Partnerships and relationships in cooperative education: Are stakeholder perspectives aligned?

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Cooperative education can be expressed in terms of a partnership between students, university and industry. A stakeholder-integrated approach involves formalised sustainable relationships between stakeholders and a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of cooperative education. This study examined, through a qualitative case study methodology, the stakeholder views of cooperative education partnerships in a tertiary sport education context. Students, industry and university academic supervisors had some degree of alignment in their understanding of the purpose of cooperative education. However, there was a range of interpretations of what cooperative education actually meant. The fundamental conception of integrating theory and practice that differentiates cooperative education from just ‘work experience’ was not clearly articulated. The perceptions of most stakeholders confirmed that cooperative education was considered a partnership. However, not all participants referred to a tripartite relationship. The students, industry and academics views supported multiple contingencies such as reciprocity, efficiency, legitimacy and synergy as important in the formation of cooperative education partnerships. Developing better strategies for communicating the meaning of cooperative education, along with a clearer understanding of partnership formation, should contribute to improving the management of the sport cooperative education experience for students, the university and the industry.

Keywords: partnerships, stakeholder relationships, cooperative education, sport.

Introduction

Cooperative education is a model under the umbrella term of work-integrated learning, where the aim is for students to integrate theory and practice and develop capabilities to enhance employability. Cooperative education can be expressed in terms of a partnership between students, university and industry. Multiple stakeholder relationships are therefore inherent in the tripartite structure. It has been argued that successful cooperative education programmes require a stakeholder-integrated approach (Cooper, Orell, & Bowden, 2010; Harvey, Moon, Geall, & Bower, 1997). This involves formalised sustainable relationships between stakeholders and a common understanding of the meaning, expectations, outcomes, associated responsibilities and level of commitment required by all involved.

When stakeholders actively and consciously participate, cooperate and collaborate, this can be called a partnership. The definition and characteristics of a partnership vary with the context in which the organisations are situated. ‘Partnership’ is often used interchangeably with other words that represent external linkages between organisations. In the sport industry interorganisational relationships (IORs) is the terminology frequently used to describe collaborative interactions similar to that evident in cooperative education. Babiak (2007) described an IOR as a “voluntary, close, long term, planned strategic action between two or more organisations with the objective of serving mutually beneficial purposes” (p.339). Various types of IORs exist on a continuum from a one-off exchange relationship, through to strategic alliances and in a business environment can lead to mergers and acquisitions. The determinants underlying the formation of an IOR (reciprocity, legitimacy and efficiency) align well with the concepts of a stakeholder-integrated approach to cooperative education.

It has been suggested that there are significant challenges to cooperative education partnerships through a lack of a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose along with different stakeholder expectations and motivations for participating in cooperative education (Beggs, Ross, & Knapp, 2006; Martin & Leberman, 2005; Patrick et al., 2008). The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of the cooperative education stakeholders (students, industry supervisors and academic supervisors) in the context of the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand in order to address the following research questions:

1. What are the views of the stakeholders on the purpose and meaning of cooperative education?
2. What are their perceptions of cooperative education partnerships and the nature of stakeholder relationships?
3. To what degree are the views of the three stakeholder groups aligned?
The outcomes of this study will enable areas of diversity and inconsistency to be addressed and will contribute to improving the management of sport cooperative education partnerships.

**Methods**

A qualitative case study methodology was used to provide a rich description of the experiences of the three stakeholder groups (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998). The intrinsic case was the cooperative education programme within the BSR at AUT. Embedded cases were the students, the academic supervisors and the industry supervisors within their own contexts.

The data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase consisted of the administration of a qualitative questionnaire (using open ended or sentence completion questions). Questionnaire responses were gained from 91 BSR students, who had completed their cooperative education experience in 2011, (response rate 79%) and 18 AUT academic supervisors, (response rate 68%). Twenty-eight industry supervisors responded to the questionnaire (response rate 44%). Industry supervisors were drawn from the sport or physical education departments in schools and a range of sport or recreation organisations in both the non-profit and commercial sectors. As the questionnaire was administered as part of a larger study, the questions relevant to this paper were focused on the stakeholders’ understanding of the purpose and meaning of cooperative education. In addition, the industry supervisors were asked why they had chosen to host a BSR cooperative education student.

Phase two involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of participants from phase one, in order to gain more in-depth responses. Participants (six students, five academic supervisors and five industry supervisors) were selected from volunteers using convenience sampling based on their availability for interviews. The interviews focused on the following themes relevant to this paper: the purpose and meaning of cooperative education; the concept of cooperative education partnerships; and the nature of the stakeholder relationships.

Questionnaires and interview transcriptions were analysed using content and thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data was coded and categorized by themes, using NVivo software.

**Findings and discussion**

**The purpose and meaning of cooperative education**

A stakeholder-integrated approach to cooperative education requires a shared understanding of purpose and meaning (Cooper et al., 2010). The questionnaire analysis identified multiple themes in the responses to the question *the purpose of cooperative education is...?* The main themes, with associated frequency counts, are summarised in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>FREQUENCY COUNTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students (91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain experience</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory and practice</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career clarification</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance employability</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop skills</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Although to ‘gain experience’ was the most common theme, it was often only part of the response given. Many responses included comments that focused on understanding the nature of careers in the sport industry, enhancing employability or developing generic skills. The interview responses affirmed the questionnaire findings. The responses failed to express any consistent views within and across the three groups that the purpose of cooperative education was to apply knowledge learnt at university in industry or more specifically to integrate theory and practice. When examining the full responses, rather than the individual themes, the stakeholders overall had similar views that the purpose of cooperative education is to prepare graduates to be ‘work-ready’, which involves developing the knowledge, skills and attributes that employers are seeking.
The questionnaire responses indicated a range of interpretations as to the meaning of cooperative education. Some described cooperative education as a tripartite relationship between student, university and the industry. Others made reference to an industry-student partnership or industry-university partnership. The interviews confirmed that most students and industry supervisors and all academic supervisors considered that cooperative education was a partnership. Some academics and students also responded that cooperative education meant the application or integration of theory and practice. Any reference to ‘theory and practice’ in the meaning of cooperative education was rare in the industry views. This is of concern as the concept of integrating the learning that happens in the university and the workplace is what differentiates cooperative education from ‘work experience’.

**Partnerships and relationships**

Oliver (1990) proposed a conceptual framework for the contingencies that determine the formation of IORs in the sport industry. Oliver referred to contingencies as “the causes that prompt or motivate organisations to establish IORs” (p. 242). Drawing upon Oliver’s framework, the interview findings illustrated that the formation of a partnership within the context of sport cooperative education aligned well with the contingencies of reciprocity, legitimacy and efficiency.

Reciprocity is based on a perspective that partnerships are formed for the purpose of pursuing mutually beneficial goals or interests. Motives of reciprocity require mutual support, cooperation and collaboration rather than being based on domination, power and control (Babiak, 2007; Oliver, 1990). This contingency is consistent with the basis of a stakeholder-integrated approach to cooperative education and was evident in these academic and industry supervisor views:

*It’s a partnership where everyone works together for a common goal, although we all gain different things from it (Academic I1).*

*So it isn’t just one person’s goal, its achieving goals for all three people and then working collectively to achieve those goals, supporting each other and working along the way (Industry I4).*

Reciprocity motives are evident when partners perceive that the benefits of forming an IOR far outweigh the disadvantages and costs (Oliver, 1990). In a cooperative education partnership each partner can offer the other mutual benefits through contributing their skills and resources. However, the outcomes they receive may be very different in return:

*There are mutual benefits for the student and our organisation. The students get to apply what they are learning in a practical environment as well as understand the work ethic required, and we benefit from having additional resources. It’s “real” learning (Industry Q22).*

Legitimacy is concerned with improving an organisation’s image and reputation and can be enhanced by affiliations or relationships with well-known organisations (Babiak, 2007). Individuals also tended to have a preference for forming partnerships with organisations that have a good reputation. The following comment from an industry supervisor in a secondary school highlighted how the image of the university and the BSR degree is enhanced through having a cooperative education relationship with a school:

*I want to take on co-op students for benefiting the school as well as the students and maintaining that relationship with AUT… The outcomes are to obviously have the student working within the sports department in a positive way and giving positive feedback to our students…we’ve actually got quite a few students who are going straight from here in year 13 into BSR the following year as soon as they have graduated, so I think it is a selling point from that respect [and] maintains that relationship (Industry I2).*

Increasing the awareness of the organisation to potential graduates was also seen as a legitimacy motivation for smaller and less well-known companies. This was often combined with the desire of an organisation to increase its reputation by having knowledgeable staff who can bring new ideas. The motivations for this industry supervisor for taking a student were:

*To help shape future outdoor recreation professionals, increase awareness of our organization, take advantage of help in the business and tap into the experience of students who are in the middle of new/modern teachings (Industry Q25).*
Efficiency contingencies are generally “internally, rather than externally, orientated” (Oliver, 1990, p. 245). In this study it was evident that industry motivations for forming a relationship were often driven by the need for extra resources to improve efficiency. A large number of the organisations that are involved in sport cooperative education (such as regional or national sports organisations) are ‘not-for-profit’, with small numbers of full time staff and a reliance on volunteers. The ‘value added’ short-term tangible returns were important for some:

*It helps us with our workload. I have to be frank about that. Being a sports organisation we run pretty lean and so that helps from that side of things (Industry I3).*

Oliver’s (1990) framework provided a basis for understanding some of the determinants of partnership formation, however, other motives and factors were evident in the findings. Synergy was identified as an important concept in the formation of cooperative education partnerships. In synergistic partnerships, partners achieve more working together than they could by doing the same thing on their own (Breen, 2001). Several stakeholders expressed similar ideas represented in the following comments:

*It’s two or more groups, in this case three groups all gaining something that they cannot access themselves but by working together as a partnership can achieve outcomes that are positive (Industry I2).*

*I don’t think the experience would be what it is if you didn’t have [each] other. I don’t think the university could replicate it without [the organization]. I don’t think the organisation could replicate such an experience without being pushed from the university behind them (Student I6).*

The multiple stakeholder relationships involved in cooperative education called for different levels of involvement from the stakeholders, at different times throughout the experience. A stakeholder–integrated approach implies that to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes the level of control should be distributed equally and total dominance by one stakeholder in the partnership may lead to an ineffective relationship. Two academic supervisors suggested that they perhaps had more dominance or level of responsibility in the partnership:

*Yeah I think it is a partnership, whether they’re all equal partners I’m not quite sure…possibly we are slightly more dominant partner because we set the rules. Because there are certain requirements that we stipulate… but yeah to call it partnership is appropriate (Academic I5).*

*It’s a three-way partnership and we can benefit as much as the student and the industry. I think it’s quite an equal partnership I’m always conscience that I have a responsibility, possibly more than the industry supervisor because I am paid to support my student and because of that I also need to maintain a relationship with the placement where they are placed. So I feel I have an obligation to make it work really, and make that partnership work (Academic I3).*

These views are in contrast to how some students viewed the partnership. Several students felt that they were in fact the main stakeholders in the relationship due to the investment that they were making in terms of themselves, time and money (fees). The amount of control they had, particularly in determining their learning goals and what they want to gain from the experience, was also evident in this comment:

*You’ve invested a lot of time and money into what you’re actually doing through the experience …you are the biggest stakeholder because of what you are doing and how you manage your time and all the processes that go with that create, they make you a stakeholder because you invested a part of yourself in the process… I had the ultimate, the biggest amount of control as to what was inputted into my particular project… I had the ability to effectively communicate what I wanted to study. Also I felt that I was paid attention to by both my supervisors, in terms of what my goals were (Student I4).*

Although most stakeholders interviewed shared similar views of the overall concept of partnership, one industry supervisor had a contrasting view:

*I don’t know if actually partnership is too strong a word, I think because there’s no outside indication of that so if for example we were a big organisation the rest of the organisation may not even know that we have got someone from AUT, and therefore it’s hardly a partnership. It’s not that we put it in our newsletter and tell the world. There is not a logo exchange, which you would expect with partnerships. So I think that is formalising it too strongly (Industry I1).*
The views expressed also recognised that it was common in the BSR context for placements to be negotiated at an individual supervisor level rather than through a whole organisation partnership agreement. Personal connections and prior experiences were often the motivating factors for industry supervisors to become involved in cooperative education. As Babiak (2007) points out, collaborative relationships in the sport sector are often formed among people who know one another. Individual interactions are important yet may be limiting factors in providing an enduring partnership. However, for long-term viability, organisations (both industry and the university) need to align strategically rather than be based on individual interests alone.

**Conclusion**

Strong relationships between educational institutions and industry are fundamental to the tripartite nature of cooperative education. The relationships exist at the individual supervisor level or at times at whole organization or institutional level. The alignment of students, industry and academics’ views, on the purpose of cooperative education suggests that the three stakeholder groups in this study were working towards a common goal. However, it was evident and of concern, that across and within the stakeholder groups there was a range of different interpretations of what cooperative education actually meant. The fundamental conception of integrating theory and practice that differentiates cooperative education from just ‘work experience’ was not clearly articulated by all parties. Multiple definitions of cooperative education exist across different contexts, however it is important that within the same context, stakeholders have a shared understanding of the definition and what this actually means. Therefore, clearer communication strategies are needed to ensure that all stakeholders involved with the BSR cooperative education programme are aligned as to what cooperative education means.

The perceptions of most stakeholders confirm that cooperative education was considered to be a partnership. Using Oliver’s (1990) conceptual framework for IOR formation, a better understanding of partnerships in the sport cooperative education context has been gained. The students, industry and academics’ views supported multiple contingencies such as reciprocity, efficiency, legitimacy and synergy as important in the formation of cooperative education partnerships. Understanding more about the views of the stakeholders in the partnership should contribute to improving the management of sport cooperative education experiences for students, the university and the industry.

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**References**


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