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Engaging university students in sport and active recreation

Engaging more students in sport and active recreation is increasingly being recognised by national organisations as a way of contributing to raising population physical activity levels by making sport a habit for life (Sport England, 2015). The expert group for health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) across Europe specifically states that “Universities, in particular, are considered important contexts for the promotion of HEPA” (EC, 2015, p.5). Engaging students in sport and active recreation has numerous benefits for universities that are increasingly being recognised by external organisations such as the European Commission (EC), highlighting the contributions higher education can make to graduate employability (EC, 2015). Similarly the sports strategy in England also recognises the importance of the Higher Education (HE) sector for achieving national ambitions through sport as well as the role of graduates in contributing to sport and employability through sports volunteering (HM Government, 2015). Within England, a significant investment was made for universities to bid for funds with the purpose of engaging more inactive and semi-active students in sport and active recreation, that is to encourage more of those students who were participating in less than 1 x 30 minutes once-a-week of sporting activity to do more. This investment was through the Sport England Active Universities project (2011-2014) followed by a further investment through the Sport Activation fund (2014-17). This editorial highlights the sport development successes from many English universities in encouraging more students to get involved in sport, not only to benefit student health and wellbeing but, for many universities, the aim is to use sport to enhance recruitment, the overall student experience, retention and graduate employability (Brookstein, 2013). The editorial also draws on research conducted by Brunton and McKenna (2016) that investigated the successes and challenges from the deliverer’s perspective of how to engage more students in sport, where the term sport here refers to both sport and active recreation.

One of the primary means of engaging more students in sport through the Active Universities and Sport Activation funded projects in England was, and still is, through using students as Sport Activators, where they work in a volunteer role to motivate participation through 1:1 conversations with their peers around campus, use of other marketing activities, organising sporting activities as well as, for some, supervising or leading a session. Some universities also pay their Sport Activators as a way of ensuring commitment to the role or where more responsibility is required from a ‘lead’ Activator role. Brunton and McKenna (2016) identified 3 key themes that enabled more students to be more active through sport: ‘make it known’, ‘make it easy’ and ‘working together’. The theme ‘make it known’ included a number of categories, one being the need to recruit through word-of-mouth and personal contact using students as a key vehicle that was said universally to work. They found that peers approaching other peers worked to allow students to check and overcome their concerns that they may have about engaging in sport. This was thought to be particularly relevant for the target group (inactive students) who were thought to be likely to be less confident generally about sport.

The national governing body for Higher Education sport in the UK, British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) commissioned a report to investigate the impact gained from the University Football activator programme that showed a growth of 155% in participation with 42,928 players from Year 1 to Year 3 stated to be as a result of the work undertaken by the network of Activators across England (Kempster, 2016). The final report from the Sport England Active Universities project (2014) also stated that “it was widely reported that word of mouth communication with peer encouragement, worked most effectively with students” (p.18) to engage more students in sport through key messages and effective communication channels. Research also identified that the use of appropriate Sport Activators to different target groups was key, that is, to engage more international students, using other international student peers worked well to increase recruitment (Brunton and McKenna, 2016) as did the use of Female Activators that was said to assist increasing more female students into football (Kempster, 2016). Likewise using the less ‘sporty-type’ of student maybe the key to engaging other less ‘sporty’ student into sport.

There were other known categories and themes for how to get more students into sport such as the use of sales promotion tools, providing free food, free t-shirts and other items that seemed to work to engage more

students, as well as putting the focus on activities being sociable and fun, with being active ironically being in effective a bi-product, albeit important. Taking into account the nature of student lifestyles is also key, where students are balancing academic life with paid work, volunteering roles and social activities, all competing with sport. With that, students often favoured activities that were easy to do, that required little 'kit', commitment to sign-up nor 'membership'. The offer of 'just play' was also endorsed universally for its effectiveness in attracting more students. The theme around 'working together' highlighted the need to work in partnership, both internally with university professional service staff such as marketing, facility staff, the student union and administration who were often the 'gate-keepers' for action, in addition to working with external sports organisations with similar interests (Brunton and McKenna, 2016).

The Active University projects in England showed an initial 2% increase (55% to 57%) in 1 x 30 minutes of sport once a week between the first two years, between 2011-2013, that was sustained to Year 3; but despite the increased sports activities and investment made, further gains between Year 2 and 3 were not shown (Sport England, 2014). Furthermore, the following year showed a decline back to 55% of the student population (Sport England, 2015), therefore there is still a sizeable un-met demand for engaging more students in sport. It was also acknowledged that the increase in participation may not have been attributable to the projects per se but was either stimulated because of or irrespective of this work (Sport England, 2014). There is clearly a lack of causal studies and evidenced-based student sport research and practice, using tried and tested behaviour change theory. The challenge therefore, lies ahead with the need for more theoretically underpinned university sport-based interventions.

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