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Title Employability and graduate outcomes for sports students with widening participation characteristics – an analysis of a data derived from 2000-2015
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Employability and graduate outcomes for sports students with widening participation characteristics – an analysis of a data derived from 2000-2015

Higher Education (HE) policy challenges universities to enrol a more diverse student body and contribute toward enhancing social mobility. However, sensitisation to HE can be more challenging for those who are first generation or commuter students ((Ulriksen, Madsen, Holmegaard, 2017; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Those with socioeconomic disadvantage are more likely to commute to and spend less time on campus connecting with peers (developing a sense of belonging) aspects linked to learning gain (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Students from lower income households are less likely to complete their studies (Pike & Kuh, 2005) or gain professional employment (HEFCE, 2015; IFS, 2016). This is attributed to a lesser capacity to use social networks to their advantage (Hawkes, Cagliesi, DeVita & Sarabi, 2016; UUK, 2016). If students are given opportunities to link with employers this has been reported to enable professional networks to develop (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Hawkes et al, 2016). This study sought to explore the graduate outcomes for Abertay University sport students in the timeframe 2000-2015. Placement is a core feature of these programmes of study.

Method

Data mining the student record system revealed that there had been 923 sports graduates in the period 2000-2015, with valid e-mail addresses available for 452 alumni. Following ethics approval, a personal message from two long-serving members of staff was sent, inviting the graduate to complete a short 4-item survey visible within the e-mail. The graduate was asked to give a summary of their employment history since completing their degree, to list further qualifications gained, and to reflect on how their degree had prepared them for employment. Responses were matched with student demographic data enabling graduate outcomes to be explored. The Standard Occupational Classification system (ONS, 2010) was used to determine whether respondents were in graduate level roles.

Results

Approximately a third of the students (n=135) responded to the e-mail questions, and together with departmental records enabled graduate outcomes for 360 students to be examined. Respondents' characteristics are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The percentage of sports graduates from 2000-2015 matched to demographic characteristics

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is used as a national marker to indicate poverty. The lower two quintiles (SIMD20/40) are those most associated with deprivation and postcode is used to identify students entering HE from this background. Across the study period 23% of graduates came from an SIMD20/40 postcode; 47% came from further education (FE) and 22% indicated that they had a parent with a HE qualification.

Degree Awards

- Slightly lower proportions of SIMD20/40 graduates gained a good degree (2:1 or better) (36% versus 44%) but this was a non-significant difference ($\chi^2 = 2.61, p > 0.05$).
- Students who came from FE college were significantly more likely to exit with an unclassified degree ($\chi^2 = 84.7, p < 0.01$) the exception being the 2012-13 cohort ($\chi^2 = 0.13, p > 0.05$).
- Across the timeframe of the study, FE students (if completing the Honours stage) were significantly less likely to be awarded a 'good degree' (defined as 2:1 or better) ($\chi^2 = 20.3, p < 0.01$).
- After 2010-11, an FE student was as likely to be awarded a good degree (51% versus 59% of non-FE graduates; $\chi^2 = 1.24, p > 0.05$).
- There was no significant difference ($\chi^2 = 0.2, p > 0.05$) in the percentage of 'good degrees' awarded for 'first in family' graduates.

Graduate destination

- Graduates from SIMD20/40 homes were as likely to complete postgraduate study as other graduates (35% versus 38% for non-SIMD20/40, $\chi^2 = 0.75, p > 0.05$) and as likely to be in a sports-related job (75% versus 79% for non-SIMD20/40, $\chi^2 = 0.31, p > 0.05$) and in a graduate job (68% versus 68% for non-SIMD20/40, $\chi^2 = 0.8, p > 0.05$).
- While lower proportions of 'first in family' graduates had a postgraduate qualification (29% versus 42%) this was not significantly different ($\chi^2 = 1.27, p > 0.05$) and a 'first in family' graduate was as likely to be in a sports industry job (51% versus 47%, $\chi^2 = 0.04, p > 0.05$) and in a graduate level job (48% versus 56%, $\chi^2 = 0.35, p > 0.05$) as a student whose parent had a HE qualification.
- Graduates from FE were significantly less likely to have a postgraduate qualification (27% for those from FE versus 41%, $\chi^2 = 6.35, p < 0.05$), almost significantly more likely to be working in the sports industry (86% of those from FE versus 75%, $\chi^2 = 3.65, p > 0.05$) but there were no differences in respect of gaining a graduate level job (64% of those from FE versus 68%, $\chi^2 = 0.3, p > 0.05$).
- The background of the student had no significant effect on their sense of preparedness for their first job or for working life in general.
- Placement was considered a critical feature of preparedness for work.

Discussion

Abertay University defines its purpose as:-

- To offer transformational opportunities to everyone who has the ability to benefit from Abertay's approach to university education;
- To inspire and enable our students, staff and graduates to achieve their full potential.

Many of the graduates from the Abertay sports degree programmes would be considered widening participation and the literature identifies the challenges that students entering HE from a position of disadvantage can face in relation to graduate outcomes (HEFCE, 2015; Hawkes et al, 2016; IFS, 2016; UUK, 2016; Waller & Bradley, 2016). Therefore it is notable that this study has revealed non-differentiated results for Abertay sports graduates coming from FE, SIMD20/40 or 'first in family' homes in respect of graduate employment and preparedness for the workplace. With the exception of the FE graduates, there were also no differences in proportion of good degrees awarded or those gaining postgraduate qualifications. HEFCE (2016) has stated that those from deprived backgrounds are significantly less likely to progress to postgraduate study – however, this was not the case in this study. Professional careers can be accessed with a Masters award and may be a route to advance earning power and social mobility (BIS, 2015; Hoffman & Julie, 2012).

It is acknowledged that many of these students may not have had the social networks that could foster graduate employment and work-based learning opportunities can be important enablers (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Hawkes et al., 2016). Placement was voiced as a critical factor in preparing the students for employment and the high volumes of Abertay alumni working in sports graduate jobs was of note particularly given the questions being posed about work-readiness of graduates (BCC, 2016; UUK, 2013).

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