Industry based Postgraduate Scholarships in High Performance Sport

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Headline

Postgraduate scholarships are becoming more common in high performance sport. Every week it seems that there are new opportunities advertised on social media for scholarships (usually PhDs) that are a result of a partnership between a university and professional sporting organisation. Several important considerations are needed prior to the commencement of the postgraduate degree which can maximise the benefits for all the parties involved.

Aim. In this opinion piece we discuss the benefits, pitfalls and important considerations for the different stakeholders (student, sporting club/organisation, University) involved with these industry based scholarships.

Discussion

Many authors have identified the benefits of having a research based approach integrated within high performance sport (1-4). This has led to the development of industry based postgraduate scholarships where Universities partner with sporting organisations to provide these opportunities. The observations outlined in this opinion piece are based on our experiences as academics, practitioners and students involved in these scholarships. It is our hope that our experience through these different lenses will provide others with a template to help with the implementation of these scholarships that ultimately benefit everyone involved.

Benefits

Postgraduate scholarships can provide a number of benefits for the student, sporting organisation, and University. The most important of course being that the student has the opportunity to be funded while obtaining a PhD, while at the same time gaining invaluable experience working in high performance sport. In our experience, there are a number of additional benefits including:

- The sporting organisation gets specific research questions answered that can benefit their program/organisation/team. As a result, this can potentially provide a “competitive advantage” over other organisations.
- Opportunities may arise for current employees in the organisation to upskill and obtain a postgraduate qualification.
- Generate new research that is applicable to practitioners working in high performance sport.
- Universities can attract new students and positive exposure via the links with high performance sport.
- A postgraduate scholarship helps to formalise a link between high performance sport and a University. This may have ongoing benefits for both organisations. For example, this brings some credibility to the University but also allows the high performance club/organisation to demonstrate they are at the cutting edge.
- Allows the high performance club access to testing equipment/facilities/staff/expertise that may be additional to the PhD/postgraduate program.
- The scholarship may attract high quality practitioners that aren’t interested in a “lab based” program of research but can produce excellent applied work. It may be that these students are better placed to understand the environment and can work effectively in it.
- Turnover of staff in high performance sport (and Universities) can produce excellent applied work. It may be that these students are better placed to understand the environment and can work effectively in it.

What are the common pitfalls?

While many benefits exist for these sport based postgraduate scholarships, we have experienced situations that are less positive. Many challenges exist for the various stakeholders including:

- Mismatch in expectations of what research can deliver in the high performance setting. In some instances, high performance programs might be disappointed when they realise the outcome of the research project is not as definitive as they had hoped. Similarly, Universities can sometimes struggle with the lack of control compared to projects involving other populations in laboratory settings.
- Lack of understanding in high performance sport of what is required with a PhD and the nature of research. High performance programs can be enthusiastic during certain phases of the training year, but understandably, the needs of a research project can be quickly forgotten during periods of pressure (e.g. competition stress, spate of injuries etc.)
- Sometimes the importance of the research and the process is not well explained to players and coaches, which results in lack of buy in. There needs to be something in it for them. This can be particularly problematic when there is a change in staff.
- Lack of understanding in academia of the requirements and realities of working in high performance sport.
- Balance between practical application and academic rigor of research being conducted in the applied setting.
- Managing expectations of the student for obtaining a job with the organisation after completion – this is generally not guaranteed.
- Student being pulled into additional work responsibilities that takes time away from their PhD and writing.
- Requirements for embargo of research findings and the implications that has for publishing of data.
- Delays in communicating the results of research to high performance programs can reduce the level of buy-in very quickly.
- As the student is based primarily with the sporting organisation, this can result in a sense of isolation from supervisors/University/department activities.
- Turnover of staff in high performance sport (and Universities). The original partners and initiators of the relationship may move on which can result in the individuals...
becoming involved having a different understanding and/or interpretation of the various aspects.

- Sometimes it appears that clubs and high performance organisations “feel the need to have a PhD link with a university” but they don’t have a specific area or research question and therefore end up not being completely bought in to the process.

Maximising the experience for everyone involved

Now that we have identified potential barriers for an effective industry based PhD, how can these be avoided and overcome? In this section we will outline some key considerations for the various parties involved in the postgraduate scholarships.

Students.

- Never lose sight of the primary reason for obtaining the scholarship i.e. to complete a PhD.
- Develop the research program early! The question needs to be driven (or at least strongly supported) by the environment to a large extent in order to maximise buy-in.
- Clear expectations from all involved. Furthermore, consider that “complicated” is not necessarily better. The less invasive the data collection process the better.
- Have set periods of time where you can “ring fence” writing time without distractions. This may be dictated by the requirements of particular training and competition phases.
- Read widely.
- If possible, spend time regularly in your University department/school/research centre with other postgraduate stud ents.
- Negotiate a clear supervisory agreement that involves both the academic and industry supervisors.
- Have Plan A, B and even C in place for your data collection. Understand that high performance sport can be volatile and don’t be thrown if things don’t go as smoothly as you would like.
- Keep in regular contact with all your supervisory team and ask for help early if needed.
- Try not to get too caught up in the day to day servicing of the program (have an agreement in place very early about what is expected of you). It’s valuable to be involved but not to the detriment of the research. Remember that the primary reason you are there is to complete a PhD.
- An industry based PhD provides a great opportunity to be exposed to a wide variety of situations and professionals. Embrace opportunities to learn about things that are not specific to your PhD providing it won’t compromise time spent on your research.

Industry.

- Have a person within the organisation willing to act as the industry supervisor. There needs to be a supervisory “presence”. We have found that to optimise the experience, it is best to have either a supervisor in the environment who has a PhD or the University based supervisor with a close link with the program.
- Early on identify agreed outcomes for the research.
- Have a clear agreement on any required work responsibilities.
- Have a clear understanding of what the research can and can’t do (i.e. it won’t be the “silver bullet” that some might be expecting)

Supervisors.

- Maintain ongoing communication with the sporting organisation and key people involved with the research. Supervisors should regularly visit the student in the high performance program and add value to the program wherever possible.
- Develop a supervisory agreement with the student that covers key aspects of the relationship e.g. frequency of meetings, timeline to completion, resources for support, publication etc.
- Identify upfront any embargo requirements for the research findings. This has particularly important implications for publishing of data and the final thesis output.

University.

- Have clear processes in place for advertising, managing and reporting of scholarships.
- Remove unnecessary barriers to obtaining the scholarships.
- Remove unnecessary barriers to student progress, particularly excessive paperwork.
- Be realistic and flexible with what is considered “timely completion”. The environment is challenging and data collection (e.g. full season) takes up a large portion of the candidature period.

Summary/Practical Applications

Industry based PhD scholarships can have many benefits for the student, sporting organisation and University. By being aware of the potential barriers to success and having strategies in place to overcome these, it can be possible to maximise the experience for all involved.

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References


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