

Building Bridges: Fostering a Positive Relationship Between Interns and Supervisors in Exercise and Sport Science

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Abstract: The objective of this investigation was to gain an understanding of the learning experiences of undergraduate students pursuing exercise and sport science during their fitness professional internship. The study aimed to shed light on various aspects, including the personal development of the interns, the influence of supervision (where an academic supervisor served as a dual professional), and the feedback they received concerning their growth as fitness professionals. To achieve this objective, a cohort of 25 exercise and sport science interns actively participated in a focus group discussion. Through this qualitative approach, the interns' perceptions of the internship experience were explored, leading to the identification of four significant themes. The first theme that emerged from the interns' perspective was a favourable rapport with supervision. They highlighted the importance of having a positive and supportive relationship with their supervisors, which contributed to their overall learning experience. This finding emphasizes the role of effective mentorship in fostering professional growth. The second theme that emerged was a sense of responsibility for their learning. The interns expressed a proactive attitude towards their own education, recognizing the need to take ownership of their learning process and actively seek opportunities for growth. The third theme identified was contentment. The interns reported a high level of satisfaction with their internship experience, indicating that they felt fulfilled and engaged during their time as fitness professionals. This finding underscores the importance of creating an enriching and rewarding environment for interns. The fourth and final theme centered around the acquisition of professional skills. The interns acknowledged the significant development of their skills and competencies as fitness professionals during the internship. These findings hold insights for both academic and workplace supervisors in the field of fitness professionals. Supervisors can enhance the effectiveness of internships and ultimately contribute to the growth and success of fitness professionals. It is important to note that while this investigation primarily focused on the experiences of exercise and sport science interns, the outcomes have potential implications for other cooperative learning environments. Specifically, these findings can be generalized to similar settings within the realms of health science and wellness. By recognizing the transferability of these insights, educators and supervisors in related fields can adapt and apply these principles to foster effective learning experiences for their students and interns.

Keywords: Fitness, Professional, Education, Internship, Skills

1. Introduction

The internship represents an endeavour to challenge the dual-phase theory that rigidly segregates a period in one's life devoted to studying from another deemed "sacrificed" to work. It also aims to transcend the deeply ingrained separatist paradigm that persists within Italian culture [1]. According to this paradigm, particularly in the eyes of families, a young

individual who enrolls in a vocational education and training institution is regarded as a second-rate student, a scholastic underachiever compelled by presumed inadequacy or lack of commitment to "settle" for employment instead of pursuing the coveted path of academically focused high school education, renowned for its wealth of knowledge, leading to an exclusively non-manual, first-class professional future.

Such a paradigm has endured and, in certain respects,

particularly within the realm of culture, continues to persist until the brink of the twentieth century. It seemed to harmonize flawlessly with an elitist perception of knowledge, a knowledge wielded by a select few in exclusive settings such as academies or universities, distinct from the other facets of everyday life. This perspective wanes precisely with the advent of mass industrialization and Taylorist capitalism, as the pace of daily experiential action becomes ever more rapid and frenzied, prioritizing not so much the process leading to the end result, but the result itself. In this realm of immediacy, one cannot forego the assistance of both technique and theory in accomplishing a task, be it of a professional nature or otherwise.

Alessandrini, G. [2] emphasized the need to chart new epistemological and cultural trajectories capable of investigating and "giving account" of the changes occurring not only at the social, political, and occupational levels but, above all, in the educational and formative realms. Within this framework of general intellectual fragility, pedagogical reflection called for a new educational model.

Today, education must increasingly take the form of a laboratory rather than a mere provision and delivery of knowledge. This implies a different emphasis on reading contexts, creating shared maps, and monitoring collective intelligence rather than individual performance. The themes of formation, learning, and education are thus redefined within new networks that can keep pace with the uncertainty and mutability of emerging professional contexts. A dark cloud hangs over the future of the young and not-so-young, which schools and universities can attempt to address by equipping their students with an internship program through which they can experience the everyday realities of the profession, understanding when and how practice connects with theory.

The examination of internships has garnered considerable attention in academia, as an increasing number of governments and postsecondary institutions advocate for their integration into students' educational programs. Several comprehensive reviews [3-5] have contributed significantly to the breadth and variety of literature in this area. Nevertheless, despite the existing body of literature on internships, certain limitations impede comparability and validity. Scholars commonly recognize the issue of terminological challenges, as the lack of a consistent and standardized definition remains a noteworthy concern [6-7]. Specifically, the absence of a universally accepted definition may result in potential misunderstandings among key stakeholders, including employers, educators, and students, regarding the nature, purpose, and quality of internships. To address this problem and foster a consensus definition, the National Association of Colleges and Employers [6] proposes that an internship be defined as a form of experiential learning that combines theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom with practical skill development and application in a professional setting. The primary objectives of internships are to afford students valuable hands-on experience and establish professional networks within their intended career domains. Moreover, internships offer employers the opportunity to

evaluate and guide emerging talent.

The definition proposed by NACE [6] possesses noteworthy characteristics. Firstly, it offers a standardized definition that mitigates potential discrepancies resulting from diverse interests and perspectives held by major stakeholders, namely employers, educators, and students. Secondly, the definition presents an idealized perception of internships, considering them as a form of "experiential learning" that uniformly enhances students' social capital and professional networks. These two objectives are challenging to accomplish and should not be assumed as guaranteed outcomes. Hence, NACE's definition [6] should be viewed as aspirational rather than purely descriptive. Additionally, this definition provides a uniform representation of an experience that can manifest in various ways, while disregarding negative and potentially detrimental aspects of internships, such as worker exploitation [8-9] adverse influences on students' career aspirations, and the potential for internships to perpetuate inequality [10]. The presence and impact of definitions similar to NACE's [6] highlight the necessity for more ethnographic and student-centred accounts of internships.

In Italy, the implementation of educational regulations based on the credit system has integrated the educational internship into students' educational paths as a curricular internship (Art. 10 of D. M. 3/11/99 n. 509). The internship serves as a crucial tool for orientation, as it allows for the integration of knowledge acquired during university training with the practical skills obtainable in the workplace. Consequently, it represents a valuable investment for accessing the realm of employment.

Within the context of educational autonomy, a multitude of universities have bestowed significant importance upon internship activities, integrating them into the majority of new study programs. Consequently, the educational internship not only facilitates the acquisition of skills and professionalism that can be applied in the labor market, but also allows for the accumulation of educational credits necessary for obtaining a degree.

The inclusion of a curricular internship holds great significance in the cultivation of competencies and knowledge that enable their transfer and appropriate application in work settings. This experience assumes a pertinent role as it highlights the essential interplay between theory and practice, fostering the development of research and action processes. These processes are considered fundamental pillars for attaining professionally relevant skills that align with the demands of the labor market [11].

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of graduates' ability to apply their knowledge and skills acquired during their academic studies to real-world work environments. Consequently, higher education institutions have been incorporating employability skills into their curriculum programs [12] identifies these skills as encompassing appropriate knowledge, personal attributes, and effective contribution in the workplace. Although these skills are applicable across various disciplines, they are broad in nature and not tailored to specific degree programs.

Typically, curricula include sessions facilitated by the university's employability team, where students receive guidance on crafting curriculum vitae and exploring career options. However, these sessions are often led by staff members who lack firsthand experience in the sporting and exercising industry, thus providing useful but not definitive advice. One possible solution is to have academic staff members from the specific discipline deliver these employability sessions. However, it is worth noting that not all academic staff members have practical experience in the field, as some transition directly from laboratory-based Ph. D. projects to lecturing positions without working directly in the industry.

In such cases, it would be prudent to invite external practitioners to engage with students and share insights on entering the industry, as well as recount anecdotes about the realities of working in practical settings. This approach would offer students a more comprehensive understanding of what it truly entails to work within the applied setting.

Within the field of exercise and sports science, the process of transitioning from a student to a professional is widely acknowledged as a challenging undertaking [13-14]. The experiences encountered by students during their tertiary education often diverge significantly from the practical realities of working as a fitness professional. Consequently, criticisms have been levied against the formal education and training of these students, highlighting the existence of an imbalance in their knowledge foundation. Previous investigations have demonstrated that students possess a robust comprehension of muscle physiology and kinesiology; however, they may exhibit deficiencies in areas such as program design and implementation, as well as exercise technique [15].

Fitness professionals are experts who utilize scientific knowledge to train individuals and optimize their performance [16-18]. Their responsibilities include conducting specific testing sessions, developing and implementing safe and efficient programs for aerobic fitness, flexibility, strength training, and conditioning, as well as providing guidance on nutrition and injury prevention. Previous studies on fitness professionals have primarily concentrated on topics such as education, self-reflection, and professional development [13, 17, 19, 20-24]. Researchers have noted that the transition from being a student in the field of exercise and sports science to becoming a fitness professional can be challenging, with concerns raised about the imbalance in students' knowledge, particularly in program design, implementation, and exercise technique [15].

Effective fitness professionals possess a blend of advanced knowledge, practical skills, and interpersonal abilities. Alongside a solid foundation and applied understanding of the field, these professionals also demonstrate higher-order social and cognitive processes associated with effective teaching and mentoring, such as emotional intelligence, authenticity, sincerity, and role modeling. This has been supported by research conducted by these authors [12, 19, 20, 23]. Work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities are becoming

increasingly important in higher education, as they offer students the chance to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. In the field of fitness, WIL provides students with an in-depth understanding of the intricacies of the profession, including the extensive planning, networking, and coordination required to succeed [14]. By participating in WIL opportunities, students can gain a broad understanding of the field, supported by practical experience. Additionally, WIL in fitness provides a platform for reflective practice and mentorship, allowing students to shape their professional growth [25].

The literature on effective fitness professional internships proposes theoretical models that emphasize active involvement of interns in practical tasks, fostering a team-oriented environment, providing challenging opportunities to fill gaps in knowledge, and promoting autonomy and self-direction through reflective practice [14]. Despite these proposals, there is a dearth of empirical data on the experiences of interns in work-integrated learning-based fitness internships, and limited research on evidence-based models for such internships.

2. Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the students' subjective interpretation of their experiences during a fitness professional internship. Specifically, the study sought to explore the perceived impact of the internship on the students' personal development, introspective contemplation, fitness-specific methodologies, and their progress in relation to the supervision and feedback they received. Additionally, the study aimed to utilize the insights gained from the students' experiences to develop a relationship-based model for fitness professional internships.

The study was conducted at a large university in Italy, specifically the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. Participants in the study were undergraduate students majoring in kinesiology. A total of 25 students, comprising 14 females and 11 males, with a mean age of 22.8 years ($SD = \pm 1.2$ years), participated in a work-integrated learning program. This program required the completion of a minimum of 125 hours of supervised practicum experience in a fitness professional setting. The students were randomly assigned to one of two work-integrated learning opportunities: either a fitness center ($n=12$) or a personal trainer studio ($n=13$).

The work-integrated learning program was designed to provide students with practical experience in various aspects of fitness, including program design and implementation, flexibility training, aerobic and strength conditioning testing, and individual management. Certified fitness specialists supervised the students throughout the program. The average duration of the program for the academic year was 24 weeks ($SD = \pm 3.1$ weeks). On a weekly basis, students spent an average of 6.2 hours ($SD = \pm 2.5$ hours) on planning and 7.1 hours ($SD = \pm 2.8$ hours) on training individuals.

3. Methods

To collect data on participants' internship experiences, a semi-structured focus group method was employed [4, 14, 20, 23, 26]. This method was chosen to facilitate the expression of diverse perspectives and capture the emotional dynamics within the group context. The focus groups were conducted at the end of the curricular internship and were divided into four sections, each dedicated to different aspects of the internship: personal development, the impact of supervision and feedback, self-reflective practice, and fitness-specific practices. The interview guide, developed based on previous research, aimed to elicit detailed responses from the participants. A skilled facilitator led the focus groups, ensuring equal participation and adherence to the research questions.

The composition of the focus groups was determined by the type of internship in which the participants were engaged. Each internship group had its own focus group session to enable targeted discussions of shared experiences. The qualitative methodological guidelines for moderating a focus group were followed to encourage intern interaction and facilitate in-depth discussions [28]. The focus group sessions lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and were audio recorded using a standard dictaphone. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. To analyze the data, an inductive thematic analysis approach, following the six-step process, was employed [28-29]. This approach has been commonly used in fitness professional research [23, 24, 30]. The transcripts were thoroughly read and re-read to develop a comprehensive understanding of the responses obtained during the focus group discussions.

To effectively address the research questions, the responses related to specific areas of impact, such as personal development, supervision, feedback, self-reflection, and fitness profession-specific practices, were grouped together. Subsequently, manual data coding was performed based on the obtained responses within each of these areas. The work addressed qualitative issues of credibility and dependability in three ways. Firstly, respondent validation was performed by inviting participants to review the transcripts and dimensions identified to confirm that the interpretation accurately reflected their internship experience. Secondly, a range of verbatim responses to the interview questions was used to support the findings. Four dimensions that summarized the internship experience were identified and labeled as relationship, satisfaction, ownership, and professional specific skills.

4. Results

The primary finding derived from the data analysis was the presence of a positive association between the intern and the academic supervisor, functioning in a dual professional capacity. The interns expressed gratitude for a supervisor who established a structured framework for the internship and effectively managed that structure. Furthermore, the interns appreciated the supervisor's approach of granting them

autonomy in decision-making while providing support when necessary. Instances where the supervisor demonstrated specific behaviors, such as interacting with and motivating athletes, as well as correcting their technique, were particularly influential in the interns' learning process. The interns felt empowered to contribute to the internship experience and valued activities such as group brainstorming. They appreciated being treated as equals to the supervisor and felt a sense of honor, respect, and recognition, all of which significantly contributed to their overall satisfaction during the internship. It is important to note that the presence and impact of supervisor feedback varied among different internship groups, depending heavily on the internship model.

Interns considered the supervisor's presence during training sessions to be valuable as it facilitated real-time feedback on exercise technique correction, program design and prescription, and advice on overcoming challenges. Conversely, the absence of the supervisor during training sessions was associated with decreased intern engagement. Interns who received formalized feedback on their performance felt empowered to make a meaningful impact as fitness professionals, as evidenced by their positive responses during interviews. Feedback from athletes, parents, coaches, and peers was also recognized as valuable sources of input.

The second aspect identified in this study pertained to the notion of "ownership" and the factors contributing to it within the internship experience. Interns attributed the development of ownership to their supervisors, who communicated high expectations and provided clear job descriptions for the interns. The interns collectively assumed responsibility for planning and executing fitness exercise sessions, as well as coordinating with individuals involved. This approach enabled the interns to gain practical experience in assuming responsibility and preparing for the demands of the fitness industry. As one intern expressed, this experience served as a bridge between education and the industry, providing an opportunity to practice taking on responsibility and ownership.

The third dimension observed in this study pertains to the acquisition of professional-specific skills by interns. Through their internship experience, interns gained practical knowledge and expertise in designing and implementing fitness programs, monitoring individual progress, and providing constructive feedback. They developed the capacity to adapt programs to meet individual needs and learned to identify and address technical errors in physical performance. Moreover, interns enhanced their communication skills through interactions with athletes, coaches, and peers.

The fourth and final dimension explored in this study is the satisfaction experienced by interns. Interns expressed a sense of personal satisfaction upon witnessing the progress and improvements achieved by the athletes they worked with. They also derived a sense of accomplishment from taking ownership of their internship experience and the tasks assigned to them. Additionally, the establishment of positive relationships with their supervisors and fellow interns contributed to an overall feeling of satisfaction with the

internship. In summary, the acquisition of professional-specific skills, ownership, and positive relationships with supervisors and peers collectively contributed to a high level of satisfaction among the interns.

As a result, interns demonstrated a more purposeful and deliberate approach to their tasks, which encompassed planning training sessions, setting goals and progressions for individuals, and ensuring a constant motivation to achieve training objectives. Nevertheless, all interns acknowledged the encouragement provided by the internship program to engage in reflective practice. They reported engaging in reflection regarding their professional-specific competencies, such as exercise techniques, program design, teaching correct form and techniques, and individual management. Additionally, they reflected on their level of ownership and the roles they assumed within the internship. Through such reflective practice, interns aimed to attain excellence in delivering fitness programs to the athletes. For instance, one intern articulated this process by consistently evaluating possibilities for improvement or alternative approaches to enhance the effectiveness of the program.

The skills acquired by the interns can be classified into hard and soft skills, further categorized as foundational and applied practical knowledge [13]. These skills include proficiency in exercise techniques, program design, teaching correct form and techniques, individual management, leadership skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and reflective practice. However, interns acknowledged the absence of certain skills, such as networking skills, evidence-based practice, research skills, periodization, exercise cues, and Olympic lifting training techniques. Overall, the internship program fostered interns who possessed a deep understanding of the qualities of an effective fitness professional, who were adept at reflecting on their own performance, and who recognized the importance of continuous professional development.

5. Discussion

Previous research has conducted several studies and examined various associations to identify the essential behaviors, standards, and characteristics of effective fitness professionals [13, 31-35]. However, the present study presents a unique contribution by not only providing a description of the interns' experiences but also introducing a relationship-based model for fitness internships. This model comprises four fundamental components: relationship building, ownership, satisfaction, and profession-specific skills.

The findings of the investigation indicate that the relationship between the supervisor and intern, operating in a dual professional role, proved advantageous for the interns in several ways. Specifically, the supervisor exhibited leadership qualities, exemplified effective fitness behaviors, and offered feedback on the intern's performance, all of which contributed to a high level of satisfaction among the interns. It was also observed that supervisors who provided opportunities for

interns to assume leadership roles and engage in fitness coaching played a crucial role in the experiential learning process. While interns generally preferred passive participation during training sessions, they still relied on supervisors being available in the background if the session did not proceed as planned. Furthermore, supervisors were accessible for teaching through modeling or facilitation when learning opportunities arose. Personalized feedback on the intern's performance played a critical role in nurturing the relationship between the supervisor and intern.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of utilizing a "community of practice" approach in developing effective internships [26, 36-37]). This study facilitated the establishment of critical reflective practice, a significant factor in enhancing the learning outcomes derived from the internship [38]. Reflective practice in the context of fitness internships can be achieved through various methods, such as self-reflection, group reflection, and reflection based on athletes' pre- and post-performance testing results. The experiential learning cycle, crucial for abstract conceptualization [38-39], must be incorporated into internship models. It is essential to formalize the provision of feedback and performance management for interns. Allocating sufficient time for supervision and feedback is vital to ensure a high-quality learning experience for the interns [21]. Feedback should be systematic and formalized, regardless of the source providing it, which could be athletes, sport-specific coaches, and/or internship supervisors.

The sense of ownership over the internship experience was found to enhance intern motivation and engagement in the learning process. It also fostered a sense of belonging to the fitness profession. The study suggests that internships that grant interns greater ownership and involvement in decision-making can result in a more meaningful and valuable learning experience. This, in turn, may lead to increased retention and success in the fitness profession. Therefore, integrating elements of psychological ownership theory into the design and implementation of fitness internships could be beneficial for both interns and the profession as a whole.

The application of psychological ownership theory has been observed in various educational and vocational settings. Asatryan [40] defined psychological ownership as the outcome of student engagement, perceived control, identification, and a sense of belonging. The findings of the present study establish a strong connection between the fitness profession and educational research. Fitness professional internships typically require interns to commit to an extended period, spending several weeks planning and executing training sessions while fulfilling responsibilities. The interns in this study placed great importance on having the opportunity to shape their internship experience through involvement in the decision-making process and being entrusted with responsibilities similar to those of a fitness professional.

Previous studies have demonstrated that familiarity with anticipated experiential learning outcomes can enhance student

satisfaction with their educational experience and their dedication to a specific occupation [40-42]. In the present investigation, the internship advertisements presented various advantages associated with participating in the internship, which were categorized as experiential learning outcomes pertaining to the fitness field. The interns reported achieving proficiency in several areas based on feedback from supervisors and introspection regarding skills developed during the internship. These areas included working confidently alongside fitness professionals and sports coaches, designing and conducting fitness workshops, strategizing for seasonal fitness enhancements that align with the competitive season, implementing exercise tactics, and effectively collaborating with athletes across different age groups at regional, national, and international levels. Furthermore, awareness of their level of accomplishment in these activities contributed to an increased sense of satisfaction among the interns, with many reporting boosts in self-confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy.

A comparison of the internship groups revealed that the internship that replicated the fitness industry was better suited to prepare interns for the profession. This emphasizes the importance of clear internship objectives that are effectively communicated to interns and aligned with the development of effective fitness professional behaviors, as indicated by previous research [14, 20, 23]. A data-driven, intentional, purposeful, and reflective approach to fitness practice, along with the acquisition of profession-specific skills (both technical and interpersonal), are essential components of a successful fitness internship. The findings of this investigation, which highlight the acquisition of a variety of technical and interpersonal skills by the interns, are consistent with previous research that emphasizes effective behaviors of fitness professionals [4, 14, 20].

The skills acquired by interns during the internship were developed through a combination of supervisor modeling, active participation in fitness-related tasks, and contemplation on the effectiveness and efficiency of the employed skills. The interns' understanding of effective behaviors exhibited by fitness professionals served as a blueprint for their success. The process of reflection enabled the interns to identify their subsequent steps in professional development, thereby guiding the content of workshops conducted with their supervisors. This characteristic aligns with the behaviors of effective fitness professionals, who assume responsibility for their ongoing and lifelong development [24].

The outcomes of the focus group interviews conducted with the interns have resulted in the formulation of a fitness internship model centered on the establishment of relationships. This model proposes various practical approaches to nurture these relationships and integrate them into the internship experience. The primary focus is on building relationships with interns, which involves the passive involvement of supervisors during training sessions and the provision of personalized feedback to interns.

Moreover, the model emphasizes the concept of ownership by offering interns opportunities to assume leadership roles within the internship, allowing them to blend their internship experiences, and assigning them typical tasks performed by

fitness professionals.

To enhance satisfaction, the model suggests allocating adequate time for supervision and feedback, providing structured and formalized feedback, involving interns in the decision-making process, communicating performance standards and evaluating intern achievements against benchmarks, clarifying internship objectives, and facilitating self-reflection on fitness performance.

In terms of professional specific skills, the model highlights the importance of comprehending the behaviors exhibited by effective fitness professionals. It suggests that supervisors should model and facilitate these behaviors and skills, create opportunities for interns to shoulder responsibilities akin to those of fitness professionals, and provide avenues for interns to engage in reflective, data-driven, intentional, and purposeful practices as fitness professionals.

While some of these methods may overlap, their collective implementation contributes to the overall objective of nurturing interns' development into competent and effective fitness professionals.

6. Conclusions

Conclusively, this investigation has yielded the formulation of a relationship-based model pertaining to fitness internships, which has been derived from the first-hand experiences of the interns. Although the model's original purpose was to cater to the fitness domain, it possesses potential for adaptation within other contexts of work-integrated learning, particularly those associated with sports. Nevertheless, it is imperative to conduct further research in order to assess whether the application of the four dimensions of the internship model in alternative contexts elicits comparable favorable outcomes for students. Furthermore, subsequent investigations should focus on examining and analyzing specific outcomes related to work-integrated learning, such as workforce preparedness, employment attainment, and income potential resulting from the implementation of a relationship-based internship model. By employing both quantitative and qualitative measurements to evaluate these outcomes, it is plausible to gather empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of the relationship-based model.

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