

The role of sports participation on graduate employability

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Abstract

Youth unemployment around the world poses a major challenge to today's societies. One of the basic functions of education is to cultivate people to meet the needs of the labour market. Employability has been a challenge for graduates of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) due to their failure to meet the current labour market expectations. Human capital theory assumes that education determines the marginal productivity of labour, and that marginal productivity determines earnings. Those who attend university and obtain graduate-level status will, according to the theory, reap benefits for themselves and for the wider society, due to the skills and knowledge they can offer. Secondary data was used to collect data from various published sources. It was found that engagement in sport is viewed as a sound investment from the perspectives of various groups, with examples highlighting how sport provided 'added value' beyond subject-specific qualifications. Skills that graduates described that they had gained from sport were the same skills that employers said that they were looking for in prospective employees. Despite the importance of sports students are facing a number of challenges when wishing to engage themselves in sports.

Keywords: Sports participation, Graduate employability, Unemployment.

Introduction

Youth unemployment around the world poses a major challenge to today's societies. Youth without jobs are not able to be self-maintaining and consequently delay their adulthood by staying in the parental house, postponing marriage plans or stable romantic relationships and wait with childbearing until they are able to earn their own livings (Knijn, 2012). Employability has been a challenge for graduates of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) due to their failure to meet the current labour market expectations. Hence, HEIs have been blamed for producing graduates who fail to meet employment demands in the labour market (Kalufya & Mwakajinga, 2017). It is well known that one of the basic functions of education is to cultivate people to meet the needs of the labour market (Cai, 2013). Graduate employability is an issue of growing importance in higher education internationally and is of relevance to each of the principal stakeholders; students, their families and sponsors, higher education institutions, employers, professional bodies, national governments and regional entities (O'Leary, 2016).

In order to ensure that higher learning produce employable graduates most higher education institutions are exploring mechanisms for enhancing the student experience through the inclusion of authentic learning experiences and 'real world' assessment strategies in the curriculum (Ferns, 2012).

Definitions of employability have become increasing complex and have developed beyond simply being skills for employment to incorporate additional factors, including the development of values, behaviours, attitudes and competencies aimed at supporting career development, thus going beyond developing skills to gain a first job, and instead building the potential required for a longer term career (Allen et al, 2013). As noted by O'Leary (2016) a widely accepted definition of employability has been

developed by the UK Higher Education Academy (Pegg *et al.* 2012) that defined it as a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Employability can simply imply possession of relevant knowledge, skills, experiences and competences that are desired by employers or the labour market and they are more likely to make one successful in a particular job.

Sport has been arguably one of ways of adding value to students and makes them more employable (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, and Lewin, 2011). This study sought to look for more evidences from the literature to find the role played by sport on enhancing graduate employability.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study sought to assess the role of sports participation on graduate employability. Specifically the study aimed at assessing employability skills that are learned from sports and identifying challenges facing students in sport participation.

Research methods

This study used desk research to gather data for realization of research objectives therefore, secondary data only was used. Thirty (31) publications published between a year 2002 and 2018 were used. Desk research was used to enable access to an extensive amount of data across the globe.

Human capital theory

Since its founding at the beginning of the 1960s (Mincer, 1958; Schultz, 1959, 1960, 1961) and its fuller development in Becker's (1964) equations, human capital theory has constituted the primary social science narrative of relations between higher education and work. Human capital theory

assumes that education determines the marginal productivity of labour, and that marginal productivity determines earnings (Marginson, 2015). Those who attend university and obtain graduate-level status will, according to the theory, reap benefits for themselves and for the wider society, due to the skills and knowledge they can offer (Jackson, 2013). The theory affirms that people invest in themselves, through accumulation of different types of human capital like formal education, knowledge and information in order to constitute stocks of generally intangible human capital with the potential of increasing their owner's market and non-market productivity (Schultz, 1961). With graduate employability being high on many universities' agendas, it becomes vital that a curriculum delivers not only subject knowledge but also the opportunity for students to develop and enhance industry-specific skills (Dinning, 2017).

Transferable skills learned from sports and graduate employability

Samuels (2002) studied transferable life skills learned through sports participation by University athletes committed to their sport. Eight focus groups of three to six people actively engaging in university sport at Western Canadian University were interviewed. A number of important life skills were observed. They include time management, goal setting, teamwork, dealing with diversity, dealing with stressful situations, confidence, competitiveness, and leadership. The findings are consistent with those of Ghildiyal (2015) who identified eleven qualities that are gained from sport participation. They include team spirit, leadership skills, fair play, never give up, great leveler, focus, strengths and abilities, process and results, planning, earnestness and sincerity, observation and analysis.

On the other hand, the study of Lowden, Hall, Elliot, and Lewin (2011) which was done in the UK identified graduate skills and attributes that are valued by employers. These are, team working, problem solving, self-management, knowledge of the business, literacy and numeracy relevant to the post, ICT knowledge, good interpersonal and communication skills, ability to use own initiative but also to follow instructions, and leadership skills where necessary. It can be observed that majority of the employability skills can be learned through sports hence this puts students engaging themselves in sports to be in a better position of being employable than those who don't.

The above identified skills are crucial in helping individuals to become more successful in performance of various jobs in the labour market. One can arguably say that sport in one of important strategies of developing soft skills among university students and these skills cannot be easily acquired in the classroom environment. Students who are able to balance between classroom experiences and experiences from extracurricular activities have a double advantage over those who put more emphasis on classroom based knowledge only. Whether engaging in sport should just remain an optional that students have to choose or being

examined and be part and parcel of students assessment in colleges and universities is one of fundamental areas of discussion.

Dinning (2017) studied 30 undergraduate university students in the United Kingdom who were enrolled into a sports project. After being presented with a list of 16 employability/enterprise skills, in general the sports students perceived themselves as possessing a range of these skills. With the exception of networking, persuading/influencing and being able to develop new ideas and make things happen, over 70% of students agreed they possessed the remaining 13 skills prior to starting the project work. After the project students identified improvements in all skills to some extent, with 60% or more of the students reporting improvements in creativity, problem-solving, persuading and influencing, team work, project management, verbal communication, developing new ideas and making things happen, time management and flexibility.

Allen *et al* (2013) did a survey in England aiming at studying the impact of engagement in sport on graduate employability. It was found that those who took part in sport at university had a personal income greater than those who did not engage in sport. Additionally, those who did not engage in sport had the lowest levels of income. Graduates who had also been involved in the organization and management of university sport reported that this experience had the greatest impact on developing key skills for employability. Furthermore they were also the least likely to have encountered a period of unemployment in their career than other groups. Graduates who did no sport and no other extra-curricular activities at university were amongst the lowest earners, and were the most likely to have had periods of unemployment. A similar study with similar findings was conducted by Lenchner and Downward (2013). The findings suggest a link between different types of sports participation to initial access to employment and then higher income opportunities with ageing. However, these vary between the genders and across sports. Specifically, the results suggest that team sports contribute most to employability.

A primary research that was done in the United Kingdom by Griffiths, Bullough, Shibli & Wilson (2017) through which data was collected from 5838 graduates, 112 employers and 13 university senior executives as part of a mixed-methods approach. The research found that engagement in sport was viewed as a sound investment from the perspectives of all three groups, with examples highlighting how sport provided 'added value' beyond subject-specific qualifications. The triangulation of results from the different stakeholder groups showed that the skills that graduates described that they had gained from sport were the same skills that employers said that they were looking for in employees.

Provided that not all students are willing and able to engage in sport activities universities should provide enabling environment that will motivate students to engage in sports. If universities play this role well by putting more emphasis on sport it is probable that more students will engage in sports and ultimately become more employable.

Beside health benefits of engaging in sports students in higher learning institutions should be provided with physical education and knowledge on how sports can help one to become employable.

Challenges facing students' sports engagement

Time constraint

The study of Apaak and Sarpong (2015) done in Ghanaian public Universities identified time constraint as one of challenges that faces students when they wish to engage themselves in sports. It was found that time is not sufficient enough to help students effectively engaging themselves in sports and academics which is their primary objective. Another challenge has been lack of sports infrastructure. The findings are consistent with those of Hashim (2012) and Mirsafian (2014) who also found time constraint to be one of barriers of students' participation in sports. This has been attributed by the fact that universities do not find sport as one of important things to accommodate in their calendars and committing a reasonable amount of resources hence students have to find their own time for that in presence of unsupportive environment.

Insufficient sports facilities

A study by Zvapano (2017) assessed the state of sport infrastructural facilities in Universities in Zimbabwe. It was found that students are discouraged to take part in sports because insufficient facilities to accommodate them. Budget constraint was mentioned as number one reason for this situation however, the study found prioritization to be one of the challenges where authorities would give first preference to provision of academic learning facilities rather than sports infrastructure. Similar findings were reported in the study of Elmagd, Tiwari, Mossa and Tiwari (2018) which was done in United Arab Emirates involving a total of 542 respondents. In this study lack of facilities was identified to be one major challenges facing sports participation among the students.

Underrepresentation of women

The culture of sport itself presents a problem. In the third world countries sport activities have generally been regarded as male oriented and male dominated activities. On the other hand, female are confronted with a number of problems in their way to participation in sport (Jabeen, Marwat, Khan, & Ali, 2017). This has led to comparatively fewer women that engage themselves in sports activities. The study of Rayburn, Chen and Philips (2015) that was done in USA involved 63 female student-athletes from two National Collegiate Athletic Association-affiliated Division-I schools, who participated in volleyball, softball, basketball, tennis, golf, and cross-country. It was found that nearly 80% of the participants agreed that there was a difference in popularity and recognition in sports based on gender. Some open-ended comments specified that the male sports received far more recognition than female sports. They believed that more recognition was given to the male sports regardless if they are team or individual sports. It also

seemed that female athletes believed that they have to fight for the spotlight and support constantly regardless of the level of their success.

Girls and women's participation in sport is linked to a number of positive outcomes including a decreased likelihood for breast cancer, decreased incidence of smoking or illicit drug use, improved educational outcomes and academic performance, and decreased likelihood of depression, suicide and risky sexual behaviors during teenage years (Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, 2007). This implies that having barriers that restrict women to take part in sports activities is a denial to their basic rights. This is probably one of the reasons why female find more difficult to climb up the career ladder than their male counter parts.

Unsupportive curriculum in secondary schools

Sport Education curriculum may increase perceptions of a task-involving climate and perceived autonomy, and in so doing, enhance the motivation of students toward physical education (Wallhad & Ntoumanis, 2004). Physical Education is yet to be included officially in the Uganda Secondary School Curriculum while in Kenya the subject is included in the curriculum, but is not examinable at the end of the secondary cycle (Akiiki, 2009). Similarly, in Tanzania physical education is not examined at the end of secondary education something which make students and teachers not taking it seriously (Mafuniko & Pangani, 2008). This may lead to having students who progress to higher education with poor foundation and less motivation to take part in sport. Since an interest and a hobby of engaging in sport is developed during early stages of growth of children having curriculum that does not support engagement in sports in secondary schools may make it more difficult to start engaging in sports when the students get in to higher learning institutions.

Lack of Parental support

Many mothers and fathers, and especially those with lesser studies, ignore the physical and sporting activities (Reverter, Montero, Hernandez, Jové, & Coiduras, 2013). In the study of Mafuniko & Pangani (2008) it was found that some parents did not want their children to participate in physical education and sports for various reasons including a belief that sport has no any impact in their children's future, wastage of time, students involving in sports normally become immoral and the fact that girls and boys together wear shorts, which is a bad manner in Islam. Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann (2004) found that there is a connection between positive, supportive parental involvement and a child's level of enjoyment and success in the sport he or she is playing. Moreover, Wiersma and Fifer (2008) found that parental help seems to be very important in achievement of child's sports (e.g., bringing their child to a training session, supporting them during competition, motivating them when discouraged, providing them with feedback or sharing a child's success and progress in sports).

Conclusion

Sport has an important role in developing various skills that are crucial in making students more employable. Students who take part in sports are in a better position of being employed than those who do not since skills that are learned in sport are also valued and demanded by employers. However, sport participation has been challenged by a number of factors in and out of higher learning institutions. Time constraint, unsupportive curriculum, lack of facilities and lack of parental support are among challenges facing sport participation.

Recommendations

This study recommends the following;

Awareness should be raised to parents so that they can understand how important sport participation is to their children including in the area of employability. Educators and policy makers should consider physical education as one of important disciplines and activities at all education levels and make it examinable and encouraged. University managements should also find a proper way of formalizing sports in their schedules and supporting students who engage themselves in sport. Students who actively engaging themselves in sport by taking part in school and university teams should be motivated in various ways including offering them scholarship or waiving their tuition fees.

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