

Chapter 33

Working in Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology

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Chapter Overview

The field of sport, exercise, and performance psychology (SEPP) presents a multitude of opportunities to work across different sectors and with unique populations. Whilst a primary area of career focus for students undertaking studies is sport and exercise, the application of SEPP has been observed within performing arts, creative industries, business, health, education, and military settings. Consideration of tailoring placement and internship experiences, in addition to research topics, during undergraduate and postgraduate training is helpful in providing early career practitioners with experience to not only better position their entry into the profession, but also to provide them with an understanding of the various applications of SEPP out in industry. Investigating what type of role and job options are available in the field and what they entail, additionally assists in shaping decision-making about future career opportunities. The following chapter explores the author's experience and observations regarding working as a sport, exercise, and performance psychologist across a range of sectors, including suggestions regarding how to best prepare for and develop a career in the field for future practitioners. Whilst grounded in the author's professional career based in Australia, it additionally covers international aspects related to training, accreditation, professional networks, and career pathways.

How Do You Become a SEPP Practitioner?

Depending upon the country in which students undertake training and the timing of pursuing psychology studies during an individual's career, some will identify early that they wish to become a sport, exercise, and performance psychologist, whilst others will not make such a decision until choosing the area in which postgraduate psychology studies is required. Given the field of SEPP is diverse and varied in the type of work that a psychologist can do, whilst presenting more opportunities, it can often also be challenging to those looking to enter the field to gain understanding exactly what they want to do in the field (Eubank & Tod, 2019).

My decision to become a sport and exercise psychologist (i.e., performance psychologist) occurred early on, when contemplating life after a career as a professional ballet dancer. Experiencing a significant injury leading into my final year of pre-professional training led me to seek professional assistance, which in the early 1990s was sparse in terms of practitioners with an understanding of the context of performing arts. This led to exploring the types of psychology training that were available in Australia at the time, and I discovered sport and exercise psychology, which appeared to be the closest thing I could find regarding the application of psychology to performance outcomes (see Moyle, 2019a).

Regardless of when interest in the area of SEPP arises, it is important for those wanting to become a sport and exercise psychologist to clearly understand the training and accreditation requirements of the respective country they plan to study and/or work in. Ill-informed decisions regarding courses and training pathways can mean that accreditation and/or registration requirements are not met, which can be a costly exercise in both time and money.

Training and Accreditation

In Australia, those interested in the SEPP area have to undertake a specific training pathway of at least six years to achieve general registration as a Psychologist, and a further two years of supervised practice within a Registrar program to achieve "endorsement" as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist. The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) implements the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, which regulates 15 health professions within Australia. Each health profession is represented by a national board and respective regional (i.e., State) boards, with the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA) being responsible for Psychology.

To meet general registration requirements, individuals have to undertake a four-year sequence of study in psychology within an accredited training program. This is followed by one of three pathways: (a) Either a fifth- and sixth-year Master's degree or combined PhD/Masters or Doctorate; (b) Fifth year degree plus one-year internship; or (c) Two-year internship program¹. Upon acceptance into an accredited program, individuals can then apply to obtain provisional registration which allows them to practice under supervision during their upcoming training pathway. If option two or three is selected, applicants must also pass the National Psychology Exam to obtain general registration (see Figure 33.1).

¹ The 4+2 internship pathway closes on 30th June 2022.

Figure 33.1
AHPRA Pathways to Registration

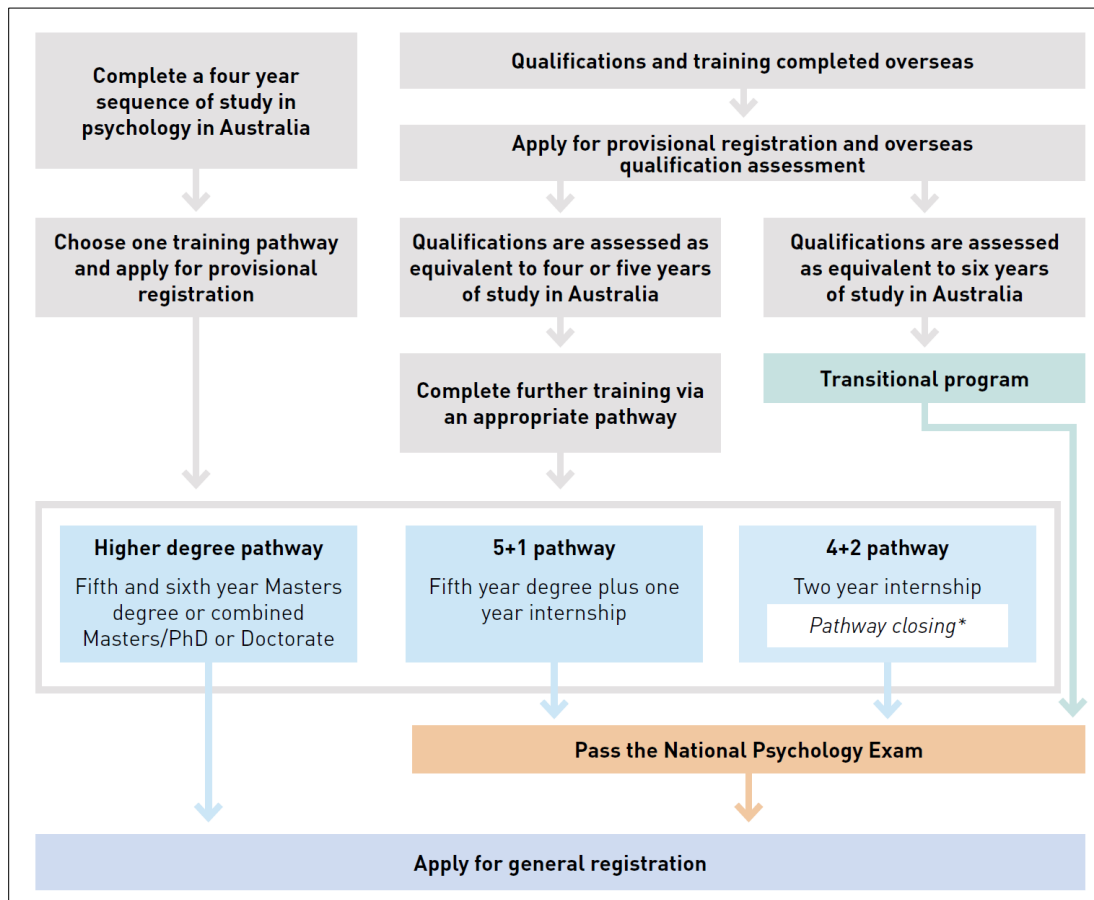


Image credit: www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Registration/General

Post-general registration, psychologists can apply for endorsement in one of the nine recognised psychology disciplines in Australia (i.e., clinical neuropsychology, clinical, community, counseling, educational and developmental, forensic, health, organisational, and sport and exercise). This involves completion of an accredited discipline-specific postgraduate program (i.e., Masters, Masters/PhD, or Doctorate), plus approximately two years of postgraduation supervision in the area of endorsement by an approved and endorsed supervisor within a Registrar Program (see Figure 33.2). Once completed, psychologists then qualify to become "endorsed" in that area of practice (i.e., sport and exercise psychology) and are entitled to use the legally protected titles associated with the discipline (e.g., Sport and Exercise Psychologist, Sport and Exercise Psychology).

Figure 33.2
AHPRA Pathways to Endorsement

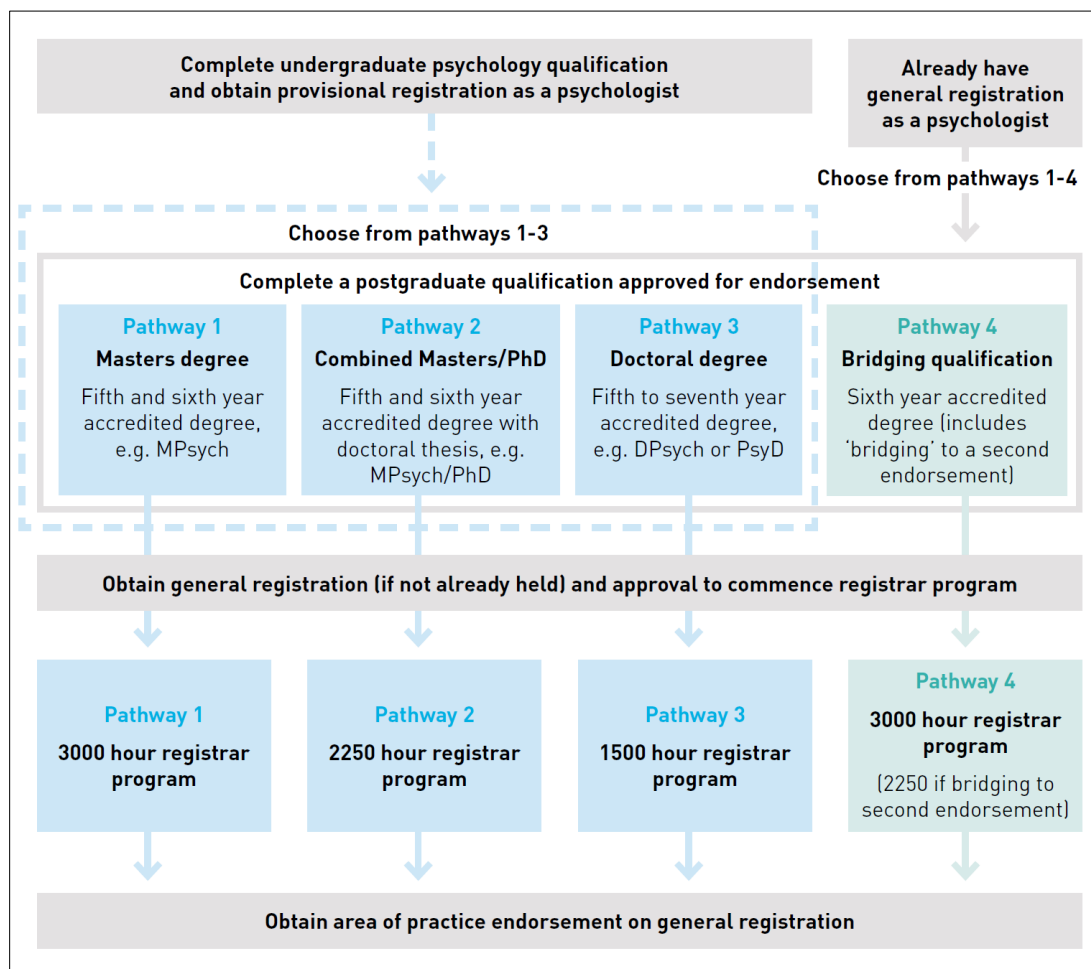


Image credit: www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Endorsement/Pathways-to-endorsement

Within the Australian context, practitioners are trained in general psychological skills and knowledge first, and as psychologists with expertise in working within sport, exercise, and performance settings second (Sebbens et al., 2012). This provides a broader education and training base, and focuses upon working with individuals as whole people, not “just” athletes or performing artists—that is, it is more than performance enhancement or mental skills training alone. Aligned with this approach is the accreditation of postgraduate programs, whereby the course approvals and accreditation processes ensure that courses incorporate achievement of general competencies that are consistent across all psychologists (see Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2019), plus the additional competencies that uniquely distinguish each of the nine endorsement areas from one another (see Psychology Board of Australia, 2019).

Becoming a Psychologist and/or Working in Other Countries

Whether exploring local requirements or considering working in another country, it is important for future practitioners to understand the varying accreditation, registration, licensed and/or chartered status requirements of training and practicing as a psychologist. In most countries, psychology is a regulated health profession which means that it is protected by law, and therefore operating or calling

oneself a Psychologist and/or Sport and Exercise Psychologist when previous training might not meet the statutory requirements could result in formal notifications, legal charges, or significant fines. Whilst there are similarities between some countries regarding training, practicum, or internship requirements to meet accreditation or registration standards, many pathways possess nuances that can vary in their occurrence whether at undergraduate, postgraduate, or internship stages within the training process. Therefore, it is essential that when investigating options, that individuals obtain the correct advice.

Further Information:

- Canada - <https://cpa.ca/students/career/becomingapsychologist/>
- Europe - www.europsy.eu/quality-and-standards/europsy-basic/national-requirements
- South Africa - www.hpcsasouthafrica.co.za
- UK - <https://careers.bps.org.uk/area/sport-exercise/how-do-i-become-one>
- USA - www.apa.org/support/us
- Asia & South America – Various pathways dependent upon country and regulatory frameworks (see Schinke, McGannon, & Smith, 2016).

Tailoring Your Training Experience

Whilst many aspects of the training pathway—including units within courses and programs—will be pre-determined to ensure they meet accreditation requirements for registration, there are a range of components that individuals have the opportunity to tailor to their own specific interests and/or to increase their employability upon finishing their studies. Thinking strategically about such options from Day 1 of the journey towards becoming a psychologist might not come naturally, however is highly encouraged. Whilst such considerations will be dependent upon the type of undergraduate course (e.g., psychology, sports science) or training pathway that is undertaken, the following section outlines key topics for further reflection in terms of their relevance for tailoring training experiences.

Placements and Internships

A key component of all psychology training programs are practicums, placements, and/or internships. Within some courses, these might be mandatory in terms of what organisational context, professional setting, or even the type of practice focus (e.g., sport, clinical, counselling). However, where there is scope to shape the type of experience it is helpful to consider what competencies, skills, and experiences you are aiming to build. When considering SEPP, undertaking a sport placement is obviously vital. Whether that is working with individual athletes or is team focused, becoming more familiar with a sporting environment and the complexities that are often involved is essential (e.g., multiple stakeholders [coaches, sports program managers, support staff]; training vs. competition; level of sport [developmental, amateur, elite, professional]; type of sport [individual, team]).

Complementing a sport placement, other performance settings (e.g., performing arts) also provide similar opportunities to work with individuals striving for performance excellence. Similar to the need to understand and learn about the varying similarities and differences when working across sports, shifting the application of psychological practice to a performing arts setting (e.g., dance, music, acting, circus) also involves increasing awareness regarding the social, cultural, and artistic considerations embedded within these performance contexts (Moyle, 2019b).

Outside of sport and performance settings, planning to obtain experience in clinical or counselling settings is critical to the development of more general psychological skills that assist in effectively supporting the whole person, not just the “athlete” or “performer”. Mental health and well-being are inextricably linked to performance: without positive mental health and well-being, it is highly unlikely they can perform to the best of their ability. Therefore, experience dealing with clinical issues

assists in broadening the scope of practice for a sport and exercise psychologist-in-training. This consequently enables them to better support their clients through an integrated holistic approach, whilst also increasing awareness related to ethical practice in not stepping outside their area of expertise and knowing when to make a referral to a clinical psychologist.

A final placement area that has been observed to complement SEPP training is that of business and corporate settings. Organisational psychology shares many similarities to SEPP in that leaders and teams are typically working towards shared performance goals and objectives that are measured and tracked, with team, leadership, and organisational culture playing a large role in achieving success. Whilst “performance” may not be through a physical modality, individuals working in business can benefit from utilising the same strategies and skills employed within SEPP settings.

SEPP practitioners-in-training would benefit from strategically considering how they can shape the types of placements, and therefore, the types of skills and experiences they obtain from them. When considering the field of SEPP, there is such a broad range of sports (i.e., individual vs. teams; winter vs. summer; amateur vs. professional; leisure vs. extreme sports), exercise settings (i.e., pain clinics, physiotherapy practices, occupational rehabilitation centres) and performance contexts (i.e., dance companies; orchestras; film/TV sets; circus troupes) that SEPP practitioners can work in, that ensuring a spread of opportunities will not only assist in strengthening their knowledge and skill sets, but increase their level of employability for their future career.

Research Projects

Another opportunity to tailor training pathways involves research projects undertaken as part of undergraduate, honours, and/or postgraduate degrees. Where students have an idea of the type of population they would ideally like to work with once fully qualified, it is helpful to start building a foundation of research that focuses upon investigating that area. Whilst students can be recruited to existing research projects being led by potential supervisors, this may not always align with the area of psychology and/or the population that one wants to work with. Although the pros of such a scenario mean that students will be directly guided in the topic area, research design, in addition to not having to recruit their own participants (which is helpful in time pressured situations), it may unintentionally take the focus away from developing a pipeline of research experience, publication outputs, and establishing industry networks within preferred areas of future practice. Other considerations include looking to the SEPP literature and recommendations regarding future research trends, so as to align with what might be considered “hot topics” in the field (Meredith et al., 2018; Sanderson, 2017; see Schinke et al., 2016).

Professional Associations

In most countries, there is at least one key professional association related to the practice of psychology. Professional associations are different to regulatory bodies (e.g., the organisations that are responsible for registration), and usually focus upon advocacy for the profession, increasing awareness about psychology with the public, and advancing knowledge within the respective psychology fields it represents. It is beneficial to consider joining your relevant professional association as a student during your training pathway. Typically, each association has reduced rates for students, however, enables full access to key information, ethical standards, resources, professional development events/courses, and current news on relevant topics.

Key professional bodies in psychology (e.g., Australian Psychological Society, American Psychological Society, British Psychological Society, Canadian Psychological Association) typically have a College or Division that represents the field of SEPP. For example, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) has the College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists, as well as an APS Interest Group in Psychology and the Performing Arts and Entertainment Industry. The American Psychological Society (APA) has Division 47 – Society for Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology, whilst the British Psychological

Society (BPS) has the Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology. Usually these sub-divisions or colleges additionally offer student membership, which provides opportunities to network with SEPP practitioners and undertake professional development activities that are focused on SEPP content.

In addition to these overarching psychology associations, there are also a range of international associations focused specifically on SEPP that are open to both international and/or localised members. For example, the Asian South Pacific Association of Sport Psychology (ASPASP), the Association of Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), the Canadian Sport Psychology Association (CSPA), the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC), the International Association of Applied Psychology – Division 12 (IAAP), and the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP). Furthermore, depending upon the area that individuals focus their practice of SEPP, there are a range of related associations (e.g., for performing arts, Australian Society for Performing Arts Healthcare, International Association of Dance Medicine and Science, Performing Arts Medicine Association).

Professional Development and Networking

Continuing professional development is usually a requirement for most SEPP practitioners to maintain registration, accreditation, chartered and/or licensed status. Typically, professional associations provide a calendar of events and activities, with the SEPP-focused associations and organisations providing further specialised development opportunities that are tailored specifically to the SEPP area. Joining professional associations will also assist in having access to member fees for professional development events, including conferences and congresses. Since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020 and having to shift events online, a range of organisations have developed a suite of webinars and resources that are often available freely to the public alongside member-only access items.

Once psychologists-in-training have joined an association for a period of time and experienced them as a student member, it is helpful to consider nominating for volunteer positions that may be available as part of Executive Committees within SEPP specific Colleges or Divisions. Most associations have student committees and/or specific student related positions that form part of State or National executive committees, which provide invaluable opportunities to understand key issues in the SEPP area across applied practice, research, education, training, and policy areas. Furthermore, such involvement presents excellent opportunities to network with not only other students, but highly experienced professionals both locally and internationally.

Volunteer Work and Work Experience

Opportunities to undertake volunteer work and/or work experience in SEPP settings is usually limited, given the practice of psychology is regulated. Students who are at the pre-registration stage of their psychology training are often very interested in "seeing" what a sport and exercise psychologist actually does, so whilst there may be some opportunities for observation of applied practice, the bulk of this experience tends to come only when they are provisionally registered and able to undertake placements, practicum and/or internships under supervision.

Other opportunities that can be undertaken often fall within a research projects, where undergraduate students can apply to Vacation Research Experience Schemes to assist SEPP academics with research activities commensurate with the student's level of experience. Being involved in such research projects can provide psychologists-in-training with a first-hand understanding of some of the basic foundations of research design, methodology, and process, which enables individuals to get a sense of what research actually involves before they have to undertake their own research. Furthermore, many students identify through such experiences that they may wish to pursue a career in academia as a researcher in SEPP, versus an applied practitioner out in the field, which can inform decision-making regarding future course and training pathway choices.

Volunteer opportunities are not only restricted to students. Sometimes sporting programs or organisations have minimal funding to support servicing by sport and exercise psychologists and may offer fully registered and experienced psychologists a role to work with their team/athletes. Whilst not as common now compared to 20 years ago given the sector recognises the significant years of training, qualifications, and experience that psychologists have to obtain to practice, this may still occur. Sometimes such offers have come from elite Olympic level programs but in sports that are not as well funded as some of their counterparts. This provides SEPP practitioners with excellent experience of working within such contexts, however if accepted, psychologists are encouraged to consider placing limits on the timeframes over which they agree to working without getting paid. Continuing to do so can ultimately do the profession a disservice, given such work is not with a volunteer organisation or charity and continues to reinforce sporting organisations to not have to pay for professional services – versus seeing the value of SEPP and the need for it to be a supported formal part of the funded program.

Finished Your Studies...What Next?

One of the most exciting yet terrifying times is once all studies, training, and placements are done, and students become fully registered psychologists. Depending upon the timing of graduation and confirmation of registration, knowing what comes next can be a daunting prospect. Many aspiring sport and exercise psychologists dream of landing a job as a full-time practitioner working out in the field with an elite sporting team or program. However, as many suggest (Eubank & Tod, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Sanderson, 2017), for nearly all graduates, this is not the reality they end up experiencing. Often SEPP opportunities fall into one of two categories: teaching and research roles usually in academia; or in applied work via private practice and consulting. Often it can be a combination of all three, with SEPP applied work occurring across a range of settings and organisations.

Sport and Performance

In Australia, work within sporting contexts can consist of being contracted to provide SEPP services to a range of sporting bodies and organisations. For example, National and State Sporting Institutes, otherwise known as the National Institute Network (NIN), which covers key Summer and Winter Olympic and Paralympic sports, in addition to some professional sports (i.e., Football/Soccer) across developmental through to elite level athletes. Additional services are utilised across a range of National Sporting Organisations (NSOs), which covers both amateur and professional sports such as Cricket, Swimming, Triathlon, Golf. Other professional sports such as Australian Football League (AFL), Rugby League, Rugby Union, Tennis, and V8 Supercars additionally use SEPP services through contracting providers. Contracts can vary in terms of length and scope, with full-time positions only rarely being available and often on a one-year basis only with an option to renew. Furthermore, with the increased focus on mental health and well-being within the context of sport, organisations such as the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and the AFL and AFL Players Association have more recently introduced well-being frameworks that include positions such as Well-being Managers and/or psychologists providing mental health support services. Many of these roles are often filled by sport and exercise psychologists.

Through private practice and consulting, SEPP practitioners can also often provide services to High School sporting programs or more general physical activity co-curricular programs. These can include both individual sessions or group/teamwork that can cover anything from performance enhancement and mental skills training, interpersonal and team dynamics, alongside supporting students cope more effectively with academic and/or personal issues. Additionally, individuals may access psychological services through referral from a General Practitioner (i.e., medical doctor) as amateur or recreational athletes.

Within performing arts settings, typically services can include individual clients accessing support via self-referral or referral from a professional company/training institution/health-care provider; the facilitation of group workshops on key performance-psychology topics or sessions that focus on collective group issues; and the provision of consulting advice to management and administration about addressing psychological issues, recommended solutions, curriculum, or the development of specific programs (see Moyle 2019a). Similar to sporting settings, being an embedded SEPP practitioner in an organisation or program has been observed to be more effective than being an external consulting psychologist. However, usually reduced funding within performing arts settings that can be allocated to SEPP services can limit the scope of practice and service provision that can be achieved. In such circumstances, prioritisation of identified servicing needs is critical.



Photo credit: James Dillon, QUT Dance

Exercise

When focusing upon the exercise side of sport and exercise psychology, there are a range of career opportunities across medical, health, and occupational related settings. SEPP practitioners often work in hospitals and clinics as part of a multidisciplinary health team dealing with such issues as pain management, weight-loss, smoking cessation, injury rehabilitation, including occupational rehabilitation regarding supporting individuals recovering from physical or psychological injury to return to employment. Additionally, many SEPP practitioners will work as the sport and exercise psychologist within a physiotherapy practice, assisting in the case management of individuals undertaking sports injury rehabilitation programs.

Other Areas of Professional Practice

Training in SEPP provides a strong foundation and set of skills that can position graduates to apply their knowledge to areas beyond sport yet related through a focus on supporting performance and enhancing human potential. For example, sport and exercise psychologists may work in career counselling, given a significant part of supporting athletes and performing artists is with transition—including entry into, during, and exiting out of their careers. Working in employment services is another sector where the specific skills that SEPP practitioners develop are very beneficial, whereby facilitating

group workshops in topics like self-confidence, motivation, and goal-setting compliment individual sessions with job seekers in exploring strengths, skills, and career aspirations. Furthermore, depending upon the training pathway and the tailored experiences students undertake, SEPP practitioners are valued within business and corporate settings with their ability to support individuals, teams, and leaders obtain the best performance and outcomes possible.

Further Training and Endorsement

Depending upon what type of career opportunities and experiences SEPP practitioners end up having, alongside what regulatory framework is in place, there are further training and endorsement options that can be explored. For example, SEPP practitioners interested in clinical sport psychology can look to upskill in clinical areas through short courses and professional development activities to further enhance their understanding, knowledge, and skills related to those areas. Additionally, in Australia as an example, if psychologists wish to obtain a second endorsed area of practice (e.g., clinical psychology), they can choose to undertake a bridging program that meets the registration and endorsement requirements for that additional field of practice (see Figure 33.2). Further areas of endorsement also require sport and exercise psychologists to meet continuing professional development for each specific area of practice. Another avenue for further training and development includes ongoing supervision, which can involve formal supervision from a more experienced psychologist, as well as peer supervision both individually and in groups. Ensuring that you continually reflect upon your practice or psychological work (i.e., teaching and research), is an integral part of being an effective psychologist.

Key Tips: Developing Your Career

When thinking about developing your career as a future sport and exercise psychologist, the following key tips may be helpful:

- Explore and be open to all possibilities, particularly the unexpected ones. Whilst you might have a dream of working with an Olympic sport or professional sporting team, opportunities to work as a psychologist or SEPP practitioner in a range of settings will only assist to further develop your skills, knowledge, and experience. Rounding out your experience in psychology simply makes you more employable and able to deal with, and work, in a variety of settings.
- Reach out to psychologists who are doing what you would like to do. For the most part, more experienced psychologists are only too willing to invest a bit of time answering questions from psychologists-in-training. Remember, they were once students too who were also nervous and excited about what their career might look like. Offer to take them for a coffee/virtual coffee as a thank you for their time. Be professional and make the effort to follow-up and stay in touch. One day they might end up being your colleague or friend!
- Find a mentor. A mentor might be a supervisor, or they might be someone in the profession that you admire or has the type of career you aspire too. Mentors can provide career advice, not just content advice, and can provide you with introductions to key people and networks.
- Invest in your ongoing development. Your learning does not stop with graduation or registration. Ensuring that you are an effective psychologist means that you will continually be developing your knowledge, and skills. Additionally, do not limit your life-long learning solely to psychology topics or for continuing professional development points. There are a range of areas that will be of benefit to you as a SEPP practitioner, that are not always covered in your psychology courses (e.g., leadership development, marketing, presentation skills, proposal development, business acumen, professional report writing of the nonpsychological type).

Conclusion

Being a sport, exercise, and performance psychologist is an exceptionally rewarding career. It provides variety, different challenges, and presents opportunities to work across a range of different settings to support people be the best that they can be. Investing time at the beginning of your training to be strategic in your choices and tailoring your experiences along the way, will enable you to more likely achieve the type of SEPP roles and work that you would most like to do.

Learning Exercises

1. In the country you wish to practice as a SEPP practitioner, what is the name of the regulatory body or professional organisation that is responsible for governing this process?
2. Identify what training and accreditation pathways these organisations state are available to become a qualified/licensed SEPP psychologist.
3. Check whether your current/future undergraduate and/or graduate/postgraduate program is listed as an accredited course in order to meet the training requirements to become a SEPP psychologist.
4. Review your current/future undergraduate and/or graduate/postgraduate programs to identify internship/placement opportunities. When do these occur within your training pathway (e.g., Semester 2, Year 2)? Are these internships/placements organised for you or do you have to identify/approach organisations yourself?
5. Reflect upon the type of client populations that you are most interested in/not interested in working with. Why? What would be the benefits of working with both of these populations in the context of becoming a SEPP practitioner?
6. What SEPP topics are you most interested in undertaking researching about? Who are the leading researchers (globally) within these areas?
7. What type of Vacation/Summer Semester schemes are available at your University/College regarding opportunities to be involved in research projects during the break?
8. Identify which SEPP related professional associations in your country have activities that are available in your local area or via virtual platforms. Attend at least two events and connect with at least one other SEPP practitioner and/or student per event to start forming your professional network outside of your own University/College.

Further Reading

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Further Professional Resources

Further information regarding relevant professional associations related to sport, exercise, and performance psychology (SEPP), can be found via the following websites.

- Australia
 - APS College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists - <https://groups.psychology.org.au/csep/>
 - Sports Medicine Australia - <https://sma.org.au/>
- Canada
 - CSPA - www.cspa-acps.com/
- Europe
 - FEPSAC - <https://www.fepsac.com/>
- UK
 - BPS Division of Sport Psychology - www.bps.org.uk/member-microsites/division-sport-exercise-psychology
 - BASES - www.bases.org.uk/
- USA
 - APA Division 47 - www.apadivisions.org/division-47/index
 - AASP - <https://appliedsportpsych.org/>

- Other
 - ASPASP - <https://aspasp.org/>
 - IAAP Division 12 - <https://iaapsy.org/divisions/division12/>
 - ISSP - www.issponline.org/

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