



Pan-European Work Force Audit (Output 1) and Best Practice Case Study (Output 2) Report

Executive Summary and Discussion

The Experiences of Coaches in Paralympic and Disability Sport

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We look forward to continuing our joint work with all involved.

If you have any observations or comments that may add further explanatory powers to this report, please email: info@paracoach.eu

Kind regards

Para Coach Team



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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report is part of the Erasmus Plus funded ParaCoach project led by Liverpool John Moores University seeking to enhance Para Coaches learning, mobility and employability across the European Union. The significant outputs of the ParaCoach project are the development of a European Para Coach Framework to act as a non-regulatory reference point for the development of coach education across the EU. Additionally, a freely available Massive Open Online Course will be developed to support the learning and development of coaches across the EU. Hence this report aims to capture and analyse the characteristics of the Para Coach workforce, and provide examples of best practice in order to support the development of the framework and MOOC.

Disabled people have the right to participate and excel in sport and physical activity across the European Union. However, the majority of coaches tasked with providing quality sporting opportunities to performers in this unique context are underprepared and often unqualified. Worse still, the social stigma and fear of disability may prevent some coaches from taking up a position specializing in para sport or including disabled athletes in mainstream opportunities. Therefore, the Para Coach project shares the EU's social agenda to ensure that disabled participants are able to access more high-quality sporting opportunities led by appropriately trained coaches

Methodology

To explore the characteristics of the Para coach workforce and highlight best practice within this context, a two-stage methodology was employed. The first stage included an online survey (including closed and open-ended questions) through which we identified common characteristics that described the workforce. Given the international focus of the project, the survey was followed up with a qualitative methodology through which semi-structured interviews were employed to gain clarity and richer accounts of the participants' experiences. This qualitative approach was also utilized when exploring best practice case studies. Specifically, the employment of appreciative inquiry allowed participants to describe and explain their perceptions of best practice through a semi-structured interview.

To gain insight into the Para coach workforce characteristics and best practice, the following purposeful sampling criterion were used. Participants coaching within a recognized Para/Disability sport on a regular basis with a specific group of performers with an emphasis on guided, purposeful improvement of performance (ICCE). Coach educators were those with direct responsibility for the development of coach education provision within an established sporting agency. As such the survey sample included coaches (N=313), with 20 undertaking follow up interviews. Best practice case study interviews were undertaken with coaches (N=15) and coach educators and policy makers (N=11).

Survey data was collected through an online platform (Bristol Online Survey) with interviews audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Numerical responses to the survey were descriptively analysed, whilst qualitative data was analyzed through an iterative approach guided by the



process of constructivist grounded theory. This involved moving back and forth between codes and categories. Once the categories were identified the report team met to discuss, challenge and agree the final categories that were pertinent to the report.

Key Findings

1. Blended profession – the workforce consisted of full time (N=79), part time (N=53), sessional (N=65) and volunteer (N=112) coaches and therefore Para Coaching could be considered as a blended profession.
2. Lack of a coaching pathway – analysis of coaches’ interviews highlighted the serendipitous nature of stepping into coaching. Meaning, for most of these coaches, their step into coaching occurred through ‘accident’ resulting through association with the sport as an athlete, parent or career.
3. Lack of formal coach education – of the 313 coaches who completed the survey, 56% stated that they held a National Coaching Qualification; whilst 31% reported that they did not hold a National Coaching Qualification. Of the 56% of coaches who held a National qualification, only a small percentage of coaches provided information about the level and name of the qualification. Specifically, coaches reported the following qualifications: level 1 (3%), level 2 (7%), level 3 (9%) and level 4 (4%) coach qualifications. Of the coaching cohort, only 19% reported that they had received Para specific coach education. Meaning, the majority of coaches had not received Para specific coach education.
4. Lack of consistency across Countries for coach education – it became clear during the analysis of survey responses that there were differences with regards to the name and level of coach education qualifications between counties in relation to the European Coaching Qualification Framework (ECQF). Hence making EU wide comparisons became problematic.
5. Lack of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) – 67% of coaches had engaged in CPD opportunities since they began coaching. 56% of these coaches had engaged in CPD in the past 12 months. However, 57% of coaches noted that their overall CPD opportunities did not relate to Para sport. In addition, the majority of coaches did not receive any form of mentoring support. Specifically, only 5% of coaches alluded to any mentoring opportunities. However, qualitative analysis of follow-up interviews illustrated that coaches valued learning from their peers.
6. Reliance on informal learning – coaches perceived learning from experience to be most effective (42%), followed by non-formal learning (31%), and formal learning (27%).
7. Gaps in knowledge – analysis of qualitative survey responses revealed that coaches requested the need for knowledge relating to: impairment, classification, sport and event specific requirements, practice planning and delivery, sport science and sport psychology. This may further position Para coaching as a blended profession in which gaps in knowledge are reflective of individual, contextual and domain level needs.
8. Best practice – analysis of best practice case studies suggest that pockets of best practice existed in some sporting contexts relating to: integration of coach education, integrated training opportunities, creating new sporting opportunities, taking a person-centered approach to coaching and a need for advocacy

Future Directions

The key findings of this report highlight a fragmented and under-resourced coaching workforce with regards to coach education, workshops and mentoring, hence validating the need for the ParaCoach Project. Indeed, by raising the profile of the vital work para coaches do and supporting the creation of a more integrative coach education and support system, targeted initiatives that will both mobilise the coaching work force and ensure disabled participants are included in more high-quality sporting opportunities. However, to gain more traction, greater commitment to policy enactment, research and financial resource is also required to ensure opportunities are fit for purpose.

Definition of terms

Impairment – refers to the altered function of the biological body which restricts and disadvantages individuals. Acknowledging ‘impairment effect’ in this study is an attempt to allow participants to express ‘knowledge and practices’ that reflects the complexity, opportunity, severity and diversity of impairment.

Disability – refers to the socially constructed forms of ‘restrictions’ and ‘oppressive’ practices that ‘disable’ people with biological impairment(s). Taking this approach provides an opportunity to highlight the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that restricts the development of quality sporting opportunities.

‘People with disability’ or ‘Disabled people’ – often used within the coaching literature and reflects national and contextual influences. The first adopts a ‘people first’ position acknowledging a shared humanity between disabled and non-disabled groups. Whilst the second foregrounds the structural and contextual barriers placed on people with impairments.

Disability or Adapted sport - is a broad term used to describe sports that accommodate people with physical, sensory and intellectual impairments (DePauw & Gavron, 2005).

Paralympic sport - refers to sports that are part of the Paralympic Games programme (IPC, 2019).

Para sport - often used as an umbrella term to accommodate both Paralympic and Disability sport.

Para coach - is a term used to refer to coaches who coach across Paralympic and Disability sports and along the athlete pathway



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Discussion of key findings

Through a two-phase research design encompassing both quantitative and qualitative data generation, this report has explored the demographics of the Para coach workforce, their learning, educational and developmental characteristics, gaps in knowledge as well as presenting initial insights into best practices. Specifically, the workforce audit and follow up interviews sought to provide a broad picture of the coaching context in order to identify gaps in knowledge and education provision. The best practice case studies provided a contextual account of pockets of good practice that move towards developing solutions to the gaps identified through the work force audit. Together these findings will inform the development of the Para Coach Framework and Online Course.

Para coaching as blended profession

Analysis of the survey data and follow up interviews revealed a workforce consisting of full (N=79), part-time (N=53), sessional (N=65) and volunteer (N=112) coaches working across participation, talent development and elite sport contexts. This is consistent with previous workforce audits within the UK context (e.g., North, 2009). Furthermore, the workforce is reflective of a highly educated population with 114 participants holding undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. Two assumptions may explain the need to demonstrate higher levels of education. Firstly, a greater number of the coaching sample were positioned within the elite Para sport context whereby knowledge relating to disciplines - i.e. sport sciences - is valued (Schempp & McCullick, 2010; Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Secondly, there may be a need for coaches to have a minimal level of education in order to understand how best to work with athletes whose impairment requires specialist attention. In keeping with research, there was a gender imbalance within this sample of coaches (male v female) and the cohort were mainly white and were in mid to higher socio-economic groupings. Surprisingly, there was a dearth of disabled coaches and this may indicate the dominance of non-disabled people influencing this specific context. While there is evidence to suggest that contextual structures (e.g. Sport Governing Bodies) have complied with social model requirements to provide access for disabled performers in sport (Townsend et al, 2015), this is yet to translate to disabled coaches. As such, the Para coach context may be missing out on valuable Para athlete experiences and knowledge as athletes do not seem to be transitioning into coaching (Douglas et al., 2018) Finally, coaches' responses to the survey showed that they were evenly spread across coaching roles, master coach (N=107); head coach (N=72); coach (N=77); and assistant coach (N=19). However, given the various contexts coaches operate within, these values are to be taken with some caution. Nevertheless, the diverse coaching population operating across the athlete pathway could be considered a 'blended profession' (Duffy et al., (2011). In conceptualising Para coaching as a 'blended profession', the report seeks to provide some clarity - moving towards increased professionalism - against a highly diverse contextual field (Taylor & Garrett, 2010). This blended profession may not fit with fixed traditional models of professional identity (e.g. teaching or medicine) but still requires recognition and investment at all levels (Duffy et al., 2011; North et al., 2019).



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Serendipitous encounters with disability

Commonly reported across the coaching workforce was previous experience as performers and possibly unique to this study, the greatest percentage (41%) attaining international status as athletes. Whereas only 14% competed at regional and 17% at participation. Thus, the coaching workforce reflected a group that were socialised through sport and in so doing were in position to take a step into coaching. However, despite their previous experiences in sport, coaches' entry into Para coaching happened serendipitously in line with other sport coaching research (e.g. Cregan et al, 2007; McMaster et al, 2012). Meaning that for the majority of coaches, entry into a coaching role was not a planned process but resulted through 'chance' being immersed within the context and in response to an opportunity provided by their own coach or a need within the local sports club (Douglas et al, 2018). In addition, entry into coaching went beyond the participation route and included those who started coaching because of experience as a parent or carer of a disabled athlete. Once coaches have stepped into the Para coach context, the results suggested they commit years of experience to coaching and this might explain the cluster of coaches within the following ages ranges: 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64. The serendipitous entry into coaching identifies the lack of a coherent pathway into Para coaching as a direct career choice. Indeed, full time paid coaches seemed to be clustered towards the elite – talent development end of the Para sport pathway and focused on one sport. As such, the Para sport context maybe undervalued by coaches, sporting agencies and sport funding bodies. However, coaches committed to coaching within the participation domain volunteered their time across several sports, ages and impairment groups. Hence, validating the need to understand the workforce further and to continually promote Para coaching as a blended profession with learning support (e.g. coach education, mentors, and CPD) being made available and aligned accordingly along the coach development pathway.

Coach education, learning and knowledge acquisition

Nelson, Cushion and Potrac (2006) suggested that coaches learn through three difference sites, considered as formal, nonformal and informal. Each of these sites serving a function which researchers suggest both facilitate and to a certain extent constrain knowledge acquisition and its application in practice. Within this study some coaches held a number of formal coach education qualifications at various levels (e.g., level 1 (N=10), level 2 (N=21), level 3 (N=28) and level 4 (N=13). However, given the various national coach education frameworks and the lack of fit with the European Qualification Framework (EQF), these results may not be a true reflection of a standardisation of coaches' knowledge (Mallett, Trudel & Rynne, 2009). Furthermore, analyses also suggested a number of coaches (N=98) within the sample held no recognised formal coach education, however, the majority of these coaches (73%) reported having previous international athlete experiences in non-disabled sport. Leading to the assumption that previous international athletic experience maybe highly valued and for some provided a means to access coaching positions (McMaster et al., 2012; Douglas et al., 2018). Indeed, as commonly reported within the coaching literature formal coach education is often viewed as individually, contextually and practically irrelevant (McMaster, et al., 2012; Tawse et al., 2012; Douglas et al., 2018) for coaches in disability sport. However, the number of non-certified coaches operating across para sport and the lack of a regulatory body across the EU ensuring minimal guidelines are followed is a concern.

Whilst, there was some evidence to suggest some coaches within this current study saw value in their formal coach education, one of the significant findings of this analysis - and consistent with Para sport research - was the lack of formal coach education reflecting the uniqueness of working within the Para sport context (McMaster, et al., 2012; Tawse et al., 2012; Douglas et al., 2018). Hence, it was not surprising that coaches (27%) ranked formal learning as having the least value when compared to non-formal and informal situations (Douglas et al, 2018). However, when exploring the best practice case study vignettes, coaches who had experienced integrated formal coach education reported positive experiences and perceptions. Indeed, the findings revealed that integrated coach education could dispel both fear and the stigma associated with coaching in the disability sport context. Furthermore, some coaches went further by suggesting that exposure to disabled performers during coach education would improve the learning experience. Arguably, both the lack and potential of integrated coach education curriculums continues to evidence the need for addressing the specific needs of coaching with Para sport. Furthermore, these findings are in keeping with the fragmented nature of coach education provision across the EU in which different social structures (sporting agencies) enable or disabled the production of coaches knowledge (Thomas, 1999).

The dearth of disability-specific formal learning opportunities meant coaches reported valuing and relying on informal and non-formal sites of learning. With respect to non-formal opportunities, (31%) of coaches reported and valued attendance at CPD events, workshops and conferences that are often considered to be contextually authentic. However, the number of coached attending non-formal learning opportunities in the last twelve months was only (56%), of which only 32% of participants perceived the content to be relevant to para sport. This continues to reflect an under resourced coach educational landscape (Cregan et al., 2007; McMaster, et al., 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014). It is important to note at this juncture that whilst non-formal learning sites were valued it does not provide evidence that such opportunities were impactful on coach learning. Therefore, understanding the needs of the coaching population is of vital importance when designing specific learning events.

Within this sample of coaches - and in line with wider sport coaching literature - informal learning was reported as having the highest influence on their learning (e.g. McMaster et al, 2012; Fairhurst, et al, 2017) Here informal learning refers to knowledge gained through experience and social interaction with others that often goes unrecognised (Cushion et al, 2010). As such, several researchers acknowledge that learning to coach started through experiences as athletes (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). However, given that the majority of this sample of coaches were non-disabled, much of the reported learning centred on experimentation, innovation and adaptation of normative approaches (Taylor et al's., 2014; Douglas et al., 2018). Consequently, learning with the athlete (Carter & Bloom, 2009) was reported as being an important source of knowledge, especially with reference to the nature of impairment effects on practice (Cregan et al., 2007; McMaster, et al., 2012; Tawse et al., 2012; Wareham, et al., 2017). However, some coaches found it difficult to articulate how adaptations were made whilst others suggested there was no difference between coaching disabled and non-disabled performers. Here the move to normalise coaching across the disability and non-disabled sporting contexts was reflective of what Gavron and Depauw (2005) called the 'invisibility of disability' in which the application of 'able-bodied and mainstream coaching principles' is simply transferable into a context considered to have additional 'constraints' (Townsend et al, 2017, p. 2). These views reflective of the taken-for-granted nature of tacit knowledge, if left unchecked can reproduced 'disablism' (Thomas, 2007) within para sport. In

reality, similar to Wareham et al. (2017), athletes' impairment shaped coaches knowledge in this current study through which adaptations were made to: accessible structures and transportation, ways of communicating, organising the practice space, modifying training loads, developing equipment, ensuring athletes received autonomy and creating independent learners. Additionally, two of the best practice vignettes demonstrated how some coaches went further to designing new sports to facilitate participation for their athletes. Arguably, this required coaches to learn about the athlete's specific needs through collaborative action. Similarly, although not explicitly reported, some coaches also highlighted how their athletes relied on assisted technology - such as wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs, sport-specific throwing implements and frames – to perform and so arguably coaches learning would include gaining knowledge about the nature of technology from their performers.

As well learning from or with their athletes, coaches also placed value in learning from their peers or expert coaches. The assumption being that more experienced coaches are able to offer knowledge on 'what works', providing a crucial learning opportunity in the absence of formal education. In addition, in contrast to the findings of Fairhurst, et al's., (2017) study in which Paralympic coaches were able to access mentoring opportunities, very few coaches within the current study reported having access to formal and informal mentoring even though it is considered to positively impact coaches' practice (McMaster et al., 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Fairhurst et al., 2017). Consequently, the lack of formalised mentoring support to promote the learning of Para coaches add further cause for concern and continues to reflect a sporting context that 'disables' the generation of knowledge required effectively support disabled performers (Thomas, 2004).

According to Cote and Gilbert (2009), the integration and application of professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge is consistent with developing effective coaching. However, in this research, analysis of the data suggested that whilst coaches desired to pursue knowledge and, in doing so, demonstrated elements of intrapersonal knowledge – a desire to learn - some coaches were very clear about the limitations of their professional knowledge in relation to coaching disabled athletes. These limitations mainly centred on disability specific knowledge (Fairhurst et al., 2017) resulting from the disruptive nature of 'impairment' (Townsend et al., 2016). and the various effects it had on performance. Consequently, coaches had were seeking learning opportunities to improve their understanding of impairment, sport science, classification, sport psychology, practice design, and associated skills such as planning and monitoring progress. Additionally, for some coaches the impairment effect also impacted coaches' ability to communicate effectively with their athletes and hence highlighted the need for interpersonal knowledge. Whilst respecting the disruptive nature of impairment to coaches' knowledge, it is important to mention that if left unchecked, coaches and agencies desire for knowledge can implicitly align with medical model understandings of disability which may problematize the impairment along with the person

Cote and Gilbert (2009) acknowledged the application of knowledge needs to be context and athlete specific, however, Cushion and Lyle's (2017) framework goes further by suggesting that performance outcomes – a measure of coaching effectiveness – may be impacted by the availability of 'resources' or lack thereof, which in this case is clearly the lack of coach education. What is clear therefore, that a key barrier to developing effective coaching is the lack of a coherent educational pathway for coaches to engage with. Thus, to progress towards the professionalization of disability sport coaching, coaches must be supported by 'the state' as a 'central driver of coaching change' (North, 2019, p. 14). Indeed, several participants within this sample made reference to the lack of financial support framing their coaching

context. Consequently, coaches may know what knowledge they need to be effective but are constrained by the context in which they operate. As such making educational resources freely available could provide more coaches with access to key knowledge thereby improving practice for disabled performers.

Coach philosophy and disability

Sport coaching is largely recognised as social practice undertaken within cultural contexts such as Para sport (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Hence, coaching within Paralympic and disability sport will have been shaped by social norms and values that are inherent within coaches' tacit knowledge. Here tacit knowledge referring to the often unnoticed, unexplained and unexplainable nature of coaches intuitive responses that are influenced through experiences in differing contexts (Cushion & Partington, 2014). Therefore, exploring coaches' tacit knowledge can provide explanations as to why coaches have particular values, views, behaviours and approaches. Given that disabled people have been historically marginalised from society and sporting opportunities and breaking down these social barriers continues to be the aim of the Paralympic movement (IPC, 2019), how coaches - as gatekeepers to coaching opportunities in this context - understand disability is of importance (Townsend et al., 2018). Consequently, understanding coach philosophy as a collective of "values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, principles and priorities" may illuminate coaches' practice ideals (Lyle & Cushion, p. 235; Cushion & Partington, 2014).

Whilst exploring coaches' understanding of 'coaching philosophy' was not an explicit focus of this research, as expected some coaches were able to describe philosophical beliefs perceived to shape their practice experiences. Hence, the analysis suggested some coaches expressed the need to adopt a 'person' or 'athlete' centred approach as a part of their coaching role. Importantly, this view was closely linked to the level of functionality associated with the athlete's impairment. Whilst at face value 'person centred' coaching seems positive, a focus on overcoming disability aligns with a medical model view which problematizes the individual. In contrast, others were seemingly aware of the social barriers reflective of both social (Barns & Mercer, 2013) and socio relational models (Thomas, 1999) that excluded disabled people from sport and so developing independence, connection and integration were expressed ideals. Yet, others seemed to attempt to normalise 'disability' by suggesting that Para sport is no different or the same as mainstream, able-bodied sport (see section on coach education). Thus, this report suggests that philosophically beliefs and understandings of disability are at the core of the Para coaching context and require further illumination.

Within the resourced starved Para coach context, it was not surprising to see some coaches and coach educators align with activist tendencies. Indeed, a number of authors have reported that para athletes often share a common desire to create a more inclusive sporting environment (e.g. Bundon & Clarke, 2015; Bundon & Best, 2016). Similarly, analysis of best practice case studies highlighted a desire by some participants to develop key partnerships to firstly advocated for an increase in disability sport provision and in the other context ensure that disability was on the agenda items of government offices and policy makers. Furthermore, one interviewee highlighted the need "to have more disabled athletes, disabled coaches, disabled leaders, disabled policy makers" which further demonstrates that Para sport and Para coaching is yet to be considered an inclusive environment for disabled people to be involved at all levels of sport. Hence more work is needed at a management and policy level to ensure the

central aspects of the social model and human rights models of disability are actualised in the removal of all physical and social barriers.

In an attempt to expand our knowledge of quality sporting provision for disabled performers, Evan's et al., (2018) extensive study identified that perceptions of quality were associated with one or more of the following constructs: belongingness, autonomy, challenge, mastery, engagement and meaning. Similarly, in the current study some coaching provision seemed to align with most of the criterion exemplified by Evan et al., (2018). For example, within the case study (see section 6.3) gaining more function through specific training could have provided the athlete a sense of mastery and challenge. Whilst social interaction with other disabled athletes made possible during training and competition allow athletes sharing the same levels of functionality to exchange ways to gain more independence and hence provide a sense of belongingness and meaning. Finally, coaches who shared their value for athlete centred coaching provide athletes with a sense of autonomy which also leads to engagement with the coaching process (Banack et al, 2011).

This discussion has attempted to provide an overview of the key findings of this research in which the coach, athlete and context are relationally bound. As such, the nature of learning, development and education of Para coaches can be viewed as fragmented and lacking. Meaning that for the majority of coaches learning to become effective is undertaken through practice and hence vital knowledge is not widely available to all. Despite, this lack there exists pockets of 'best practice' in the, coaching of athletes which considers individual needs and the level of impairment and the provision of integrated coach education. Hence the findings of this report can provide applied recommendations in the next section.



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