

Is U Sports hockey the best kept secret in North American sports?
**A Case Study of the Legitimacy of U Sports Men's Hockey Member Schools as a
Pathway to Professional Hockey**

by

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ABSTRACT

Previous literature recognized (e.g., Chard, 2013; Edwards, 2012) a perception that U Sports men's hockey is not a league to advance careers towards professional hockey. Chard (2013) established this perception through the opinions of 54 Canadian hockey players between the ages of 15-19, with their perception that U Sports is an end of a hockey player's career professionally. There is a gap on CHL, U Sports, and professional hockey literature pertaining to this thesis topic. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to explore current and former hockey players' perceptions of U Sports men's hockey, as a means of gaining insight into how legitimacy is maintained by the member schools as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey.

To examine this purpose, a qualitative case study approach, guided this research to gain an in-depth understanding of the opinions of current and former players regarding the legitimacy of the U Sports pathway. As part of this, semi-structured interviews were employed through open-ended questions to explore these perceptions and opinions. Purposeful sampling was implemented for participant recruitment, as this topic is highly specific and can be difficult to access individuals in relation to the key criteria. The findings revealed the following themes to be influential in maintaining legitimacy in the U Sports pathway: *Athlete Development, Education/Scholarship opportunities, Professional career opportunities, Marketing, and Reputation*. The themes reinforced Pragmatic legitimacy (i.e., Exchange and Influential) as the type of legitimacy that was found within the context of U Sports men's hockey. It can be determined that the individual member schools from this study are establishing credibility, sustainability, and

social judgment, thus maintaining legitimacy in U Sports men's hockey as an alternative pathway to professional hockey.

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List of Symbols, Nomenclature or Abbreviations

NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association)

CHL (Canadian Hockey League)

NHL (National Hockey League)

AHL (American Hockey League)

ECHL (East Coast Hockey League)

CHL² (Central Hockey League)

SPHL (Southern Professional Hockey League)

UHL (United Hockey League)

IHL (International Hockey League)

FHL (Federal Hockey League)

Serie A (Italy)

Ligue Magnus (France)

Hndl (Netherlands)

DEL/DEL2 (Germany)

Liiga/Metis (Finland)

KHL (Kontinental Hockey League [Russia])

EBEL (ERSTE BANK EISHOCKEY LIGA [Austria])

NLA/NLB (Switzerland)

EIHL (Elite Ice Hockey League [Great Britain])

Metal Ligaen (Denmark)

Slovak Extraliga (Slovakia)/Extraliga (Czech Republic)

ALIH (Asian League Ice Hockey)

Chapter 1

Introduction

There are a number of hockey organizations that exist within North America that are influential in affecting a male hockey player's decision regarding a specific pathway to making it to a professional level of competition (e.g., National Hockey League [NHL], American Hockey League [AHL], East Coast Hockey League [ECHL]). Some of the organizations that affect a player between the ages of 16 to 21 pathway include: the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Canadian Hockey League (CHL or Major Junior), and U Sports (formerly Canadian Interuniversity Sport [CIS]). Edwards and Washington (2015) identified NCAA Division I and the CHL as two equally legitimate pathways to playing professional hockey. The term legitimacy (also identified as legitimate) is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Absent from Edwards and Washington (2015) identification of two legitimate pathways to professional hockey is a discussion around the legitimacy of U Sports as a pathway to a professional hockey career, which is the focus of this thesis research.

Scholars have argued the importance of hockey as crucial to the formation and maintenance of the national identity in Canada (e.g., Earle, 1995; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Jackson & Ponc, 2001; Kidd, 1996; Kidd & Macfarlane, 1972; Nauright & White, 1996). The Canadian minor hockey system has over 440,000 registered players (IIHF, 2018). Many of these children who are registered for Canadian minor hockey in a given

season will not continue to play the sport for a number of different reasons (e.g., cost, time and travel commitment, and loss of interest; Armentrout & Kamphoff, 2010; Mulcahy, 2017). However, the most talented players that continue with hockey will reach a key transition point typically around the age of 12, where they need to choose between the CHL or NCAA Division I route (Edwards & Washington, 2015). This is a critical decision for elite Canadian hockey players as, generally, players are not able to do both routes. On rare occasions a player may decide to leave the NCAA Division I pathway and pursue the CHL pathway; however, this decision cannot be made in reverse order. For those players who choose the CHL pathway, there becomes a second transition point where an elite CHL player has to decide between turning professional or playing U Sports men's hockey. Subsequently the third transition point at this time would be retirement from competitive hockey.

There are two perspectives when discussing U Sports men's hockey. The first perspective is that U Sports men's hockey has been viewed negatively amongst junior hockey players (aged 16-21). A pivotal study conducted by Chard (2013) explained that U Sports is "perceived as a league for relative failures, confirming its status as an inferior brand. Perhaps this perception of inferior quality is related to the lack of promotion of the successes of [U Sport] athletes" (p. 336). Furthermore, Chard (2013) found that the consensus among major junior hockey players was that playing in U Sports was not viewed as a league to advance their careers towards professional hockey. Similar sentiments were expressed by Edwards (2012), who stated that U Sports is not a legitimate pathway to the NHL, "[as U Sports players are] more likely to play in European professional leagues or to get a career outside of hockey" (p. 11). Chard (2013)

concluded that the current view of U Sports is that, “the relevance of [U Sports] is greatly affected by the perception that players’ hockey dreams are over once they are playing in the Canadian university league” (p.335).

Therefore, the challenge U Sports men’s hockey faces is that the league is not a new league seeking to gain legitimacy, but rather seeking to maintain its legitimacy and attract the most talented players to compete in the Canadian university sport, which is particularly the case at the member school level. Thus, it becomes important to understand the type of legitimacy that exists as a means of understanding how U Sports member school are able to maintain their legitimacy, which is the focus of this research. Suchman (1995) clarified the notion of perception by suggesting that legitimacy affects both 1) how people act towards, and 2) how they interpret an organization. Perception then plays a pivotal role when discussing the concept of legitimacy as this concept becomes the determinant of legitimacy by the constituents (e.g., members, athletes, parents, patrons, and stakeholders).

The second perspective is that U Sports is an alternative a pathway to reaching professional hockey. In Figure 1, the number of U Sports hockey players who played professionally, from each team and conference over a 10-year period (2005-2015), is provided below. Each graph represents one of the sub leagues of U Sports: Canada West, Atlantic University Sport (AUS), Ontario University Association (OUA) East and West Division. The Y-axis represents the number of players who played professionally following at least one season in U Sports while the X-axis represents the U Sports schools those players represented. It is worth noting that professional leagues in North America and Europe have changed since 2005. Examples of changes in professional

hockey include (e.g., Central Hockey League folding into the East Coast Hockey League, Germany’s second division rebranded as the DEL2).

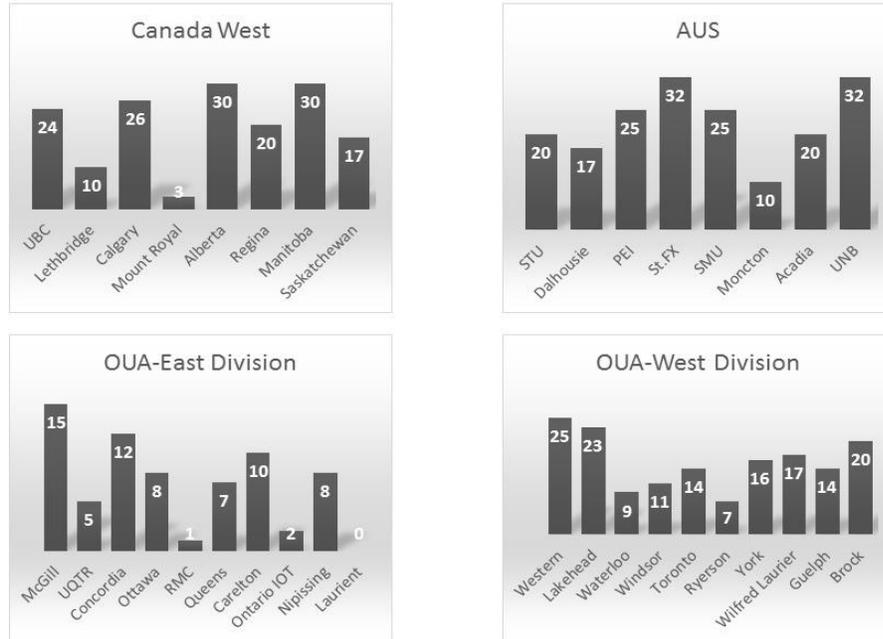


Figure 1. The number of U Sports men’s hockey players who have played professional hockey following their university career by sub leagues

Although not overly common, U Sports has had six players (2005-2015) move onto the NHL following their U Sports careers. These players include: Joel Ward (University of P.E.I.); Bracken Kearns (University of Calgary); Derek Ryan (University of Alberta); Fredric St. Denis (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières); Daryl Boyce (University of New Brunswick [UNB]); and Kevin Henderson (UNB). These former players have combined for a total of 744 NHL games played. Other players such as Rob Hennigar (UNB), Hunter Tremblay (UNB) and Mark Louis (St. Francis Xavier [St.FX] University), all signed NHL contracts after their U Sports career was completed, although they never played an NHL game.

Because there is evidence for two different perspectives about U Sports, the question that arises: How is U Sports perceived by the current and former Men's U Sports hockey players? Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to explore current and former hockey players' perceptions of U Sports men's hockey, as a means of gaining insight into how legitimacy is maintained by the member schools as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey. To understand these perceptions, this thesis used the theoretical construct of legitimacy, established by Suchman (1995), to examine the U Sports pathway as it pertains to the member schools. By using the theoretical construct of legitimacy, this thesis explored the maintenance of legitimacy by determining the type of legitimacy that exists for U Sports men's hockey as it relates to understanding the perceptions of the members schools as a pathway to professional levels of hockey competition.

One of the challenges facing U Sports men's hockey is the perception that if any player had interest in post-secondary education and hockey advancement, they would have chosen the NCAA Division I pathway (Chard, 2013; Edwards, 2015; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Rogers Sportsnet anchor Arash Madani had strong words for the overall product U Sports offers, saying University sport in Canada is an untapped resource and one of the most underrated parts in the Canadian Sport system (USPORTS.ca, 2016). As it is explained by College Hockey Inc. (2017a), "College hockey, in short, is the fastest growing development path for the NHL" (para.4). While Chard, Hyatt & Foster (2012) explained that within Canada "an argument can be made that despite the significance of the sport to its citizenry, almost the entire country ignores intercollegiate men's hockey" (p.246). This is an interesting concept, because the CHL and its players are held in such

high regard as the best development league in the world (CHL, 2018), while U Sports, which is predominately made up of CHL players, is seen as an inferior brand of hockey (Chard, 2013).

In the 2009-2010 season CHL representatives reported that 74% of U Sports players previously played in the CHL (OHL, 2010). Three quarters of U Sports rosters were comprised of CHL players, meaning not only are a lot of CHL players playing in U Sports, but impactful CHL players have and are choosing to play U Sports hockey. These impactful players include NHL draft picks, CHL captains and top scorers. By way of example, the 2012-2013 UNB Varsity Reds roster consisted of 8 NHL draft picks and 11 former CHL captains (Eliteprospects, 2016). The 2012-2013 Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL; a sub league in the CHL) scoring leaders serves as another example of top scorers from the CHL deciding to play in U Sports. Of the top six scorers in the QMJHL that year, the number one (Ben Duffy [St. Mary's University]) and number four (Peter Trainor [UNB]) top scorers opted for U Sports, while three of the remaining four leaders in points are currently playing in the NHL (Eliteprospects, 2016b).

Stevens and Holman (1993) explained “in the scholarly study of sport, ice hockey is a relatively new addition to the gallery of fascinating subjects that occupy the field” (p.251). Hockey research has recently become a more prominent empirical setting to explore amongst scholars (e.g., Chard, 2013; Chart et al., 2012; Edwards, 2012; Edwards & Washington, 2015); however, there is limited literature on the CHL and U Sports men's hockey. The exceptions to the limited literature pertaining to the CHL, U Sports and transition points has been done on athlete pathways (e.g., Edwards, 2012; Edwards & Washington, 2015). The scholarly work has highlighted the pathways available to

Canadian hockey players at two key transition points in a player's career (e.g., community or elite hockey, and the CHL or NCAA pathway).

U Sports hockey research has focused from a coach's perspective (Chard, Hyatt & Foster, 2012) and the brand meaning of league in the eyes of young Canadian hockey players (Chard, 2013). There has been no literature on the transition point of an overage CHL player and the decision to play U Sports men's hockey, which is an identifiable gap in the research. Providing literature on U Sports men's hockey would help inform the Canadian hockey community and its stakeholders (i.e., players, parents, administrators, coaches, and fans) about the perceptions about U Sports men's hockey and help assist in the decision-making process of a transition point in CHL player's career when decided between playing U Sports hockey or attempting a professional career. Providing answers to this gap in literature may in turn affect how people act and interpret U Sports men's hockey.

The next section of this thesis is the empirical setting. In this chapter a further breakdown of the CHL, NCAA and U Sports are explained. Included in this chapter is the literature review. Next, the theoretical framework explores the construct of legitimacy and how using that scope and lens helps explore current and former hockey players' perceptions of U Sports men's hockey, as a means of gaining insight into how legitimacy is maintained by the member schools as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey. Succeeding, is a description of the methodology and methods used in this thesis research. Next, the findings that are a result of the data collected through interviews and secondary data sources. Following the findings is discussion of the findings within the context of the theoretical construct of legitimacy. The final section of the thesis provides a conclusion,

contributions, and areas for future research.

Chapter 2

Empirical Setting

The country of Canada has a rich, deep history in hockey dating back to the origins of the sport (see Appendix A). Hockey is not just a sport in Canada; it is a cultural identity that brings pride to the country (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Howell, 2001; Kidd, 1996; Laba, 1992; Robidoux, 2002). Laba (1992) echoed this notion talking about the bond between Canada and hockey by stating that hockey shows evidence of character, competition and direction of Canadian culture. A child-playing hockey appearing on the Canadian currency (five-dollar bill), is an example of how integrated the sport is within the Canadian culture. Some of hockey's greatest moments in the sport have directly involved Canada and its players (e.g. Montreal Canadians 24 Stanley Cups, '72 Summit Series, '87 Canada Cup, "The Golden Goal", and Hockey Night in Canada). Also, some of the all-time greatest hockey players have come from Canada (e.g., Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid, Bobby Orr, Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux). As indicated earlier, there is limited literature that has examined the U Sports men's hockey, which limits the scope of this literature review.

This chapter provides a description of some of the different leagues and subsequent pathways available to elite Canadian hockey players. Describing the different organizations that are influential in transitioning players towards professional hockey provides a better understanding of this empirical setting and its impact on the broader hockey system in North America. Three pivotal organizations will be discussed: CHL, NCAA Division I male hockey, and U Sports. The scholarships from each pathway are examined in an effort to help clarify the strengths and weaknesses each pathway offers.

Furthermore a literature review pertaining to professional hockey was provided in addition to a description of the empirical framework.

CHL

The CHL is widely considered the premiere hockey league in the world for junior-aged players; indeed, the league produces more NHL players than any other development league (Hockey Canada, 2011). Since 1969, the CHL has produced over 50% of the players that played in the NHL (Ontario Hockey League [OHL], 2010). As a developmental league the CHL resembles the NHL in terms of policies and actions (i.e., number of games, travel, policies, draft) and professional approach to the treatment of players (Edwards, 2012).

Each player and their families have different reasoning when making decisions regarding their son's developmental pathway; however, the most talented players in Canada typically choose to play in the CHL, as it is their best chance of advancing to compete at the professional hockey level (Chard, Edwards, & Potwarka, 2015; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Hockey Canada, 2011). As a means of competing with the NCAA Division I men's hockey schools for the most talented Canadian hockey players, informally the CHL has partnered with U Sports to provide educational opportunities for their players to attend a university on a scholarship. Academically, the CHL offers a scholarship package allowing players to receive tuition and books at a Canadian educational institution for every year a player plays in the CHL. It is important to note that the CHL scholarship is done at an institutional level and does not require that the player continue to play hockey in order to receive the scholarship (Edwards, 2012). This means once a player has played a season in the CHL, they have earned one year of paid

tuition and books without the ability for the CHL to rescind the scholarship due to player performance, injury or lack of community involvement.

The CHL is the governing body for 60 franchises stretching across Canada with some teams residing in the US (CHL, 2018). The CHL is comprised into three regional sub-leagues; Western Hockey League (WHL), Ontario Hockey League (OHL), and Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL or LHJMQ), all competing to win the CHL championship, the Memorial Cup. One of the fundamental differences between the sub-leagues is the age at which players can be drafted to and their playing rights are owned the drafted franchise. For example, the draft age for the WHL is 14 years old, while the OHL and QMJHL players are drafted at 15 years of age (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

Similar to the NHL, drafted players by individual franchises become the property of that particular franchise restricting them from playing for different CHL teams (Edwards, 2012). Furthermore, players can be drafted by any franchise within the league (i.e., WHL, QMJHL, and OHL), which results in the presence of players as young as 16 years old. Drafted players will attend the team's training camp and will be evaluated by coaches, managers and scouts to determine if they will make the team (Edwards, 2012). Before any player plays a CHL game, they must sign a Standard Player Contract (SPC) and by doing so they are forgoing their amateur status and become semi-professional (WHL, 2016).

It is important to understand that although the CHL has been researched, the majority of articles are not relatable to this thesis topic. For example, Dube, Schinke, Hancock and Dubuc (2007) investigated ten CHL players' experiences playing in a

physically removed region of Canada. The perceived benefits of the players playing in a physically removed region of Canada included fan involvement and closer team bonding. These notions are due to the premise that there is not much else to do “up north” in comparison to a big city, therefore fans have nothing better to do than attend a CHL game, and players will tend to hang out with other players on the team because there are less distractions of family and other activities big cities may offer.

Allain (2008 and 2014) investigated the masculinity of the CHL; in particular challenges women may face in gaining access to the “closed community” that is junior hockey, and also the experiences of 10 Europeans playing in the CHL. Allain (2008) determined some of the biggest obstacles facing Europeans coming to play in the CHL were smaller rink size, style of play, language barriers and the maturity level of peers. Allain’s (2014) study indicated that the challenge to accessing players for the study was getting past CHL gatekeepers who would not get back to her requests. Upon getting through the gatekeepers and Allain was able to gain access and interview players. During the interview process, Allain suggested that the answers were guarded as to suggest the gatekeepers forewarned the players not to reveal too much information on masculinity of the CHL. Allain (2014) felt participants displayed dominant masculinity by trying to direct the interview, declining to answer questions and attempting to make Allain feel like an outsider. Duquette and Mason (2004) used the WHL as a case study for a potential owner to purchase a CHL franchise.

Absent in the literature on the CHL are statistics from the league's ability to be the primary feeder system for the NHL, and the importance of the CHL as a transition point in players’ future hockey endeavors. The relevance of the CHL to this thesis is based on

membership in U Sports who are comprised of former CHL players and who are typically involved in the CHL scholarship program. Furthermore, the transition point of CHL overage players, deciding between pursuing professional hockey or using their CHL scholarship and playing U Sports hockey is an important aspect of this thesis.

NCAA Division I Men's Hockey

The equivalence to U Sports and the direct competitor of the CHL is the NCAA Division I Men's hockey league. The NCAA is a multi-billion dollar institution, that is the governing body of university and college athletics in the US (Edwards & Washington, 2015) and men's ice hockey is one of the sports the NCAA oversees. Collegiate athletics in the US is divided by three competitive levels, Division I, II and Division III (College Hockey Inc., 2017b). For the purpose of this thesis, Division I of the NCAA will be referenced. This is due to the fact that typically players that are competing in Division III do not get the opportunity to make it to a professional level, as the competition level is limited. It is important to note that the NCAA has six teams competing in Division II men's hockey, however they do not compete for a national championship, which is a reason why players typically pursue Division I or III.

There are 60 schools spread out over six conferences (Arizona State plays in an independent conference) that comprise teams in Division I men's hockey. The six conferences are Atlantic Hockey, Big Ten, Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC), National Collegiate Hockey Conference (NCHC), Western Collegiate Hockey Association and Hockey East (College Hockey Inc., 2017c). Similar to the CHL, all teams across the different divisions are competing for the national championship called the Frozen Four championship (Edwards, 2012). This championship typically occurs

during March and revolves around the academic calendar. Games within the NCAA Division I men's hockey typically do not occur during the week; they usually occur on weekends as during the week the players are attending classes.

Canadian players have been recruited to NCAA Division I hockey since before the 1950's (Holman, 2007). The NCAA has policies on eligibility regarding an athlete's amateur status (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Here, the CHL is deemed as a professional league, thus players forfeit their NCAA eligibility if they compete in the CHL. Canadian players who are pursuing the NCAA route will most likely be scouted from junior "A" or "B" teams depending on the province in which they played (Edwards, 2012). The Canadian Junior Hockey League (CJHL) is the only accepted junior "A" league in Canada (CJHL, 2016). The CJHL is comprised of 10 leagues across the country all-competing for the RBC Championship. It also boasts over 2,900 graduates who furthered their careers by moving onto the CHL, collegiately or professionally (CJHL, 2016).

The NCAA Division I men's hockey provides a platform for Canadian players to pursue a professional hockey career, including the NHL, while receiving a world-class education. In the 2016-2017 NHL season, 32% of the players were former NCAA Division I hockey players (College Hockey Inc., 2017a). A study done by Krukowska et al. (2007) projected that the average cost of a four-year education at an NCAA Division I university or college without scholarship would be an estimated \$ 187,936. USD. The thought of earning a "full ride" scholarship while playing NCAA hockey at the same time is incredibly attractive from a financial point of view. The NCAA classifies a "full ride" scholarship as covering the cost of tuition, books, fees, and room (NCAA, 2016).

Collegiate hockey in North America is quite different when comparing, US (NCAA Division I men's hockey) and Canada (U Sports). The majority of scholarly research on NCAA Division I men's hockey has examined different forms of injuries (e.g., Agel, Dompier, Dick & Marshall, 2007; Wijdicks, Spiridonov & LaPrade, 2011; Wilcox, Machan, Beckwith, Greenwald, Burmeister & Crisco, 2014). One of the rare exceptions was research done by Edwards and Washington (2015), which examined College Hockey Inc. (CHI). Edwards and Washington (2015) confirmed CHI is a viable source of knowledge to help aid NCAA Division I men's hockey coaches, and players to determine the truths about the NCAA Division I men's hockey without breaking any recruitment violations. Also, Edwards and Washington (2015) established that CHI was created and maintained by fostering Pragmatic legitimacy.

U Sports

U Sports is the governing body of university sport in Canada. Ice hockey is one sport that falls under the U Sports umbrella. U Sports men's hockey consists of 33 universities across three regions compete for the U Sports championship, the University Cup. U Sports men's hockey is comprised of over 800 student-athletes, with the majority of these athletes coming from the CHL. The three regions involved in men's hockey include: AUS, OUA, and Canada West (U Sports Men's Hockey, 2018). The CHL is a feeder system for U Sports due largely to the CHL scholarship package. Krukowska et al. (2007) reported the projected cost (e.g., tuition, books, residence and travel) of a four-year education at a U Sports university would amount to \$ 53,610. Canadian. Fortunately for U Sports men's hockey players who previously played in the CHL, tuition and books are covered as part of the CHL scholarship.

The CHL scholarship is flexible in terms of allowing players to try professional hockey (e.g., AHL, or the ECHL) before accessing their scholarship (WHL, 2016) before a specific date in the U Sports men's hockey schedule. Unless a player has signed an NHL contract, or in some cases a top-level European club, a CHL player can try professional hockey for a full year, without any repercussions in the form of being ineligible for competing for a U Sports school (WHL, 2016). If a player decides to continue playing professional hockey past that first year, they will forfeit their CHL scholarship package. U Sports is also flexible in terms of allowing players the opportunity to come back from professional hockey and get an education.

However, for recent junior hockey graduates trying out professional hockey, they must decide to join a U Sports roster before January 1st, or else they will have to "red shirt". The term "red shirt" refers to a player who must sit out a year of U Sports competition (e.g., school transfer, professional, academic probation). U Sports restrictions for professional hockey players transferring back to school are not based on scholarship, but a player's years of eligibility. U Sports flexibility allows for players to chase their professional hockey dreams for longer than one year, while still providing them a place to continue their hockey career while earning an education.

U Sports is similar to the NCAA Division I men's hockey in the recruiting process, as athletes have the ability to decide where they would like to attend school. Many factors may influence a hockey player's decision to attend a certain school (e.g., hometown, program, partners/friends, and facilities). Another important factor to consider in the recruiting process is the additional funding a U Sports men's hockey team can offer to the player in addition to his CHL package (Chard et al., 2012). The additional

funding could cover the cost of residence, travel, and some miscellaneous costs, virtually leaving a hockey player debt free and with a university degree. Chard et al. (2012) found that OUA teams could not offer as much funding as the other two conferences (Canada West & AUS) in U Sports men's hockey. That being said, unless a player is talented enough to earn a "full ride" scholarship to a Division I NCAA University or College, the CHL scholarship package is unmatched financially.

Previous research on U Sport men's hockey examined perceptions of CHL players on U Sport and the assets and obstacles U Sports men's hockey coaches' experience (e.g. Chard, 2013; Chard et al., 2012). Chard (2013) determined that overall, the consensus of U Sports men's hockey's caliber of players is high, but the league is not viewed in high regard with a view towards advancement to professional hockey. Chard et al. (2012) interviewed coaches from the OUA conference and through their responses concluded the assets U Sports possesses are players, coaches, affiliation with universities and the overall product on the ice. The obstacles outlined were arenas, suppliers, media attention, financial sustainability and leadership.

Despite being one of the largest sporting organizations in Canada, research has yet to discuss the importance of U Sports men's hockey and its players. What makes men's hockey unique in comparison to every other sport in U Sports is the informal partnership formed by the CHL and U Sports regarding the CHL scholarship.

Professional Hockey

There are many professional hockey leagues around the world (NHL, AHL, ECHL, DEL/DEL2, Liiga/Metis, Kontinental Hockey League [KHL], ERSTE BANK EISHOCKEY LIGA [EBEL], NLA/NLB, Elite Ice Hockey League [EIHL], and

Metal Ligaen). These professional leagues differ in size and competitive level. For example, the KHL is arguably a superior league to that of the EIHL as there are a number of former NHL players competing in the KHL (e.g., Jaromir Jagr, Ilya Kovalchuk, David Booth, Derek Roy, Cristobal Huet, and Linus Omark). In addition to the size of the leagues and competitive level, factors such as “import” rules and athlete payment differ between leagues. Import rules are essentially the number of players that a team can have from outside of the country and Europe. Many of these professional leagues are viewed as feeder professional leagues to the larger and more visible professional leagues such as the NHL or KHL. The background information about professional leagues is important as it can play a role in the decision-making process of U Sports men’s hockey players who are wishing to continue playing hockey at a professional level of competition.

The NHL is the focal point of much scholarly research in this field. Examples of academic research on professional hockey outside of the NHL include marketing strategies for minor professional teams in North America (e.g., Paul, Weinbach & Robbins, 2013; Smith, 1995) and migration patterns of Canadians playing professional hockey in Europe (e.g., Elliott & Maguire, 2008). Limited research has examined professional hockey league players' experiences in professional hockey outside of the NHL. An exception is Robidoux’s (2001) book “Men at Play”, which explores masculinity and work-related socialization of players in the AHL, chasing the NHL dream. This book is important because it examines players at the AHL level, which is one of the professional leagues U Sports players have advanced to.

As for the NHL, it is considered one of the “big four” sports in North America (Titlebaum & Lawrence, 2010). Therefore, extensive research has explored the NHL

from multiple angles. Some topics included the adaptation process of playing in the NHL (e.g., Battocchio, Schinke, Eys, Battocjio, Halliwell & Tenenbaum, 2009; Battocchio, Schinke, Battocjio, Halliwell & Tenenbaum, 2010); violence (Burdekin & Grindon Morton, 2015; Zakhem, 2015); concussions (Caron, Bloom, Johnston & Sabiston, 2013); shootout advantages (McEwan, Martin, Ginis & Bray, 2012); and scouting (Renger, 1994). The relevance of professional hockey on this thesis was to examine players who went onto to professional hockey following their U Sports hockey career. Gaining an understanding of former U Sports hockey players that moved onto professional hockey sheds a light on how U Sports member schools prepared them to turn professional.

Analysis of Each Pathway's Strengths/Weaknesses

This section will discuss the strengths and weakness of the CHL, NCAA Division I and U Sports pathways. Furthermore, the scholarships each pathway can offer will be further explained. Mirtle (2009) described players pursuing the CHL are typically focused on hockey and not as concerned with academics. Subsequently, Kennedy (2015) indicated that players pursuing the NCAA route are generally considered “smart students” and want to gain an education and play hockey at the same time. As Edwards (2012) explains, young Canadian hockey players are faced with a difficult decision (transition point) when choosing what pathway to pursue: CHL/U Sports or NCAA Division I men’s hockey. This critical decision can shape a child’s future hockey direction and this choice may need to be decided as early as 12 to 14 years old, as indicated by Hockey Canada (Hockey Canada, 2011).

The CHL is widely considered the fastest and most direct route to the NHL as it produces more players than any other league. This does not necessarily mean that the

CHL is the best pathway for every player to pursue. The CHL route is most effective for a select group of players that are NHL bound; however, it can leave other players at a turning point where a decision needs to be made on the next pathway to pursue in their hockey career. The overwhelming majority of hockey players that choose either the CHL or NCAA Division I men's hockey pathway will never realize the NHL dream (Edwards & Washington, 2015). The lure of the NCAA Division I men's hockey route is the insurance policy of obtaining an education, while still competing at the highest level of competition. If NCAA Division I men's hockey players are unable to reach the NHL, they still leave themselves with a university degree in their back pockets and the ability to pursue high level careers once their hockey careers are over (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

As previously mentioned, Canadians often pursue the NCAA Division I men's hockey pathway with hopes of obtaining a scholarship via playing Junior A hockey in Canada (i.e., British Columbia Hockey League (BCHL), Alberta Junior Hockey League (AJHL) or the US (i.e., United States Hockey League [USHL]). Playing junior hockey in one of these leagues listed above, however, does not guarantee a scholarship to a NCAA Division I men's hockey university; in addition, for those who are lucky enough to obtain a scholarship, they may not receive a "full ride" allowance. Most student-athletes who are on scholarship will receive an amount covering only a portion of their educational expenses (NCAA, 2018). Parcels (2002) shared this truth by noting that most NCAA scholarship are not "full rides" and most Canadians are typically on half scholarships with 40-60% of their education costs covered. Using Krukowska et al.'s (2007) estimation of the cost of a four-year education at a NCAA Division I school and applying

that to a Canadian hockey player on a half scholarship (50%), that player would still owe \$ 93,686.00 US in tuition costs.

Parcels (2002) also noted that NCAA Division I scholarships are also reviewed after each year (i.e., grades, on ice performance, lack of community involvement), and if a player is not measuring up to school standards, their scholarship can be withdrawn. Scholarships can also be withdrawn if a player suffers a serious injury. Although expensive, playing hockey at the highest level while receiving an undergraduate degree provides an insurance policy for players who do not turn hockey into a career and sets them up for high-level career opportunities in such disciplines as accounting, finance, law, engineering, kinesiology or whatever field their undergraduate degree may be (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

The CHL recognized their lack of an educational insurance policy as a detriment towards their league. As such, the CHL needed to compete with the NCAA Division I colleges and universities for players and thus, the implementation of the CHL scholarship program. The CHL offers scholarships of tuition and books for every year an athlete plays in the CHL (CHL, 2018). The CHL scholarship has become one of the leading providers of post-secondary scholarships in Canada (Hockey Canada, 2011). For example, it is stipulated on the WHL website that they recognize the “paramount importance that parents and players place on education” (CHL, 2018, para.6), and have provided close to 3,500 scholarships worth over \$11million in student-athlete funding (CHL, 2018).

Players who have chosen the CHL pathway and have not been lucky enough to earn an NHL contract at that particular time in their career (overage season), are then

faced with yet another transition point in their hockey career. Players do not have to continue playing hockey as a requirement to receive their scholarship from the CHL (Edwards, 2012). However, for players who want to continue their hockey journey, they come to a transition point of whether to attempt professional hockey or use their CHL scholarship and play U Sports hockey.

U Sports does have policies for eligibility participation, but, they are not as strict as the NCAA's regulations on amateur status. Hockey players may choose to play professional hockey for more than one year and still return to U Sports. Although U Sports would not deem these players ineligible, they would be required to "red shirt" for a full season and have years taken off of the standard U Sports five years of eligibility (U Sports Policies and Procedures, 2017). A real-life example will be used to clarify U Sports eligibility for hockey players returning from professional hockey. Dan LaCosta played professional hockey between the AHL and NHL levels from 2006-2010. LaCosta decided to return to U Sports and pursue an education at the University of New Brunswick. LaCosta was required to "red shirt" for the 2010-2011 season before joining the hockey team at the start of the 2011-2012 season. As previously mentioned, U Sports can offer five years of playing eligibility, however LaCosta's professional hockey career limited his eligibility to two years. He played for the Varsity Reds from 2011-2013 using up all of his remaining eligibility.

The next chapter explores organizational legitimacy providing a theoretical framework for this study. Legitimacy will be discussed within the context of sport, which then leads to the research questions.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

To understand the opinions and perceptions of former and current U Sports players, organizational legitimacy was explored. Studies on legitimacy have been examined using two different groups - strategic and institutional traditions (Suchman, 1995). Strategic tradition (e.g., Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) implements a “managerial perspective and emphasizes the ways in which organizations instrumentally manipulate and deploy evocative symbols in order to garner societal support” (Suchman, 1995, p. 572). Institutional tradition (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Zucker, 1987) implements a “more detached stance and emphasizes the ways in which sector-wide structuration dynamics generate cultural pressures that transcend any single organization's purposive control” (Suchman, 1995, p. 572).

Institutional tradition values a subdivision of an organization's dynamics, creating cultural influence towards the organization as a whole. Scholars have further examined tradition by subdivided this concept into three categories:

1. Legitimacy grounded in Pragmatic assessments of stakeholder relations;
2. Legitimacy grounded in normative evaluations of moral propriety; and,
3. Legitimacy grounded in cognitive definitions of appropriateness and interpretability. (cf. Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Suchman, 1995, p. 572)

The term legitimacy has been defined by social scientists in a variety of different ways. Organizations can achieve legitimacy through the perceptions of observers and

stakeholders. As such, “Legitimacy emerges when organizational activities align with constituent expectations” (Lock, Filo, Kuntel & Skinner, 2015, p.362). Although legitimacy of an organization is produced internally, the perceptions and assumptions of the observers to the organization will regulate legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

There are various reasons why an organization would strive for legitimacy. For one, “obtaining legitimacy is important for sport organizations as it leads to the accrual of constituent support (e.g., participants, consumers, coaches, volunteers, parents” (Lock et al., 2015, p. 362). Suchman (1995) expressed two reasons in particular were important to address, “(a) the distinction between pursuing continuity and pursuing credibility and (b) the distinction between seeking passive support and seeking active support” (p. 574). It is important to note that legitimacy affects both how people act towards and interpret an organization (Suchman, 1995).

For this thesis, institutional traditional is applicable for understanding the opinions of former and current U Sport hockey players. Institutional researchers describe legitimacy as a set of constitutive beliefs and not as an operational resource (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, “cultural definitions determine how the organization is built, how it is run, and, simultaneously, how it is understood and evaluated” (Suchman, 1995, p. 576). To further understand how an organization is structured, run, perceived, and evaluated, the different types of organizational legitimacy need to be clarified.

Types of Organizational Legitimacy. There are three different types of organizational legitimacy: Pragmatic, Moral, and Cognitive legitimacy. Suchman, (1995) expressed “all three types involve a generalized perception or assumption that organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially

constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 577). Suchman (1995) also stated that “each type of legitimacy rests on a somewhat different behavioral dynamic” (p.577). The first type of organizational legitimacy is Pragmatic. Pragmatic legitimacy “rests on the self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences” (Suchman, 1995, p. 577). Wood (1991) found that audiences would make up the population that inspects organizational behaviour determining consequences for any given decision or activity. Often, this immediacy involves direct exchange between organization and audience (Suchman, 1995).

The second type of organizational legitimacy is moral. Moral legitimacy “reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities” (Suchman, 1995, p. 577). Opposing pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy does not rest on the judgments of a given decision or activity, but on the evaluation if the decision or activity was morally the right thing to do (Suchman, 1995). These evaluations reflect the beliefs about whether the activity promotes societal welfare in the audience’s value system (Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy is indicated in four forms: (a) evaluations of outputs and consequences; (b) evaluations of techniques and procedures; (c) evaluations of categories and structures; and, (d) evaluation of leaders and representatives (Suchman, 1995).

The third type of organizational legitimacy is cognitive. Cognitive legitimacy “may involve either affirmative backing for an organization or mere acceptance of the organization as necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account” (Suchman, 1995, p.582). Cognitive legitimacy does not deal with an evaluation, as society accepts an organization as necessary. It is created when organizations pursue goals that society accepts as proper and desirable (Suchman, 1995). When an

organization has reached “taken-for-granted status”, an organization is beyond dissent (Suchman, 1995, p. 582). The three types of organizational legitimacy subcategories are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Legitimacy category definitions (Suchman, 1995)

Types of legitimacy	Definition
Pragmatic Legitimacy	
Exchange	The support for organizational policies due to the policy’s expected value benefit to the constituencies (Suchman, 1995).
Influence	Constituents support the organization not only because they believe it provides favourable exchanges, but also it is responsive to their larger interests (Suchman, 1995).
Disposition	Support for an organization due to the good attributes (e.g., motives, values) constituencies believe the organization has that are compatible with their own (Suchman, 1995).
Moral Legitimacy	
Consequential	Relates to what an organization has accomplished based on criteria that is specific to that organization (Suchman, 1995).
Procedural	Can be obtained by an organization adhering to socially formalized and accepted procedures (Suchman, 1995).
Structural	People view an organization as legitimate because its structural characteristics allow it to do specific kinds of work (Suchman, 1995).
Personal	Derives from the charisma of an individual leader (Suchman, 1995).
Cognitive Legitimacy	
Comprehensibility	Generally, view the world as a messy cognitive environment, where participants struggle to organize their experiences into clear understandable thoughts (Suchman, 1995).
Taken-for-grantedness	Organizations transform disorder into a set of intersubjective givens that submerge the possibility of dissent (Suchman, 1995).

Legitimacy within the Context of Sport

Previous research on legitimacy in the sporting field has included: Edwards & Washington (2015); Kikulis, Slack & Hinings (1995a,1995b, 1995c); Lock et al. (2015); Podilchak (1983); Sam (2011); Slack & Hinings (1992); Washington (2005); and Washington & Patterson (2011). Lock et al. (2015) developed a framework to Capture Perceptions of Organizational Legitimacy (CPOL) in sporting organizations. Their research contributes to the existing research on legitimacy and

builds on the call for a greater focus dedicated to how individuals conceptualize legitimacy; thus, extending work into the perceptual domain of constituents, which provides a new basis for organizations to design strategies to gain, maintain or repair support. (Lock et al., 2015, p. 376)

Podilchak (1983) compared legitimacy theory and resource dependency in an effort to review sport organizations within a larger social structure. Podilchak (1983) determined

legitimacy theory can explain the shifts in sport leagues as rationalized niche in the environment; simultaneously becoming less dependent on the voluntaristic nature of the resource. (p. 27)

Sam (2011) used Moore's (1995) model of public value creation to investigate Sport Canada (the National funding body for sport organizations in Canada). Sam (2011) found Sport Canada must continue to build legitimacy and gain support for programs and policies from governmental politics, although funding support is often a controversial subject. Sam (2011) determined sport itself is an area of governmental investment that is in competition for resources with different sectors (e.g., health, education,

culture/heritage) and jurisdictions (e.g., federal, provincial, municipal). Sport Canada must continue to show governmental members not only the benefits of investing in sport, but to become further legitimized, promote ethical values and social equality by demonstrating public value (Sam, 2011). Overall, Sam (2011) explained,

In the end, the challenge of building political support is not necessarily that claims might not be 'true' and consequently support poor programs. The challenge as well is that in the process of producing continuous validations and rationalizations, it may become increasingly difficult to maintain credibility in the organization's policies and capacities. (p. 773)

Edwards and Washington (2015) used a theoretical lens of Pragmatic legitimacy to evaluate the creation of CHI as a viable resource with regards to recruiting for NCAA Division I men's hockey. Edwards and Washington (2015) discussed

forces, actions, and events contributed to the creation of CHI and what forces, actions, or events contribute to maintaining CHI's relevance in their attempt to leverage NCAA Division I hockey with Canadian players and parents. (p.291)

Some of the forces and actions discovered in the study were educational opportunities, student life experiences, player development and professional hockey opportunities (Edwards & Washington, 2015). It was determined from Edwards and Washington's (2015) study that these broad strategies used by CHI helped maintain the institution through Pragmatic legitimacy.

Research Questions

The use of the theoretical construct of legitimacy provides a base for this research in understanding the empirical setting of U Sports men's hockey member schools. In

order to gain insight into how the legitimacy of U Sports member schools is maintained, as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey, understanding the “how” and “why” is necessary. This leads to the research questions:

1. What factors did former and current U Sports players identify to contribute to maintaining legitimacy in U Sport member schools?;
2. How can those factors be categorized within the context of organizational legitimacy?; and,
3. Why was maintaining the legitimacy of member schools important for developing the perception of men’s U Sports hockey for current and former players as a viable option to reach professional levels of competition?

Chapter 4

Methodology

The philosophical underpinnings of qualitative inquiry are an attempt to construct an understanding of a phenomenon. Qualitative research is defined as,

An open, flexible and unstructured approach to enquiry; [which] aims to explore diversity rather than to quantify; emphasizes the description and narration of feelings, perceptions and experiences rather than their measurements; and communicates findings in a descriptive and narrative rather than analytical manner, placing no or less emphasis on generalizations. (Kumar, 2014, p. 14)

Patton (2002) concurs, stating qualitative research is a discovery-oriented approach. The intention of qualitative research is to evolve naturally, allowing for the flexibility to understand the area of research being studied.

One of the main focuses in qualitative research is to explore and understand the experiences and perceptions of a group of people (Kumar, 2014). In qualitative research, the researcher builds off the concepts and theories as the data is obtained. Qualitative research is flexible and evolving, allowing for the data to dictate the parameters of a study. Kumar (2014) expressed,

One of the most distinguishing features of qualitative research is the adherence to the concept of respondent concordance, whereby you as a researcher make every effort to seek agreement of your respondents with your interpretation, presentation of the situations, experiences, perceptions and conclusions. (p.133)

There are several ways for a researcher in social science to conduct research.

Examples of ways to conduct research within a social science context include: case study,

experiments, histories, surveys, and the analysis of archival information (Yin, 2003). Due to the exploratory nature of this thesis, a case study approach is an applicable strategy for conducting research (Creswell, 2003; Li, Pitts, & Quarterman, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Yin, 1994).

Case Study

Case studies are a predominant inquiry strategy in qualitative research (Kumar, 2014). Case study research is defined as “a qualitative approach that explores real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded system (cases) over time, through a detailed, in-depth data collection using multiple sources of information” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 96). The use of information from multiple sources aid in identifying case themes and descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Case studies seek to answer the “How” and “Why” (Yin, 2014). Tangible entities that can be used in case studies include: an individual, a small group of people, or an organization (Yin, 2014). Also, a relationship, a decision process or a specific project can be used as a case study (Yin, 2014). Creswell and Poth (2017) identified several defining features of case studies. For simplicity and clarity, the defining characteristics of a case study and how they align with this thesis is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Defining features of a case study (Creswell & Poth, 2017)

Features of a Case Study	Context within Thesis
Identification of a specific case that will be explained and analyzed (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 97).	The tangible entities being researched are a small group of people (current and former U Sports men's hockey players). Using single case design (legitimacy maintenance of U Sports men's hockey as a pathway to professional hockey) explores a real-life case.
Case identification is bounded and can be described or defined within certain parameters (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 97).	The parameters within this thesis are using current and former U Sports men's hockey players during a certain time period (2005-2015) from a purposeful sample population (specific teams).
Qualitative case studies can be composed to describe a unique case (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.98).	The NCAA and CHL are considered equal pathways to professional hockey (Edwards & Washington, 2015). However, U Sports is an unorthodox pathway to the professional ranks. There are two conflicting perspectives about U Sports, as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey. Further research is needed to advance literature on U Sports and also explore the uniqueness of an unconventional pathway that could still help a player achieve their professional aspirations.
Generating the descriptions of a case happens through identifying case themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.98).	Themes arose from interviews with current and former U Sports hockey players. Themes represent specific issues needing further investigation within a case.
Assertions and explanations can be concluded from the overall meaning delivered from the case (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.98).	The case study will provide assertions and a conclusion to better understand the perceptions of current and former U Sports hockey player's on the maintenance of legitimacy as a pathway to professional hockey.

An important aspect of case study research is selecting the correct type of case study applicable to the case being researched. The analysis of a case study could look to understand a single case, or multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The intent of a case study can be viewed in three different variations: single instrument, collective or multiple case study, and intrinsic case study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For the purpose of this thesis, a single instrumental case study was employed. Single instrumental case study focuses on a question by selecting a bounded case to describe the topic being reviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The reasoning for using a single instrumental case study is to use perceptions and opinions of current and former U Sports men's hockey players as a bounded case to clarify U Sports maintenance of legitimacy as a pathway to professional hockey. Specific procedures for conducting case study research have been identified by Stake (1995) and Yin (2014). The procedures for guiding case study research have been broken down into five steps for providing an in-depth understanding of a case or cases:

1. Determining if the research problem is appropriate for using a case study approach;
2. Identifying the focused of the study and select a case or cases;
3. Developing techniques using multiple sources for extensive data collection;
4. Specifying the analysis approach for developing case description(s); and,
5. Reporting the interpreted meaning of the case through using case assertions.

(Creswell & Poth, 2017, pp. 100-101)

This research design used a case study approach because it has a clearly identifiable case (legitimacy maintenance of U Sports as a pathway to professional

hockey) with boundaries seeking to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Based on table 2 the case study in this thesis is using current and former U Sports players as a bounded case to discuss their perceptions and experiences within U Sports hockey and the maintenance of legitimacy in a pathway to professional hockey. The intent of this thesis was to conduct a single instrument case study approach using several individuals as a bounded case. The case selected provides the ability to employ purposive sampling, where interviews and secondary data sources were collected.

Methods

In qualitative research, a researcher purposely selects a sample population that is qualified and can provide relevant information pertaining to the study (i.e., purposively sampling; Kumar, 2014), which is known as purposive sampling. Accessing potential respondents that have extensive knowledge about U Sports happened through purposive sampling. The premise of purposive sampling is using a wide range of methods to find participants from of a highly specific and difficult to reach population (Neuman, 2000). The population of current and former U Sports men's hockey players is both highly specific and can be difficult to access. Therefore, the sample population was selected through known contacts and at the convenience of the researcher. Purposive sampling aided in accessing a population that fits inclusion criteria.

This thesis was reviewed by the University of New Brunswick Ethics Board. As a starting point for this study, 12 participants were selected to be interviewed, which followed the guidelines of data saturation when limiting the study to a certain number of participants (see Table 4). Of the original 12 participants the criteria for recruitment was based on selecting players who represented the universities with some of the highest

number of players who played professionally following their U Sports careers (see Figure 1). The rationale behind selecting schools with high number of players transitioning to professional hockey was because the population is difficult to access and since one of the criterion of the study was to interview former U Sports players that played professional hockey, this allowed for a higher likelihood of accessing a participant that fit the criterion. These schools include, UNB (n=32), ST. FX (n=32), Alberta (n=30) and Calgary (n=26). The schools represent a case study of a subgroup in the population of the U Sports men's hockey league. Table 3 provides a rich description of each of the universities that were used in this thesis research. The sample population represents two different conferences (Canada West and AUS) within U Sports.

Table 3. Description of the members schools selected for this thesis research

U Sports Member Schools	Description
University of Alberta (U of A)	<p>The U of A is located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and has 32,435 students that attend the academic institution (THE, 2017). According to the <i>Times Higher Education</i> (THE) world university rankings of 2018, U of A's Education program is ranked 60th in the world, its Health program is 77th, the Law program is 83rd, and Psychology is 99th (THE, 2017). The U of A is ranked 119th in the world overall (THE, 2017). The men's athletic program is called the Golden Bears, while the female athletic program is called the Pandas. Both the Golden Bears and Panda's participate in 12 varsity sports, including hockey (Golden Bears and Pandas Athletics, 2018).</p> <p>Men's hockey began at the University of Alberta in 1908 (Golden Bears and Pandas athletics, 2018). The Golden Bears hockey program is considered to be one of the most successful hockey programs in Canada. Evidence of their success stems from the fact that the Golden Bears have won 53 Canada West Titles and 15 national championships (Golden Bears and Pandas Athletics, 2018). The Golden Bears have had 14 players move onto the NHL. Some of the most successful Golden Bears alumni include: Four-time Stanley Cup champion, Randy Gregg; Ian Herbers; current member of the Carolina Hurricanes Derek Ryan; and, Clare Drake (U of A hockey, 2017). In addition to players, Clare Drake was the head coach of the Golden Bears for 28 seasons (between the years of 1955-1989) and won six national championships and retired the winningest coach in U Sports history (U of A Clare Drake, 2017). Since his retirement, Drake has been named to the order of Canada and inducted into the builder category at the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2017-2018 (U of A Clare Drake, 2017).</p>

University of
Calgary (U of C)

U of C has more than 30,000 students and competes in the same conference (i.e., Canada West) as the U of A. According to THE's World University rankings of 2018, U of C was ranked between 201 and 250 of the top universities in the world overall. U of C consists of 14 faculties and has a \$1.2 billion operating budget, which contributes nearly 48 billion to the Alberta economy (University of Calgary, 2017). The City of Calgary retains 2/3 of U of C graduates as more than 173,000 alumni live or work in the community (University of Calgary, 2017).

U of C men's varsity sport program is called the Dinos (also identified as the Calgary Dinos). The men's Dinos program competes in eight varsity sports, and the women's program competes in nine varsity sports. Since 1964, the Dinos have won 45 National Championships in 10 sports (University of Calgary 2017b). U of C athletes have also been extremely successful on the international stage, as Dinos have won a combined 14 Olympic and Paralympic medals (University of Calgary Olympics, 2017). The U of C Dinos men's hockey team has won eight Canada West titles. However, unlike the rest of the universities sampled, the Calgary Dinos hockey team has yet to win a National championship in U Sports.

Similar to that of U of A, U of C is located in the same city as an NHL franchise, the Calgary Flames, which also gives opportunity to its players. Between 2011 and 2014, the Calgary Dino's hockey team has played an exhibition game against the Calgary Flames rookies. Mark Howell the Dinos' head coach, described the importance of the game as, "We have been really committed to building a strong relationship with the Calgary Flames. Having the two organizations supporting one another and having games like this is something we want to continue to foster and grow" (Doucet, 2014, para. 4). Another important event on the calendar every year for the Dinos' hockey team is the Crowchild Classic against crosstown rivals the Mount Royal Cougars. Hosted at the Scotia Bank Saddledome (Calgary Flames [NHL] arena) the 2016 edition of the game set an all-time U Sports attendance record of 12,859 (Matchett, 2017).

St. Francis Xavier
University (St.FX)

St. FX has more than 5,000 students and is located in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. St. FX is known for its residential community spirit and has been ranked by *Maclean's* magazine as the top party school in Canada (Honey, 2017). Furthermore, *Maclean's* also ranked St. FX as the 27th top school in Canada by reputation (Goldberg, 2017). The athletic programs at St. FX are known as the X-Men and X-Women. Together, they have won 10 National Championships in five different sports: X-Women rugby, X-Men hockey, X-Men cross country, X-Men basketball, and X-Men football (St. FX athletics, 2017).

The X-Men hockey program has won 26 Atlantic University titles, one national championship and has appeared in the U Sports University Cup (the national championship) 13 times. One of the most successful alumnus to come out of St. FX is P.J. Stock who played in 235 NHL games and is a regular member of the Hockey Night in Canada broadcast team (a popular Television program in Canada for the NHL). Other alumni to have success in professional hockey include Jason Bast, Mark Louis and Michael Kirkpatrick.

University of New Brunswick (UNB)

UNB is located in Fredericton, New Brunswick Canada. UNB has close to 7,000 students at the Fredericton campus. UNB became the first university in the province to earn a silver medal in worldwide sustainability ranking (UNB, 2017). Also, UNB is known for being an entrepreneurial leader amongst schools in Canada (UNB, 2017). *MacLean's* magazine ranked schools on comprehensiveness and UNB was ranked 6th in Canada (*Macleans*, 2017). The school is a diverse university offering over 75 undergraduate programs.

The athletic program at UNB is called the Varsity Reds. The Varsity Reds have won eight national championships in two sports. Currently the Varsity Reds compete in nine varsity sports. *Inside Fitness* (2015) magazine ranked UNB as one of the six best sport schools in the country partially due to its hockey program success.

The Varsity Reds have won 14 Atlantic University titles and seven national championships. The last six championships have come with coach Gardiner MacDougall behind the bench. An *Inside Fitness* (2015) article suggested that “much of the credit for this unprecedented rise to prominence belongs to head coach Gardiner MacDougall, one of the most decorated coaches in the CIS [U Sports] and without a doubt one of the main architects behind the team’s startling success” (p.1).

The most successful alumnus to come out of UNB is Daryl Boyce who suited up for 84 NHL games. Other alumni to have success in professional hockey include Kevin Henderson, Rob Hennigar, Hunter Tremblay, ET Marcoux, Matt Petgrave and most recently signing AHL tryouts following the 2016-2017 year, Francis Beauvillier, Cam Braes, Philippe Maillet, and Jordan Murray. Furthermore, successful tryouts for three of those four players (Beauvillier, Maillet, and Murray) all earned them AHL contracts for the following season.

The inclusion criteria included current or former U Sports men’s hockey players who represented UNB, ST. FX, University of Alberta, or University of Calgary for at least one season. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with former players that played

professional hockey following their U Sports career and players who finished their competitive hockey careers at the U Sports level. Table 4 provides the detailed credentials of the participants selected for this thesis research.

Table 4. Participant credentials

P #	Conference	Team	Former (pro)/Current
P1	Canada West	Calgary	Former (Pro)
P2	Canada West	Alberta	Current
P3	AUS	ST. FX	Former
P4	Canada West	Calgary	Current
P5	AUS	ST. FX	Former (Pro)
P6	Canada West	Alberta	Former
P7	Canada West	Alberta	Former (Pro)
P8	AUS	ST. FX	Current
P9	Canada West	Calgary	Former
P10	AUS	New Brunswick	Current
P11	AUS	New Brunswick	Former
P12	AUS	New Brunswick	Former (Pro)

The rationale behind exploring players who moved onto professional hockey and players who did not is to provide opinions and perceptions from both spectrums. If the sample population of former U Sports hockey players all played professional hockey following their U Sports careers, their perceptions might be biased. Similarly, if the sample population did not include any player who advanced to professional hockey following their U Sports career, the bias could swing the other way. Including both sides of the spectrum of professional and non-professional former U Sports men’s hockey players allowed for a balanced examination of their opinions and perceptions.

Limitations

A limitation of this study pertained to the limited number of athletes and member schools selected for this study. With the understanding that the member schools selected

for this study are generally some of most successful programs in U Sports, which is evident from the number of players that have transitioned to the professional level of competition in Figure 1. By selecting thesis participants who arguably competed in these successful programs the sample population has a bias towards the intended research topic which can lead to the possibility that less successful member schools would not value some of the main themes outlined in this study. Due to this limitation, this is a potential area for future research.

Interview Process

In an effort to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of current and former U Sports men's hockey players, semi-structured interviews were employed. Semi-structured interviews are a favoured technique by sport management researchers (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are useful when the participants cannot be observed, and it also allows for the participants to discuss their own perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2003; Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Open-ended and probing questions were used within the context of semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2003; Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Patton, 2002). Probing questions allows the researcher to ask questions into a participant's response to provide more in-depth responses. Probing was useful when participants began to get off topic and helped refocus their thinking to the original question being asked. Probing was also used when participant's responses began to discuss a concept, and a for the researcher to ask a follow up question could lead to a further explanation on the concept. Creswell (2003) and Edwards and Skinner (2009), concurred that probing is strong follow up to the initial question and probe questions usually try to discover the "how" and "why".

The semi-structured interviews consisted of 20-30 questions allowing flexibility for the researcher to probe further as the interview naturally transpired. The questions were influenced by the literature review and the purpose of the study. A list of interview questions is included in Appendix B. The duration of the interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes depending on the participant's openness and responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The participants were provided the results of interpretation, and a member checking technique was implied. Member checking involves bringing the participant's data and interpretations from the study back to the participant to ensure the information is credible and from a narrative account (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The data were collected was obtained through phone interviews. Each participant was assured confidentiality and remained anonymous throughout this thesis, which provided an environment where participants could speak freely. Ethical privacy was maintained through a coding system (e.g., Participant 1 [P1] through Participant 12 [P12]), which is displayed in Table 4. A coded map of the analytical themes arose from the data set. An analysis of the data was done following the completion of data transcription. The review of the themes by the supervisor helped improve the researcher's interpretive gaze.

Prior to the start of the interview process, two interviews were conducted with a former and current U Sports hockey players who have played or are currently played for a member school in the study. The purpose of these interviews was to test the interview questions developed for the research, and for the researcher to gain experience in conducting interviews. The data were not used for this thesis, and the researcher

consulted with the supervisor as to areas that went well and areas of the interview process that needed improvement.

In qualitative research, data were collected until a point is reached where no new information is being presented. This is referred to as the data saturation point (Kumar, 2014). Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles, & Grimshaw (2010) outlined two principles for specifying data saturation that was implemented for this thesis. The first principle was specifying a priori at what sample size the first round of analysis is deemed complete (Francis et al., 2010). The second principle was specifying a priori of how many more interviews will be completed as a saturation guideline (Francis et al., 2010). Following the principles of data saturation outline, the first-round analysis consisted of nine interviews and an additional three in the second round of analysis. In the second round of analysis the three interviews did not present any new themes. Therefore, data saturation was reached with 12 participants for this current thesis research.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources were used to augment the primary sources of data collection (Kumar, 2014). Researchers using secondary sources in qualitative research “usually extract descriptive and narrative information (such as information from historical accounts of an event, descriptions of a situation, stories about beliefs and superstitions, or descriptions of a site)” (Kumar, 2014, p. 197). The secondary data that was used in this thesis was the content of the social media and websites of U Sports men’s hockey and the individual member schools selected. This was subjected to content analysis, which is a research method that uses a set of techniques to make valid interpretations from text

(Weber, 1990). Content analysis categorizes contextual material, reducing it to more applicable, manageable data (Weber, 1990).

The content analysis was applied to the data gathered from websites and social media (Twitter) from a governing body level (U Sports) and at an institutional level (UNB, St. FX, U of A, and U of C). At a governing body level, U Sports has undergone a rebranding effort and created a new web page. U Sports' current webpage focuses on athlete profiles of current players and coaches. They equally presented all sports under the U Sports umbrella. Absent from the new webpage is archived articles transferred over from their previous website. Contrarily, the individual member school's webpage had archived articles that were accessible to the general public.

Each member school had a number of archived articles that were easily accessible from the varsity sports webpage. The archived articles at the individual member schools went as far back as 2010, with the U of C having some articles dated in 2008. Overall, St. FX had 748 articles, U of C had 629 articles, U of A had 538 articles, and, UNB had 475 articles. The majority of these articles were game updates, scores and the schedule. However, all four teams displayed alumni promotion and recognition in professional hockey.

Based on the content analysis, UNB had 35 electronic news articles (also identified as articles) with mentions to professional hockey, while the U of A had 24 articles, U of C had 17 articles, and St. FX had 12 articles. A main difference between electronic news articles from a team website and Twitter mentions was content. The principal reason behind this is based on Twitter's restrictions to character limit, while news articles do not have the same restrictions. Twitter is on a standardized feed, so

accessing archived Tweets is not possible.

Currently U Sports has 33,400 followers and U Sports hockey has 3,263, followers. Furthermore, UNB hockey has 4,882 followers, St.FX Hockey has 1,351 followers, U of A hockey has 3,899 followers, and U of C hockey has 953 followers. How many Tweets each Twitter account (UNB Hockey, U of A Hockey, U of C Hockey, and St. FX Hockey) published, influenced how far back in their history could be accessed. It is important to note that only original Tweets (from UNB Hockey, U of A Hockey, U of C Hockey, and St. FX Hockey) were examined and any content that was a retweet from another source was not included in the data collection process. UNB's twitter published 20 Tweets since June 27, 2017 regarding professional hockey. Content analysis indicated U of A and U of C both published 10 Tweets, while St.FX had not utilized Twitter promotion of professional success. The majority of Twitter-use for all four schools was general updates on scores, schedule and players of the game. Access to social media and the websites will only be able to used as a snap shot at a particular time as it could not access content beyond 2008.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the primary and secondary data sources for this thesis consisted of a three-step process, a modified version of Miles & Huberman's (1994) five-step process. A three-step process allowed for steps two, three and four from the Miles and Huberman (1994) process to be combined into one step. The stages used for this thesis were:

1. Familiarization
2. Thematic framework, Coding, and Charting

3. Interpreting

The first stage of data analysis for this thesis is familiarization. In this stage, the researcher became familiar with the data, by means of reviewing the interview process, the transcribed data, primary and secondary sources and notes related to the study (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

The thematic framework involved the researcher reviewing the transcripts from the interviews for recognizable and frequently emerging concepts. Themes arose from real-world examples participants provided during the interview process (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Also, themes were supported by secondary sources through content analysis of U Sports social media and websites. Themes were then indexed by manually coding related quotes and information from all data sources (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Specific text configurations and symmetries supported the elaboration of a conclusion (Trochim, 2006). The researcher charted and categorizes the data into coded theme. The research used a computer program QSR NVivo 10, which allowed for a place to organize, store, and retrieve data more efficiently (QSR International, 2018).

The third step of data analysis for this thesis was interpretation. As a researcher, data interpretation was displayed by charting the results. In an effort to comprehend the data, an interpretivism approach was applied to the thesis. Creswell (2003) and Smith, Evans and Westerbeek (2005) described interpretivism as a means of examining social actions and the true meanings behind the actions in an effort to understand and explain the behaviours (meaning it holds to them) of the study participants. Within interpretivism, a researcher looks to “explain the reasons for intentional action in relation to the whole set of concepts and practices in which they are embedded” (King, Keohane, & Verba,

1994, p. 37). A matrix display was implemented as a means of interpreting the data. Matrix display is an effective strategy for presenting interpreted data clustered together by themes (Riddick & Russell, 2008). The Matrix is displayed in Table 5.

Data analysis of the secondary sources consisted of becoming familiar with each archived story by reading and reviewing them. The data was then manually coded and charted the articles into descriptions. Each of the codes were interpreted and placed into themes within this thesis context. An example of a description that became apparent through this three-stage process was the theme of professional opportunity found within the primary dataset. All four schools had articles related to alumni playing in professional hockey. For social media (Twitter), a similar process was undertaken. Twitter is a standardized feed and there were no archived stories available. However, familiarization was accomplished by reading every Tweet published as far back as the search would allow.

Trustworthiness

In an effort to validate the case study, triangulation was implemented. Triangulation provides an essential way of confirming the legitimacy of case study research (Johansson, 2007). Triangulation of data sources is a primary strategy that can be used and supports the use of case study research from multiple perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies are synonymous with triangulation, as they can also be known as triangulated research strategy (Tellis, 1997). The need for triangulation comes from the requirement to verify the validity of the processes. In case studies, triangulation could be accomplished by using several sources of data (Yin, 1984).

Denzin (1984) identified four different types of triangulation, thus, the type of

triangulation used in this research was data source triangulation. Data source triangulation is when the researcher looks for the data to stay unchanged in different contexts (Tellis, 1997). For this thesis the triangulation of the case study was made up of:

- 1) Interviewing former U Sports men's hockey players
- 2) Interviewing current U Sports men's hockey players
- 3) Website/social media content analysis of U Sports hockey

Bias

It is important when conducting research for the researcher to understand the difference between subjectivity and bias. Subjectivity is a fundamental part of a person's way of thinking that is influenced by educational background, academic discipline, philosophy, experience and skills (Kumar, 2014). Bias however, is a deliberate attempt to disguise or emphasize something because of a person's vested interest (Kumar, 2014). A number of techniques were used to minimize bias within this research.

As a researcher my personal subjectivity in this thesis is due to my background and experience as a former men's U Sports hockey player. I also joined a professional hockey team following the completion of the 2016-2017 U Sports season. With my personal subjectivity being clearly stated, I used different techniques to minimize bias affected the findings of this study.

First, member checking was implemented to establish accuracy in the study. As a researcher, member checking occurs when the transcribed data is taken back to the participants in an effort to make sure it is how they wanted to be interpreted (Neuman, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checking in a study as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Secondly, reviews of the themes

that emerged were discussed with the supervisor to ensure no bias had leaked into the data. It is important to understand that a supervisor may also have personal subjectivity involved in the study; therefore, the final technique is crucial to ensure validity. The final technique involved keeping a reflective journal. A reflective journal is a private and confidential environment where a researcher can evaluate and analyze their learning experiences (Boud, 2001; Callister, 1993; Cameron & Mitchell, 1993; McAlpine, 1992; Saylor, 1990). Keeping a reflective journal improves the researcher's self-analysis and critical thinking skills (Boud, 2001; Riley-Douchet & Wilson, 1997). The use of a reflective journal allows a researcher to share ideas with their supervisor and scrutinize the interview process to improve their overall research abilities. Finally, reflective journal writing also reinforces the importance of using theory in practice (Riley-Douchet & Wilson, 1997). This three-step approach was efficient in minimizing bias that transpired from the research study.

The next chapter begins by describing the participant credentials within the CHL, U Sports and professional hockey. Next, the themes and subthemes are clearly displayed. In support of the primary data, the themes are augmented with secondary sources.

Chapter 5

Findings

Four schools represented the participants used in the case study: University of Alberta (U of A), the University of Calgary (U of C), St. Francis Xavier University (ST. FX), and the University of New Brunswick (UNB). The findings revealed the following themes to be influential for member schools in the maintenance of legitimacy as a pathway to professional hockey: *Athlete Development*, *Education/Scholarship opportunities*, *Professional career opportunities*, *Marketing*, and *Reputation*. Each case theme came from data retrieved from the interviews and secondary data. The subthemes are discussed within the context of the corresponding main themes. The structure of this chapter describes the participant's credentials and the themes and subthemes identified by the participants in this study. The themes are supported by secondary data from the content analysis of websites and Twitter of U Sports and the individual member schools.

The U Sports participants from this study that moved on to play professional hockey represented multiple professional leagues in North America and Europe (AHL, ECHL, Ligue Magnus, EIHL, ALIH, and DEL). All 12 participants played in the CHL between 2004-2014 prior to playing U Sports hockey and, in total, have played a combined 2,697 career CHL games. In addition, they scored a combined 438 goals and 805 assists for 1,243 career points. Of the 12 participants, eight have finished their U Sports careers, while four are still currently playing. The former U Sports players played in 919 career U Sports games, and combined, they scored 242 goals and 349 assists for 591 career points. The four current participants playing in U Sports men's hockey have combined for over 400 career games played and over 200 career points in U Sports.

Similarly, the four players who played professionally have combined for over 300 career games played and have over 100 career points in professional hockey.

Themes

This section describes the themes that emerged from the data analysis. An initial coding of the interview and secondary data sources resulted in 21 reoccurring themes through an inductive analysis. The 21 reoccurring themes were condensed into 5 main themes and subthemes. The condensation was a result of selecting concepts that were strong enough to stand alone as a main theme, which was indicated by eight or more of the thesis participants discussing the theme. Concepts that were relevant, but not strong enough to support a main theme were used as subthemes. Furthermore, the five main themes selected were also some of the concepts most frequently discussed by thesis participants. The five main themes consisted of *Athlete Development*, *The Importance of Education/Scholarship Opportunities*, *Professional Career Opportunities*, *Marketing*, and *Reputation*. Each main theme is supported by subthemes related to the topic. The five main themes and subthemes from both primary and secondary sources are exhibited below.

Athlete Development

Athlete Development (also identified as development) was a theme that was identified as how the players are trained to develop their skills and how they progressed through their hockey careers. Athlete development in this context is referring to the growth and evolution of an individual player's personal game during their U Sports career. The subthemes for athlete development in this context are schedule, opportunity, and coaching. An underlying concept that was evident amongst the interviews were based

on the participants developing their “games” or enhancing their talents against “men” as opposed competing against “kids” in the CHL, where the age of players range between 16 to 21 years old. As P1 explained their experience:

Right away from the second you step into the U Sports hockey league every guy on the team is already bigger, faster, and stronger. They were all 20-year olds in the CHL and are smart hockey players, so right away you’re adjusting to a bigger faster game. In U Sports you practice four times a week with two intense games on the weekend, so it really pushes you to get better.

P1 further explains that,

I think just the fact that they're all coming from the Canadian Hockey League, which is a great feeder to professional hockey. Everyone comes into U Sports hockey league as big strong men. Playing at that pace with the physicality, and how big everyone is I think it prepares you quite well for pro.

A similar statement from a secondary data source, an interview by Roberts (2015), on Kodie Curran (former player of the Calgary Dinos) who transitioned to the Hartford Wolfpack of the AHL, stated:

"Having finished last year with Hartford, the CIS [or U Sports] helps develop you for the transition to the AHL, because you play with men, and you train like a pro, you play a similar schedule. What the CIS [or U Sports] and what the Dinos’ program does for you over the period of time you're with them helps make you a stronger player, it matures you as a player and a person; making the transition smooth." (para. 2)

Additionally, P8 explained, “I think U Sports is definitely a good stepping stone for

professional hockey to develop players into not only professional players, but people that can have an impact on the professional level.”

Building off the previous statement, P10 expanded on the theme of athlete development by explaining,

I’ve been able to round out and mature my game. Understanding that if I am going to play at the next level, I need to be good in all areas and not just one. But it definitely opened my eyes that I am going to be more ready to make the step to pro.

(P10)

P2 described being skeptical at first of the quality of hockey, however, the perceptions changed when he stated playing: “I think it's made me a better player and it's developed me a lot. I think it's a great league and although, maybe I didn't think that before, I definitely do now.”

The theme of athlete development within the context of these findings would indicate that the participants perceive U Sports as a “stepping stone” for getting prepared to have a second attempt to playing at a professional level of competition. Being considered a “stepping stone” has only been a recent development for U Sports men’s hockey. As P11 explained,

I think it’s a growing league, it’s a development league; I think over these past five to ten years, I think it’s been a legitimate development program for players that maybe needed a year or two, or four years, to continue to grow as a player.

The understanding that U Sports can be a development league was expressed by P12 who explained, “I could have went and played in the East Coast [i.e., ECHL], but I decided to come to school for a few years and see if I could develop anymore and maybe get a

different contract.”

The ECHL is not publicly viewed on the same tier as the AHL, and the NHL, however it is still a legitimate professional league. Firstly, the ECHL is part of an affiliate system for the NHL, as NHL teams use the AHL to call players up, and the AHL uses ECHL to call up players. An example of the affiliate system between the three leagues is the New York Islanders (NHL), Bridgeport Sound Tigers (AHL), and Worcester Railers (ECHL). Players on NHL contracts will play on any one of these three teams depending on where the organization wants them to play. This is similar to how Major League Baseball (MLB) uses an AAA, AA, and A minor league system to develop their player before they reach an MLB franchise. Within the understanding of professional, the ECHL is legitimate as players are being paid to play hockey. Furthermore, the ECHL has had 641 graduates play in the NHL (ECHL, 2018). Therefore, this speaks to the quality of players coming into U Sports, who tuned down professional opportunities to further develop in U Sports as a hockey player while earning a degree.

Schedule. A subtheme of athlete development is the schedule. Participants discussed the schedule of U Sports men’s hockey as being both a positive and a negative aspect of their experience. This experience influenced how the participants perceived playing at a member school and the legitimacy of the league as a development pathway to professional hockey. There was a split amongst study participants who felt that playing fewer games did not emulate a pro schedule, while other participants felt having more time to practice helped them develop as a hockey player. P12 believes the onus is on the individual player, “it’s definitely up to the player because you practice every day, and play games on the weekend. It’s up to you to take practice seriously and to develop

yourself and become the best you can be.” This notion is also reflected in a secondary data archived story, “St. FX in particular gives you all the tools you need to succeed at the next level, it just comes down to how bad you want it” (St. FX Men’s hockey, 2012, para 7).

Negatively, the schedule was viewed as shorter in comparison to the CHL and North American professional leagues. For example, “The small amount of games isn't great as you don't get the regular grind of a season” (P1). Similarly, P2 shared a same view on schedules saying, “The only negative is that we only play 28 games, where in junior we played 72. Looking at professional leagues they are playing up in the 60-80 game range.”

Positively, a shorter schedule was perceived as a time provided for player development. P6 explained their experience as being one where, “I was able to improve everything because you get four practices a week you get a chance to work on things that you normally wouldn't in a regular pro career.” Comparably, P4 had a similar experience, “I think on ice my skills have developed. There is a lot of practice time and a lot of time to get better on certain things, so I think I've gotten better as a player.” Most hockey players at the U Sports level are experienced at evaluating their own play, and therefore understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own game. If their goal is to advance to professional hockey, improving those weaknesses theoretically will help them achieve that goal. With practicing up to four times a week and the presence of high quality-coaching players receive at the U Sports level, the opportunity to improve and advance to a professional level, is much more likely to occur, at least theoretically.

Opportunity. All the participants discussed the importance of developing as a

player at an individual member school in U Sports and giving themselves an opportunity to play professionally following their U Sports career. Most of the participants indicated they could have played professionally but opted to play U Sports as a legitimate alternative route to continue their hockey careers while also getting an education. For example,

For me, once I got here I wanted to one and done (leave after one season) and go play pro. But it shocked me how good the quality of hockey was and I realized that a couple more years of playing, and obviously the benefits of getting my degree, it really helped me and now that I have my degree I am looking forward to playing professionally. (P10)

In the above quote, what was apparent for P10 was that because of the quality of play there was an opportunity to play professional hockey.

In an electronic news article, it was explained that opportunities that stem from player development is a result of a well-designed hockey program at a member school. UNB Varsity Reds coach Gardiner MacDougall, explained that player development was important for UNB as a member school, saying, “The Varsity Reds have been the model of excellence on the ice recently with three national championships in the past five years and are also excelling in the aspect of player development” (VReds, 2017, para 3). This quote explains the importance of player development from a coach’s perception at one of member schools in the study. Furthermore, it shows player development is important at the individual member schools as well for the players.

The overall discussion that was generated by most of the thesis participants was that U Sports men’s hockey was an opportunity to develop against bigger and stronger

players, which in turn enabled the players to be prepared to make the transition and provided them with a better opportunity as opposed to their position coming out of the CHL. Based on data gathered from UNB's webpage, it was highlighted that former Varsity Reds player Hunter Tremblay received an opportunity to play in the NHL. Tremblay's AHL Todd Nelson felt,

“These guys do have an opportunity. Let's face it, in the NHL you want your prospects to play because you drafted them, but you're going to try and put the best product on the ice as you can and Hunter is working his way into that situation.” (Pereira, 2012, para. 42)

Coaching. An important facet of athlete development is Coaching. Generally, U Sports member schools do not have general managers; thus, coaches not only implement a game plan during the season, but they are busy in the off-season filling out the roster with new recruits. The thesis participants understood that coaches have an impact on athlete development and in the recruitment process regarding the most talented CHL players. P5 felt a main reason why he chose the team he did was because of coaching, schedule and opportunity to play professional hockey. P5 stated, “I knew with coaching and competitiveness of the league that it would allow me to have a chance to play professional hockey.”

Based on an electronic news article from St.FX's website, former St.FX player Mark Louis' explained his thoughts on the coaching he received at his member school. He stated,

The coaching staff works with you individually to better your game, and it's as close to a professional atmosphere as you can get... They give you everything you

need and the coaching staff works and prepares you for the next level. St. FX is a hockey program that wants you to make the jump to the professional ranks. (St. FX, 2012, para. 6)

What attracted P11 as a recruit to his team and particular conference was “you see good hockey and you get legitimate coaches.” Furthermore, an electronic article explaining how coaching helped a former U of C player making the transition from U Sports men’s hockey to professional levels of competition is another example of the theme of coaching. Kris Lazaruk (former U of C player) in 2014 made the transition to the Colorado Eagles of the ECHL and was quoted as saying,

Being with the same team for the past five years at the University of Calgary, you develop your skills and relationships. I was fortunate to have great goalie coaching available to me with the Dinos, it definitely helped with the jump to the ECHL. (Roberts, 2015, para. 12).

The Importance of Education/Scholarship Opportunities

The importance of education/scholarship opportunities refer to the CHL scholarship and the scholarships that U Sports teams offer to players in order to receive a free education. Furthermore, education is referring to the degree these players are working on while playing U Sports hockey. Education was referenced by all 12 study participants and was discussed 44 times, while scholarship was referenced by 11 participants in the case study and discussed 39 times. All the participants valued education and it was one of the major reasons why they chose U Sports. P2 explained that U Sports was a backup plan,

I think the big thing for me was that I was done playing hockey and I either had to

choose between going pro or getting a degree and having a little bit of the backup plan, so for me the choice came to go to the CIS [U Sports], get a degree and then pursue pro afterwards. That's the goal at least.

Another example regarding the decision-making process for playing for a U Sports school was further explained by P1 who said,

After playing a few years in junior I was speaking to current teammates and former teammates about the routes they took and a few of them had gone to the U Sports hockey league. I decided that it was in my best interest to try and go get an education first before I turned professional.

P11 explained his situation by stating that,

Originally, I thought I was just going to postpone and grow my game and try for a better contract. But the longer I was here the more I started to realize schooling was something that was important in life.

Similarly, P6 explained, "I knew going to school I can still play at a really high level of hockey while not delaying my life at all".

Receiving a scholarship was highly valued amongst participants as all 12 participants referenced this theme. These players identified the importance of the scholarship and how it influenced their decision to attend university. Many of the study participants felt the value of the scholarship outweighed their pro ambitions coming right out of the CHL. One of the study participants put numbers towards the value of the scholarship by stating, "I can say with a lot of confidence, maybe 95-100%, that if I did not have that scholarship from junior that I would have not gone to university" (P7).

The selection on what school a player will attend was found to have an influence on

the player's life decision pertaining to a hockey career. An example of why P4 selected his university was, "I just wanted a school that was giving me an opportunity to do well academically. For me that was a bigger school. Also to go to a team that was sending players to pro after they're done University." Education/scholarship opportunities was financially important for P11 who felt,

The scholarship allows you to get a free education. You start to realize how much that stuff actually costs and how much time goes into it, so originally it was a one, two year plan max, but when I got here I realized that I was going to stick it out and get my degree and that was something that was important to me.

A secondary source from U Sports website, discussed the CHL scholarship. One of the players interviewed in this feature was Sam Fioretti of Acadia University and he talked about the importance of the CHL scholarship by saying,

"When you can go to school and its paid for it definitely makes the decision a lot easier. I think that throughout my junior career I saw a lot of guys that I wouldn't necessarily call them school guys, but when the scholarship package was there they definitely took use of it and at the end of the day it was the best thing for them."

(USPORTSca, 2017)

In this particular secondary source U Sports is promoting their partnership with the CHL scholarship. It is important to note that although this social media example from a governing body level was promoting the scholarship and education, generally the social media platform from individual schools focus more on the athletes, as opposed to the student athletes. This speaks to the different narratives on priorities the governing body and individual schools use as marketing tools.

University Life. A subtheme for Education/Scholarship in the context of this thesis research was University Life. The participants indicated the expected university life experiences were perceived comparable to the importance of receiving an education and scholarship. P11 explained the connection between university life and education as he became “mentally more mature, and developed an understanding of how the world works”. University Life is understood as everything associated with the university experience and the benefits that go beyond playing hockey and getting a degree. The study participants discussed University Life as an area where they matured as a person both on and off the ice. Off the ice, P4 explained, “I think coming to university, playing hockey you make a lot of relationships and connections that you’re going to use later down in your life.” On the ice, P9 felt that,

The university program in general and getting through your undergrad is something that can really prepare you for your life and instill values in you. When hockey becomes a profession as a career you have the knowledge and know-how to really pursue it as a career instead of just a sport.

Furthermore, participants talked about transferable skills and situations they experience in university that helped them mature as a person. Time management was a concept that all of the participants stressed as important to succeed at the U Sports level. Other experiences that were mentioned that helped players mature as a person involved living on their own for their first time and everything that goes into being away from home (i.e., laundry, cooking, groceries, and paying bills). These life experiences acquired at university can translate to the real world. P9 explained how university helped his life in the professional setting by stating,

I think I got really good at being able to time manage and prioritize. Just having to balance a full course load with hockey and making sure you're studying and giving yourself ample time to work on projects and term papers. I think that has already translated into my professional life after school.

Attending university is a general transition and maturity phase most undergraduate students will experience. It could be argued most students have to learn aspects of time management, and prioritizing life events as some may even work while attending university. However, the study participants felt the demands and commitment that come with juggling a full course load and playing a full hockey season was challenging. Understanding that most of their weekends would be committed to playing games and practicing everyday, while staying on top of their studies and enjoying university life experiences was a challenge that better prepared them for the vigor's of professional hockey or joining the work force. In a testimony from UNB's website Hunter Tremblay experienced while attending university,

“It was four of the most amazing years of my life. I built a lot of good relationships, won some championships, ended up getting my (business) degree and ended up getting an NHL contract out of it, which I didn't have coming out of junior.” (Pereira, 2012, para. 11)

Professional Career Opportunities

The theme of professional career opportunities was understood as playing in a professional hockey league. All participants had different interests and experiences involving their views on professional sports, however, most felt they could play professional hockey following their U Sports career. One participant felt strongly that his

U Sports teammates could all be professional hockey players if they desired,

When I look at the caliber of players I played against in pro hockey and I look back to my teammates, I don't see why all of them couldn't play professional hockey given different roles. But I think they could definitely all play. (P7)

P8 expanded on this statement, saying,

I can't speak for other conferences, but I know in my conference there were many players who left their U Sports teams after their season last year and went on to play professional hockey and had significant roles on their professional teams after playing a full season in the U Sports.

P7 and P8 play or played in different conferences, however, both study participants feel strongly about the ability of teammates and players in their conference moving onto professional hockey. The high level of play and competition has allowed for a number of players to not only move onto professional hockey, but as P8 said, play significant roles on their professional teams.

Based on secondary data analysis, an archived story by the U of A highlighted a list of former Golden Bears who advanced to professional hockey:

Bears that earned pro opportunities include Chad Klassen (2010-2012 ECHL and Europe), Tyler Metcalfe (2010-Present - Europe), Aaron Sorochan (2009 – AHL and ECHL), Harlan Anderson (2008 and 2009 – AHL and Europe), Ben Thomson (2006-2012 – AHL, ECHL and Europe), Chris Ovington (2005-2008 – AHL, ECHL, CHL and Europe), Ryan Wade (2003-2008 AHL, ECHL), and Kevin Marsh (2003-2009 – AHL, CHL and Europe). (Gutsch, 2013, para. 8)

It is also important to note that U of A is located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada,

which is also the location for the Edmonton Oilers NHL team. It might be suggested that because of the NHL franchise's presence in the same city as the U of A, there is an increased professional opportunities for U of A hockey players. One such example of an increased professional opportunity for U of A players emanates from a yearly exhibition game against Oilers rookies, where most of the Oilers staff would be attendance. The pre-season game between U of A and the Oilers rookie team has been a long-standing tradition. An electronic news article, Gutsch (2016) spoke with U of A's general manager (Stan Marple) on the professional relationship between both organizations. Marple indicated U of A "has a great long-term relationship with the Edmonton Oilers... it is our hope that we can continue to grow our already excellent relationship over the next few years, for the mutual benefit of both organizations." (para. 5)

Level of play. A subtheme for professional career opportunities in this context is Level of Play. Using the Level of Play in U Sports as a benchmark to the CHL, NCAA and professional hockey helped shape participants perceptions on the ability of players to move onto professional hockey. A secondary source from U of C's website featured a player from the U of C Dinos, Kodie Curran, talking about his time in U Sports and how the level prepared him for professional hockey. Curran explained,

"I took the CIS [U Sports] as a stepping-stone to where I wanted to be. I worked hard everyday with the coaches and my teammates, as well as in conjunction with the University itself. It gave me the opportunity to further my career." (Roberts, 2015, para. 5)

Thesis participants felt that U Sports was a better league than they had anticipated, and the level of competition makes the league "very strong." P9 believed that "every

player that plays U Sports is a legitimate hockey player and that makes the games really structured, fast paced, and there's not a whole lot of mistakes.” P3 added that “the quality of hockey is high enough that it could probably allow guys to develop and be contributors at the pro hockey level.” Another example found within the secondary data regarding the level of play within U Sports, was explained through Hunter Tremblay’s (UNB) advancement to professional hockey following his U Sports season. Tremblay’s AHL coach Todd Nelson stated,

“(Our scouts) said this is a guy that could help your team right now, so we said get him in here...I could tell from the first practice, he didn’t even have to play a game. I could just tell the way he conducted himself, the way he passed the puck, the way he shot the puck. He looked like a seasoned pro just coming in from college.” (Pereira, 2012, para. 18)

Using the CHL as the “gold standard”, all participants felt that U Sports is a higher level of hockey. For example, P10 stated that, “The majority, if not all, the U Sports teams would be able to beat the CHL teams.” At the same time, the NCAA was viewed as an equal or comparable level of play as U Sports. The study participants have a good understanding of the level of play as most U Sports teams play exhibition games against the NCAA every year. P2 drew on his experience and described the level of play between the two leagues,

I think if you throw us [his member school] into an NCAA conference we’d be right there at the top. I think it is really comparable to an NCAA conference whether we are a little bit better or a little worse, I'm not sure.

Marketing

Marketing was a theme that is understood to be how the governing body and the individual school teams market and celebrate their players' successes. Subthemes for marketing in this context are promotion, recruitment, and social media. Marketing becomes important for the recruitment of players, particularly the advertising of the most talented male hockey players competing in the league and at member schools. Most of the study participants perceived marketing as beneficial in two ways. First, the celebration aspect of marketing players' success within U Sports and second, the alumni that move onto professional hockey promote the league as a viable route for players transitioning from the CHL. Therefore, the success of U Sports hockey can in part be seemingly contingent upon players transitioning from U Sports to professional hockey, and that transition being marketed towards top players coming out of the CHL.

The majority of the participants felt that U Sports is deficient in marketing and is an area needing improvement. For example, P10 shared "I don't think they [U Sports] do a good enough job to promote the schools, or the universities, and it's more based on the coaches and that's kind of the only reason how I knew about some of the schools." P9 shared his opinion on U Sports marketing saying, "I think a lot more emphasis could be focused on marketing towards how U Sports is a legitimate pathway to the pro ranks." P4 supports P9's statement by adding, "I think its hidden talent that could be promoted and used more that way." In some ways, U Sports men's hockey can be considered the forgotten hockey league in the North American hockey system.

An improved emphasis on marketing U Sports as a legitimate pathway to the professional levels of competition can be established through new recruits. P1 expressed his feelings towards U Sports marketing by stating,

I think that they should market professional success because lots of these kids, when they're 21 years old and they are coming into U Sports; they don't really understand that professional is a legitimate option after. And seeing guys go on would make it more enticing for people to come to school.

When examining the Twitter feeds of U Sports as far back as history will allow (i.e., November 11, 2017) a trend became more evident. U Sports as a governing body had eight mentions regarding professional football and five mentions regarding professional hockey. Although that does not seem like a big difference, further investigation revealed that three of the five hockey articles were about professional coaches (Barry Trotz, Mike Babcock/ Glen Gulletzen, and Clare Drake), while the other two mentions are on the same player, Joel Ward.

Although not many former U Sports players move onto the NHL and have long careers, there are numerous players thriving in top professional leagues all around the world. As evident from U Sports social media, professional successes for players are not being used or captured in alumni features. U Sports football plays a prominent role in the CFL draft as the majority of the players selected come from U Sports rosters. Subsequently U Sports markets and promotes that event and the athletes being selected to a professional league, far and beyond any promotion a hockey player moving onto professional hockey has received on social media.

Comparatively, the U Sports website provides greater amount of news coverage towards Canadian university football. Football uses multiple relevant alumni and features to promote U Sports football, whereas hockey has had only their most famous alumni as a newsworthy story. It can be argued that of the two sports, hockey and football, the

degrees of professional advancement are not equal. The rationale behind this statement is based on U Sports being the most direct pathway to the CFL for Canadians. The CFL mandates that on a 44 active man roster, a minimum of 21 players must be Canadian (CFL, 2018). Furthermore, on a 24 man-starting roster, seven must be Canadian. In comparison U Sports is not the most direct pathway to the NHL or professional hockey. This could be the rationale on why U Sports philosophy on marketing professional sports is not equal amongst the two sports. Although hockey is not the most direct path to professional hockey it still is an unconventional pathway to professional levels. This is evident amongst the four schools chosen in this study.

Promotion. Closely related to marketing is the subtheme promotion. Promotion is one part of an organizations marketing mix (i.e., price, product, place, and promotion). The rationale of why promotion is a subtheme of marketing is because marketing can exist without promotion, while promotion can't exist without marketing (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014; O'Reilly & Séguin, 2008). Although some of the participants felt that U Sports is improving in the marketing and promotional aspect, each study participant expressed that they should and could be doing a much better job in that area of promoting men's hockey.

When discussing the theme and subtheme (marketing and promotion), participants felt this was an area that is holding U Sports back. The general public and major junior hockey players are not aware of U Sports hockey due to the lack of promotion of their product. Simply put, P7 believes that, "U Sports does a terrible job of promoting itself." P1 provided an example of where a lack of promotion affected the recruitment process, "Obviously when you're in the U Sports hockey you see the little Twitter updates, but

when you're not connected directly with the league I didn't really see anything."

Furthermore, the participants explained that there has been lack of promotion from U Sports of graduating players who move onto professional hockey. P3 explained, "I have never heard of the CIS promoting athletes who have gone on to play pro." This potentially speaks to U Sports philosophy on marketing professional success within the sport of hockey. An explanation of how P12 sees the promotion of former U Sports players that have moved on to professional hockey is, "I'm not sure if U Sports itself cares, but I know that the individual schools will put a lot of emphasis on that." An example of promoting professional success at an individual member school comes from the Twitter feed of DinosHockey, on April 19th, 2017 publishing, "congrats to our former @Nixer39 on his Denmark Metal Liagen championship with Esbjerg energy!!! #GoDinos" (DinosHockey, 2016).

Social media and electronic news or media content was found to be used as a means of advertising to the transition from the university to the professional level of competition. Another example of a Tweet promoting UNB professional success was on January 16th when UNB Hockey acknowledged,

Our alumni continue to impress everyday. Congrats to both Matt Petgrave and ET Marcoux on the all stars selection in the ECHL. We are proud of both of you. We take pride in our development at UNB. (UNBHockey, 2018)

This is reflected in a quote by P12 who discussed the use of social media during the recruitment process by stating,

Social media was beginning to gain popularity when I first came to university, so it wasn't as popular as it is now. But I definitely checked out the school's just to

kind of try to get a feel for the school.

U Sports recently launched a new website in the fall of 2017 in conjunction with the rebranding of the organization. CEO Graham Brown commented on the site's new launch proclaiming,

Our latest digital initiative completes the first phase of our online transformation, one that will continue to evolve in a fast-changing world of technology and content... We'll keep looking for improvements to the website, especially in terms of statistics, and evaluate if the content we're focusing on is what student-athletes, family, friends, alumni, faculty, staff, and other students actually want to see. (U Sports, 2017, para. 21)

However, it was discovered that there were no archived articles from the previous website or current articles that identified or discussed male players transitioning from collegiate to professional hockey on the U Sports website.

The display of alumni moving onto professional hockey was communicated at the individual member school level where the promotion of players occurs. As P3 explained, I'm always seeing UNB just sent five guys to NHL development camps. But as far as everyone else in the CIS [or U Sports] I haven't heard a snippet of one U Sports hockey team that sent anyone else to pro or even signed a pro contract.

The above quote would suggest that U Sports as a governing body nationally does not market or promote men's hockey professional advancement, which perhaps speaks to the philosophical importance they put on marketing professional hockey success.

Recruitment. Another subtheme of marketing was Recruitment. This subtheme was discussed in the context of player recruitment experience prior to the selection of a

member school. The study participants felt that the recruiting process was conducted at the individual member school level rather than at governing body level. P9 reiterated that by stating, “most of the contact I received was through the individual university programs opposed to the U Sports body itself.” This is understandable as universities are competing against each other to bring in top talent each year. Participants indicated that there is a lack of support from the governing body to help facilitate the recruitment process.

P12 had a suggestion on a plan for U Sports to aid in the recruiting process:

I think they could have someone set up in every league where they could go around and talk to all the overage players and kind of inform them and maybe help make the decision a little bit easier for them. Because right now, players are almost on their own and have to do everything themselves.

The above quote would suggest the rapport between players (including recruits) and the governing body is very much removed. This disconnect can lead to uncertainty from recruits and players on the league, its actions and policies.

Understandably, social media (Twitter) and electronic news content was in the introductory stage amongst most of the participants. What this means is that the growth of social media and use of this tool within the U Sports and its member schools is still evolving. The participants from the study all felt that Twitter was not a big part of their recruiting process as it was just becoming popular as a platform for sharing information. The use of social media is evolving and the participants felt there is a need for continued advancement in the constant evolving social media platform.

Social Media. Building on P6 comments, it is evident that P6 did not really hear too much about U Sports from a governing body level . The non-existent marketing of

professional hockey success from the governing body level was articulated by P11 who indicated that U Sports as a governing body,

don't go out of their way to post someone going onto school, or I mean going on to professional hockey or signing an American League contract. I don't think that they use the platforms that are available to them to do that.

P11 further stated, "the actual sports/hockey side of it, there wasn't a whole lot of information being brought forth through websites." In general, the content provided through social media by U Sports is strictly game and score updates and awards at the U Sports level. Absent are alumni features, or keeping tabs on players that have moved onto the NHL or other professional leagues at a governing body level. The participants felt these are missed opportunities as free publicity and marketing are challenging U Sports men's hockey overall reputation.

Reputation

Reputation was a theme is understood as how U Sports hockey is perceived and viewed by its players. However, in this context following Fombrun (1996) organizational reputation is an understanding of the organization, as it exists in the mind of the stakeholders. The stakeholders for U Sports hockey are parents, players (past and current), coaches, managers, administration, and fans. The perception displayed by stakeholders retrieved from the interviews can impact organizational reputation.

The study participants, while playing in the CHL, did not know or think highly of U Sports reputation. An understanding of this perception was well articulated by P9 who felt,

when I was that age being really trained towards just playing in the NHL

obviously it really discounted the legitimacy in my eyes of U Sports, but I think that was more a lack of information and understanding.

If the players' perception on U Sports is not taken into account, the participants also felt the hockey community's perception is also affected. P1 explained this perception by saying,

I think a lot of people are misled in the hockey community. I think most people would understand that it's a step up from the Canadian Hockey League because these are graduating players, but to the untrained eye I would think that they perceive the league as fairly weak, which is due to lack of knowledge and not seeing any games.

The reputation of U Sports has been negatively viewed amongst the opinions of the participants through lack of marketing and understanding. P10 indicated that, "I know the general population around Canada, it's not viewed as good or not as comparable to other leagues, which is not the case whatsoever." The fact that U Sports is not viewed as comparable to other leagues, especially the NCAA, is an obstacle for U Sports being viewed as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey. Subthemes for reputation in this setting is the comparison to NCAA hockey and perception.

Comparison to NCAA hockey. NCAA Division I male hockey is considered to be one of the top amateur leagues at producing NHL talent. As an example, 32% or 314 former NCAA players played in the NHL during the 2016-2017 season (College Hockey Inc., 2017a). U Sports struggles comparatively with accomplishing the same or similar amounts of players being drafted and playing in the NHL or other professional leagues as the NCAA Division I men's hockey. This is evident in the opportunity players received

last year as no free agent U Sports player signed an NHL deal last season, while three of the top four NCAA Division I scorers (e.g., Zach Aston-Reece, Mike Vecchione, and Spencer Foo) who were undrafted free agents signed NHL deals (College Hockey Inc., 2017d). This can be frustrating for U Sports players, as opportunities tend not to present themselves professionally as often as they do to NCAA Division I players. P10 shared his frustration by stating,

The thing that's really tough for players in U Sports is when we play these teams and at the end of the year, you see some of these kids in the NHL. These players are getting an opportunity and you kind of question, how can we beat these teams badly or have good success and how is this player getting more of an opportunity? And that kind of goes back to why it's [U SPORTS] the best-hidden secret in hockey.

The idea of a brighter spotlight on U Sports hockey is something P2 is hopeful for, "it's definitely something that I hope will change. I hope U Sports will receive more exposure to pro teams because I do think it's a really good league and comparable to the NCAA." Furthermore, P2 continued to say that

if you look at US (NCAA) schools and the Canadian (U Sports) schools, you see that there is a difference perception-wise. When a player is going to [the] NCAA, people in the hockey world kind of perceived that differently than if a player is going to CIS [U Sports].

Perception. A subtheme for Reputation in this context is Perception. The participants viewed perception as their initial impression of U Sports and also how the general population views the legitimacy of the league. Participants felt past teammates

influenced their perceptions of U Sports. However, the participants recognized the perception alters as players age in the CHL. P8 summarized by saying that

when you talk to 16-year-old they may have a very different opinion than a 20-year old on a junior team. The older guys on my team had a different perception and maybe they realized how good U Sports actually is.

No secondary source on social media from U Sports and the individual member schools referenced the reputation of the league or explained the feelings the participants of the study shared on the subject. As a secondary source, Jason Gregor, hockey analyst with *The Sports Network* (TSN) provided an explanation on U Sports players' reputation:

"The U Sports players are known quantities so to speak, players where their potential is pretty established having mostly come from the CHL. The NCAA players who are pursued are not known and have blossomed and have more of an upward trajectory from an evolution perspective." (Gregor, 2017, para. 21)

Furthermore, Gregor indicated that,

"I've often wondered if the NHL is missing out on finding some late-developing hidden gems in Canadian Universities. Many U Sports players sign in Europe, or often in the AHL at the end of their season, but they are never given the same opportunity as many of the NCAA free agents." (Gregor, 2017, para. 24)

The next chapter will discuss the findings within the context of organizational legitimacy. By determining the type of legitimacy that exists, it can be explained how U Sports and its individual member schools maintain legitimacy and are perceived as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey.

Chapter 6

Discussion

This thesis initially set out to gain an understanding of current and former hockey players' perceptions of U Sports men's hockey, as a means of gaining insight into how legitimacy is maintained by the member schools as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey. By determining the type of legitimacy that exists, it can be understood how U Sports men's hockey can be perceived as a pathway to professional levels of competition, which ultimately has an impact on the member school programs, and governing body. By maintaining the legitimacy of the organization, there becomes less uncertainty within U Sports men's hockey for constituents. The findings revealed that the legitimacy indicators in U Sports men's hockey are the importance of education/scholarship opportunities, professional career opportunities, athlete development, marketing and reputation.

The above themes were similar to the findings of Edwards and Washington (2015), who focused on NCAA Division I male hockey legitimacy in the US. Thus, pragmatic legitimacy was determined as the type of legitimacy that was found within the context of U Sports men's hockey in a Canadian context. Both moral and cognitive legitimacy were found not to align with the focus of this study. To reiterate, moral legitimacy evaluates if a decision or activity was morally the right thing to do, which did not emerge from the findings. Furthermore, cognitive legitimacy, by definition, is not determined through an evaluation, as society accepts an organization as necessary. The focus of this thesis research was to explore current and former hockey players' perceptions of U Sports men's hockey and its member schools, as a means of evaluating

and judging U Sports men's hockey legitimacy maintenance as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey.

Pragmatic legitimacy was found to align-with this study's findings, as it involves the judgment and an evaluation of organizational behavior that results in determining consequences for any given decision or activity by the organization. Drawing on the work of Bitektine (2011), Pragmatic legitimacy is judged through the overall value that is assessed by an evaluator. In this research, the evaluators were former and current players. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the evaluators correspond with the types of Pragmatic legitimacy (i.e., Exchange, Influential, and Dispositional legitimacy), as identified by Suchman (1995), and can be found in Table 5. Although Suchman (1995) identified three types of pragmatic legitimacy, dispositional legitimacy was not among the themes and subthemes in the findings. In dispositional legitimacy constituents are likely to accord legitimacy to those organizations that "have our best interests at heart," that "share our values," or that are "honest," "trustworthy," "decent," and "wise." (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). The participants felt as a governing body U Sports did not share their values and have their best interest at heart.

Table 5. Themes, subthemes and types of Pragmatic legitimacy

Theme	Subtheme	Types of Pragmatic legitimacy Suchman (1995)
Athlete Development	Schedule, Opportunity, Coaching	Exchange legitimacy
The importance of Education/Scholarship opportunities	University life	Exchange legitimacy
Professional career opportunities	Level of play	Exchange/Influential legitimacy
Marketing	Promotion, Recruitment, Social Media,	Influential legitimacy
Reputation	Comparison of NCAA hockey, Perception	Influential legitimacy

Exchange Legitimacy

The general concept of exchange legitimacy is that stakeholders and potential stakeholders support the organization's policies and actions. An exchange occurs between the two parties, and through this exchange the organization is perceived as legitimate (Suchman, 1995). In its simplest form, pragmatic legitimacy involves support for an organizational policy based on the policy's expected value to a particular set of constituents (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Constituents are defined as players, coaches and management at member universities as indicated in Edwards (2012). Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) determined that legitimacy is evaluated in the "eye of the beholder." Essentially, in this thesis the support of an organization's actions and how current and former U Sports players view these actions' expected value determines legitimacy of U

Sports as a pathway to professional hockey. The themes that correspond with exchange legitimacy include: Professional career opportunities, the importance of Education/Scholarship opportunities, and Athlete Development.

Pragmatic legitimacy is evaluated on the self-interest calculations of an organization's most immediate audience. The immediacy involves direct exchange between organization and the audience (Suchman, 1995). As a form of pragmatic legitimacy, exchange legitimacy involves an exchange between two parties and the support of the organization's policies and actions. Both the member school and a player understand the parameters of the exchange of education/scholarship as a theme. Education/scholarship exchange occurs between a U Sports member school supplying a scholarship, university life, educational opportunities and a competitive league for players to continue playing and in return, the players commit to a particular member school and play for their hockey program. The players deemed the exchange of a scholarship and the intangibles that come with playing university hockey as a legitimate exchange; therefore, they support the organization's policies and actions. Having a scholarship was a crucial factor in all the participants' responses as a main reason they chose to go the U Sports pathway. Thus, because they buy into these policies and actions and they deem the U Sports pathway through the member schools as a legitimate pathway by means of development it could be suggested the players are getting a second opportunity to potentially advance to professional hockey.

These findings were similar to Adler and Adler (1991), Reynaud (1998), and Schneider and Messenger (2012) where scholarship was one of the student athlete's top reasons for selecting their university. The idea of playing hockey at a high level and

leaving school with a degree and no debt was an enticing opportunity many of the participants factored into their decision-making process. Committing to a university is a life-altering decision that can impact the future endeavors of a person, both on and off the ice.

The notion of life after hockey and having a university degree as a contingency plan is similar to the findings of Chard (2013), and Edwards and Washington (2015). The idea of having a ‘safety net’ is a selling point for the NCAA recruitment, because if NCAA players do not reach the NHL, they have a world-class education from a NCAA Division I institution and will be able to pursue high-level career opportunities (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Similarly, in Chard (2013) the CHL scholarship is perceived as a failure of a professional career opportunity, and the scholarship package is a ‘safety net’. The idea of a ‘safety net’ was a notion that study participants contemplated when deciding between pursuing professional hockey coming out of the CHL or using their scholarship and playing U Sports men’s hockey. The thesis participants felt the exchange of a scholarship was an acceptable reason to commit to a member school, and by committing they support the policies and actions of the member school, league, and U Sports.

An important aspect reflected in the thesis participants responses regarding receiving a degree is the student life experience gained while attending university. Adler and Adler (1991) indicated that social life was an important factor for NCAA Division I basketball when selecting a university. The impact this exchange has on a student athlete can be life-altering. Edwards and Washington (2015) explained that the CHI framed student life experiences as a means of attracting players to pursue the NCAA Division I

pathway. Furthermore, Edwards and Washington (2015) also explained that student life on a college campus is an important recruitment strategy to convince Canadian players to attend an NCAA Division I school. CHI outlined student life experiences as an opportunity to be involved in a university community and grow social aspects away from the rink (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Although these athletes are attending university primarily to play hockey and obtain a degree, the social aspects university life has to offer provides a full spectrum of the entire university experience available to them.

Moreover, student life experience was identified as a subtheme of scholarship in this thesis research as players understood that beyond the scholarship there was an opportunity to build on social aspects outside of the hockey environment. Lock et al. (2015) explained that legitimacy emerges when the organizational activities align with the constituent's expectations. The member schools offer student life experiences by providing scholarship opportunities to players that may not be able to afford attending university and that those expected life experiences align with their expectations of university life and being a student-athlete. Therefore, the understanding has already been deemed to be an acceptable exchange for their commitment to the member school and support their policies and actions.

College Hockey Inc. (2017e) indicated that the university student life experiences can develop an individual's ability to be independent, building confidence from the forging of new friendships and the bonds between college teammates, lifelong friendships, and potential to meet a future spouse. However, the findings indicated that university life experiences of the participants of this study were focused on the player maturing as a person. For example, the study's participants indicated that the

responsibility of attending school, living with teammates, paying bills, cooking meals, doing laundry and buying groceries, while playing hockey at the same time, helped them mature as a person and benefitted their lives moving forward (e.g., P8 and P10).

Another example of exchange legitimacy that emanated from the themes is athlete (player) development. The member school offers up an opportunity for a player to continue their development as a hockey player at the university level. Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) explained that legitimacy is a relationship approved between the practices and utterances of the organization and those constituents that are contained within the organizational system. Player's receive a competitive schedule and opportunity to develop as a player under the direction of a member school's hockey team coaches in exchange for supporting the member school's policies and actions.

The support from players towards member schools' is connected directly with the culture these teams possess. The players implicitly supporting the member school's policies regarding training camp arrival date, pre-season schedule, practice times, community involvement, actions, systems (style of play), and workout plans. There becomes an expectation by the coaches and staff that there is a "buy-in" to these policies, with the outcome of establishing a culture within the team dynamics that involves trust. Subsequently, the member schools used in the study have a strong exchange with their players, as trust is built through the development by the coaches to create a culture of winning championships and providing opportunities for development that enables the advancement of players to professional levels of hockey competition. The players understand the importance of this exchange because not only do they get to continue their playing career at the university level, they also have the opportunity to develop into a

professional hockey player. Essentially, then, this maintains the legitimacy of U Sports men's hockey as viable pathway option to not only possibly furthering their careers but also being a 'safety net' for life after hockey.

Providing player support is crucial towards the development trajectory of a player through the playing, training, and practice schedule. The exchange occurs from players accepting and supporting the established playing schedule from the member school and league in exchange for providing four practice slots a week and generally two games a week (e.g., Friday & Saturday). Typically, U Sports men's hockey schedule consists of 28 games in the OUA and Canada West conferences and 30 in the Atlantic University conference. This allows for players to be able to focus on both academics and athletics, as they are student-athletes. Furthermore, with more practice time as opposed to games, there is a greater opportunity for player development in theory.

Negatives can be drawn from the low number of games in U Sports, but the higher number of practices is an important part of a player's development. Similarly, the NCAA Division I men's hockey leagues has a comparable schedule in terms of games to U Sports. Edwards and Washington (2015) briefly discussed the schedule as a means of impacting development. They determined that the NCAA Division I hockey teams focuses on three areas of development (i.e., games, practices, strength and conditioning). CHI claims college hockey offers the epitome practice-to-game ratio to develop and prepare players for professional hockey. U Sports member school emphasizes similar areas of development that is made possible by the established schedule.

Thesis participants from this research explained that U Sports men's hockey is the highest level of hockey they have played. With regards to comprehending why this

perception is prevalent amongst the participants is related to the competition they are playing against. In U Sports, the competition against grown men provides an advantage for those players looking to transition to the professional level of competition, whereas in the CHL the completion is between 16 to 20 years old, who have not fully matured cognitively and physiologically. Essentially, U Sports players are competing against former 20-year olds in the CHL, which means they need to adjust to a bigger, and faster game. In the case of the NCAA Division I men's hockey, the CHI markets the development of players as having an opportunity to compete against opponents that were faster, stronger and older (CHI, 2017e).

Similarly, the participants used the analogy of “playing against men as opposed to kids,” which helps them prepare for the challenge of competing at the professional hockey level. U Sports men's hockey, led participants to feel they were more prepared for pursuing professional hockey options, rather than straight out of the CHL. This speaks to the participant's beliefs that through exchange of scholarship acquisition, and development expectation have led to the perceptions that professional advancement transitioning from U Sports to professional hockey is legitimate.

Influential Legitimacy

To reiterate, Suchman (1995) indicated that constituents support an organization beyond that of favourable exchanges, because the actions and policies are developed and implemented with intention of meeting their larger interests. With this understanding in mind, the organizations – such as U Sports, member schools, and the individual leagues – receive support from constituents (i.e., players) because the organization's actions and policies are deemed align to their larger interests, and thus are perceived as legitimate

(Suchman, 1995). Thus, to establish legitimacy within this context, the perceptions of the constituents are influenced based on the trustworthiness and the stability of the organization.

Suchman (1995) also suggested that that an organization that identifies with influential legitimacy must also recruit influential actors (e.g., parents, and coaches) to correspond and represent the organization who are credible in the view of constituents. This is evident in the context of this research through the theme of professional career opportunities. The promotion of former U Sports players by individual member schools regarding their transition to professional hockey can represent the member school's larger interests. The individual member schools receive support in form of testimonies from the constituents who move on to play professional hockey as the program helped them achieve a career goal. Some types of support individual members schools can receive beyond testimonies can include: support on recruitment trips, sponsorship, and alumni networking. Also, because these players are satisfied with transitioning onto professional hockey, when discussing their former program they typically indicate that they come from a quality program, which is evident from the testimonies as secondary sources from member schools archived stories.

These former players are recognized as credible as they have first-hand experience with the program and have achieved success. Thus, these players are used as an influential recruiting tool for the member school for potential players. Member schools from the study use testimonies from former players to reinforce the effectiveness of their program in preparing players to achieve their professional goals. Testimonies from former U Sports players on social media can further help certain programs excel in the

recruiting process for member schools. For example, a former U Sports player of the year and male athlete of the year, Philippe Maillet, of the UNB Varsity Reds had high praise of his former team following his signing with the Los Angeles Kings' American League affiliate Ontario Reign. Philippe Maillet is influential as it is coming from a trustworthy source, which further can help establish UNB's credibility as a program that provides opportunities for players to develop and transition to professional hockey levels.

Understandably, the recruiting process is far more complex than simply testimonies. Recruitment can be understood as the implementation of practices by management and coaches of member schools for the solicitation of potential players (Edwards, 2012). Furthermore, recruiting is essential for the success of an athletic program within collegiate sports (Dailing, 2002). Some factors that are influential include: coaching, scholarships, professional opportunities, education, university life, and organizational reputation (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1991; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Gabert, Hale & Montalvo Jr, 1999; Letawsky, 2001; Reynaud, 1998; Schneider & Messenger, 2012). Since selecting a university to attend and play for is such a critical decision for players, testimonies from reliable sources on their experiences at that particular university can be influential in the decision-making process because players may be looking to achieve similar success.

For potential recruits, knowing the level of play that can be expected at member schools in U Sports establishes credibility for the program, which can have an influential impact on the decision-making process of a player choosing the U Sports pathway. This can be understood as the reputation of U Sports, which can be defined as a perceptual identity formed from the collective perceptions of others (Zinko, Ferris, Blass, & Laird,

2007). Previously, Chard (2013) indicated that U Sports reputation was viewed negatively associating the leagues as a place for male hockey players' careers to end. Although the findings from this research would suggest otherwise, the reputation of U Sports was still viewed negatively amongst all the thesis participants prior to joining U Sports member school. The reputation and perception the study participants shared about U Sports was directly influenced by their CHL teammates (e.g., P4, P11, and P12). The influential judgment of the thesis participants' former teammates would suggest that the reputation of U Sports men's hockey has an impact on influencing potential recruits to pursue this pathway. Similarly this is evident from the findings of Edwards & Washington (2015), where they demonstrated that they used player testimonies as a recruitment tool to attract the most talented players to NCAA programs, thus being influential in those players decision making process.

The thesis participants indicated that the lack of information and awareness of U Sports is a result of the league's deficiency of marketing implementation. Chard (2013) found the majority of the 54 junior aged study participants did not hear about U Sports. Thesis research participants indicated that marketing and promotion is an area needing the greatest attention to ensure the maintenance of U Sports legitimacy.

The use of the member schools website and social media has become one of the most common information sources for consumers to find brand or product information (Lee, Kim & Chan-Olmsted, 2011). Charlesworth (2014) indicated that, "Brands [such as U Sports] that have succeeded either offer something that meets the needs – physical or psychological – of users or have tapped into existing niche markets" (p.306). The marketing and promotion of U Sports hockey can be understood in two ways: 1)

marketing U Sports men's hockey, by the governing body, in an effort to grow the credibility of the league; and 2) the promotion of players' success within U Sports men's hockey and their progression to professional hockey to improve the reputation the league

Growing men's university hockey visibility internally and marketing the highest level of amateur hockey within Canada can be essential to influence how people view the league, which directly affects U Sports legitimacy. The participants suggested U Sports management also needs to go beyond the general public and use marketing and promotion strategies to improve perceptions of U Sports from potential recruits coming from the CHL. Marketing the potential ability to develop into a professional hockey player through the assistance of member school can influence a potential recruit's decision to play U Sports hockey.

Currently, U Sports, from a governing body level, has struggled to market and promote men's hockey as a legitimate professional pathway, through alumni success. An argument can be made that U Sports men's hockey focus should be only on athletes currently representing member universities. However as an example, UNB beat the Portland Pirates (AHL), and Carleton University beat the Binghamton Senators (AHL) in preseason games in 2015; yet, there was not a promotional celebration of either accomplishment on U Sports website or Twitter.

Furthermore, every year individual member schools have players attend NHL development camps, including five from UNB in 2017, and U Sports used no marketing or promotion on these accomplishments on any social media platform. This is a missed opportunity as indicated by Charlesworth (2014), "the provision of high-quality, well-developed, relevant, product-related information in a manner that is easy to access so that

is the primary use of the Internet” (p.7). The findings show that the participant’s perception of U Sports management is that they don’t value or promote and market professional success of its athletes. However, this is not the case as U Sports has marketed and promoted the success of men’s football players at the CFL combine and draft (Buckholtz, 2018; U Sports staff, 2017).

Pragmatic Legitimacy and U Sports Men’s Hockey

To repeat, pragmatic legitimacy is judged through the overall value that is asessed by an evaluator, as indicated by Bitektine (2011). Bitektine (2011) also suggested that within organizational theory, legitimacy, reputation and status are key theoretical concepts. Since legitimacy is not on a continuum, meaning an organization either has legitimacy or not, maintaining legitimacy is a fundamental aspect to ensuring the success or nonsuccess of an organization’s survival and its ability to compete with other competitive organizations (Bitektine, 2011; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Fombrum, 1996; Podolny, 2005). Drawing on the work of Edwards (2012), credibility, sustainability and social judgment were used to discuss the impact that pragmatic legitimacy has on this current thesis research.

Credibility. Organizations that have ‘credibility’, or are seen as ‘credible’, have positive associations related to their actions and policies (Guido, Pino, & Frangipane, 2011). These terms are often associated with a favourable evaluation of a certain entity, U Sports men’s hockey and its member schools in this context. Guido et al. (2011) indicated, “credible sources are accepted as truthful and are likely to exert a more persuasive effect on receivers’ opinions” (p.210). Persuading an organization’s policies and actions towards a receiver (i.e., stakeholders or constituents) are increasingly

impactful from a credible source (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 2000). Credibility represents an organization's ability to communicate policies and actions positively, thus affecting 'receivers' beliefs about the validity of their assertions (Ohanian, 1990). Guido et al. (2011) drew on the work of Ohanian (1991) and explained that there are three main dimensions of credibility which are all present in the current thesis research: "1) trustworthiness, which is the level of liability perceived in the source; 2) expertise, which is the receivers' beliefs about the communicator's knowledge of a particular subject; and 3) attractiveness, which is the extent to which the source is judged to be pleasant or familiar" (p.210).

Credibility is understood as policies and actions of an organization that are perceived by an external actor (e.g., stakeholder, or athlete/player) as trustworthy and reliable (Suchman, 1995). Evidently, the findings demonstrated that the thesis participants felt that credibility was established in U Sports through the themes athlete development, the importance of education/scholarship opportunities and professional career opportunities. In contrast to the work of Edwards (2012), these findings were found at an institutional level (i.e., member schools) through the individual member schools and not at a governing body level. The member schools used in this study are establishing credibility and trustworthiness from potential recruits and players through exchange and influential legitimacy.

Suchman's (1995) describes credibility as constituent's support of policies and actions of an organization. This leads to favourable social judgment and the organization being seen as trustworthy and reliable. If an organization is deemed credible, and exhibits elements of being stable, which match the organization's policies and actions, then

favorable social judgment will be reflected. The participants of this thesis perceived at a member school level there has been a trend towards credibility improvement. The trend towards improved credibility was understood through positive social judgment through the five main themes. Scholarship acquisition, development expectation, and professional advancement opportunity have led to this perception. Member schools are relying on these actions to develop credibility and to establish trustworthiness to potential recruits and players in part with past actions (i.e., championships, programs reputation and culture).

Potential recruits and players are also influenced by member schools' former players' testimonies highlighting actions and policies that helped them advance to professional hockey. In the exchange, Hodson (2004) indicated that, "Organizational trustworthiness is a precondition for productivity and meaning in work..." (p.433); thus, by establishing trustworthiness players will be seemingly more productive and value the opportunity for playing U Sports men's hockey. Support of policies and actions from constituents establishes credibility, making the member university trustworthy and reliable (Suchman, 1995). Jepperson and Meyer (1991) suggests that credibility recognizes or explains what an organization is doing and why. Showing what an organization is doing, and why, from credible sources builds towards sustainability.

Sustainability. Although, there is no widely accepted definition of sustainability, Ciletti, Lanasa, Luchs, and Lou (2010) described sustainability, as presently sufficing current needs without obstructing future needs being met. An organization that is stable has the aptitude to connect a community, broaden a customer base, lower operating costs and benefit society (Ciletti et al., 2010). Based on Ciletti et al. (2010), the definition of

sustainability within the context of this thesis is understood that an organization's current policies and actions that are not obstructing growth and the progression of evolving policies and actions of future constituents. Communication is an important aspect of sustainability in providing an organization competitive advantage (Doorley & Garcia, 2007; Ioakimidis, 2007; von Kutzschenbach & Brønn, 2006). Ensuring the stability of an organization creates the perception of less uncertainty for the organization and its operation within the environment, which allows for the organization to sustain its operations. Furthermore, an organization that values sustainability and communicates its policy and actions clearly can increase the value of its image and brand, providing a competitive advantage (Ioakimidis, 2007). The sustainability of U Sports member schools ability to maintain their legitimacy requires effective communication tactics.

Furthermore, the sustainability of U Sports as a governing body to meet the needs of the participants of this study and future recruits of U Sports is inadequate because of the poor communication to potential male hockey players. To reiterate, effectively communicating an organization's message can increase its brand and image (Ioakimidis, 2007), which is essentially what management has looked to do through rebranding from CIS to U Sports. On the rebranding effort, U Sports CEO Graham Brown said,

I felt that we were doing such a good job of branding and marketing from a school perspective. Some of the schools were very good at representing their institution on campus, and at the national level we were letting them down a little bit.

(Bennett, 2016, Para 5).

The shortcomings of U Sports as a governing body relates back to communication, an essential part of credibility and sustainability. Subsequently, the participants felt the

biggest areas for improvement is that U Sports need to focus on marketing and promotion and reputation management. Thus, through the participants perception that U Sports struggles with marketing, promotions and reputation, it can be suggested that there is uncertainty from a governing body perspective that U Sports as a viable option for professional hockey pathway, which can be argued to have an impact on the sustainability of legitimacy in men's hockey in Canada. Ultimately, this has shaped the social judgment of U Sports men's hockey.

Social Judgment. The communication of credible sources accompanying the perception of a stable organization influences the social judgment of that organization. Bitektine (2011) defined social judgment as an evaluator's perception and decision about the policies and actions of an organization. Once an action is witnessed or experienced, constituents form their social judgments based on their expectations of suitable practice (Lock et al., 2015). As previously discussed, the thesis participants had their social judgment influenced by former teammates in the CHL prior to playing in U Sports hockey. Fortunately, the thesis participant's perceptions and evaluation of U Sports changed as they aged and experienced, first-hand, the policies and actions of individual member schools and the league as a whole.

However, at best, the general population's social judgment is rendered through spectatorship, not on a day-to-day evaluation of policies and actions of the organization. The general population's social judgment can be understood as 'outsiders' perceptions about what distinguishes an organization and establishes the image of the organization (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Bitektine (2011) spoke in hyperbole when describing social judgment as a matter of life or death of an organization (i.e.,

sustainability). As such, social judgment impacts the credibility and sustainability of an organization moving forward. Furthermore, social judgment can be understood as the appropriateness, acceptance, and desirability of an organization (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), which is a similar understanding of Suchman (1995) definition of legitimacy.

Based on the findings the member schools used in the study and perceived as viable option for developing players into professional hockey; thus reducing the uncertainty that exists playing U Sport men's hockey at certain schools with a reputation of being a viable pathway to professional levels of competition and continuing their hockey careers. The participants felt the communication of U Sports through the marketing and promotion of the league has ultimately affected its reputation. Since the policies and actions of U Sports sustainability are not symmetrical with the larger interests of the players and member schools, social judgment remains a concern. The social judgment of U Sports as a step backwards and not a means of advancement to professional hockey discredits its reputation in the university hockey landscape. The next chapter provides a conclusion to the research, pertaining to the research design and addressing the research questions. Furthermore, it highlights the contributions this thesis can make, both practically and theoretically. Finally, it explains areas where future research could build off this study.

Chapter 7

Conclusion, Contributions, and Future Direction

This thesis sought to explore current and former hockey players' perceptions of U Sports men's hockey, as a means of gaining insight into how legitimacy is maintained by the member schools as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey. Through qualitative research methods, specifically a case study approach, data was collected that enabled insight into the current and former U Sports men's hockey players' perceptions of competing for certain teams in Canadian university hockey. Three research questions were initially posed:

- What factors did former and current U Sports players identify to contribute to maintaining legitimacy in U Sport member schools?;
- How can those factors be categorized within the context of organizational legitimacy?; and,
- Why was maintaining the legitimacy of member schools important for developing the perception of men's U Sports hockey for current and former players as a viable option to reach professional levels of competition?

Based on data collected from the interviews and secondary sources, five main factors were found to contribute towards legitimacy maintenance in U Sport member schools, which addresses the first research question, within the context of U Sports men's hockey: *The Importance of Education/Scholarship opportunities, Professional Career Opportunities, Athlete Development, Marketing, and Reputation*. Through Suchman's (1995) categories of legitimacy, these factors can be categorized within the context of pragmatic legitimacy, more specifically, exchange and influential legitimacy, which

addresses the second research question. The final research question was addressed by establishing that credibility, sustainability, and social judgment are important for the maintenance of pragmatic legitimacy in U Sports member schools being perceived as a viable option to reach professional levels of competition.

In Chard's (2013) study, U Sports as a league was positioned as the place where careers go to die; thus, this reputation makes it challenging for U Sports' to attract the most talented hockey players. However, the findings from this thesis present an alternative view, as there has been an evolution where male hockey players have competed in the various leagues throughout Canada (e.g., AUS, OUA, and Canada West) and then transitioned to professional levels of competition. This is an indication of the legitimacy of the league by providing credibility and sustainability. Participants from this thesis suggested teammates or they personally turned down professional offers in order to play U Sports hockey. This research demonstrated that although U Sports is not the most direct path to professional hockey, thesis participants did not view it as a step backwards, but an alternative pathway to professional hockey while also gaining an education.

While U Sports men's hockey member schools are perceived as legitimate, it can be concluded that the marketing initiatives and the promotion of player's success into professional hockey was expressed as a weakness of the governing body for university sport in Canada. However, the weakness seemingly does not exist at the university member level for the four universities that were used for this research. This would suggest that there are two different objectives when it comes to U Sports men's hockey. Generally, participants felt as a governing body, U Sports does not put an emphasis on professional success and rather U Sports instead places an importance on their players

getting an education and representing hockey at the university level (i.e., student-athlete). Ultimately, by the governing body not emphasizing that U Sports is an alternative pathway to professional levels of competition, U Sports may continue to struggle establishing credibility, sustainability, and influence social judgment.

Furthermore, a conclusion can be drawn from the findings that legitimacy is being maintained for member schools by establishing U Sports men's hockey as a pathway to a professional level of competition, as opposed to by the governing body. Although individual member schools from the study emphasize the five main themes, U Sports as the governing body level does not seemingly value the same themes. In particular, the exchange legitimacy theme: *Professional Career Opportunities*, and influential legitimacy themes: *Marketing* and *Reputation* are all areas U Sports as a governing body can improve, as they are significant in affecting the social judgments of university men's hockey.

Although, the theme professional opportunity was viewed generally from an individual member school's standpoint, it also fits with marketing and reputation within Influential legitimacy. Fundamentally, influential legitimacy occurs when an organization receives support from a constituent because the actions and policies of the organization are seen as similar to their larger interests. The influential exchange between former and current players of a team in the form of testimonies has a positive impact for an individual member school in the promotion of their program to future recruits. The findings show a disconnect between member schools and the governing body's goals and objectives. Member schools are establishing credibility and sustainability through marketing and promotion of their own players moving onto professional hockey. This in

turn helps member schools with recruiting as they are being seen as trust worthy and reducing a player's uncertainty of advancing to professional hockey. Therefore, U Sport's credibility and sustainability is being discredited through social judgment as the governing body has failed to communicate the member schools message as a credible route towards professional hockey.

U Sports failure to communicate men's hockey's ability to advance players to professional hockey can be traced back towards its underutilization of social media. Using four UNB players who signed tryouts in AHL following the 2016-2017 as an example, U Sports hockey twitter and U Sports twitter unsuccessfully communicated (tweeted) these players signing AHL tryouts. Philippe Maillet was awarded male athlete of the year (2017) and within his recognition of the award U Sports mentioned his signing in the AHL, however they did not highlight his professional signing standing alone. Although UNB as a member school promoted all four of these players' signings on social media, U Sports did not build off this promotion. Furthermore, no Tweets or articles were communicated from U Sports about the three players (Beauvillier, Maillet, and Murray) who translated their AHL tryouts in contracts for the following season. Meanwhile, U Sports extensively covered U Sports football at the CFL combine on social media. The inconsistency of U Sports social media marketing and promotional strategy towards professional football and not highlighting professional hockey in a similar way, further clouds social judgment on U Sports sustainability and reputation as a league that advances players to professional hockey.

Contributions

The contribution that this thesis research makes to the field of intercollegiate sport and sport management is both practical and theoretical. To begin, the practical contribution this thesis research makes is to the management of U Sports. The findings identified that former and current U Sports men's hockey players indicated that there is a need to increase the awareness from U Sports of men's hockey success as a means of growing the university game.

In a video posted by U Sports on its YouTube page talking about why university sport matters, it discusses men's hockey in two instances. First, CEO of U Sports, Graham Brown mentioned NCAA hockey teams playing U Sports hockey teams and losing a lot (USPORTS.ca, 2016). Those games are opportunities that could enhance U Sports' reputation within the hockey setting, essentially selling U Sports men's hockey as an equivalent or in certain games superior in comparison to NCAA opponents.

Second, Madani explained U Sports is now sending players to the National Hockey League (USPORTS.ca, 2016). Although there are only two former U Sports hockey alumni currently playing in the NHL, U Sports does send numerous players to NHL development camps every year, and even more commonly, sends players to the AHL, ECHL and other top professional leagues around the world. However, through content analysis of websites and social media it can be determined at a governing body level, U Sports has not successfully marketed and promoted U Sports players' success within professional hockey. From a practical standpoint, this thesis contributes evidence that U Sports needs a "bigger buy in" when marketing and promoting U Sports hockey in a professional avenue. At the very least, using the credibility individual member schools from this study are gaining by marketing and promoting professional success could be an

area for U Sports as a governing body could look to explore moving forward. Participants from this study agreed from a governing body level that U Sports is not doing their part to highlight and promote the league and its players. The findings indicate that U Sports does not do enough to market its hockey in a professional avenue and that is hurting its credibility and sustainability through social judgment.

Another practical contribution this thesis can offer is furthering U Sports utilization of social media. Currently, U Sports hockey and U Sports has a strong following with 3,263 followers and 33,400 followers respectively. Using Twitter as a social media platform to market and promote team success against NCAA competition, alumni success within professional hockey, and current players signing tryouts following their U Sports season could enhance its sustainability and influence social judgment. Providing U Sports management with the realization that they can do more for the sport of hockey is an important contribution of this study.

A theoretical contribution this thesis provided was towards pragmatic legitimacy. Although pragmatic legitimacy has been researched, this thesis confirmed and enhanced literature by adding credibility, sustainability and social judgment as a means of understanding this theoretical construct. This thesis contributes towards the lack of literature on U Sports, especially within the academic hockey setting. U Sports men's hockey provides rich empirical setting for exploring sport management issues. Additionally, this thesis enhances literature on elite hockey within Canada. This study also expanded on Chard's (2013) work providing a national scope, which led to different results. Furthermore, providing first hand insight of current and former players'

perceptions of U Sports is a sample that has not been used, as such this thesis research provides a new sample population to explore.

Future directions

This study is the first of its kind to explore U Sports men's hockey through current and former players. The premise of the study is relatively simple and a duplicate study could be used going forward. Some examples of parameters that a replica study could change include (e.g., using different teams, using more than four teams, evaluating an entire U Sports conference). A cross comparison of the different leagues within U Sports could also be used. Using one of Canada West, OUA, or AUS as a case and comparing it to a separate conference within U Sports would be interesting to evaluate if there are different findings amongst the leagues. Furthermore, allowing for this original study to mature and reevaluate the findings in a couple years would make for an interesting future research study.

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Appendix A

The Origins of Hockey

The origins of hockey are obscure, as many different cities have claimed to be the birthplace of hockey. Cities such as Halifax, Kingston, and Montreal all staked claim to playing the first recorded hockey game during the 1800's (Simpson, 1989). The question that needs to be determined is what defines the sport of hockey. Many of the earliest forms of "hockey" were technically games known as shinty, hurley, bandy and field hockey (Simpson, 1989). Being on ice and hitting an object with a stick does not mean that hockey is being played. To determine what is hockey, a set of rules needs to be established for the sport to gain legitimacy. The first formalized ice hockey game was played at the Victoria Skating Rink in Montreal (Simpson, 1989).

Formalization occurred because the game was played on an indoor arena and furthermore, the game was played with a puck not a ball (Simpson, 1989). Once a standardized playing surface 200 ft. by 85 ft. (same as a modern ice rink) was established, rules soon followed and the sport of hockey gained legitimacy and became established. Morrow et al. (1989) stated that, "These rules were called the "McGill" rules and once they had been widely accepted the game of ice hockey began to gain popularity" (p.173). The rise of hockey began following the formation of standardized rules and club teams began to challenge other clubs in games of hockey. Governor General of Canada, Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley was an avid hockey supporter at the time, and he decided that a challenge cup should be rewarded to the leading hockey club in Canada (Simpson, 1989, p.177). A silver bowl on a base (the Stanley Cup) was purchased and presented to the leading club in Canada at the time. Competition was open to all, and the winner from

each of the regions of the country competed against one another for the right to win the Stanley Cup (Simpson, 1989).

Hockey had begun to earn the reputation as Canada's national sport (Simpson, 1989). The competitiveness of these club teams to win the Stanley Cup saw the rise of amateurism come to question, as teams would recruit and pay for talented players to play on the team (Simpson, 1989). Fans enjoyed watching the best players on the ice regardless of professional or amateur status, thus the creation of the National Hockey Association (NHA) later changed to NHL was created. Expansion of rival leagues began to surface, as each league had visions of becoming the prominent hockey league in the country.

The Canadian Hockey Association (CHA), Pacific Coast Hockey League (PCHL), and West Coast Hockey League all had stretches of greatness, however over the long haul all these rival leagues had to fold or cease operations due to financial complications (Simpson, 1989). As each rival league began to corrode, team rosters and players were dissolved and available for NHL rosters, allowing the best talent to play within one league. Teams in the NHL were frequently folding and expanding to different cities, and it was not until 1940, the 'original six' were established and the NHL would enjoy a long time of stability and success (Simpson, 1989). From 1940-1967 Toronto, Montreal, Boston, New York, Chicago, and Detroit remained constant and built "rivalries that cemented, in the minds of Canadians, the close relationship of hockey to the sense of the Canadian identity" (Simpson, 1989, p.195).

Appendix B

Interview Questions Guide

Prior to beginning the interview process, the participant will be asked to sign waivers, allowing for their answers to be interpreted into usable data for the study. An in-depth explanation of the process will be described to the participant. The explanation will describe different aspects of the interview process (e.g., a general idea of how many questions being asked, assuring confidentiality of their answers, their rights to refuse to answer a question or stop an interview at any time, member checking, recording, and the availability for follow up questions if the participant has any). The hope is to ease and calm the participant prior to the interview. In doing so they will not have any questions on the interview process and can focus on answering the questions to the best of their ability.

Prior to playing U Sports

- 1) Describe how you heard about U Sports hockey?
- 2) What were your goals when you were deciding to play U Sports?
- 3) Did you have a look at the social media content or the school's website when deciding what school you were going to attend?
 - a. What did you look at?
 - b. Why was this important for you?
- 4) What was your initial impression of U Sports hockey?
 - a. How did you get these impressions?
- 5) Did you have professional options available to you coming out of junior hockey?
 - a. If so, why did you not pursue those options?

- 6) Describe your decision-making process in choosing to play U Sports hockey.
- 7) How was U Sports Men's Hockey marketed to you?
- 8) Discuss the recruiting process you experienced for U Sports?
- 9) Was the CHL scholarship a big influence in playing U Sports hockey?
 - a. How did it help you?
- 10) What was the opinion of your junior teammates about U Sports hockey?
 - a. How did that effect your perception about the league?

Playing U Sports hockey

- 1) Has your perception of U Sports changed since playing in the league?
 - a. How or why?
- 2) Did your overall goals change since playing in the league?
 - a. Why did they change?
- 3) How would you describe the level of play in comparison to other leagues?
- 4) Has playing U Sports hockey helped your hockey game?
 - a. If so, how did it help?
- 5) Has playing U Sports hockey helped you in life?
 - a. If so, how did it help?
- 6) In your opinion what are some of the strengths of U Sports men's hockey?
- 7) In your opinion what are some of the weaknesses of U Sports men's hockey?

- 8) Did you receive additional scholarship money from the university on top of your CHL scholarship? How did different universities differ on scholarships?
- 9) Do you think U Sports hockey is a league where players play when they have given up on pro aspirations? Why or why not?
- 10) Through your experiences do you perceive U Sports is a stepping-stone to professional hockey? How come?
- 11) Do you feel U Sports is effective at preparing players for professional hockey?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 12) In your opinion what are some areas that U Sports could improve?
 - a. How would they go about improving?
- 13) Did/Do you believe you could play professional hockey after playing U Sports hockey?
 - a. Why or why not?

General questions

- 1) What do you think the general populations perceptions of U Sports hockey is?
 - a. Hockey community's perception?
 - b. Why do you feel that way?
- 2) Was the CHL beneficial in providing you with U Sports hockey information?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 3) In your opinion do you think the CHL could do a better job at providing future U Sports athletes with information about (e.g., scholarships, statistics)?
- 4) Do you feel U Sports could do a better job at providing information about U Sports?
- 5) How would that benefit future athletes? Did you feel informed?

Appendix C

Information letter

Dear [Study participants name],

My name is Cam Braes and I am a graduate student at the University of New Brunswick in the Faculty of Kinesiology. Based on your involvement as a U Sports hockey player, I would like to invite you to take part in the research study that explores the perceptions of men's U Sports hockey as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey. This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file as [Insert REB file #]. Specifically, for this interview I would like to draw on your experience and understanding of the hockey league as current and former players. This study is voluntary and you will only be included if you provide permission.

I would like to invite you to take part in an interview over the phone. The interview will take approximately 30 to 60 minutes. A review of the information letter will take place prior to the start of the interview and you will be required to provide verbal consent. The interview session will be audio recorded. Furthermore, you will receive a summary report regarding the findings for the study within approximately one year after the completion of the study. There are no known risks with this study. You are free to withdraw at any time up until the analysis of the data begins and you can request that the audio recorder be shut off at any time during the interview without any consequence. There are no negative consequences for non-participation in this study.

All transcribed data will remain confidential and be stored on password-protected computers at the University of New Brunswick. Although, the identity of the university cannot be masked, guidelines for personal confidentiality will be implemented. In addition, pseudonyms will be used in place of your personal identity. Data will be stored for a period of five years' post-publication. All the names of interviewees and organizations will be removed and pseudonyms will be used in the written report and within the transcribed data so that your identity is kept private. As a participant, you will be provided with a copy of your transcript, which you will have a chance to review for approximately two weeks.

The benefits of participating in this study are that you will be involved in sharing your opinions and perception on U Sports as a league. Furthermore, the information that you will be providing will assist in determining the type legitimacy that exists for U Sports male hockey. By the establishing the type of legitimacy U Sports, and the Universities can gain an understanding of the different perceptions of former and current U Sports hockey players to enhance recruitment tools of the league and institution. Also, this research will provide a foundation for conducting further research on U Sports hockey.

If you have concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Wayne Albert, the Dean of the Faculty of Kinesiology at the University of New Brunswick, at (506) 453-4576 or by email at walbert@unb.ca. Dr. Albert has no direct involvement with this project. You may also contact the chair of the UNB Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steven Turner at (506) 458- 7433 or by email at ors@unb.ca. If you have any questions about the study, please free to contact the principal investigator or supervisor at anytime.

Sincerely,

Cam Braes

Principal Investigator:

Cam Braes;

Graduate Student;

Faculty of Kinesiology;

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Curriculum Vitae

Candidate's full name: Cameron Braes

Universities attended: Bachelor of Recreation and Sport Studies (2015)

Publications: None

Conference Presentations: Edwards, J.R., & Braes, C. (2018). Legitimizing

Intercollegiate Sport: A Case Study into the Type of Legitimacy of Men's U Sports Ice

Hockey in Canada. Oral presentation at the North American Society for Sport

Management Conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia