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Original Investigation

Exploring Knowledge, Perceptions, and Awareness of the Emerging Role of Basic Kinesiologists among Internal and External Stakeholders in Italy

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Purpose: The aim of this study was to compare knowledge, perceptions, and awareness between internal and external stakeholders regarding the figure of the basic kinesiologist. Furthermore, the aim was to verify if the qualification possessed by stakeholders could influence the perception on the adequacy of their training to perform the basic kinesiologist.
Methods: Participants were 95 stakeholders divided in two groups: 63 internal stakeholders, composed of ex-athletes, trainers, technicians, or other management figures who practice their profession in the sports field; 32 external stakeholders, composed of bachelor's degree students in Exercise and Sports Sciences. An ad-hoc questionnaire was prepared with Google Form and administered to participants via e-mail. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data. Chi Square was used to analyze difference in perceptions among participants.
***Results*:** Generally, the knowledge on the introduction of the professional figure of kinesiologist was sufficient. The qualification possessed by stakeholders influenced their perceptions on the adequacy of their training to perform the different activities of the basic kinesiologist ($P< .05$). Chi Square revealed significant differences between internal and external stakeholders ($P< .05$) regarding the educational qualification ($P= .00$), the perception of the adequacy of their training to perform the basic kinesiologist ($P= .00$), to conduct, manage and evaluate activities to improve the quality of life through exercise ($P= .00$), to perform the personal training activities ($P= .01$) and the possession of the qualification issued by Federations and promotion bodies ($P= .00$).
Conclusions: The study revealed, on one hand, the incomplete adequacy and coherence of university and sports training for working as a kinesiologist, with some differences between internal and external stakeholder, and thus the need to revise L22 curricula; on the other hand, a greater adequacy of training for working as a kinesiologist perceived by those with an L22 degree with an external qualification.

Keywords: sports science; training; university; sports reform; Italy.

Introduction

Physical activity plays a central role to maintain the mental, physical and social health of individuals, as stated in the scientific literature and by the World Health Organisation[1,2]. This has led to an increase in demand, which in turn has created the need to generate new types of offers, with professionals in the sports field[3]. There is an increasing need for a wide range of innovative professionals who are able to combine traditional skills with modern, technological knowledge to maximise athletes' performance, improve team management and optimise training strategies[4]. Generally, the sports system includes internal and external stakeholders, whose perceptions influence the way they plan and implement their work activities. Internal stakeholders are all those who interact directly within the organisation, including employees of sports centres and companies that actively participate in strategies and decisions that are decisive for value creation, driven by variables such as regulations, sustainability and innovation[5-8]. Specifically, they are represented by personal trainers, athletic trainers, physiotherapists and kinesiologists, and each of them has a different educational background that has enabled them to acquire the knowledge and skills to perform their role within the organisation[8-10]. It is crucial for the organisation to identify potential stakeholders acting from within in the pursuit of the company's goals of increased productivity and customer satisfaction[12-13]. Conversely, external stakeholders are all those who operate outside the organisation but have an interest in it, including individuals who have completed a university class or are still students[14].

In Italy, officially recognised sports figures are represented by individuals who have obtained specific training qualifications through National Sports Federations (NSF), Sports Promotion Bodies (EPB) or Associated Disciplines (AD)[15]. In Italy, there has been a long legislative evolution on the subject, starting with Legislative Decree (d.lgs.) no. 178 of 8 May 1998, entitled 'Transformation of the Istituti Superiori di Educazione Fisica (ISEF) and institution of the Faculty and Degree Course in Physical Education'[16]. With this first measure, the "*Istituti Superiori di Educazione Fisica*" (ISEF) were abolished and, at the same time, the degree class in Exercise and Sport Sciences and the corresponding faculty were established. Subsequently, Bill No. 1757, dated 3 October 2006, and Bill No. 2228, dated 7 February 2007, were presented, which aimed to regulate 'professional figures in exercise and sport'. The aim was to valorise the figures of university graduates to ensure the proper exercise of sports activities.

The category of exercise science graduates, in the absence of national legislation outlining its traits in a clear and unambiguous manner, has organised itself in associative form in the manner indicated by Law No. 4 of 14 January 2013, dedicated to the so-called unregulated professions[17]. Article 41 of Legislative Decree (D.lgs) No. 36 of 28 February 2021 established the

new professional figure of the basic kinesiologist with specific training in the degree class in Exercise and Sports Sciences (L-22)[18]. This legislative innovation provides for the mandatory possession of a university degree, which current professional profiles (coaches, instructors, personal trainers, educators) are not required to possess to exercise the profession of basic kinesiologist[19]. Paragraph 2 of Article 41 states that the object of the professional activity of the basic kinesiologist is: a) the conduction, management and evaluation of individual and group physical activities of a compensatory, educational, recreational and sporting nature aimed at maintaining and recovering the best conditions of physical well-being in the various age groups through the promotion of active lifestyles; b) the conduction, management and evaluation of activities for improving the quality of life through physical exercise, as well as personal training and non-competitive athletic preparation.

Despite this legislative evolution, it has been noted that in Italy, in the sports field, the habit of favouring figures with non-university qualifications is still consolidated[20-22]. Different studies in scientific literature were focus on the perception of the impact of the new decree on different kinds of stakeholders, but there was no comparison between them[23-26]. Consequently, the aim of this study was to compare the knowledge, perceptions, and awareness between internal and external stakeholders regarding the figure of the basic kinesiologist. Furthermore, the aim was to verify whether the qualification possessed by stakeholders would influence the perception on the adequacy of their training to perform the basic kinesiologist.

The two hypotheses were:

(H_1) There was a difference among internal and external stakeholders.

(H_2) The qualification possessed by the stakeholders influenced their perceptions on the adequacy of their training to perform the basic kinesiologist.

Method

Design and study participants

Study design was explorative and associative. A convenience sampling was conducted to recruit 95 stakeholders from two Italian regions, Campania and Apulia, through personal contacts from universities and sports centres. Participants, aged between 20 and 50 years old, were divided in two groups: 63 internal stakeholders, composed of ex-athletes, trainers, technicians, or other management figures who practise or have practised their profession in the sports field; 32 external stakeholders, composed of bachelor's degree students in L-22. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it was an educational research study that did not involve clinical treatment. No sensitive data were collected. Informed consent was obtained. All individuals involved in the study were guaranteed anonymity and were provided with complete and honest information about the content, purpose, and process of the research in an understandable way. No individual was forced to participate.

Data Collection

An ad hoc questionnaire was prepared with Google Form and administered to 250 stakeholders via e-mail, to which only 95 replied. Moderate participation may depend on several factors, including the motivational aspect, which may derive from interest in the research topic, a desire to express a point of view that is not shared, or a desire to support one's own opinions[27]. Once the target population was selected, the process of gathering data was conducted, considering both methodological implications and the existing economic and human resources. The formulation of the survey questions was grounded in the conceptual dimensions and relevant indicators identified during the establishment of the research objective. Several studies in the existing literature supported the effectiveness of the survey in capturing the perceptions of stakeholders[28-32]. The questions with the most commonalities between those asked of the two types of stakeholders were considered for a total of 12 as shown in **Table 1.**

Statistical Analysis

To validate the questionnaire, we first assessed its internal

Table 1. Questionnaire Item

1. Are you/are you attending the L-22-degree course?
- Yes
- No

2. Are you aware of the figure of the kinesiologist?
- Insufficiently
- Sufficiently
- Yes, completely

3. Are you aware of the various specialisations related to the figure of the kinesiologist?
-No, not at all
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Yes, completely

4. Based on your experience as a secondary school student, what kind of idea do you have of the knowledge and skills of a motor and sports science graduate?
-Insufficient
-Sufficiently positive
- Positive

5. Do you consider your training to be in line with practising as a basic kinesiologist?
-No, not at all
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Yes, completely

6. How well do you feel your training enables you to conduct, manage and evaluate individual and group motor activities?
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Excellently

7. How well do you feel your training enables you to conduct, manage and evaluate activities to improve quality of life through exercise?
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Excellently

8. How well do you think your training allows you to do personal training?
-Not at all
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Excellently

9. How well do you think the training you received at university allows you to do non-competitive athletic training?
-Not at all
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Excellently

10. How satisfied are you with the disciplines covered in your curriculum?
-Not at all
-Insufficiently
-Sufficiently
-Excellently

11. Do you perceive any deficiencies in your training?
- None
- Few
- Many

12. Do you hold a qualification issued by a national sports federation, sports promotion body or other?
-Yes
-No

consistency through Cronbach's α and associated 95% confidence intervals (CI). A Cronbach's α of 1 indicated perfect reliability, with a cut-off of .70 indicating an acceptable internal consistency[33]. Then, we assessed the test–retest reliability by administering the surveys after 15 days to a sub-sample of 15 internal and 15 external stakeholder who agreed to be contacted again about the study[34]. The ICC was interpreted using the criteria suggested by Portney and Watkins[35] as poor reliability (ICC ≤.50), moderate reliability (ICC .50–.75), good reliability (ICC .75–.90), and excellent reliability (ICC≥.90).

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the participants' answers in frequency (N). A chi-square analysis ($\chi 2$) was performed to analyse the difference among internal and external stakeholders, and to verify if the qualification possessed by both stakeholders could influence their perceptions on the adequacy of their training to perform the basic kinesiologist. Significance was set at $P< .05$. Data analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science software (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 26.0, IBM, SPSS Inc., Armonk, NY, USA).

Results

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was good (Cronbach's α coefficient [95% CI] .86 [.82–.89]; $P<.00$), while the test–retest reliability ranged from good to excellent. Chi Square revealed significant differences between internal and external stakeholders ($P< .05$) regarding the educational qualification ($P= .00$), the perception of the adequacy of their training to perform the basic kinesiologist ($P= .00$), to conduct, manage and evaluate activities to improve the quality of life through exercise ($P= .00$), to perform the personal training activities ($P= .01$) and the possession of the qualification issued by Federations and promotion bodies ($P= .00$). Generally, the knowledge on the introduction of the professional figure of kinesiologist was sufficient. A detailed description is shown in Table 2.

		Stakeholder		Chi Square (*P*)
		1 (internal)	2 (external)	
1. Do you attend, or have you attended the L-22-degree class?	No	51	0	.000
	Yes	12	32	
2. Are you aware of the figure of the kinesiologist?	2(Insufficiently)	9	7	.555
	3(Sufficiently)	40	17	
	4(Yes, completely)	14	8	
3. Are you aware of the various specialisations relating to the figure of the kinesiologist?	1(No, not at all)	8	4	.203
	2(Insufficiently)	16	13	
	3(Sufficiently)	38	13	
	4(Yes, completely)	1	2	
4. Based on your experience as a secondary school student, what kind of idea do you have of the knowledge and skills of a graduate in L-22?	2(Insufficiently)	11	4	.137
	3(Sufficiently positive)	37	14	
	4(Positive)	15	14	
5. Do you consider your training to be in line with practising as a basic kinesiologist?	1(No, not at all)	1	1	.001
	2(Insufficiently)	20	12	
	3(Sufficiently)	41	11	
	4(Yes, completely)	1	8	
6. How well do you feel your training allows you to conduct, manage and evaluate individual and group physical activities?	2(Insufficiently)	15	10	.105
	3(Sufficiently)	45	17	
	4(Excellently)	3	5	
7. How well do you believe your training enables you to conduct, manage and evaluate activities to improve the quality of life through exercise?	2(Insufficiently)	21	11	.001
	3(Sufficiently)	40	12	
	4(Excellently)	2	9	
8. How well do you consider that your training allows you to perform personal training activities?	1(Not at all)	4	4	.011
	2(Insufficiently)	24	11	
	3(Sufficiently)	34	11	
	4(Excellently)	1	6	
9. To what extent do you consider that your university education enables you to perform non-competitive athletic training?	1(Not at all)	2	2	.283
	2(Insufficiently)	13	11	
	3(Sufficiently)	46	17	
	4(Excellently)	2	2	
10. How satisfied are you with the disciplines covered in your curriculum?	1(Not at all)	5	2	.502
	2(Insufficiently)	15	12	
	3(Sufficiently)	42	18	
	4(Completely)	1	0	

11. Do you perceive any deficiencies in your training?	3(Medium)	10	10	.172
	4(Few)	29	10	
	5(Many)	24	12	
12. Do you hold a qualification issued by a national sports federation, sports promotion body or other?	No	4	22	.000
	Yes	59	10	

The qualification possessed by stakeholders influenced their perceptions on the adequacy of their training to perform the different activities of the basic kinesiologist ($P< .05$). A detailed description is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Association among qualification and knowledge on kinesiologist figure

		Qualification			
		Only qualification by NSF/ EPB /AD	**Only degree**	**Degree + qualification by NSF/ EPB /AD**	**Chi Square (*P*)**
5. Do you consider your training to be in line with practising as a basic kinesiologist?	1(No, not at all)	1	1	0	.003
	2(Insufficiently)	17	12	3	
	3(Sufficiently)	32	7	13	
	4(Yes, completely)	1	2	6	
6. How well do you feel your training enables you to conduct, manage and evaluate individual and group motor activities?	2(Insufficiently)	13	10	2	.008
	3(Sufficiently)	35	12	15	
	4(Excellently)	3	0	5	
7. How well do you believe your training enables you to conduct, manage and evaluate activities to improve the quality of life through exercise?	2(Insufficiently)	20	11	1	.002
	3(Sufficiently)	29	8	15	
	4(Excellently)	2	3	6	
8. How well do you consider that your training enables you to perform personal training activities?	1(No, not at all)	4	4	0	.000
	2(Insufficiently)	23	11	1	
	3(Sufficiently)	23	7	15	
	4(Yes, completely)	1	0	6	

Discussion

The results of the study showed a sufficient knowledge on the introduction of the figure of the basic kinesiologist in sports field among stakeholders. However, some difference in perceptions between internal and internal stakeholders emerged. Stakeholders exert enormous influence on multiple facets of business, as they not only help shape crucial decisions, but also suggest strategies aimed at creating value, innovation, sustainability and other factors of equal relevance[36,37]. The variable that influenced their adequacy to perform the different activities of basic kinesiologist, as the law stated, seemed to the possessed qualification, ranged from a certificated issued by NSF/ EPB /AD to a bachelor's degree in L-22.

Among the external stakeholders, all had or were in the process of graduating in L-22, unlike most internal stakeholders. Regarding the awareness on the role of basic kinesiologist, there were no differences between internal and external stakeholders: they were sufficient aware of the figure of kinesiologist and the relative specializations. Regarding the adequacy of their training to perform the different activities required by the basic kinesiologist, according to the law, some differences emerged. In fact, most internal stakeholders perceived their own training to be sufficient for practising basic kinesiology, whereas among the external stakeholders, some perceived themselves to be insufficiently ready, others to be sufficiently ready, and some to be completely ready. It is well known that most exercise science students do not perceive their undergraduate education to be complete, due to exams with little focus on the sports field, as they are scattered among biomedical, biomechanical, psycho-educational and sociological[38,39].

Concerning the adequacy of their own training in conducting, managing, and evaluating individual and group physical activities, most internal and external stakeholders answered sufficient, while a minority answered insufficient. Concerning conduct, manage and evaluate activities to improve the quality of life through exercise, most internal stakeholders perceived their training as sufficiently adequate, while the responses of

external stakeholders were equally divided between excellent, sufficient, and insufficient. Most internal stakeholders perceived their training as sufficiently adequate for personal training while external stakeholders were divided between sufficient and insufficient. Both groups considered themselves sufficiently trained to perform non-competitive athletic training, sufficiently satisfied with the disciplines covered in their own curriculum, although many deficiencies in their own training. Finally, most internal stakeholders do not have a qualification issued by NSF/ EPB /AD, compared to external ones. In summary, the training of internal and external stakeholders seemed to be perceived as sufficient to perform the activities of the basic kinesiologist, with some differences depending on the type of stakeholder. An interesting reflection emerged from the answers to question 12, which asked whether one holds a non-university degree. This reveals 3 sample types with 3 different qualifications:

1) Only technical qualification
2) Only L22 undergraduates/graduates
3) Undergraduates/graduates + technical qualification

Thus, by subdividing the sample by educational qualification at three levels, it is analysed whether there is a difference in perception towards the adequacy of one's education to perform the profession of basic kinesiologist, to ascertain whether there is an ideal education that guarantees greater preparation. Analysis of the data from these three sample types revealed four significant associations. From the first relationship, it can be seen that a greater percentage of group 3 (qualification + degree) perceives their training to be sufficiently or completely adequate to perform the profession of a kinesiologist (P= .003), more than the other two respective groups, to conduct and manage and evaluate individual and group motor activities (P= .008), to conduct and manage and evaluate activities for the improvement of quality of life through physical exercise (P= .002) and to conduct personal training activities (P= .000). In summary, it was shown that the ideal training was the combination of an L22 degree in addition to a technical qualification from a body/ federation.

The study revealed a greater adequacy of training for working as a kinesiologist perceived by those with an L22 degree with an external qualification. There were some differences between internal and external stakeholders, according to which the external ones felt more prepared, but this could be because these undergraduates also obtained an external qualification and therefore probably already worked in the sports sector. Previous studies[23-26] showed that internal stakeholders had a good knowledge of the Sports Labour Reform Act, but, nevertheless, preference was given to behaviour prior to it. In sport, individuals with different or external training to that of the basic kinesiologist were preferred to fill certain professional roles. Internal stakeholders also continue to prefer training and titles from outside the university, as they do not consider the figure of the kinesiologist so important that they would consider including it in sports organisation charts. In contrast, external stakeholders have a good appreciation of the training offered within the university. It has emerged, however, that even with the reformulation of sports work, a small percentage prefer the previous behaviour. In the sports sector, there was still a preference for professional profiles with different or external training to that of the basic kinesiologist to fill certain professional roles.

Practical applications

The study suggests that the best training for working as a kinesiologist cab be the university training combined with externally promoted training courses. Future studies could extend the sample, making it more representative, and later focus on analysing university curricula, comparing them with the curriculum offered by non-university training courses, to understand how to improve the kinesiologist's university training. There is a need to expand the sports area with respect to the biomedical and psycho-pedagogical ones. Training programs should include the development of soft skills and provide opportunities for internships and diverse practical experiences in different settings, enabling kinesiologists to acquire practical skills.

Conclusions

The study revealed, on the one hand, the incomplete adequacy and coherence of university and sports training for working as a kinesiologist, with some differences between internal and external stakeholder, and thus the need to revise L22 curricula; on the other hand, a greater adequacy of training for working as a kinesiologist perceived by those with an L22 degree with an external qualification. A limitation of this study is the difficulty in identifying questions that included as many commonalities between the questionnaires posed to internal and external stakeholders as possible to address the issues identified and achieve the study's objective. Another limitation is the sample size, emphasising the need to resubmit the questionnaire to a large sample size. The strengths are the reliability and validity of the answers and the originality of the study, as to our knowledge it is one of the first to investigate the differences in perception between internal and external stakeholders following the reform of the kinesiologist and the importance of both university and non-university training.

Ethical Committee approval

The use of these data did not require approval from an accredited ethics committee, as they are not covered by data protection principles, i.e., they are non-identifiable, anonymous data collected through an anonymous questionnaire. In addition, based on Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council on 27 April 2016 on the protection of individuals concerning the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (which entered into force on 25 May 2016 and has been compulsory since 25 May 2018), data protection principles do not need to be applied to anonymous information (i.e., information related to an identifiable natural person, nor to data of a subject that is not, or is no longer, identifiable). Consequently, the Regulation does not affect the processing of our information. Even for statistical or research purposes, its use does not require the approval of an accredited ethics committee.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Topic

Sport Science.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Author-s contribution

Conceptualization, F.D.D. and F.D.; methodology, F.D.D; software, S.A.; validation, F.D.; formal analysis, S.A.; investigation, F.D.D; resources, F.D.; data curation, S.A.; writing—original draft preparation, F.D.D and S.A.; writing—review and editing, F.D.; visualization, F.D.; supervision, F.D.; project administration, F.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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