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Reflections on the accreditation process: Advice for in-training practitioners

Andrew Manley and Carla Meijen

As professional and public interest in sport and exercise psychology continues to grow, so too the number of students enrolling on sport and exercise psychology courses is on the increase. As a result, the number of graduates looking to embark on a period of supervised experience within this domain is also expected to rise. The importance of practitioner training cannot be understated. It is intended to provide a standardised route to attaining accepted levels of competence in relation to knowledge, skills, and professional conduct. The accreditation process also doubles as a safeguard designed to ensure that the public can identify and are therefore protected from individuals practicing sport and exercise psychology who have not met accepted standards of professional competence. Given the necessity for such a process of training and accreditation, it is imperative that in-training practitioners are offered appropriate levels of information and support to ensure they are able to satisfy the specific criteria outlined by the relevant accreditation guidelines. Following the recent approval of the Society's Stage 2 qualification in sport and exercise psychology, this article aims to provide current and aspiring in-training practitioners with helpful tips and advice regarding the accreditation process, outlining some of the key considerations that will help individuals successfully navigate the various obstacles they must overcome.

The perspective of experienced practitioners who had previously completed or were currently undergoing a process of accreditation was considered a crucial element in devising a list of core considerations for in-training sport and exercise psychologists. Consequently, in preparation for writing this article, the thoughts and experiences of experienced professionals were sourced using a range of methods (e.g., adverts placed in relevant journals, magazines, and on-line discussion groups; networking at conferences and events; examination of related literature). Some of the recommendations were gleaned from psychology practitioners working in domains outside of sport and exercise (e.g., clinical, educational, health, occupational). However, their input was considered valuable, since much of the advice related to issues that most in-training practitioners are likely to face, regardless of their area of

work. The remainder of the article outlines the main themes that were identified from the resulting responses and discussions.

Tip 1: Choose your supervisor well

Whether the specific route to accreditation is explicitly termed “supervised experience” or not, all in-training practitioners will need to enlist the assistance of an accredited professional who will be required to oversee the accreditation process. The choice of supervisor is likely to have a huge impact on the training process, as it will probably determine the resources the supervisee has available to them during their training, as well as the approach(s) to professional practice that they are exposed to. The consensus seems to be that the choice of supervisor is a pivotal one, and should not be a decision that is taken lightly. Three separate suggestions in relation to the quest for an appropriate supervisor were identified. Firstly, some practitioners believed that supervisees should look for someone who has a similar outlook to your own in terms of their underpinning professional philosophy as well as their personality. Proponents of this strategy believed that this makes for a smooth working relationship and a suitable introduction to the world of applied work.

An alternative suggestion was that in-training practitioners should opt for a supervisor who has a completely different perspective from their own, thus allowing the trainee to experience a different way of working and the opportunity to draw on more than one approach in their eventual work. Finally, one particular practitioner suggested that a good supervisor is someone who will be able to provide experiential opportunities as well provide access to a network of suitably qualified professionals, and as a result, this should be one of the first things an individual looks for in a supervisor. Given the contrasting nature of these recommendations, it is clear that the choice of supervisor will often be based on individual preferences. However, the general consensus is that a supervisor is a key player in the accreditation process and should exhibit the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to facilitate the development of their supervisee. Individuals preparing to embark on a process of accreditation should consider carefully what they want, need, and should expect from a supervisor.

Tip 2: Obtain a balance

Those going through a process of training and accreditation are often expected to fulfil other duties that require a great deal of their time and attention (e.g., postgraduate study/research, teaching/lecturing, other forms of part-time or full-time work). Combining some of these activities where possible (e.g., conducting research on an area linked to the applied work the trainee is involved in) may help to achieve the criteria and meet the deadlines specified by the relevant accrediting body. However, rather than directly integrating training activities with other responsibilities that need to be dealt with, an alternative strategy would be to develop an organised time-management structure. By being disciplined and having a set of definitive yet flexible goals in place, trainees are likely to be better equipped to deal with the demanding schedule that a period of supervised experience often represents.

Tip 3: Be reflective

As the title of this article implies, a key skill for any applied practitioner is to be able to reflect on previous professional experiences. Reflective practice is usually integrated within a process of accreditation (e.g., providing a portfolio, writing reports alongside applied practice), thus emphasising its importance as a professional skill. Whether they include examples of good practice or unintentional mistakes, by looking back on early experiences, in-training practitioners learn to identify and understand the reasoning behind certain actions. The reflective process also enables the trainee to not only develop strategies for dealing with future situations that may prove problematic, but also achieve an understanding of their own service delivery and how they can be made more effective in their work (Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004). It is also useful for trainees to share their reflections with other trainees and practitioners, as reflective case studies can be used to initiate discussion and examine alternative ways of working. Moreover, other practitioners can benefit from hearing trainees' reflective accounts, which may assist the former in their own consultancy activities (Tod, 2007).

Tip 4: Be resilient

The next point of advice is to be resilient. The criteria for the training routes can appear tough hurdles to clear and some of the criteria will often seem difficult to satisfy. To become a successful sport and exercise psychologist, you might want to consider practicing what you preach. Try to work hard to overcome these hurdles and

other set-backs, like finding clients, meeting with supervisors and employing other points that have been discussed previously. However, do make sure that you stay realistic, set appropriate goals to assist you in being resilient, and talk to other in-training practitioners to share experiences. Resilience was a common theme on the path to become accredited according to experienced practitioners who had been through the process themselves.

Tip 5: Engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Congratulations, you are finally an accredited practitioner! However, this does not mark the end of the journey, but rather the beginning. In order to ensure that practitioners continue to meet the agreed standards of professional practice, continuing professional development (CPD) is an essential requirement for re-accreditation. CPD can include conference visits, attending workshops, and becoming part of a regional based networking group. The Society, along with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), organises a variety of workshops for sport and exercise psychologists, which are advertised on their respective websites.

A number of sport and exercise psychology conferences are organised nationally and internationally. These events are often worth attending, not only to consume, but also to share ideas, network and further develop your career. It is also often worth considering attending conferences or workshops from other areas, like coaching or hypnosis. For example, a coaching conference can be very useful to initiate contacts with coaches. Sport and exercise psychology conferences are incredibly useful for keeping up to date with new developments in the field. Events of note include the Division of Sport & Exercise Psychology conference (11-12 December, 2008), the FEPSAC European Congress (2011 in Portugal), the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) conference (2009 in Morocco), and Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) conference in the United States (annually). The European Network of Young Specialists in Sport Psychology (ENYSSP) organises workshops every one or two years in different European cities, and are an informal way of enhancing knowledge and sharing information with other young sport psychologists.

Tip 6: Make the most of networking opportunities

Already mentioned above, networking is an important part of the accreditation process. Networking can be a useful tool for developing your clientele. Be creative in how to network and perhaps more importantly, believe in what you are doing. Just collecting business cards is not enough. If you initiate contact at a conference, follow this up. Even a short e-mail can be sufficient. Not everyone will expect an e-mail or phone call from you, and not everyone will reply to your messages, but the contacts that you do forge will no doubt help you through the training process. In addition, networking is not something that you should only do with professors that you look up to. Your peers and other young sport and exercise psychologists are brilliant networking partners too! What may start off as a fun and enjoyable get-together with other young trainees may turn into very useful contacts when you are establishing a career as a practitioner and/or researcher. Other ways of networking are to join a regional group (or even set-up one). Sharing experiences with other sport and exercise psychologists will help.

Conclusion

Although the accreditation process is long, it is nevertheless an essential and often rewarding part of pursuing a career as a sport or exercise psychologist. It is not an easy process, and there will inevitably be difficult moments. Keeping a diary to reflect on such experiences will help in navigating the process and providing an opportunity to learn how to cope with similar difficulties should they occur again in the future. Networking can also help in sharing problems with others and learning from one another. Finally, it is vital that trainees familiarise themselves with the accrediting body's guidelines for in-training practitioners, as well as the relevant code of ethics and conduct. The below links provide relevant information for those wishing to find out more about the process and pre-requisites of becoming an accredited sport and exercise psychologist.

Useful links:

http://www.bps.org.uk/careers/society_qual/spex/spex_home.cfm

http://www.bps.org.uk/spex/spex_home.cfm

<http://www.bases.org.uk/home.asp>

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