantly different across all twenty items within the conceptual framework.

Table 3: Comparison of possession of capabilities and competencies

		Sports graduates		Employers				
Dimension	**Item**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**t**	**df**	**p**
Personal	Energy & passion	4.44	0.65	3.60	1.13	17.06	1464	.000
	Self confidence	3.94	0.81	3.49	1.00	8.28	1463	.000
	Flexibility	4.23	0.73	3.44	0.99	15.84	1463	.000
	Initiative	4.15	0.75	3.52	1.00	12.27	1463	.000
	Dimension overall	16.74	2.13	14.04	3.39	17.24	1447	.000
Interpersonal	Teamwork & cooperation	4.43	0.64	3.59	1.14	17.09	1463	.000
	Communication	4.25	0.74	3.53	0.99	14.17	1465	.000
	Building relationships	4.01	0.86	3.36	1.00	11.44	1459	.000
	Impact & influence on others	3.86	0.84	3.33	0.95	9.57	1458	.000
	Leadership	3.62	1.01	3.21	1.00	6.51	1460	.000
	Supporting others	4.18	0.78	3.48	1.00	13.07	1454	.000
	Dimension overall	24.34	3.27	20.56	4.66	16.23	1421	.000
Cognitive	Ability & willingness to learn	4.46	0.60	3.58	1.14	18.48	1468	.000
	Subject knowledge	4.01	0.76	3.35	1.15	12.20	1464	.000
	Analytical & conceptual thinking	3.95	0.80	3.36	0.89	11.37	1464	.000
	Problem solving	4.08	0.71	3.36	1.00	14.54	1463	.000
	Ability to apply knowledge	4.11	0.72	3.44	0.96	13.67	1460	.000
	Planning	4.07	0.82	3.43	1.01	11.75	1466	.000
	Dimension overall	24.67	3.00	20.52	4.80	18.69	1442	.000
Role-specific	Up to date knowledge	3.95	0.81	3.35	1.10	10.66	1457	.000
	Organisational awareness	4.24	0.72	3.35	1.03	17.37	1455	.000
	Dimension overall	8.19	1.23	6.69	1.87	16.77	1444	.000
Generic	Computer skills	3.86	0.84	3.41	0.94	8.19	1467	.000
	Work experience	3.78	0.97	3.06	1.05	11.44	1465	.000
	Dimension overall	7.64	1.37	6.48	1.67	12.70	1462	.000

In order to assess differences within each country a Kruskall-Wallis test was used to examine whether there was a significant difference between sports graduates and employers in relation to perceived possession of the five capabilities and competencies dimensions. Acknowledging the unequal spread of responses within the present study, in presenting an overview of the comparisons, Table 4 highlights particular differences which included flexibility (personal capabilities), building relationships (interpersonal capabilities), and subject knowledge (cognitive capabilities) (individual item-level data not presented but available on request from the authors).

Table 4: Comparison of employer and sports graduate perceptions concerning possession of capabilities and competencies

	Germany			France			Greece			UK			Spain			Czech Republic		
Dimension	t	df	p	t	df	p	t	df	p	t	df	p	t	df	p	t	df	p
Capabilities																		
Personal	2.21	78	.162	7.68	537	.005	18.25	263	.001	6.79	69	.767	-1.37	134	.881	2.40	334	.024
Interpersonal	2.60	74	.757	6.86	530	.055	16.90	255	.003	8.68	71	.147	-1.19	130	.765	3.12	330	.454
Cognitive	2.17	79	.732	8.27	533	.000	21.11	262	.007	8.63	70	.602	-1.33	131	.401	4.50	335	.273
Competencies																		
Role specific	2.71	78	.836	5.82	536	.166	16.20	259	.000	6.15	70	.619	0.24	133	.994	3.98	336	.266
Generic	1.57	79	.455	6.92	543	.233	14.98	269	.000	4.73	72	.680	-3.02	133	.055	3.67	334	.336

Italian responses excluded as no comparative data was available.

Overall, France, Greece and the UK demonstrated the highest frequency of significant differences across the five capability and competency dimensions ($p = .001$ to .007). However, the effect sizes were small and differences between sports graduates and employers were less consistent within countries than at a whole sample level. This is likely due to the spread of responses within the sample whereby the numbers were not equal. Sample size is a typical concern for quantitative research (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) and the current findings suggest that the analysis may have been impacted by inconsistencies within the sample, resulting in some countries having much smaller frequencies of sports graduates and employers than others.

Discussion

Although it is not possible to draw generalisations from the findings of this study given the methodological and practical limitations, the findings reported here suggest that there is a potential difference between the perceptions of the relative importance of personal capabilities and competencies within the workplace between sports graduates and employers. The implications of this are critical for the graduate when the employer places significant emphasis on them, in respect to employability. While the modern conceptions of employability are increasingly being couched to include personal and social credentials (Tomlinson, 2008), these findings suggest that the comprehension and development of 'life skills' such as confidence and flexibility requires specific attention in graduate employability programmes (Gould & Carson, 2008). With regard to interpersonal capabilities, while the findings suggest that sports graduates and employers are generally more equal in their perceptions in relation to the importance of interpersonal capabilities, it is clear that disparities exist. Providing sports graduates with opportunities to develop an awareness of the importance of interpersonal capabilities both through academic instruction and work-based practice would likely help to equalise these apparent disparities. While the effect sizes were small this is not necessarily an indication that the finding is trivial given the lack of research in the present context specifically with regard to the assessment of a broad range of capabilities and competencies across multiple countries.

The apparent difference between sports graduates and employers of the importance of capabilities and competencies suggests a need for sports graduates to establish a clearer understanding of the skills employers are looking for. Although we were unable to state with any certainty the applicability of the findings to sport graduates more widely, evidence from the broader sport sector highlights the importance placed by employers on volunteer work and working with people, coupled with a concomitant need to provide students with industry and extracurricular experiences as early as possible (Mathner & Martin, 2012; Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). In this respect, the involvement of undergraduates in community based opportunities for volunteering may provide a meaningful adjunct to work-based opportunities, whereby students are able to develop a range of qualities and capabilities that extend beyond academic learning (O'Connor, Lynch, & Owen, 2011). Further, the clear differences at a general level between sports graduates and employers for the cognitive capabilities, particularly ability and willingness to learn, subject knowledge, analytical and conceptual thinking, problem solving, and ability to apply knowledge and planning suggests graduates

consistently failed to recognise the importance of the range of capabilities required to be effective and productive in the workplace.

Differences between sports graduates and employers concerning generic competencies particularly with regard to work experience found in this study suggested that employers attached greater value to sports graduates' previous work experience than sports graduates themselves. While we were unable to assume that these findings were applicable more broadly, they potentially underline previous findings elsewhere which emphasise the importance of obtaining structured work experience prior to entering the labour market, and the subsequent positive effects on the ability of graduates to find employment and secure employment in graduate-level jobs (Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009). Indeed, specifically with regard to the perceived possession of the capabilities and competencies the findings overall demonstrated that graduates in the present study appeared to overestimate the degree to which they personally possess the capabilities and competencies required for work compared to employers. This was largely replicated at a country level although results were less consistent and may indicate a lack of graduate understanding about the true nature of their perceived capabilities and competencies, and those required to be effective and productive employees. Methodological and practical limitations aside, this could be attributed to a number of factors; a lack of consistency between degree programmes, a lack of understanding from employers about the nature and quality of sports graduates' skills, and the contrasting demands of 'real world' jobs. It might also highlight a lack of understanding by employers concerning the nature and purpose of graduate programmes, which has been noted in the sport employability literature (Minten, 2010). It could be argued that the effect sizes were far from trivial which suggested a potential divergence between sports graduates' and employers' perceptions concerning the possession of a broad range of capabilities and competencies which, on the basis of the represent study, would appear to require further investigation in the context of graduate employability. Ostensibly, this underlines the importance of supporting graduates to adopt a reflexive approach to employability that simultaneously promotes the relevance of specific and general skills, and opportunities for functioning (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011).

The present study's findings emphasise an apparent wide difference of opinion between employers and graduates concerning a range of graduate capabilities and competencies and confirm the importance of developing social and personal skills for graduate employability as suggested by Tomlinson (2008) and Wells and Berbic, Krananburg, and Bygrave (2009). In this respect, it is critical that sports graduates and HEIs invest in understanding that contemporary conceptions of employability within the sport sector have moved well beyond a focus on academic qualifications alone. In turn a more complex and nuanced skillset, formed as part of a graduate identity that requires significant personal reflection (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011), should be developed. Differences between sports graduates and employers in terms of the importance and relative possession of the capabilities and competencies assessed in this study suggest that specific components of employability programmes require attention in order to narrow, or equalise, sports graduate and employer perceptions and balance expectations.

With reference to existing literature, it is critical to ensure that subject specific skills and knowledge in addition to creativity, flexibility, willingness to learn, ability to manage others, communication, working in a team and decision making (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Sewell & Dacre Pool, 2010) are integral aspects of HEI employability programmes. Given the essentially niche area of sport graduate employability, it is likely that employers would benefit from greater support from HEIs in order to develop a common understanding between HEIs, employers and graduates. More specifically this detailed understanding may seek to include factors such as job type, required skills, and ultimately ensure that employers are supported to fully utilise graduates (Mathner & Martin, 2012; Minten, 2010). Equally, it is likely that graduates need support to better understand how to research sectors and employers so that they are better able to plot a course through labour markets more effectively (HECSU/AGCAS, 2013).

Consistent with research by Scott and Yates (2002), the identification of high importance, low performance (i.e. possession) items in this study highlight potentially important areas for improvement with respect to HEI employability programmes across all capability and competency dimensions; personal (specifically, energy and passion, initiative); interpersonal (specifically teamwork and cooperation, communication); cognitive (specifically ability and willingness to learn, problem solving); role-specific (specifically organisational awareness), and generic (specifically work experience) skills. While it was clear that sports graduates in this study generally recognised self-reflection and self-awareness as important for employability, more than half indicated that sport graduates needed more support, and more than half stated that the curriculum needed improving. This finding suggests that sports graduates within the study sample were ostensibly recipient of, and prepared to, engage with complex conceptions of employability, but were not necessarily able to access employability opportunities that supported personal responsibility for career development. This underlines the importance of developing stronger links between HEIs and employers via the identification of direct contacts, establishing collaborations across multiple aspects of HEIs and employer businesses, and including employer input in course design and validation (HECSU, 2014; O'Connor, Lynch, & Owen, 2011).

Previous research investigating challenges affecting businesses in knowledge-based economies by Baryniene and Krisciunas (2013) makes a salient point in stipulating that greater partnership between HEIs and employers are recommended as a matter of priority in order to help universities respond better to human resource requirements in the contemporary labour markets. This is consistent with the need to develop mutual HEI-employer relationships that simultaneously educate graduates about employers' needs, and employers about how to meet or understand graduates' needs (Minten, 2010). Such approaches might usefully develop a shared approach to the acquisition of core capabilities, for example, communication and problem solving, and job-specific competencies which may help balance employer expectations and responsibilities within employability programmes (Maxwell, Scott, Macfarlane, & Williamson, 2009). Indeed, the findings in this study suggest employers generally agreed that sports graduates should undertake work placements, but many of these did not necessarily offer such opportunities themselves, which would appear to provide an immediate and prudent course of action. Supporting employers of sports graduates in seeking to provide opportunities for functioning in the work place as early as possible

may help graduates develop a coherent understanding of job-related prerequisites (Mathner & Martin, 2012) and develop new employability-enhancing opportunities.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to provide a critical insight into the perceptions of sports graduates and employers concerning a range of employability issues and a number of specific capabilities and competencies. While the spread of responses impinges on the interpretation of the data, the findings suggest that there is potentially a wide difference of opinion between employers and sports graduates in terms of the importance and possession of a number of capabilities and competencies. As such, there is a need for both universities, the HE sector more broadly and employers to take responsibility in ensuring that work experience, work placement and volunteering opportunities, whether work or community based, are embedded in curricula to maximise their impact and to develop greater understanding of skill prerequisites prior to graduates entering the labour market. This might help to develop validated employability frameworks that can be used to ensure the fitness of purpose of what and how graduate capabilities and competencies are assessed. This requires greater and closer collaboration between HEIs, students and employers in addition to effective monitoring and evaluation of employability programmes together with an appreciation of the potential impacts of external factors including the economy, cultural factors, and workplace trends. Whilst it is too simplistic to suggest that such measures will provide a panacea for the challenges facing HEIs, employers, and sports graduates, they might develop a greater level of mutual understanding and connectivity that reduces, or to some extent equalises, the divergence between graduate and employer perceptions.

Limitations

The present study represents the first of its type within the sports sector with regard to the appraisal of sports employer and graduate perceptions. However, its cross-sectional nature and unequal sample size limits the ability to generalise the findings because the sample is not representative due to the nature of the context in which it was devised (i.e. it formed part of a larger applied project to address these employability issues). Given the uneven nature of responses it was not possible to make meaningful comparisons between countries, graduate and employer types, and sector or subject types and the findings cannot be assumed to be relevant across Europe as a whole or at a local level. Further, given the complexity of operationalising employability within a data collection tool and as a concept across multiple domains in the EU, it is likely that some dimensions of employability were omitted and, or, interpreted differently between countries despite attempts to use clear and concise terminology. Issues of internet coverage, access, and awareness of the surveys are also likely to have created sources of bias within the data regarding participant recruitment and we were not able to assess response rates given the sampling strategy which was necessarily pragmatic in nature. The cross sectional nature of the study represents only a single point in time and does not allow employer and graduate perceptions to be tracked over time, thus limiting the relevance and application of the current findings within a broader time frame.

Given the method of questionnaire administration it is possible that issues of internet coverage bias and accessibility (Salomon, 2001; Sarantakos, 2005), in addition

to contrasting education systems and administration, influenced the data. As such, the findings in the current study do not allow divergence within countries to be fully assessed in terms of the relative level of capabilities and competencies possessed and suggest further research is warranted to determine the nature of these differences within and between countries. However, the results appear to support a tentative suggestion that the findings derived from the broader sample are likely, in part, to be replicated at a domestic or local level. In addition, this apparent mismatch between sports graduate and employer perceptions is likely to replicated, at least in part, within other European countries. These would appear to confirm the relevance of both traditional subject knowledge, and the need to acquire added value in terms of expanding broader sports graduate skillsets. However, the findings lend support to the use of the capabilities and competencies framework deployed in this study as a tool for simultaneously assessing employer and graduate perceptions of employability and provide a basis on which further research might be developed.

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Notes on contributors

Colin Baker, PhD, is a Research Fellow in the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Gloucestershire. His current research interests include innovation within health promotion, new forms of commissioning and evaluation in health, and factors determining

partnership success in sport and physical activity. University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK, GL50 4AZ, cmbaker@glos.ac.uk, 01242 715198. [Corresponding author].

Elizabeth A. Loughren, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK, eloughren@glos.ac.uk.
Tabitha Dickson, University of Gloucestershire, Gloucester, Gloucestershire, UK, tdickson@glos.ac.uk.
Marios Goudas, University of Thessaly, Trikala, Greece, mgoudas@pe.uth.gr.
Diane Crone, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK, dcrone@glos.ac.uk.
Michal Kudlacek, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic, michal.kudlacek@upol.cz.
Michal Petr, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic, mpetr@netsport.cz.
Lucie Petrova, Palacký University, Olomouc , Czech Republic, lucie.petrova@upol.cz.
Lilian Pichot, University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France, pichot@unistra.fr.
Jean Claude Frery, University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France, freryjeanc@aol.com.
Anne Benoit. University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France, anne.benoit@unistra.fr.
Sandrine Knobé, University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France, knobe@unistra.fr.
Jürgen Schröder, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany, jschroeder@sport.uni-goettingen.de.
Alfonso Valero Valenzuela, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain, avalero@um.es.
Ernesto De la Cruz Sánchez, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain, erneslacruz@um.es.
Miguel López-Bachero, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain, mlbachero@gmail.com.
Diego Villarejo, Elpozo Murcia Futbol Sala, Murcia, Spain, dvillarejo75@gmail.com.
Fran Serrejón, Elpozo Murcia Futbol Sala, Murcia, Spain, fran.serrejón@elpozomurcia.com.
Craig Mortiboys, Cheltenham Trust, Cheltenham, UK, craig.mortiboys@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk.
Tom Sparks, Cheltenham Trust, Cheltenham, U K, tom.sparks@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk.
Rowena Tassell, Cheltenham Trust, Cheltenham, UK, rowena.tassell@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk.