

Institution: Abertay University		
Unit of Assessment: 24 - Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism		
Title of case study: Enhancing practice and improving outcomes of career transition support services in elite sport		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2017 – May 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name: David Lavalley	Role (e.g. job title): Professor	Period employed by submitting HEI: August 2017 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: February 2018 - November 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Abertay University has influenced professional practice and improved outcomes of elite sport support services in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Research led by Professor David Lavalley has challenged existing knowledge about helping elite athletes prepare for upcoming career transitions in sport. Working directly with elite sport wellbeing practitioners, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have translated the findings into tools that have enabled effective changes in the practice of career transition support to improve outcomes for government-affiliated organisations, professional associations, and third sector organisations.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>More than half of elite sportspeople experience wellbeing difficulties associated with sport career transitions due to focusing on their sporting performance instead of planning for upcoming transitions [BBC State of Sport 2018]. Professor David Lavalley has been conducting research on career transitions in sport for over 20 years and, after being appointed at Abertay in August 2017, designed a new programme of research to explicitly influence three key sets of stakeholders responsible for policy and training of elite sport wellbeing practitioners: a) government-affiliated organisations; b) professional associations; and c) third sector organisations delivering services to improve athlete wellbeing.</p> <p>The direct utilisation of the research by these stakeholders has led to a shift in the way practitioners support elite athletes facing upcoming transitions across their career and contributed to improved outcomes of sport support services. The research has addressed challenges that were uniquely felt by elite sport wellbeing practitioners.</p> <p>Specifically, this programme of research has combined quantitative and qualitative methods in the studies to: 1) develop a new survey tool to enable professional associations to improve career transition support service outcomes; 2) determine previously unknown benefits of preparing for an upcoming sport career transition; 3) develop, evaluate and implement a new method aimed at supporting more effective sport career transition preparation in order to meet the needs of sport wellbeing practitioners; and 4) provide novel insights to improve service delivery outcomes.</p>		

1) Development of a new survey tool to enable professional associations to improve career transition support service outcomes.

This research was conducted by Professor Lavallee at Abertay University between April 2018 and May 2020, and involved item development, content validation and instrument reliability of a survey tool (The Sport Census) measuring seven sport wellbeing areas, including sport transitions [3.1]. The research introduced clear data as a new data typology. The utility of the tool was also presented in the context of how it can help illuminate best practice and empower informed decision-making for the provision of support services in sport.

2) Determining previously unknown benefits of preparing for an upcoming sport career transition

This research was conducted by Professor Lavallee at Abertay University between September 2017 and May 2018 and has provided evidence for the first time that higher levels of engagement in pre-retirement from sport planning are positively associated with sporting performance, team tenure, and career tenure. Pre-retirement planning by athletes was also found to exert its effect on performance through the experience of career transition practitioners and the number of intervention support sessions the athletes participated in. Data for this research was sourced from the National Rugby League, a top-level men's professional sports league in Australia and New Zealand and included 28,516 performance selection observations for 632 professional players over three competition seasons (2014-2016) [3.2].

3) Development, evaluation and implementation of a new method aimed at supporting more effective sport career transition preparation

The design and evaluation of sport career transition interventions is rare. This research, undertaken in collaboration with Kingston University and in response to gaps in evidence identified by practitioners in helping athletes prepare for upcoming transitions, developed, evaluated and implemented a novel psychological intervention (symbolic modelling) to help athletes prepare for the transition from junior to senior level in elite sport [3.3]. Professor Lavallee contributed to the research at Abertay University between November 2017 and July 2018.

4) Providing novel insights to improve service delivery outcomes

In collaboration with Liverpool John Moores University and Bangor University, this research focused on collaborative problem solving between expert practitioners and elite athletes. The study identified how to help practitioners enhance the quality of their support with athletes in order to improve outcomes, including career transitions [3.4]. Professor Lavallee contributed to the research at Abertay University between September 2018 and January 2019.

3. References to the research

3.1 Lavallee, D., Lowder, J., & Lowder, J. (2020). Clear data as a new data typology to enhance sustainability in sport. *Sustainability*, 12 (11), 4527. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12114527>

3.2 Lavallee, D. (2019). Engagement in sport career transition planning enhances performance. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 24, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2018.1516916>

3.3 Pummell, E. K. L., & Lavallee, D. (2019). Preparing U.K. tennis players for the junior-to-senior transition: Development, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention program. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 40, 156-164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.07.007>

3.4 Tod, D., Hardy, J., Lavallee, D., Eubank, M., & Ronkainen, N. (2019). Practitioners' narratives regarding active ingredients in service delivery: Collaboration-based problem solving. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 43, 350-358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2019.04.009>

4. Details of the impact

Through direct knowledge transfer activities and presentations at national and international practitioner events, our programme of original research challenged accepted wisdom and enabled effective changes in the practice of career transition support to improve outcomes for professional associations, government-affiliated organisations and third sector organisations.

Evidence of national and international reach is demonstrated by:

- The research findings have elevated the professionalism of elite sport wellbeing practitioners and enabled **professional organisations** including the National Rugby League in Australia and New Zealand (NRL), Welsh Rugby Players' Association (WRPA), Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) Scotland, and Rugby Players Association in England (RPA). The underpinning research has led 80 NRL practitioners to be more confident and improve outcomes for over 4000 players [5.1], positively contributed to the WRPA making a significant difference to the lives of professional rugby players in Wales [5.2], been used by 11 PFA Scotland staff and over 100 Apprentice players to improve outcomes across 11 professional football clubs [5.3] and enhanced the support practice of 8 Development Managers and 1 Transition Manager at the RPA who have supported over 800 current and 400 former players across all premiership clubs, the relegated side and England Women's and Men's 7s [5.4].

"Professor Lavalée's research study on the relationship between our career transition programme and the performance of our players has been a game changer and of great practical value. The independence and rigour of the research has led our 80 practitioners to be more confident and given us a greater belief across our work. Our service provision in the wellbeing and education space has been directly improved as a result of the findings and we have used the research in our decision making to improve outcomes for over 4000 players". National Rugby League in Australia and New Zealand [5.1]

"Professor Lavalée's research has made a quantifiable impact and positively contributed to the development and implementation of a program that has made a significant difference to the lives of professional rugby players in Wales". Welsh Rugby Players' Association [5.2]

"This research by Professor Lavalée provided PFA Scotland with better knowledge and ideas on how to promote future career planning and career transition support. The research allowed us to design a different approach to support players in career transition". Professional Footballers' Association Scotland [5.3]

"This research by Professor Lavalée allows all working in the space of elite athlete personal development, wellbeing and transition support - like the RPA - to better influence decision makers at the highest level in a positive way, with proven credibility. His work is helping to drive the essential cultural change in professional sport that places the person behind the player at the heart of the business of sport". Rugby Players Association [5.4]

- The research was used by the UK Netball Players Association, a **professional association**, to help inform their decision-making, identify the next steps to develop their career transition support and ultimately improve career transition support outcomes for 92 elite athletes [5.5].

"He worked directly with us to measure support to our members across 7 different sport wellbeing areas, and the area of transition was identified as being under supported. The Sport Census informed our decision-making and helped us identify our next steps to develop our career transition support. We subsequently launched a series of interventions for our members focusing specifically on

transitions over a 12-month period including four webinars in May 2020 (55 members participated), and Dr Lavallee participated as a guest in the first webinar. We administered the Sport Census again to our members in September 2020 and saw a significant improvement in the transition area with all the other support measure either remaining the same or increasing. This has helped illustrate to us that the action we took over the previous year worked well and improved our career transition support for our 92 members without having to sacrifice other areas". United Kingdom Netball Players' Association [5.5]

- Campaigns launched by two **professional associations**, the UK Netball Players Association in May 2020 [5.5] and the Professional Footballers Association Scotland in July 2020 [5.3] used the underpinning research to provide career transition support to 55 and 27 athletes, respectively, during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The research findings were recommended by the World Players' Association, a **professional association** bringing together 85,000 players across professional sport through more than 100 player associations in 60 countries, as a "*new, important key study area*" to be used by player associations looking to enhance practice and improve outcomes of career transition support in the *World Players' Association Guidelines on Surveying Retired Players* [5.6].
- Campaigns by the English Institute of Sport (#More2Me) and the International Federation of Professional Footballers Associations (FIFPro) used the research to encourage athletes to recognise the benefits of planning for a life after sport. FIFPro is the global representative **professional association** for over 65,000 footballers, with over 60 national players' associations. The #More2Me campaign was publicly backed at the highest level by both the Minister for Sport and Chair of UK Sport, and has enhanced the practice of the English Institute of Sport practitioners [5.7]. Professor Lavallee was directly involved in training the English Institute of Sport practitioners through knowledge transfer activity [5.8] and the underpinning research provided this **government-affiliated organisation** with the confidence to launch the campaign:

"There is a large amount of anecdotal experience but having this demonstrated through scientific data for the first time is very impactful and has significant implications for elite sport. Professor Lavallee's research evidence supports our #More2Me campaign as it shows that athletes who have interests outside of sport and plan for their retirement whilst they are still competing can perform better and be retained for longer". English Institute of Sport [5.8]

- The research was commended in a House of Commons Debate on Sport in the UK [5.9]. This debate was significant as it considered sport in the UK in February 2019, three years after the publication of the Government's *Sporting Future* strategy that focused on five key outcomes (i.e., physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development). The commendation in the House of Commons Debate on Sport highlights the impact on **government-affiliated stakeholders** responsible for policy and training of elite sport wellbeing practitioners:

"Research by Abertay University's Professor David Lavallee shows that athletes who engage in planning for their future feel less stressed and are better able to focus on their sporting performance". House of Commons Debate on Sport [5.9]

- The research has improved outcomes for a UK-based charity (Switch the Play Foundation) focused on supporting elite athletes with career transitions [5.10]. The underpinning research has enhanced the skills of elite wellbeing sport practitioners in this **third sector organisation** to improve sport career transition outcomes for 300 athletes.

"Professor Lavallee's research in this area...focuses on real world problems,

addresses the issues in a practical way and, crucially, responds to gaps in evidence identified by practitioners working in the area. The research has enhanced the skills of our 11 practitioners, engaged effective changes in our practice of career transition support and has been used to inform our decision making. Our practitioners use the research to deliver our message in an impactful and credible way. The research has helped to maximise the impact to 300 elite athletes". Switch the Play Foundation [5.10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1** Testimonial Letter from Paul Heptonstall, Senior Wellbeing and Education Manager, National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia and New Zealand.
- 5.2** Testimonial Letter from Andries Pretorius, Chief Executive Officer, Welsh Rugby Players' Association (WRPA).
- 5.3** Testimonial Letter from Chris Higgins, Personal Development Officer, Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) Scotland.
- 5.4** Testimonial Letter from Ben McGregor, Head of Gain Line, England Rugby Players' Association (RPA).
- 5.5** Testimonial Letter from Liz Bloor, Director, United Kingdom Netball Players' Association (NPA).
- 5.6** Webpages for World Players' Association *Guidelines on Surveying Retired Players*
<https://www.uniglobalunion.org/sectors/uni-world-athletes/dignity>
https://www.uniglobalunion.org/sites/default/files/imce/wpa_surveying_past_players_en_0.pdf
- 5.7** #More2Me Campaign Press Release (February 2019)
<https://www.eis2win.co.uk/article/more2me-campaign-launches-with-support-from-olympic-paralympic-athletes-and-minister-for-sport/>
- 5.8** Webpages on English Institute of Sport website
<https://www.eis2win.co.uk/2018/11/09/performance-lifestyle-hold-webinar-around-impact-of-engagement-in-a-career-planning-with-prof-david-lavallee/>
- 5.9** Sport in the UK: House of Commons Debate (4/2/2019): 8.17pm Column 106
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-02-04/debates/048CD63B-3BA7-4708-8EE1-8362DEF0783B/SportInTheUK>
- 5.10** Testimonial Letter from Leon Lloyd, Chief Executive Officer, Switch the Play Foundation.