

# An Exploration of Sport and Recreation Students' Perceptions of Relevance of An Academic Literacy Course

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**Abstract**—Degrees in sport and recreation provide students with an opportunity to develop industry-relevant skills that include discipline literacy. However, student success in this discipline tends to fall below that of others. In response to this issue in the context of an academic literacy course, we surveyed 100 sport and recreation students about their academic engagement in relation to accessing course resources, and their affective engagement through their perceptions of course relevance to their degree and future profession. The findings indicated some behavioural engagement with frequent tutorial attendance but not with online lecture modules. Perceived relevance was limited, as the academic literacy course was seen by students as largely irrelevant to their degree and future profession. These findings offer insights for the development of teaching and learning strategies for sport and recreation students. This research contributes to the limited body of literature in this area and exposes a gap for future research.

**Keywords**—Sport and recreation, Academic Literacy, Student Engagement, Relevance

## I. INTRODUCTION

The sport and recreation industry is rapidly requiring more appropriately qualified individuals [1, 2]. More recently sport has been considered worthy of academic research and accepted as a legitimate pathway in higher education, particularly in New Zealand [1]. Despite this recognition by the industry and educational providers, lower pass rates for sport students than other students seem common [3, 4]. Factors influencing sport student success include: motivation, sporting demand, gender [5], negative stereotypes of college athletes by faculty [5, 6], alignment of one's own effort with misperceptions of athlete peers not valuing academic performance [3], engagement [7], personal study skills [8], embedding of academic skills with the discipline [9] self-efficacy [10], and poor study environment and skills [4]. There is a dearth of research on sport and recreation students' perceptions of relevance of academic literacy.

The concept of relevance in teaching and learning has a long history of promoting the idea of connecting school learning to current and future life [11]. In the relationship between student perception and engagement, previous research has found an increased motivation to study in students who perceived their course content as relevant to their interests and personal / career goals [12, 13]. However, even when a connection between educational curriculum and industry requirements exists, students may not perceive the relevance. As an example, studies have found students

may not perceive the relevance of their academic studies to future professions in clinical nursing [13, 14], science education [15–17], and music [18]. Investigating and developing strategies for teachers to promote student perception of relevance may help learners [19]. One way to investigate how the learning environment can facilitate student perceptions of relevance is to ask current students how they perceive their course as relevant or not.

The aim of this study was to explore engagement in terms described by Finn and Zimmer [20] of academic engagement (observable or self-reported behaviours such as attending tutorials) and affective engagement (perceived value of an academic literacy course (Knowledge Enquiry and Communication [KEC]) to their degree (Bachelor of Sport and Recreation [BSR]) and future profession in the sport and recreation industry). The research questions were: 1) To what extent do BSR students have academic engagement through accessing the current KEC resources? 2) Do BSR students have affective engagement through perceiving KEC as relevant to their degree and future profession? 3) Based on the students' reflections, what are the implications for the resource, teaching and external support of the KEC course for BSR students?

## II. METHODS

### A. Context

The university's Human Ethics Committee approved the study. Participants were 100 first-year sport and recreation students studying for a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation at Auckland University of Technology. This represented approximately 40% of the 2015 sport and recreation cohort. Participants were close to evenly divided between females and male participants. Of the 2015 sport and recreation cohort, 61% were male and 39% female. A range of ethnicities included: Europeans (45%), Maori/Pacific Island (37%), Asian (11%) and other (7%). The age distribution of this of this cohort was: under 20 years (52%), 20–29 (44%), and over 30 (4%). The cohort consisted of 98% domestic students, with the remaining 2% international.

### B. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire included questions relating to demographics, engagement in the course and access to learning support. Engagement was based on academic and affective dimensions as described in previous research [20]. Academic engagement was measured in terms of self reported tutorial attendance, lecture module viewing,



assigned readings and discipline specific welcome video. Affective engagement was measured by two open questions which were, firstly why they felt KEC was relevant, or not, to their degree and secondly why it was relevant, or not, to their future profession. Following a pilot of the questionnaire, the final version was used in this study.

Recruitment and questionnaire completion occurred after the return of the first summative KEC assessment, towards the second half of the semester (week 9). This gave participants enough time to experience the KEC course and receive feedback on their progress. Administration staff from the School of Sport and Recreation introduced the study and administered the questionnaire during a required attendance lecture. A reminder was sent the following week via an online announcement to all the BSR students enrolled in KEC to encourage those who had not yet returned their survey, or who had not attended the lecture and still wanted to participate to do so.

Data analysis included examining BSR students' academic engagement by accessing KEC resources and analysing the quantitative questionnaire data in an Excel spreadsheet. Simple statistics were calculated for demographic variables and the academic engagement with tutorial attendance, online lecture modules and learning materials, and academic support services. To address the research question of whether BSR students have affective engagement and perceive KEC as relevant to their degree and future profession, the quantitative ratings overall for the relevance of KEC to their degree and profession were calculated as percentages from the three possible ratings of "yes", "not sure" and "no". In the qualitative analysis of the open ended questions, we used a dual deductive-inductive approach [21, 22]. We developed further subcodes based on the students' responses. Inter-coder reliability was calculated by percent agreement and the codes reviewed, if necessary, until at least 80% agreement was achieved. This agreement is considered high [21]. Following this, discrepancies in coding were negotiated to full agreement.

### III. RESULTS

#### A. Engagement with course resources

The first research question was whether BSR students would show academic engagement with the KEC course resources. The degree of engagement is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Percentage of engagement with course resources.

Resource	Degree of engagement	Percent
Sport specific intro module	Watched	61
Tutorials	Attended 7 or 8 of 8	54
Tutorials	Attended 5 or 6 of 8	33
Lecture modules	Watched most or all	30
Course readings	Read some or most	24
Student learning centre	Attended workshop or appointment.	29
Weekly drop in session	Attended at least 1	6

Academic engagement by BSR students was mostly through the discipline-specific introductory video and the weekly tutorials.

#### B. Perception of relevance to degree

The questionnaire data indicated that only 39% of participants saw the course as relevant to their degree. The reasons mentioned (in order of frequency) were that it helped with: writing, research, referencing, other courses in the degree, communication, presentation skills, critique, grades, understanding the required standards, reading and academic skills. The following quotes illustrate some of these reasons:

Academic writing is necessary to communicate effectively, no matter what career path one chooses to take. Employers struggle to find graduates with appropriate level of communication skills. (Student 16)

I know it's relevant in teaching written and oral skills which will be used further on in our degrees and make essay writing/presentations etc. easier. (Student 63)

There were more students, however, who indicated they were not sure or did not think KEC was relevant to their degree. Of those who were not sure, some mentioned possible or uncertain value in the course. The value tended to be related to writing, research and referencing. The following quotes illustrate this:

I don't see how KEC will help me to gain a bachelor of sport though it does give tips on writing. (Student 41)

KEC is useful for learning how to write academically but I don't feel that it has anything to do with BSR. (Student 52)

#### C. Perception of relevance to profession

The questionnaire responses indicated that only 19% of participants considered KEC to be relevant to their profession, 45% were not sure and 33% stated it was not relevant (3% did not answer). Students who saw the relevance to their profession mentioned the usefulness of academic skills in their future profession. The following quotes indicate these views:

Yes, it is as it demonstrates critical analysis and research skills and also allows me to look into my future career by giving me the opportunity to choose the question I want. (Student 15)

Whether I am a personal trainer or fitness instructor, I need experience in speaking to a group of people and teaching. (Student 39)

By having an extra paper that is dedicated to writing and reading skills can help me improve in

BSR through the years and in my career in sports industry. (Student 93)

Not necessarily in academic writing but perhaps useful in terms of research to help an industry grow. (Student 94)



The students who were not sure about the relevance of KEC to their profession mentioned not being clear about how the skills would transfer to their profession. In some cases, the students were not sure of what their future profession would be and were therefore unable to assess the relevance of KEC to their career. The following quotes show their views:

KEC is helpful for teaching how to research, but I don't think that in my future career that will be totally relevant. (Student 33)

Studying sport and rec, I don't believe there is a lot of use for this content in the industry. (Student 53)

I feel that it is relevant but I don't know exactly how relevant it is. (Student 96)

I don't think I'm going to need to fully write in detail for later in life. (Student 97)

#### IV. DISCUSSION

##### A. Engagement with course resources

Academic engagement by BSR students was mostly through the discipline-specific introductory video and the weekly tutorials. This is not an acceptable level of engagement as the content in the online lecture is applied in the tutorials. Therefore, failing to watch the lecture modules prior to the tutorials is likely to decrease the learning achievable in tutorials. The lack of online lecture module engagement shows that there needs to be further investigation into their disengagement to this learning resource. Higher engagement with online modules requires a strong instructor presence, multiple communication channels, and meaningful interaction between students and educator [23]. These strategies may improve the online experience; however it is still an online format, which does not have face-to-face interaction. BSR staff reflections noted a stronger response from students towards face-to-face interactions as opposed to self-directed online learning resources. Therefore, BSR first-year course curriculum development continues to emphasise face to face interaction between students and staff, rather than following the trend towards blended learning.

The findings also suggest that few students regularly engaged with the assigned readings, despite this being important resources for the course. It is however, a familiar trend that university students do not always complete the set reading tasks [24]. One of the most important decisions that university educators will make for their students is the selection of required readings [25]. A main reason suggested is that many students have limited time left in their schedules to focus on private study [26]. Although the more motivated students will often attempt to read the assigned texts, many students will give up if the readings are deemed beyond their competence levels. Considering this limitation of time, it is vital that the assigned readings are perceived by the students as highly relevant. Academic literacy readings could include a sports focussed academic

skills reading such as Tara Magdalinski's (2013) *Study Skills for Sports Studies*.

##### B. Perceptions of relevance to degree and profession

There appeared to be a change in perception as students recognised the value of KEC later in their studies. This is consistent with previous study findings that as students move through their course of study, their perceptions of the importance of core skills changes and they grow to understand their importance [14, 17]. Likewise, graduates had noted relevance between their academic study and current sports career requirements [27]. Thus, the challenge becomes how to make students perceive the value of academic literacy at the start of the course.

The findings showing a perceived disconnection between KEC and their degree as students mentioned the course had “nothing to do with sport”, “doesn't really play a big part” and that it was different from “our actual paper”. In a study with science education, the use of inappropriate structures and contexts in curricula was mainly responsible for students' perceived lack of relevance. Therefore, it was suggested that contexts and topics need to strongly fit the learner's needs to gain higher levels of perceived relevance [28]. This may also apply in the current study where the topics and examples are drawn from a variety of disciplines to cater for the wide range of students enrolled. Therefore, with a relatively large proportion of examples not applying to sport and recreation students, it is not surprising that they do not perceive the course's relevance.

Many student responses indicated a lack of awareness of how academic skills could be used in their profession. For example, Student 26 focused on a very specific referencing format rather than seeing the general skill of following a formatting convention that may also be required as part of the writing needed in their future profession. Likewise, Student 35 identified “this type of structured writing” rather than seeing the more general skill of being able to determine a required structure and therefore adapt writing structure to fit the writing task in a future professional context. Another study noted similar narrow judgements of irritating details rather than understanding general concepts by her nursing students and suggested that students have their own conception of professional life and use that to determine their perceptions of relevance [14]. Their perceptions of nursing as a skills-based profession that did not require the more general knowledge content. She noted this is an issue for educators who prepare students to be professionals as the students may not appreciate the influence of professional expertise on curriculum development.

Sport and recreation students may have the same conception of a career in sport and recreation as being solely skills-based, overlooking the need for academic competency. As Student 35 wrote not being able to “see” the relevance of KEC in sport and recreation may indicate that because much of the skills taught in KEC are not visible. Students may focus on the visible skills without understanding the cognitive processes that underpin these skills.

##### C. Implications for teaching

Greater perceptions of relevance to career goals could be achieved by making the connection between academic



skills and the sport and recreation industry more explicit. One study recommended using discipline-specific examples to demonstrate relevance to students [4]. A positive correlation has been found between teachers making content relevant to students and their motivation to study [12]. In our context, this could be achieved by incorporating exercises or assessments that use a realistic industry task such as a funding project or proposal plan. Furthermore, providing teaching staff with more sport and recreation industry knowledge and specific examples that can be used in the classroom will highlight the links between content and profession. One study questioned how teachers could use personal experiences to increase student perceptions of the relevance [12]. KEC staff who do not have sport backgrounds could learn of experiences from staff who do and share these with students. This was suggested as a strategy for nursing and non-nursing teaching staff as a method to increase the perceived relevance of content between subjects [14].

Another implication for teaching from our findings is to make it clearer to students how academic literacy can prepare them for future employment outside of the sport industry. We noted several students who were unsure of their future profession. Other research has also found many sports students were in the process of deciding their career goals as they progressed through higher education. Furthermore, that many sports graduates did not enter employment in the sports industry [29]. Therefore, demonstrating how academic literacy skills are relevant for both a career in the sport industry or a wider range of occupations could increase the perceptions of relevance for those students who have entered the BSR, but are undecided about their future career.

Our findings demonstrated limited behavioural engagement with course resources and the majority of students not perceiving the relevance of KEC to either their degree or future profession. We noted that even students who perceived relevance of KEC to their degree did not do so in great depth. Perceiving KEC as useful because “we write a lot of formal reports” (Student 33) or “will be used further on in our degree [to make essay writing easier]” (Student 63) shows a surface level understanding of relevance. Educators could make these skills more relevant by showing how the skills achieve course learning outcomes in both KEC and in other current and future courses.

Student reflections and previous literature offer some potential teaching strategies that may improve students’ behavioural engagement and perceptions of relevance to degree and professional goals. Greater perceptions of relevance to academic degree goals could be achieved by making the connection between academic skills and other present and future courses more explicit. A teaching strategy identified was to explain how current material relates to future classes [19]. In our context, this could be facilitated by understanding by both KEC and BSR staff of the association between academic literacy and sport professional requirements. All staff could then mutually promote the interconnecting relevance of their courses to the students. Perceptions of relevance could also be

facilitated by using student peers. Others suggested a peer-discussion approach can encourage sports students to share their peers’ greater understanding of positive commitment to academic performance [3]. In our context, we could invite third year students (level 7) (who have already completed KEC) to explain how they apply academic literacy skills to the other courses in their degree.

The possible limitation of our investigation is that we narrowed our scope to perceptions of relevance to degree and future profession in the sport industry. However, part of the graduate profile for BSR students is to become critical thinkers and ethical, global citizens. Academic literacy skills are useful for this, regardless of the profession students enter. This aspect of relevance could also be investigated in the future to see how students perceive this dimension of relevance and how it could be increased through learning and teaching practices.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study examined academic engagement and affective engagement through the perception of relevance of an academic literacy course in a cohort of first-year sport and recreation students at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The results showed less than optimal engagement with the course resources. Most students did not perceive the academic literacy course to be relevant to their degree or future profession in sport. The importance of this work is that it offers insight for educators of sport and recreation students for the development of teaching and learning strategies to increase perceptions of academic literacy relevance to sport which in turn may lead to more engagement and success.

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