



Shahid Bahonar
University of Kerman



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Analysis of The Status of Academic Education in Sport Management Based on Documents and The Lived Experience of Experts: A Case Study of Iranian Universities

Hamid Ghasemi¹  

1. Corresponding Author, Professor of Sport Management Department, Payame Noor University of Tehran, Iran.
Email: h_ghasemi@pnu.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to assess the state of academic education in sport management in Iran. A mixed methods research approach was utilized, involving the collection of documentary data from relevant websites, followed by interviews with experts in sport management education. The participants were purposefully selected using a non-random method. The findings revealed the existence of 65 doctoral programs in sport management, with a target of attracting 266 students, as well as 261 master's programs in three tracks within sport management, aiming to draw 3554 applicants. Furthermore, there are approximately 230 faculty members in sport management. The experiences of experts highlighted a decrease in the average quality and motivation of students in sport management programs. One of the reported reasons for this was the lack of legal support in attracting specialized individuals in this field to the job market.

Introduction

Assessment, accreditation, and accountability are important in higher education. National organizations that focus on specific subjects often set up the courses, check degree programs, and make sure that the quality of the programs is good (Dane-Staples & Burakowski, 2023). The sport management education program in Iranian universities aims to train professionals and experts in this field. These programs have been under evaluation and change at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. It seems that this trend should continue in line with national and international developments (Arab Narmi & Khalilian, 2020; Hosseini Ravesh et al., 2019). Philosophy plays a vital role in the content of sport management education. It helps to cultivate advanced problem-solving skills and influences personal beliefs, values, and actions. Engaging in philosophical inquiry enables students to think critically and make wise decisions. The philosophies of sport management education prepare students for successful careers in the field (Shapiro, 2021).

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It's important to see what students learn in approved sport management programs and how schools affect that. Despite differences between schools, the content of approved programs is generally similar, with a focus on hands-on learning, business concepts, and sports marketing (VanSickle et al., 2023).

In the field of sport management, there is an assumption that education should prepare individuals for professional practice. This has evolved from philosophical approaches to emphasize the necessary skills and knowledge required in the field. This implies that education for professionals should encompass appropriate behavior and the delivery of quality services. The contemporary understanding of professionalism places emphasis on financial rewards, status, power, and privilege, which serve as important motivators for pursuing university education (Smith & Westerbeek, 2004). The philosophy behind sport management education varies, with some programs focusing on business opportunities, others on elite athletic performance, and some seeing sport management as a means to promote sports participation (Smith & Westerbeek, 2004). Sport management programs are shaped by the job opportunities and demands in the industry, resulting in a range of approaches, from practical skills and vocational training to more theoretical and holistic education. This has led to discussions about the role of university sport management education in providing a comprehensive professional education. Educators now see professionalism as a blend of behavior and occupation, focusing on outcome-oriented managerial perspectives and the competencies needed for successful operational results. The prevalence of business and commerce degrees in sport management has raised questions about program content and delivery. While educators may not control the professional status of sport management, they play a crucial role in university curricula (Ghasemi et al., 2020; Smith & Westerbeek, 2004). Universities are undergoing transformation due to broader social and economic changes, particularly the shift from industrial to post-industrial systems. This transition has given rise to the economy of common good and its impact on education, research, and knowledge dissemination. The shift to post-industrial systems has affected various sectors, including education, healthcare, and research, driven by technological advancements and globalization. In the context of these changes, sport management programs require a philosophical and methodological framework to understand the complexities of university transformations. This includes examining how sport organizations are evolving in the post-industrial era, emphasizing collaboration, and the development and sharing of technologies that facilitate teamwork. This shift also involves voluntary activities for mutual benefit and the exchange of knowledge and experiences in social networks. The analysis offers a detailed exploration of the evolution of universities across historical eras, outlining the characteristics and changes associated with the third generation university in the context of the super-industrial era (Lapteva & Efimov, 2016). Fourth generation universities are entrepreneurial, opportunity-creating, creative, and pioneering in nature, playing an effective role in solving social problems. On the one hand, fourth generation universities have a significant impact on the environment and local and regional development, and on the other hand, they provide the conditions for their own transformation and development, and in fact, they go beyond education, research, and entrepreneurial creation and opportunity-making for local and regional development. Fifth generation university refers to promoting sustainable development and preparing students for the demands of society. It discusses the role of universities in promoting sustainable development and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration. It underscores the crucial role of sport management programs in preparing students for the challenges of the future (Rosak-Szyrocka et al., 2022). Won and Bravo (2009) emphasize that quality teaching and course content influence student satisfaction. They discussed how attitudes are formed and how they affect behavior of sport management students. Their study talks about how important it is to consider students' opinions when designing new courses in sport management programs. It discusses to understand what students prefer in different courses. This knowledge help understand how to choose important factors when designing courses and consider the perspectives of different people involved, such as students, academic staff, and employers (Won & Bravo, 2009). Aims and Silk (2005) talk about the need for a more thoughtful and inclusive way to do research in sport management. They suggested researchers to understand the history and social context of sports organizations better and do research for a longer time. They also talk about using new ideas

and methods in research with different ways of thinking and doing things (Amis & Silk, 2005). There is debate about the value of obtaining specialized accreditation for sport management programs, with the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) being the sole provider of this accreditation. COSMA assists schools in developing quality sport management programs and ensures that students acquire the necessary skills. A study examined the opinions of students at a COSMA-accredited school regarding their sport management classes. The students expressed satisfaction with the classes, found them beneficial, and considered them relevant. This indicates that obtaining COSMA accreditation can lead to program improvement and student satisfaction (Sellars et al., 2023). Another study examines the sense of belonging and support among individuals in sport management programs, particularly focusing on faculty and doctoral students. It identifies three main themes: initial feelings about fitting in, adaptation to the program's culture, and areas where the fit may be lacking. The faculty's experiences are characterized by subthemes such as coachability, possessing a diverse skill set, practical experience, specific research interests, and statistical knowledge. On the other hand, doctoral students' experiences encompass subthemes related to funding, initial interactions, geographical location, foundational knowledge, and the sense of belonging to a group (Martyn et al., 2021).

Sport management research employs various approaches, including intradisciplinary, multidisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. Intradisciplinary research occurs within a single discipline or field of study, involving collaboration among researchers from different subfields within sport management. Multidisciplinary research integrates knowledge and methods from multiple disciplines, with researchers from various fields contributing their expertise to sport management projects. Cross-disciplinary research involves the exchange of ideas and methods between different disciplines, addressing complex issues in sport management. Interdisciplinary research integrates knowledge and concepts from different fields to create new understanding or frameworks, while transdisciplinary research goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to address real-world problems, often involving collaboration with non-academic stakeholders. These diverse approaches offer unique strengths and potential for innovation and impact in addressing complex issues in sport management (Whitley et al., 2022). Gammelsæter (2021) highlights the shift in focus within sport management from sport organizations to industry management, advocating for a renewed emphasis on understanding sport as a societal institution. He expresses concerns about the dominance of commercialism and managerialism in the field and emphasizes the need for a more sport-focused approach. Additionally, he suggests that journal editors and editorial boards play a role in influencing research and debate within the field. His study examines the impact of commercialization on sport, athlete development, and potential challenges such as doping and corruption (Gammelsæter, 2021).

Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) provides different information about sport management scholars and their scientific results with an opportunity to be seen internationally (Yazdani et al., 2015). Sport management as a young discipline need regular assessment of scholars and their scientific results in order to development (Ghasemi et al., 2021; López- Muñoz et al., 2003). The Google Scholar Database enables the identification of sport management researchers from around the world (Rahbarinejad, 2021). The academic field of physical education and sports sciences in Iran has a history of about a century. While it began in the 1930s with a diploma program for physical education teachers, it gained momentum in the 1970s with the hosting of the Asian Games in Iran, leading to the establishment of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs in sports sciences. Initially, specialized areas such as sport management programs were only offered at the doctoral level. However, significant developments occurred in the field of sports sciences in Iran from 1990 to 2020 (Ghasemi et al., 2021). Specialized areas were first introduced at the master's level and later at the undergraduate level, but eventually, the undergraduate program returned to a general sports sciences program. At one point, there were six tracks in sport management at the master's level and three specializations in doctoral sport management. After a five-year period and educational feedback, the three specializations in doctoral sport management were merged into a general sport management specialization, and the six tracks in master's sport management were

reduced to three. The current three specializations in the master's sport management program in Iran include "sports marketing and communication management", "event and sports tourism management", and "sports organizations and clubs management" (Ghasemi et al., 2021). In a study, the quality of the doctoral program in sport management was examined from the perspective of experts, and the results emphasized the need for their revision (Hosseini Ravesh et al., 2019). Another study found that over 90% of the curriculum at selected universities in world is divided into 26 subject areas, while sport management education in Iran is only covered in 21 subject areas. The bachelor's degree in Iran is broadly defined, with sport management being a small and limited part of it. However, at the master's level, there is more specialized and differentiated academic focus on sport management. As a result, there appears to be a lack of sufficient cognitive and empirical skills to qualify for and enter a master's program in sport management in Iran. (Arab Narmi & Khalilian, 2020). The changes in the field and tracks of sports sciences over the past three decades have been significant, and it appears that a major portion of these changes has been influenced by global developments and growth in sports sciences. Overall, this general question was created for researcher to investigate the current status of sport management educational programs in Iranian universities based on official websites, and what the perspective of experts will be based on this information.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to analyze the situation of sport management education in Iran. The research method was sequential explanatory mixed method. Initially, a quantitative method was used to collect quantitative data, and then, based on the quantitative findings, the design of the question was approached with an interpretative phenomenological perspective of the experts. The documentary data was collected from relevant websites in November 2023 and is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Official Websites for Data Collection in Documentary Method

Websites	Descriptions
/https://www.sanjesh.org	The official website of the Assessment and Education Organization of Iran.
https://mapfa.msrt.ir/	The official websites of the research services of the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.
/https://scholar.google.com	Researcher database in various fields.
/https://iaui.ir	The official website of the Islamic Azad University of Iran.

The data related to the number of admissions for the field of sport management for the year 2024 at the master's and doctoral levels was collected from the relevant examination booklets on the website of the sanjesh.org. Information regarding the faculty members of sport management was gathered from the mapfa.msrt.ir. For the Islamic Azad University, relevant information about the professors was collected from the central website by identifying the university units. The information on the status of sport management professors in Iran, scientifically compared to other researchers in this field globally, was collected from the Google Scholar database. Subsequently, data related to the status of scientific journals related to sports management was also collected from the mapfa.msrt.ir. For the analysis of the data obtained from the quantitative section, descriptive statistics and frequency distribution tables were used.

For the second phase and the design of phenomenological questions, educational planning experts with more than 2-decade experience in the field of sport management were consulted. To this end, the questions began with recognized individuals and continued with the snowball method until reaching 14 participants, repeating answers and the absence of new ideas. To ensure the adequacy of the sample, interviews were conducted up to 17 participants. For each interview, a 10-minute report on the quantitative findings was provided, followed by questioning the expert about their experiences over the past two decades in each area. The expert was then asked to indicate potential reasons for changes based on their experiences. The collected data was analyzed using common thematic coding.

The study aimed to assess the credibility of the research data, focusing on reliability, validity, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To ensure credibility and reliability, intra-subject agreement coding was used. A sport management expert defined the research topic, and interviews were randomly coded. Codes that agreed were labeled as “agreement” and those that disagreed as “disagreement”. The specific codes were then used to calculate consistency and reliability, resulting in 89% consistency. The credibility, desirability, and reliability of the codes should be considered, as well as the quality and validity of the research and measurement tools. The study also considered the accuracy and validity of the research method, seeking input from knowledgeable individuals for coding, concept clarification, data extraction, and theory development.

Results

The findings from the website of the sanjesh.org presented statistics as described in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of the programs and students for them

Degree	Number of Programs	Number of Students for Programs
Doctorate (Ph.D.)	65	266
Master (All Tracks)	261	3554
Master of Sports Marketing and Communication	52	722
Master of Sports Event and Tourism	98	1356
Master of Sports Organizations and Clubs	111	1476

In Iran, there is no tracks in sport management at the bachelor's level. The findings related to the faculty members of sport management on the mapfa.msrt.ir and the units of the Islamic Azad University were organized as described in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of sport management faculty members in Iran

Universities	Sport Sciences Faculty Members	Sport Management Faculty Members	Sport Management Percent
All Universities	850	230	27%
Governmental	385	122	31%
Non-governmental	465	108	23%

The findings related to the Iranian sport management researcher from the Google Scholar database were organized as described in Table 4.

Table 4. Sport management scholars in Google Scholar database

Scholar Label	Total Scholars	Iranian Scholars	Iranian Precents
Sport Management	906	265	29%
Sports Management	260	22	5.8%

In Google Scholar, people are labeled as “Sport Management” and “Sports Management”. Some people are labeled in both sections. In the indexes of both sections, the highest citation is 20627;

this is while in the exercise physiology discipline, the highest citation with a value of 184794 is much higher than the sport management discipline. In the sports injuries discipline, the first rank with 51191 citations is higher than the sport management discipline, but in other disciplines such as motor behavior, sport psychology, and sport biomechanics, the first rank in sport management has higher citation conditions. The findings related to the scientific journals approved by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (mapfa.msrt.ir) showed 38 journals, with 17 (45%) in the field of sport management, 5 in interdisciplinary fields, and 16 in the field of biological sciences in sport. Among these, three of the sports management journals are in English, and the remaining 14 are in Persian.

The results of interviews with experts in sport management education have been organized in the Table 5.

Table 1. Coding the lived experience of sport management experts

Theme	Sub- theme	Participants Frequency
Societal Needs	Decreasing the average quality of students and feeling not relating to societal needs.	15
	Decreasing the average motivation of students (feeling not relating to societal needs)	15
	The lack of a comprehensive plan for developing academic programs in sport management in response to societal needs.	8
	The lack of update technology, especially artificial intelligence in sport management programs.	4
	Limitation of course offerings and educational resources in some universities and failure to utilize all capacities to create interest and train students in line with the needs of society.	4
Program Job Market	The lack of legal support, such as the requirement of a sport management degree for acceptance in sports club management	13
	Preference is for the “marketing and communications” tracks, followed by the management of organizations and clubs, and then event and tourism management (as popular for employ ability).	12
	The graduates of bachelor's degree in sports science have a greater tendency towards more marketable fields such as exercise physiology and injury identification and corrective movements.	8
Supply and Demand	All available capacities in doctoral programs were not fulfillment (specially in nongovernmental universities).	9
	All available capacities in master programs were not fulfillment (also in some governmental universities).	9
	In some cities and especially in remote areas from the capital, the existence of multiple master's programs in sport management causes to decrease demands for some specializations.	9
Professionalism	Exams in theoretical sport management courses focus less on assessing students' ability to apply theories in practice.	8
	Due to the low number of related credits in sport management at the bachelor's level, it seems that students are not adequately prepared for specialized courses compared to other specializations such as exercise physiology and sports injury.	8
	Weakness in research education and its effective learning in postgraduate studies due to the weakness of research education in schools and undergraduate studies.	4
Faculty Member Quality	The quality of teaching by some professors in graduate programs has made the field feel inferior compared to other fields.	6
	The quality of educational textbooks in sport management needs to be reviewed and updated for motivated study.	6
	The quality of papers in sport management needs to be reviewed and updated for more applicable study.	6

Discussion and Conclusion

Some potential reasons for a decrease in applicants for a master of sport management program by view of experts were different. One reason was job Market. If the job market for sport management professionals is saturated or if there is a lack of growth opportunities, potential applicants may be less inclined to pursue a master's degree in this field. Other reason was program professionalism. Experts emphasized that if the program has a poor reputation, potential applicants may be discouraged from applying. This could be due to factors such as outdated curriculum, lack of industry connections, or poor graduate outcomes. Another related reason refers to societal needs. If potential applicants perceive limited career prospects or low earning potential in the field of sport management, they may choose to pursue other career paths instead. The cost of pursuing a master's degree in sport management may be prohibitive for some individuals, especially if they do not see a clear return on investment in terms of career advancement or earning potential. Also, shifting trends in education and career preferences may also impact the number of applicants for sport management programs. If there is a growing interest in other fields or industries, this could lead to a decrease in applicants for sport management programs. It seems that some reasons also threat the number of applicants for PhD sport management program in Iran universities. First reason by view of experts was concern about future job prospects. Second reason was the availability of funding and scholarships for PhD students can significantly impact the number of applicants. If there is a lack of financial support, particularly for research and living expenses, it may deter potential candidates. The demand for individuals with a PhD in sport management is low, thus potential applicants may be less inclined to pursue advanced research in the field. The reputation of the PhD program, including the quality of faculty, research opportunities, and industry connections, can influence the number of applicants. A program with a poor reputation may struggle to attract candidates. If potential applicants perceive limited career prospects or lack of industry recognition for PhD graduates in sport management, they may opt for alternative career paths. The demanding nature of PhD studies, including long hours and high stress levels, may deter potential applicants who are seeking a better work-life balance. With the rise of international PhD programs and opportunities, domestic programs may face increased competition, impacting the number of applicants. Thus, it's important for institutions to address these challenges to attract and retain high-quality candidates.

First idea by experts for developing sport management faculty qualities to attract more applicants for master and PhD programs was industry experience. Encourage faculty members to maintain active involvement in the sports industry, whether through consulting, research collaborations, or direct industry experience. This real-world experience can enhance the credibility and relevance of the program, attracting more applicants. Also, foster a culture of research excellence among faculty members. Encourage them to publish in reputable journals, present at conferences, and engage in cutting-edge research that contributes to the advancement of the sport management field. A strong research reputation can attract high-caliber applicants seeking to work with renowned scholars. Other idea is developing faculty members' skills in mentorship and advising. Strong mentorship can significantly impact the graduate experience, and prospective students may be drawn to programs with faculty known for their supportive and nurturing approach to mentoring. It is necessary to encourage faculty to build and maintain strong connections with industry professionals, sports organizations, and governing bodies. These connections can provide students with valuable networking opportunities, internships, and potential career pathways, making the program more attractive to prospective applicants. Another idea is fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty members, both within the sport management department and across other relevant disciplines. This can lead to innovative research, expanded course offerings, and a more comprehensive educational experience, appealing to applicants seeking a well-rounded education. Other idea emphasis on investing in faculty development programs focused on teaching excellence. Faculty members who are passionate, engaging, and effective educators can positively impact the student experience and attract applicants seeking a high-quality academic environment. The institutions should encourage faculty members to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the program. This can include recruiting faculty from various backgrounds and experiences, as well as promoting diversity in course content and research topics. A diverse faculty can appeal to applicants

seeking inclusive and multicultural learning environments. By focusing on these areas, sport management programs can enhance the qualities of their faculty members, ultimately making the programs more attractive to prospective applicants for both master's and PhD programs.

Developing citations and branding for sport management faculty members in the Google Scholar database can enhance their visibility and contribute to the overall reputation of the program. By experts' ideas, it needs to publish High-Quality Research. Faculty members should publish their research in reputable journals and conferences within the field of sport management. High-quality, impactful research is more likely to be cited, contributing to the faculty members' citation counts and overall academic influence. They can collaborate with colleagues within and outside the institution. Collaborative research can lead to higher citation rates, as it increases the visibility of the faculty members' work and fosters interdisciplinary connections. Faculty members should create and maintain comprehensive research profiles on platforms such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories. These profiles should be regularly updated with their latest publications, ensuring that their work is easily discoverable by other researchers and potential students. Also, they should engage in knowledge translation activities, such as writing articles for popular media, participating in podcasts, or giving talks at public events. This can increase the visibility of their research and potentially lead to more citations. They can create or support research centers and groups within the institution that focus on sport management. Faculty members can collaborate within these groups, leading to more cohesive and impactful research outputs that are likely to be cited. Other idea is support faculty members in making their research openly accessible through institutional repositories or open access journals. Openly accessible research is more likely to be cited, as it is easily discoverable and available to a wider audience. In addition, faculty members should to share their research on social media platforms and academic networks. This can increase the visibility of their work, leading to more citations and broader recognition within the academic community. They need to work with faculty members to develop a cohesive branding strategy for the sport management program. This can include highlighting the faculty's research strengths, areas of expertise, and the program's unique contributions to the field. A strong program brand can attract more attention to the faculty's research outputs and increase citations. By implementing these strategies, sport management faculty members can enhance their visibility and branding in the Google Scholar database, ultimately increasing citations and solidifying the program's reputation within the academic community.

By the findings and view of experts, there are some suggestions for the future of academic sport management programs in Iran. As technology continues to revolutionize the sports industry, academic sport management programs should incorporate education on data analytics, digital media, and emerging technologies. This will prepare students for the evolving landscape of sports business and management. With the sports industry becoming increasingly global, academic programs should emphasize international perspectives, cross-cultural understanding, and global trends in sport management. This can include offering international study opportunities, partnerships with global institutions, and exposure to diverse sporting contexts. It should be notice to integrate sustainability and social responsibility into sport management curricula. This includes addressing environmental sustainability, ethical business practices, diversity and inclusion, and social impact initiatives within the sports industry. The programs need to interdisciplinary collaboration with other academic departments, such as business, marketing, law, and public health. This can provide students with a well-rounded education and prepare them for the complex and interconnected nature of the sports industry. Programs should offer more hands-on, experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, practicums, and industry projects. These experiences can provide students with practical skills and industry connections, enhancing their readiness for careers in sport management. Given this issue, it is necessary to pay more attention to specialized sport management programs in undergraduate courses in Iran. Sport management programs should foster strong partnerships with sports organizations, leagues, teams, and governing bodies to provide students with real-world insights, networking opportunities, and potential career pathways. Industry partnerships can also facilitate research collaborations and experiential learning opportunities. Thus, they should encourage faculty and students to engage in cutting-edge research and innovation

within the field of sport management. This can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the industry and position the program as a leader in sports research. Given the rapid pace of transformative changes in the sport management industry, programs should be flexible and adaptable. This may include offering specialized tracks, certificates, or concentrations that align with emerging trends and career pathways within sport management. Sport management programs should provide students with opportunities for professional development, mentorship, and networking within the sports industry. This can include workshops, speaker series, and alumni engagement to facilitate connections and career advancement. There is need to foster a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion within sport management programs. This includes recruiting a diverse student body, faculty, and staff, as well as integrating diversity and inclusion topics into the curriculum. By focusing on these areas, academic sport management programs can position themselves for success in the dynamic and evolving sports industry, preparing students to thrive in their careers and contribute to the advancement of the field.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines: Ethical points have been observed.

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