

Ger J Exerc Sport Res 2021 · 51:344–353
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-021-00722-w>
 Received: 8 October 2020
 Accepted: 23 April 2021
 Published online: 18 June 2021
 © The Author(s) 2021



Olivia Wohlfart · Sandy Adam · Gregor Hovemann

Faculty of Sport Science, Institute for Sport Psychology and Sport Pedagogy, Department of Sports Economics and Sports Management, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

Asymmetry in information acquisition—Exploring the principal–agent dyad of sport organizations and sport management higher education institutions

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have reacted to the demand for education in the field of sport management with an increasing number of academic programmes. To achieve the goals of the Bologna Declaration, the European Higher Education Area requires dialogue between industry and higher education, as the latter directly contributes to graduates' personal development, sustainable employability and active citizenship (Vossensteyn et al., 2018).

Our study departs from an agency theoretical perspective and assumes a metaphorical contract within the principal–agent dyad, wherein sport organizations (the principal) engage sport management HEIs (the agent) in adequately qualifying graduates for employment. Distinctive for this type of relationship, problems concerning divergence of interest as well as asymmetrical distribution of information between the two are assumed. In addition, we assume asymmetry in information acquisition, which results from the agent's ignorance and inability to obtain the information that is necessary to efficiently fulfil the metaphorical contract (Lewis & Sappington, 1993). The global sport industry, on the one hand, requires a highly qualified and flexible workforce to sustain

growth and respond to emerging opportunities. A specific characterization of qualifications and competencies needed for employment in this industry, on the other hand, is non-existent (Dowling, 2018). Additionally, higher education tends to slowly anticipate and adapt to rapidly changing requirements of industry (Chan, Fong, Luk, & Ho, 2017; European Commission, 2019).

Specialized third parties, such as labour market research entities, can help to mitigate these problems by acquiring and reporting the necessary information (Lewis & Sappington, 1997). With this study we adopt this role and aim to:

1. Resolve information acquisition problems of sport management HEIs by identifying and exploring which field-adequate qualifications and competencies are required of sport management graduates, and
2. Clarify the role of sport management HEIs in diligently fulfilling the metaphorical contract of preparing sport management graduates.

Our study contributes to the body of knowledge, by applying the problem of asymmetrical information acquisition to sport management and higher education research. Through content analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews with representatives of sport organizations in

Germany, we acquire and report crucial information for sport management higher education (SMHE) to use for programme design and delivery. In applying this facet of agency theory to sport management research, we also contribute to the discussion and further development of agency-theory more generally. Furthermore, our study offers direct implications for sport management faculty and sport management programme coordinators. Finally, (prospective) sport management students and graduates, practitioners in the sport management industry and policy makers benefit from our findings concerning the qualification and competency requirements of sport managers as well as the presupposed role sport management HEIs play therein.

“Sport managers”?—A review of current literature

Induced by increasing commercialization and professionalization of the sport industry since the 1970s, academics around the world concluded the need for a scientific sport management discipline and the development of specific study programmes. As a result, there has been a steady growth in sport management programmes globally (Costa, 2005; Kaiser & Beech, 2012; Shillbury, Philips, Karg, & Rowe, 2017). From the outset,

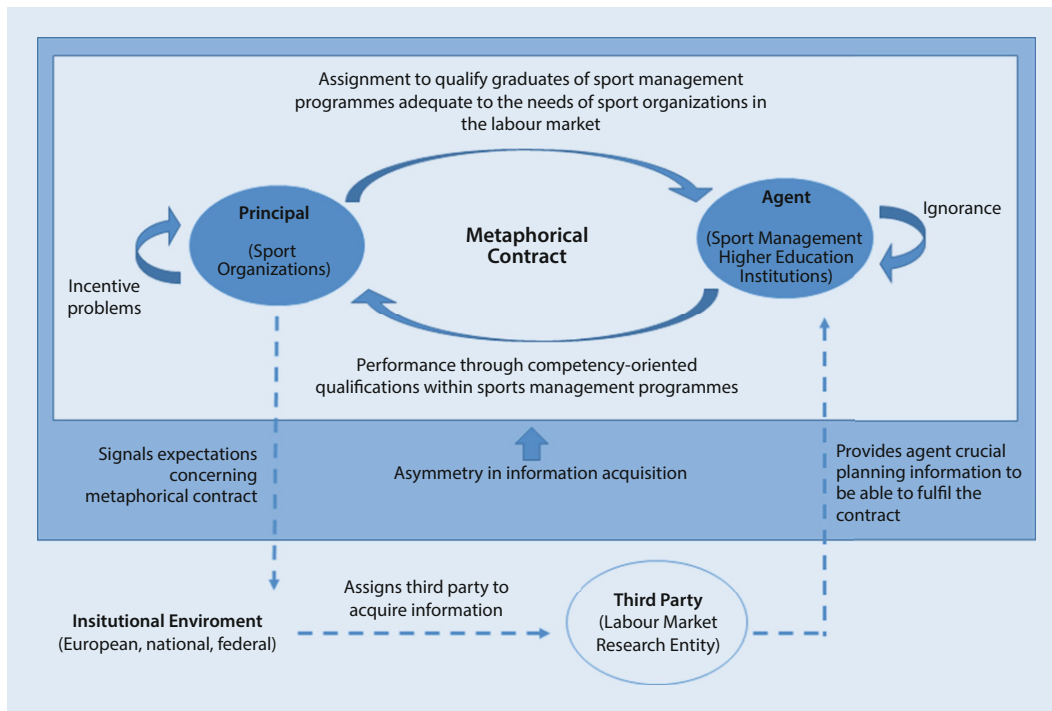


Fig. 1 ◀ Metaphorical contractual relationship between sport organizations and sport management higher education institutions (our illustration based on Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Lewis & Sappington, 1997)

the legitimacy of these programmes has been critically discussed (among others: Chalip, 2006; DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990; Dowling, 2018). Field dynamics and the heterogeneity of sport organizations have made it difficult to clearly define the sport management profession and related qualifications and competencies (Dowling, 2018). Therefore, sport management HEIs find themselves in a fierce competition for students with other vocational training institutions (Kaiser & Schütte, 2012). Common job requirements revolve around sector-specific experience, an affinity for sports, passion, and endurance (Packheiser & Hovemann, 2013; Wohlfart & Adam, 2019). Therefore, future sport managers need to possess a professional blend of generic management competencies and competencies specific to the sport industry (Barcelona & Ross, 2004; Emery, Crabtree, & Kerr, 2012; Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Mathner & Martin, 2012).

Competency research in the sport industry appears to be a complex endeavour, since empirical data have mainly been generated by individual graduate studies rather than objective industry requirements. There are only a few exceptions, which include Emery et al. (2012)

and Packheiser and Hovemann (2013), who analysed the requirements stated in job advertisements for sport managers in Australia and Germany, respectively. We therefore conclude that an information acquisition problem exists in the principal-agent dyad of sport organizations and sport management HEIs.

Agency theory

Agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) is a relevant analytical framework for all kinds of contractual relationships between at least two parties in which one party (the principal) engages another party (the agent) in performing a service on behalf of the principal. These contractual arrangements are characterized by so-called agency problems, which are most often caused by asymmetrical information distribution between the two parties (Crémer, Khalil, & Rochet, 1998). Most agency models assume that the agent is fully informed about their characteristics, intentions and actions, whereas the principal is not. This information structure typically allows the agent to act opportunistically at the expense of the principal in precontractual (adverse selection) and postcontractual

(moral hazard) settings (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Lewis and Sappington (1997) suggest that the principal prefers contracts which either provide accurate planning information to the agent, such as detailed product specifications, or encourage them to gather planning information, when an optimal level of activity for the agent is sensitive to the output level that maximizes the principal's benefits and when informational rents from accurate planning information are limited for the agent. The agent, meanwhile, decides whether they want to share the principal's information or acquire superior information, and if so, how much (Kessler, 1998). Devoting more resources to research would likely provide the agent with valuable planning information, but the financial cost of information acquisition limits the extent of these activities. Additionally, research activities might not always result in desired outcomes, and the agent may remain uninformed or ignorant about the prevailing environment (Kessler, 1998; Lewis & Sappington, 1993).

As they are aware of the possibility of ignorance and undesired outcomes, the principal is willing to motivate the agent to acquire valuable planning information

before acting and to subsidize the cost of information acquisition for the agent. In most cases, the agent can both acquire valuable planning information and fulfil the duties of the contract, since they are likely to benefit from economies of scope. However, Lewis and Sappington (1997) suggest that separation of the two activities may eliminate problems of ignorance. If a third party gathers information about the environment, the principal can ensure the agent is informed while simultaneously inducing them to work diligently. This is where our study departs with a focus on the principal–agent dyad within SMHE.

A principal–agent dyad: sport organizations and SMHE

Although agency theory originated in the field of economics, it has been widely applied, both theoretically and empirically, in many different disciplines since ‘examples of agency are universal’ (Ross, 1973, p. 134). A growing number of authors are using agency theory as a conceptual framework, heuristic tool or organizing concept in the higher education context (Gornitzka, Stensaker, Smeby, & de Boer, 2004; Kivistö, 2008; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015; Liefner, 2003). However, most of these studies employ common agency theory models, which assume asymmetrical *distribution* of information rather than asymmetrical *gathering* of information.

We assume the existence of a metaphorical contract within a principal–agent dyad, wherein sport organizations (the principal) engage sport management HEIs (the agent) in adequately qualifying graduates for employment (■ Fig. 1). This assumption is grounded in the formal and informal pressures exerted on both parties by their institutional environments (European, national, local) and cultural expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). HEIs are responsible for adequately qualifying graduates to function as valuable citizens (European Commission, 2019; Kultusministerkonferenz, 2000).

The principal in our dyad is a diverse set of sport organizations with converging and diverging interests and organiza-

tional logics, sharing the need for a highly qualified and flexible workforce. While a sport marketer is interested in profit maximization, a non-profit sport association aims to maximize utility for its stakeholders, and a professional sport club pursues both interests simultaneously. The agent in our dyad represents HEIs with sport management programmes. While the institutional pressures exerted on higher education (i.e. the Bologna Process) have partly resulted in convergence of formerly divergent logics of research and teaching, diversity still exists. Whereas the primary role of public universities remains ensuring ‘excellence, prestige, and influence’ in research (Bowen, 1981, p. 20) and providing education with academic freedom, this does not necessarily characterize private HEIs with profit-maximizing goals. We assume that SMHE fails to quickly respond to industry demands as a result of problematic asymmetry in information acquisition (Crémer et al., 1998; Kessler, 1998; Lewis & Sappington, 1993).

Asymmetrical information acquisition

Sport organizations’ preferred information structure does not provide specific planning information to sport management HEIs or induce them to acquire such information. We argue that is due to incentive problems for sport organizations, because they believe that an optimal level of activity for SMHE is not sensitive to the output level that maximizes sport organizations’ benefits. When recruiting qualified graduates, sport organizations can select candidates from a wide range of study programmes, not just those offered by SMHE (Kaiser & Schütte, 2012). Indeed, sport organizations have few incentives to recruit sport management graduates or inform HEIs about the qualifications, competencies, skills and abilities they require. This might be due to ambiguity about whether SMHE is a distinct academic discipline or a profession (Chalip, 2006; Dowling, 2018).

As a consequence of the contract design, sport management HEIs remain uninformed about industry demands and may decide whether to take the infor-

Ger J Exerc Sport Res 2021 · 51:344–353
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-021-00722-w>
 © The Author(s) 2021

O. Wohlfart · S. Adam · G. Hovemann

Asymmetry in information acquisition—Exploring the principal–agent dyad of sport organizations and sport management higher education institutions

Abstract

This study is based on a metaphorical contract in sport management, whereby sport organizations (the principal) engage sport management higher education institutions (the agent) in qualifying graduates according to industry demands. There is asymmetry in the contract due to the lack of incentives for the principal to provide specific information and the agent’s ignorance about this information. A third party can acquire crucial information that sport management higher education institutions need to fulfil the contract. Based on a qualitative content analysis of 12 interviews with sport organization representatives, the study finds that sport management higher education institutions need to focus on either developing generic competencies or credibly signalling the value of sport management-specific competencies in their curriculum in order to efficiently fulfil the contract.

Keywords

Agency theory · Agent ignorance · Labour market · Employability · Competencies

mation provided by sport organizations or acquire superior planning information. We argue that sport management HEIs decide to remain uninformed or ignorant (Kessler, 1998; Lewis & Sappington, 1993) due to the information costs of conducting labour market research, which are perceived to be excessive.

We assert that sport organizations are willing to subsidize the cost of information acquisition for SMHE to avoid ignorance in sport management HEIs (Kessler, 1998). However, since sport organizations assume that unified information acquisition and contract fulfilment by these HEIs produce undesired outcomes, they signal to the institutional environment that a third party, such as

specialized labour market research entities, should be responsible for information acquisition. The EU-funded research project “New Age of Sport Management Education in Europe” (NASME) was tasked with acquiring information about qualification and competency requirements as well as sport management HEIs’ role in developing these requirements. From 2017–2019, research teams from nine European countries partnered to question and enhance SMHE based on industry demands. The project was divided into two consecutive data collection phases, with an overall sample of 635 responses by experts in the sport management labour market in the nine partner countries. After acquiring information, NASME was to publicly report their findings so that sport management HEIs could use this information to diligently fulfil the metaphorical contract (Lewis & Sappington, 1997).

Method

This study involved qualitative data analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews with representatives of sport organizations in Germany. The semi-structured interview guide was developed within the second phase of the NASME research project based on reviewed literature as well as the results of the quantitative analysis (Wohlfart & Adam, 2019; Wohlfart, Adam, & Hovemann, 2019). Semi-structured interviews have the strength of providing a detailed understanding of topics and social settings as well as flexibility in the interview process based on the interviewees’ background, experience and status (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Previous studies within the examined principal–agent dyad have applied quantitative questionnaires (Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Mathner & Martin, 2012; Schlesinger, Studer, & Nagel, 2016) or document analysis (Emery et al., 2012; Packheiser & Hovemann, 2013). As we aim to better grasp the relationship between the actors, we want to understand the *how* and the *why* and therefore apply a qualitative approach. When gathering information using the method of qualitative interviews, the researcher tries to understand

the world as the informants perceive it (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014).

The interview guide consisted of 11 open-ended questions that related to four main themes: trends, competencies, job development and recruitment. In addition, we used a short questionnaire to obtain sociodemographic information about the informants. Three interviewers conducted the interviews between December 2018 and February 2019, with the lead author assuming the main responsibility. The interviews lasted between 34 and 58 min, and they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim according to a specific transcription guideline based on that described by Kuckartz (2010). The lead author then proofread and anonymized the transcripts. We generated 126 pages of single-spaced transcribed text and a total interview time of 550 min.

Participants

We employed a purposeful sampling strategy based on the work of Patton (2015), selecting individuals with senior positions such as managing director, chief executive officer (CEO), and general secretary. To gain a holistic perspective of the sport industry, four main stakeholder categories were included: (1) professional sport clubs (C), (2) non-profit sport clubs and federations (NP), (3) private sector organizations (P) and (4) public sector organizations (PU). The selected organizations were representative of their sector, and their size varied from medium to large (Baile & Robinson, 2007). In addition to institutionalized internships, the organizations offer job opportunities for career entrants as well as experts in specific fields. Most positions focus on general management, project management or aspects of communication management (marketing, sponsoring), and full-time commitment is expected (Table 1).

The 12 informants were 34–52 years of age and had academic degrees, mostly in sport management or sport economics. They had 9–25 years of work experience, with 3 months to 25 years at their current organization.

Data analysis

We performed qualitative content analysis of the 12 interview transcripts in accordance with Mayring (2015). Of eleven main questions, six focused on competencies, qualification requirements and the role of HEIs in their realization, but the data analysis included all interview data. The lead author repeatedly read the transcripts and coded segments using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018 (VERBI Software. Consult. Sozialforschung GmbH, Berlin, Germany). Coding employed deductive categories identified from the literature review and theoretical background (e.g. divergence of interest; information asymmetry, qualifications; competencies) as well as inductive categories related to the main research interest that emerged from the transcribed interview materials (e.g. expectations, empathy, assessment). The qualitative data analysis resulted in 67 codes and 927 coded segments.

Following a social-constructivist epistemology and post-qualitative perspectives on research, we acknowledge that theory-free knowledge does not exist (Smith & Hodkinson, 2009). The lead author analysed and interpreted the coded segments in regard to the research aim (qualifications, competencies, role of sport management HEIs, information asymmetry). To ensure rigour in the overall research and data analysis process, we employed ‘critical friends’ and self-reflexivity, as advocated by Smith and McGannon (2018). The role of a critical friend is ‘not to “agree” or achieve consensus, but rather to encourage reflexivity by challenging each other’s construction of knowledge’ (Cowan & Taylor, 2016, p. 508). This provides opportunities for rich dialogue about interpretive possibilities and requires researchers to make their thought processes explicit.

We extracted quotes from the interview transcripts to illustrate the findings and interpretations. All interviews were held in German, and a professional translator translated the quotes into English. The lead author examined the translations to ensure that the informants’ voices were maintained and avoid pos-

Table 1 Socio-demographic information of interviewees ($n = 12$)

Pseudo-nym	Stakeholder category	Gender	Position	Organizational size ^a	Education (Field)	General/specific work experience (in years)
C-1	Professional Sport Club	Male	Managing Director	Large (230 staff)	Bachelor (Economics)	20/5
C-2	Professional Sport Club	Male	Managing Director	Large (160 staff)	MBA	25/9
C-3	Professional Sport Club	Male	Managing Director	Medium (17 staff)	German Diploma (Sport Education)	12/12
NP-1	Non-Profit Organization	Male	General Secretary	Big (44 staff)	German Diploma (Sport Sciences)	14/4
NP-2	Non-Profit Organization	Male	Commercial Manager	Medium (38 staff)	Magister (Sport & Economics)	13/7
NP-3	Non-Profit Organization	Female	CEO	Large (170 staff)	German Diploma (Sport Education)	22/1
P-1	Private Organization	Male	Senior VP	Large (57,016 staff)	German Diploma (Sport Economics)	24/0.25
P-2	Private Organization	Male	Senior Project Manager	Large (640 staff)	German Diploma (Sport Economics & Sport Education)	25/25
P-3	Private Organization	Male	Senior Team Head	Large (12,192 staff)	German Diploma (Sport Education)	13/6
PU-1	Public Organization	Male	Professor	Medium (24 staff)	Dr. (Sport Management & Sport Sciences)	9/2
PU-2	Public Organization	Male	Freelancer/Head of Department	Medium (34 staff)	German Diploma (Economics)	25/10
PU-3	Public Organization	Male	Professor	Large (341 staff)	Dr. (Sport Sciences)	20/11

MBA master's of business administration, *CEO* chief executive officer, *VP* vice president

^aBased on Bayle & Robinson (2007), organizational size according to the number of paid staff (5–10 = small, 11–40 = medium, 41–100 = big, >100 = large)

sible misunderstandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Findings and discussion

In this section, we report and discuss the findings of our qualitative content analysis. Following the social-constructivist approach, we analysed and interpreted the content of the interviews. Following our research aim of resolving information acquisition problems of sport management HEIs, we examined the perspective of key informants from sport organizations concerning field-adequate qualifications and competencies as well as the role of sport management HEIs in preparing sport management graduates for employment in these. By providing planning information to SMHE, we reduce agent ignorance and promote fulfilment of the metaphorical contract described earlier.

Qualification and competency requirements

According to the interviewees, there are no specific qualifications required for positions at sport organizations:

Well, I believe that sport management certainly is a good prerequisite. [...] I don't believe that what a sport manager brings along compared to a business administration graduate is a hiring criterion to the left or to the right. For us, both are programmes that offer the prerequisites for being hired, as well as some other study programmes. (C-2)

The informants showed no preference for graduates from a specific type of HEI (e.g. public or private, full-time or part-time). Likewise, they did not value specific study programmes and degrees over others:

To be honest, it would be all the same to me. [...] What matters to me is that there is a passion for what he [or she] wants to

do here, yes. Whether it is someone with a bachelor's, a master's or another degree, would make no difference to me. (P-3)

One interviewee from a non-profit sport organization (NP-2) mentioned the importance of cooperation with a specific educational programme for selecting future sport managers. The same interviewee negated the importance of certificates:

I have a look at what he or she has done. And also, the important things, such as personality. If I read that someone travelled for a year, I think it is sensational. [...] So, I prefer that over someone who somehow did 10 quick internships in a row. [...] So, in practical terms: When it comes to applications, I don't even have a look at any certificates. (NP-2)

The interviewees did not value a master's degree over a bachelor's degree in sport management. This finding substantiates early research in the field. For

example, DeSensi et al. (1990) pointed out the conflict between ‘what college/university faculty suggested as recommended degree levels and what business/agency personnel suggested as required degree levels’ (p. 56). This divergence of interest has been immanent since the foundation of the first academic programmes and presents a typical agency-problem (Akerlof, 1970). The prolonging situation of “over-education” within sport management would indicate opportunistic behaviour of SMHE in consciously offering highly specialized graduate programmes which students do not necessarily need for employability (Meroni & Vera-Toscano, 2017).

In the attempt to reduce asymmetry in information acquisition relevant information for SMHE, we further analysed the competencies required by interviewees. Based on a modified version of the competency explorer proposed by Heyse and Erpenbeck (2004)¹ as well as previous studies (Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2016), we allocated coded segments to four competency classes: self, social and methodological competencies (i.e. generic competencies) and professional (sport management) competencies (i.e. subject-related competencies).

Decision-making capacity was mentioned by most interviewees and was identified as the most critical self-competency. However, the interviewees ascribed different meanings to decision-making, such as making firm decisions (C-2, NP-2, P-1), taking responsibility for decisions made (C-1, P-3), decision-making as a team process (C-3, PU-2) and guiding and preparing decisions as part of the decision-making process (NP-1). Affinity for sport was the only other crucial self-competency for all sport organizations. Interestingly, the interviewees did not necessarily associate affinity for sport with a sport management degree,

supporting the ongoing discussion on the relevance of sport-management-specific programmes (Tsitskari, Goudas, Tsalouchou, & Michalopoulou, 2017; Zhang, 2015). Leadership, responsibility, passion and organizational identification were vital self-competencies for future sport managers. The interviewees from non-profit sport organizations emphasized the importance of special leadership skills, since sport managers need to lead two types of employees: paid staff and volunteers (NP-1, NP-3).

Most interviewees mentioned soft skills required of sport managers. This term was used in various ways, but most often as a synonym for generic competencies. We separated the social aspects of this generic term and highlighted the complexity of social competencies. Within this category, teamwork was identified as the most important competency across all sectors:

Teamwork [...] is a great skill. On the other hand, I can tell you that many of our organizations, you need to picture them as rather compartmentalized organizations. I will never forget the manager of a regional association who said the only one to talk to is the mirror because I am the only one in the office. So, in many places we also have very, very small organizations which have one full-time employee, and the question is, what is teamwork there? Then, teamwork of course is the cooperation between full-time and honorary staff, and then teamwork is one of the key skills. (NP-3)

Furthermore, the interviewees from the professional sport clubs and private-sector sport organizations highlighted the importance of (English) communication skills. Finally, relevant methodological competencies included applying theoretical knowledge into practice, reflection and flexibility.

Professional competencies concerning sport-management-specific knowledge were given very little emphasis in the interviews. Specialized knowledge about sport systems and structures appeared to be helpful in non-profit and public sector organizations. Informants from all sectors regarded generic information technology (IT) skills as vital. More spe-

cialized IT skills were less important for sport management graduates since sport organizations hire IT specialists.

In conclusion, the key informants gave an abundance of in-depth information concerning field-adequate competence-requirements for the employment of sport management graduates. When and if transmitted to decision makers within the development of sport management programmes, this information can substantially promote the fulfilment of a competency-based qualification as required by the metaphorical contract (Research Aim 1).

Interestingly, only three interviewees had a solid understanding of the variance and diversity of sport management programmes in Germany (NP-3, PU-1, PU-3). We interpret this as the result of asymmetric information between the contracting partners due to weak signals from sport management HEIs concerning the unique value of their programmes (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Spence, 1973). The principal, however, seems to be highly interested in such signals:

But if I knew that these skills are taught in the bachelor's or master's degree in sport management, I might prefer him [/her] much, much more. Because I say, okay, he [/she] has exactly these soft skills, teamwork, network, communication, plus can stand his [/her] ground and can do that because he [/she] comes from sports. And has at least basic knowledge in [...] digitalization, communication and accounting. [...] Then I would much prefer him [/her] over a pure journalist. Well, but you don't know that at that moment. (C-3)

The CEO of a national sport federation agreed:

I'm not interested in whether it's part-time or private or at a university [...]. My point is, if I know this is a sport manager, then I [should] know that certain competencies and certain skills have been taught during their studies and that, so to speak, a minimum of quality standards are linked to them. And, let me give you another example: if someone has a doctoral degree, then it is relatively clear what steps they have

¹ We modified the competency classes developed by Heyse and Erpenbeck (2004)—personal competencies, activity and action competencies, methods and professional competencies and socio-communicative competencies—in order to make the findings comparable to previous studies.

gone through to get there. And I don't see that with the sport manager, and I actually have to consider and worry that differences in quality are not comprehensible to outside parties. (NP-3)

These findings substantiate earlier studies, which found a lack of clear signals for sport organizations regarding sport management programmes (Chalip, 2006; Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014). Due to this information asymmetry, the principal is not able to clearly interpret compliance of SMHE in fulfilling their assignment within the contract. This could in parts be due to the heterogeneity of sport management programmes in Germany, rendering the assessment of individual agents nearly impossible (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, sport management HEIs need to signal their unique value (i.e. developing graduates with strong generic competencies) via reputation assurances, such as the publication of study documents (e.g. module descriptors), ranking orders and successful graduate testimonials in order to reduce information asymmetry and demonstrate their compliance to the requirements of the metaphorical contract (Spence, 1973).

Presupposed role of sport management HEIs

Surprisingly, all interviewees expressed specific expectations for sport management HEIs. They are regarded as responsible for developing the aforementioned generic competencies as well as holistically preparing students for the (sport) industry. As one representative from a professional football club explained, 'I believe that a university today not only has the task to prepare [students] academically for the profession, but to prepare [them] for the profession in an all-around way' (C-2).

Furthermore, the interviewees highlighted the need for practical applicability of learning content, as this leads to sustainable employability. However, the interviewees were unable to specifically describe how practical content can be increased in higher education programmes. Most representatives proposed obliga-

tory internships as an optimal solution for both sport management HEIs, as this increases their applicability, and sport organizations, as they profit from extra human resources. One representative explains:

Interns [...] make an important contribution in many areas. The basic problem is that the studies are too school-like and there are no more possibilities to get interns for six months. And we actually only want to have interns [for six months] because everything else really doesn't make sense. [...] I believe six-month internships should be integrated and enabled in all study programmes. (C-3)

Study programmes should take this into account when designing curricula and make them more flexible to allow for internships (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Dunkel, Wohlfahrt, & Wendeborn, 2018). Open and transparent communication between the principal and agent could help both sides of the dyad to reduce asymmetry in information acquisition and, in doing so, better understand the importance of practical opportunities. While German law on minimum wages regulates voluntary internship arrangements intended for students to gain work experience, we maintain that the principal is just as responsible for creating appropriate conditions (i.e. compensation) for internships (mandatory or voluntary).

Voluntary engagement in sports could be advocated within sport management programmes to improve the practical applicability of sport management content (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). As Wallrodt and Thieme (2020) have shown, sports volunteering has a positive effect on applicants' perceived qualifications and operates as a positive signal of social skills. Integrating such experiences into study programmes has great potential to raise awareness of the practical applicability of content and, thereby, distinguish graduates.

Finally, possible cooperation between sport organizations and specific sport management programmes emerged as a central theme in the interviews. The CEO of a large non-profit organization (NP-3) spoke about a cooperative

relationship in which a specific sport management programme allowed employees to further their education. While most representatives spoke about partnerships with HEIs in general, few of these partnerships involved sport management programmes specifically. One representative highlighted dual-career opportunities as a form of partnership with a private HEI offering sport management (NP-2). Many studies within and outside of sport settings have emphasized the advantages of contractual cooperation between HEIs and industry (Hardin, Bemiller, & Pate, 2013; Petersen & Pierce, 2009). HEIs could contribute to fulfilment of the metaphorical contract by consenting to needs-based qualification of sport management students and being receptive to cooperation with sport management organizations (i.e. involving sport organizations in curriculum development, hosting career fairs or creating professorial positions that combine practice and academia).

We conclude from the interviews that the key informants have quite specific expectations concerning the role of SMHE in the principal-agent dyad. They clearly endorse the idea of a metaphorical contract and to that effect the expectations of qualifying graduates according to their needs. Notwithstanding, the key informants also acknowledge the slow response of HEIs to labour market demands:

Especially in the areas that are developing dynamically in sports management, universities and especially the public ones [...] are very much lagging behind. Because they are simply less able to adapt quickly to corresponding developments and to incorporate trends [...] into their programs. (PU-1)

We assert that the metaphorical contract lacks clear information about how HEIs should professionally train students for employability. HEIs primarily aim to create and disseminate knowledge. However, sport organizations demand that sport management HEIs support students in their personal development and active citizenship in order to remain competitive and fulfil supranational and national economic policy goals (Euro-

pean Commission, 2019; Vossensteyn et al., 2018).

The interests of sport organizations and sport management HEIs are contradictory in parts (Akerlof, 1970). This typical agency problem is exacerbated by the heterogeneity of the institutions and existing outcome-uncertainty (Eisenhardt, 1989). Legitimized by the Bologna Reform, we recommend SMHE to both acknowledge and fulfil the metaphorical contract and *take a seat at the table*, willing to learn more about the requirements of the principal. This would in the long run potentially help SMHE in achieving their goals. Due to their institutional goals and structures, private HEIs might be better prepared for fulfilling the role of professional trainers, and public universities' self-image as educators might be a considerable hindrance to fulfilment of their role according to the metaphorical contract.

In clarifying the role of sport management programmes in fulfilling the metaphorical contract (Research Aim 2), our findings offer two major implications for sport management HEIs. First, sport management study programmes need to develop students' generic competencies through, for example, group work or volunteering services. Second, SMHE needs to establish a clear profile for sport management programmes. There is currently no need for sport-management-specific qualifications, possibly due to the ambiguity surrounding whether sport management is an academic discipline or profession (Chalip, 2006; Dowling, 2018; Dowling et al., 2014). Concise differentiation between the abundance of degrees seems to be a suitable starting point in signalling relevance and uniqueness. While the sport management bachelor's degree was developed to be an independent professional degree (European Commission, 2019), the master's degree was developed to enable graduates to take on leading positions in the sport business (e.g. manager, team leader). As the two programmes have different goals concerning the employability of graduates, they should develop different generic and subject-specific competencies. According to educational policy goals, a master's degree programme must

develop higher levels of competence across all competence blocks compared with a bachelor's degree programme (European Commission, 2008, 2019; Kultusministerkonferenz, 2017). Finally, SMHE needs to define the institutional architecture needed to offer degrees and determine whether it is more efficient to engage all types of HEIs in this task or whether specific HEIs are better suited.

Limitations

In our study, we acquired and reported crucial information for SMHE programme design and delivery, focusing on asymmetry in information acquisition. We omitted pre- and postcontractual information asymmetry in our dyad that could lead to moral hazard as well as issues regarding divergence of interests (Kivistö, 2008; Liefner, 2003). These agency problems present considerable issues that need to be examined in additional studies.

We used agency theory, as it has particular strengths for analysing the principal-agent dyad of sport organizations and HEIs. However, like other theories, agency theory is subject to criticism, particularly for its focus on the economic aspects of contractual relationships and related assumptions about human motivation and behaviour, which are relevant to our study. In addition, the theory does not question whether the principal's goals are legitimate (Kivistö, 2008). This is particularly interesting in the context of the controversial debate of the last two decades concerning the role of HEIs. Utilitarian arguments (from the perspective of the sport industry) contend that they need to produce a qualified workforce for the labour market, while cultural arguments (from the perspective of higher education) advocate for institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Considering the heterogeneity of sport organizations and the quick pace of change in this market due to the global trends of digitalization, commercialization and internationalization, these demands will continue to change. However, it remains uncertain whether society will accept the demands of sport organizations as valid and require adaptation of

sport management programmes in the future.

Our study focused on one specific dyad in a complex institutional field. Principal-agent relationships, such as those between students and HEIs as well as between academic staff and HEIs were not considered. Future studies can build on the findings from our study and examine further principal-agent relationships in the complex network of SMHE.

Conclusion and future research

This study contributes to labour market research on sport management by introducing agency theory as a theoretical framework. Analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews with sport organization representatives revealed no specific requirements regarding the qualifications of sport managers. We assert that SMHE needs to credibly signal its unique value compared to other study programmes in order to better comply with the metaphorical contract. Our findings reinforce the relevance of generic competencies and the possibility of making the content of sport management study programmes applicable to the labour market. Sport management HEIs should therefore, in turn, concentrate on developing generic competencies within study programmes.

Experimental studies examining the perceived and measured differences between graduates of generic management and sport management programmes could validate the value of the latter. Standardised and long-term graduate surveys and tracking studies could offer vital information regarding the success of sport management programmes. Colloquia with current students, as key informants, during or after internships could make tacit information explicit and, as such, contribute to research in the field. In addition, we recommend document analysis of sport management course content and qualitative investigation of the actual content that is taught.

HEIs are faced with several challenges concerning their role within the metaphorical contract. Following the

assumptions of agency theory, third parties, such as the NASME research project, can aid in the process of asymmetrical information acquisition and distribution, shedding light on the needs of sport organizations in Germany and thereby contributing to improved dialogue between the sport industry and HEIs. SMHE must act on these recommendations if the field of sport management is to grow and advance.

Corresponding address



Olivia Wohlfart

Faculty of Sport Science,
Institute for Sport Psychology
and Sport Pedagogy,
Department of Sports
Economics and Sports
Management, Leipzig
University
Jahnallee 59, 04109 Leipzig,
Germany
olivia.wohlfart@uni-leipzig.de

Sandy Adam

Faculty of Sport Science, Institute for Sport
Psychology and Sport Pedagogy, Department
of Sports Economics and Sports Management,
Leipzig University
Jahnallee 59, 04109 Leipzig, Germany
sandy.adam@uni-leipzig.de

Gregor Hovemann

Faculty of Sport Science, Institute for Sport
Psychology and Sport Pedagogy, Department
of Sports Economics and Sports Management,
Leipzig University
Jahnallee 59, 04109 Leipzig, Germany
hovemann@uni-leipzig.de

Funding. This work was supported by the Erasmus+ Program "New Age of Sport Management Education in Europe" of the European Union (2017-1-DK01-KA203-034270).

Funding. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Conflict of interest. O. Wohlfart, S. Adam and G. Hovemann declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical standards for good scientific practice were considered in accordance to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Open Access. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and re-

production in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Akerlof, G. A. (1970). The market for "lemons": quality uncertainty and the market mechanism. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 84(3), 488–500. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1879431>.
- Barcelona, B. & Ross, C. (2004). An Analysis of the Perceived Competencies of Recreational Sport Administrators. *The Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 22(4), 25–42.
- Bayle, E., & Robinson, L. (2007). A framework for understanding the performance of national governing bodies of sport. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 7(3), 249–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184740701511037>.
- Bowen, H. R. (1981). *The costs of higher education: How much do colleges and universities spend per student and how much should they spend?* (2nd edn.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brinkman, S., & Kvale, S. (2014). *Interviews: learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd edn.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Chalip, L. (2006). Toward a distinctive sport management discipline. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.20.1.1>.
- Chan, C. K. Y., Fong, E. T. Y., Luk, L. Y. Y., & Ho, R. (2017). A review of literature on challenges in the development and implementation of generic competencies in higher education curriculum. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 57, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.08.010>.
- Costa, C. A. (2005). The status and future of sports management: a Delphi study. *Journal of Sport Management*, 19(2), 117–142. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.19.2.117>.
- Cowan, D., & Taylor, I. M. (2016). 'I'm proud of what I achieved; I'm also ashamed of what I done': a soccer coach's tale of sport, status, and criminal behaviour. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 8(5), 505–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2016.1206608>.
- Crémer, J., Khalil, F., & Rochet, J.-C. (1998). Contracts and productive information gathering. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 25(2), 174–193. <https://doi.org/10.1006/game.1998.0651>.
- DeLuca, J. R., & Braunstein-Minkove, J. (2016). An evaluation of sport management student preparedness: recommendations for adapting curriculum to meet industry needs. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 10(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1123/SMEJ.2014-0027>.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th edn.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- DeSensi, J. T., Kelley, D. R., Blanton, M. D., & Beitel, P. A. (1990). Sport management curricular evaluation and needs assessment: a multifaceted approach. *Journal of Sport Management*, 4(1), 31–58. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.4.1.31>.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>.
- Dowling, M. (2018). Exploring sport management as an academic profession: a critical review of occupational theory. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 3(4), 321–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2018.1457970>.
- Dowling, M., Edwards, J., & Washington, M. (2014). Understanding the concept of professionalisation in sport management research. *Sport Management Review*, 17(4), 520–529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.02.003>.
- Dunkel, K., Wohlfart, O., & Wendeborn, T. (2018). Kompetenzen in Sportmanagementstudiengängen: Eine curriculare Analyse der zu erreichenden fachspezifischen Kompetenzen an Deutschen Hochschulen. *Zeitschrift Für Studium Und Lehre in Der Sportwissenschaft*, 1(2), 50–59. Competencies in sports management courses: A curricular analysis of the subject-specific competences at German universities.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Agency theory: an assessment and review. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258191>.
- Emery, P. R., Crabtree, R. M., & Kerr, A. K. (2012). The Australian sport management job market: an advertisement audit of employer need. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 15(4), 335–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2012.737300>.
- European Commission (2008) The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Commission (2019). Relevant and high quality higher education. https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/relevant-and-high-quality-higher-education_en. Accessed 08 November 2020
- Fahrner, M., & Schüttoff, U. (2020). Analysing the context-specific relevance of competencies—sport management alumni perspectives. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 20(3), 344–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2019.1607522>.
- Gornitzka, Å., Stensaker, B., Smeby, J.-C., & de Boer, H. (2004). Contract arrangements in the Nordic countries—solving the efficiency/effectiveness dilemma? *Higher Education in Europe*, 29(1), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03797720410001673319>.
- Hardin, R., Bemiller, J., & Pate, J. (2013). Development and organization of a student-operated sport management cocurricular club: partners in sports. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 7(1), 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.1123/smej.7.1.43>.
- Heyse, V., & Erpenbeck, J. (2004). *Kompetenztraining: 64 modulare Informations- und Trainingsprogramme für die betriebliche, pädagogische und psychologische Praxis*. Schäffer-Poeschel. Competence training: 64 modular information and training programs for workplace, pedagogical and psychological practice
- Jensen, M. C., & Meckling, W. H. (1976). Theory of the firm: managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 3(4), 305–360. <https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-405X>.

- Jiang, L., & Alexakis, G. (2017). Comparing students' and managers' perceptions of essential entry-level management competencies in the hospitality industry: an empirical study. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 20, 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2017.01.001>.
- Kaiser, S., & Beech, J. (2012). Perspectives of sport-related labour market and employment research: the need for a specific approach. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 9(4), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2012.11687902>.
- Kaiser, S., & Schütte, N. (2012). Patterns of managerial action: an empirical analysis of German sport managers. *International Journal of Management in Education*, 6(1), 174–189. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJME.2012.044008>.
- Kessler, A. S. (1998). The value of ignorance. *The RAND Journal of Economics*, 29(2), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2555892>.
- Kivistö, J. (2008). An assessment of agency theory as a framework for the government–university relationship. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 30(4), 339–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800802383018>.
- Kivistö, J., & Zalyevska, I. (2015). Agency theory as a framework for higher education governance. In J. Huisman, H. de Boer, D. D. Dill & M. Souto-Otero (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of higher education policy and governance* (pp. 132–151). : Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-45617-5_8.
- Kuckartz, U. (2010). *Einführung in die computer-gestützte Analyse qualitativer Daten*. : Springer. Introduction to computer-aided analysis of qualitative data.
- Kultusministerkonferenz (2000). Rahmenvorgaben für die Einführung von Leistungspunktsystemen und die Modularisierung von Studiengängen. Beschluss der Kultusministerkonferenz. <http://bit.ly/2o8Megz> Frameworks for the introduction of credit systems and the modularisation of study programs. Resolution of the Standing Conference. Accessed 08 November 2020
- Kultusministerkonferenz (2017). Qualifikationsrahmen für deutsche Hochschulabschlüsse [Qualifications framework for German university degrees]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/359cgag>. Accessed 8 November 2020.
- Lewis, T. R., & Sappington, D. E. M. (1993). Ignorance in agency problems. *Journal of Economic Theory*, 67(1), 169–183. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jeth.1993.1064>.
- Lewis, T. R., & Sappington, D. E. M. (1997). Information management in incentive problems. *Journal of Political Economy*, 105(4), 796–821. <https://doi.org/10.1086/262094>.
- Liefner, I. (2003). Funding, resource allocation, and performance in higher education systems. *Higher Education*, 46(4), 469–489. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1027381906977>.
- Mathner, R. P., & Martin, C. L. L. (2012). Sport management graduate and undergraduate students' perceptions of career expectations in sports management. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 6(1), 21–31. <https://doi.org/10.1123/smej.6.1.21>.
- Mayring, P. (2015). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* (12th edn.). : Beltz. Qualitative content analysis: Fundamentals and techniques
- Meroni, E. C., & Vera-Toscano, E. (2017). The persistence of overeducation among recent graduates. *Labour Economics*, 48, 120–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2017.07.002>.
- Packheiser, A., & Hovemann, G. (2013). Rekrutierung von Sportmanagern – eine quantitative Analyse der Anforderungsprofile in Stellenausschreibungen. *Sport und Gesellschaft*, 10(3), 240–259. Recruiting sports managers: a quantitative analysis of the requirements stated in job advertisements.
- Patton, M. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th edn.). : SAGE.
- Petersen, J., & Pierce, D. (2009). Professional sport league assessment of sport management curriculum. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 3(1), 110–124. <https://doi.org/10.1123/smej.3.1.110>.
- Ross, S. A. (1973). The economic theory of agency: the principal's problem. *The American Economic Review*, 63(2), 134–139.
- Schlesinger, T., Studer, F., & Nagel, S. (2016). The relationship between competencies acquired through Swiss academic sports science courses and the job requirements. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 16(1), 115–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2014.995234>.
- Shilbury, D., Phillips, P., Karg, A., & Rowe, K. (2017). *Sport management in Australia: an organisational overview* (5th edn.). Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 101–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357>.
- Smith, J. K., & Hodkinson, P. (2009). Challenging neorealism. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(1), 30–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800408325416>.
- Spence, M. (1973). Job market signalling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>.
- Tsitskari, E., Goudas, M., Tsalouchou, E., & Michalopoulou, M. (2017). Employers' expectations of the employability skills needed in the sport and recreation environment. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 20, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2016.11.002>.
- Vossensteyn, H., Kolster, R., Seeber, M., File, J., Kaiser, F., Huisman, J., Gwosc, C., Muehleck, K., & Vukasovic, M. (2018). *Promoting the relevance of higher education: main report*. : European Commission.
- Wallrodt, S., & Thieme, L. (2020). The role of sports volunteering as a signal in the job application process. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 20(3), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2019.1598457>.
- Wicker, P., & Breuer, C. (2011). Scarcity of resources in German non-profit sport clubs. *Sport Management Review*, 14(2), 188–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2010.09.001>.
- Wohlfart, O., & Adam, S. (2019). *New age of sport management education in Europe – concluding report*. Aarhus: University Colleges Knowledge database (UC Viden).
- Wohlfart, O., Adam, S., & Hovemann, G. (2019). Zukünftige Anforderungen an Sportmanagementabsolventinnen und -absolventen aus Sicht der Arbeitgeber in Deutschland [Future requirements for sports management graduates from the point of view of employers in Germany]. In J. Königstorfer (Ed.), *Innovationsökonomie und -management im Sport [Innovation economics and management in sport]* (pp. 45–64). : Hofmann.
- Zhang, J. J. (2015). What to study? That is a question: A conscious thought analysis. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1123/JSM.2014-0163>.