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University Sport and Public Policy: Implications for future Research

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This Special Issue on University sport and public policy aims to stimulate further research to better evidence this growing field of study. In addition, the aim is to illustrate the potential for university sport by looking at how sport across a number of countries can be used as a vehicle to support many university and sport policies and practices. The term itself, ‘university sport’, is being used to incorporate all forms of sport and active recreation seen in universities from ad-hoc participation, organised recreational sport (with or without informal competition) to more formal external competition and student performance sport. The broader use of physical activity is not being looked at in terms of the World Health Organisation’s (2010) Physical Activity Guidelines that includes leisure time physical activity, transportation (e.g. through walking or cycling), occupational (i.e. work), household chores, play, games, sports or planned exercise, in the context of daily, family and community activities (p. 26). The Special Issue is interested in sport and active recreation as part of physical activity but not the full breadth of the term physical activity. The word sport is often used alone here for ease but refers to both sport and active recreation. It is worth noting that many studies within this field also refer to the term ‘campus recreation’ that would also fall within the use of the definition for sport here.

Increased interest has been seen in recreational sport at college campuses across the United States and institutional priorities regarding recruitment, retention and student satisfaction have arisen (Lindsey and Sessoms 2006). In the UK and Australia for example, such issues are only starting to emerge with any significance nearly a decade later with the potential for sport to better support the changing university context following major changes in the political and economic landscape. For instance, following the tuition fee increases in England in 2012 and the concerns around students’ perceptions of gaining value for money, the Teaching Excellent Framework has been introduced as a way of demonstrating this value (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2016) where sport is considered to be a key part of student satisfaction (Douglas et al. 2008).

Whilst there is limited evidence within the UK, there is a consistent body of work conducted over the years from research carried out predominantly in the United States; most specifically on areas of core university business such as recruitment, retention, satisfaction and campus community (Haines 2001, Lewis et al. 2001, Lindsey and Sessoms 2006, Kampf 2010, Elkins et al. 2011, Miller 2011, Henchy 2013). In addition, university sport research has focused on university students themselves and on their motivations and barriers for participation, however, with few focusing specifically on sport per se (Hashim 2012, Spivey

and Hritz 2013) versus exercise or physical activity (Arzu et al. 2006 and Grubbs and Carter 2002). More recently, a growing body of research has been conducted in the field of dual career student-athletes with continued European support for student dual careers (Commission of the European Communities 2007, European Commission 2016). With this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have developed, or are developing, innovative methods and programmes focusing on how best to support such student-athletes (Sánchez-Pato et al. 2016).

Little focus has been given to the purpose of university sport as seen by university leaders and managers, nor other deliverers, despite the growth of university students, their sport facilities and programmes and expansion of university sport over its history (Clearing House for Sport 2017, International University Sports Federation [IUSF] 2017, Universities and Sport 2017). To illustrate the potential of sport within universities, in the UK for example, there were 2.28 million students studying at UK HEIs in 2015–16, from which sport can take advantage of (Universities 2017). Additionally, this also indicates a considerable research opportunity for examining how governments across the world interact with the higher education sector specifically in the field of sport and physical activity. Furthermore, analysis of the breadth of possible roles for university sport and sport policies impacting on universities is missing, whether in the provision of more sporting opportunities to increase student physical activity levels, improving support for elite student athletes during what has been termed their ‘dual-career’ or in enabling universities to capitalise on sport to support core university business, such as achieving high graduate employability. This lack of critical analysis of sport policy implementation and robust evidence of the use and value of sport within the higher education sector, both from policies originating within or outside of universities, is the rationale for this Special Issue. As Moffitt (2010) highlighted, ‘the value of campus recreation programs and services at institutions of higher education has generally been ignored’ (p. 25–26).

There are four articles that start to provide this critical analysis and evidence for the use and value of sport within Higher Education. The first paper opens the Special Issue questioning the broader purpose of university sport. The next two contributions are case studies providing an analysis of policy implementation from a recreational level to elite within two contrasting country perspectives within China followed by New Zealand. The final article illustrates how sport can be used to enable universities to better support their strategic plans, here supporting the agenda around graduate employability. Overall, papers discuss university policy impacting on (or the potential to impact on) sport practice and vice versa, as well as critiquing how national sport policy fits with, and is being implemented by, the university sector. The papers draw upon diverse theoretical and conceptual frameworks to unpick the various nuances of the research problems being examined. But much remains in terms of the opportunity for wider theoretical exploration in this political field itself.

Indeed, it is apparent that sport may be able to offer wider insights for higher education, political use of cultural activities in education and examine the fine distinctions and shades of understanding between universities, their local communities, meso tiers of regional governance and national and even supra national organisations and policy. Universities do not operate in a policy vacuum and are central advocates and key influencers in elite sport, community sport and influence many potential students at a critical phase of their life course in sport participation or the much talked of ‘drop out’ from post-school phase of involvement in physical activities. Considering the agency of individual actors, policymakers or those enacting government policies in HE and wider community collaborations with national

governing bodies, voluntary agencies or local government, remains as a rich vein of potential empirical future research. Likewise, opportunities to examine structural factors such as ‘race’, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and disability within this realm of public policy of sport need considerable further theoretical and empirical enquiry. Such matters are multifaceted, dynamic and have a complex interplay with wider issues of the politics and policy of sport and wider society. It is suggested that the specific spaces of university campuses are considered closely in future examinations of potential exclusion through sport, but also as realms of intersection with other global spheres of sport policy debate such as the obesity agendas, elite sport infrastructure development, coaching development and coach education, and broader collaborations between sporting federations and associations, local communities and regional governments.

Brunton and Mackintosh start this Special Issue with the aim to answer the question around what the purpose of university sport is within the current context of Higher Education given what are argued to be particularly turbulent political and economic times. The paper itself is an example of an interpretivist analysis of public policy. The study illustrates the key meanings and interpretations of the purpose of university sport to be one that often simultaneously embraces narratives of supporting the wider student experience, increasing students’ sport participation to contribute towards impacting on student recruitment, retention, satisfaction, mental health and graduate employability. However, there were mixed views as to whether the extent of the role of sport is recognised by senior university leaders. Brunton and Mackintosh also conclude that strategic drivers are more internal than external although highlighting that universities recognise the value of working in a symbiotic relationship with all stakeholders. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for university leaders and sport policy makers on how to better capitalise on university sport.

Chen and Chen explore Physical Education teachers’ perceptions regarding the roles of sport and the Chinese national fitness test programme for university students along with their reactions to, and perspectives on, recent national policy changes. They focus on how universities react to macro-level policies from a ‘bottom-up’ case study approach of the unique situation in China where Physical Education is a mandatory provision for all Chinese national university students (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2002). They highlight the lack of studies examining how universities react to macro-level policies. Findings demonstrate that the role and value of sport has increased following major changes in sport policy at the national level, but that the implementation of the policies at university level varies depending on micro-level factors, including individual interests and perspectives as well as the contextual constraints of universities.

Ryan, Thorpe and Pope’s paper illustrates an area of growing research on dual career student-athletes, examining the impact of a new policy that New Zealand initiated in late 2010 called the ‘Athlete Friendly Tertiary Network’ (AFTN). A case study analysis of the lived experiences of university’s high-performance student-athletes was carried out, questioning whether the AFTN policy is achieving what it was intended to do, with no prior analysis of this policy implementation. Ryan, Thorpe and Pope’s results suggest that despite the implementation of the AFTN policy, these student-athletes still face difficulties in combining both their academic and athletic pursuits. This was particularly seen amongst teaching staff with a lack of flexible course delivery compounding the inflexible sporting demands, suggesting the policy is not being fully implemented. The authors recommended the need for clearer policy communication to both universities and sporting communities to enable better policy implementation.

Griffiths, Bullough, Shibli and Wilson conclude this Special Issue with an analysis of the impact of engagement in sport on graduate employment and longer-term employability. This article found that engagement in sport was considered a sound investment from the perspectives of graduates, employers and universities, with examples demonstrating the value over and above that gained from subject qualifications alone. This was particularly the case for students involved in sports volunteering within leadership and management roles. Griffiths, Bullough, Shibli and Wilson argue that there are important implications for HEIs, employers and students regarding the use of, and involvement within, sport at universities, particularly for universities around the contribution sport plays towards the overall student experience.

We hope that this Special Issue illuminates the breadth of potential research within this field of study and stimulates further work to address the many areas of university sport research. We invite scholars to add to this emerging area. We suggest current areas of research should start with the need for better quality research design, rather than on quantity of studies, as well as addressing the gap in multi-site and longitudinal studies to increase confidence in findings. We highlight four potential key research topics: (i) robust evaluation studies purporting to underpin interventions and outcomes of university sport as a vehicle to support core strategic business (such as recruitment, retention, student experience, satisfaction, attainment, graduate employability and health and well-being); (ii) theoretically driven interventions to explore the impact of policy on student sport participation and organisation, particularly in light of the size of the student market and potential to impact on the participation agenda; (iii) pedagogical interventions and evaluations regarding how universities can better support dual career student-athletes and student-para-athletes; (iv) evaluation of the workforce development needs for university sport staff to keep pace with changing purposes for university sport policy. The agenda for research in this public policy space is emergent, but, the opportunity for offering original insights into an under explored realm is considerable. Given the current scale of this global market, higher education sport policy research has never provided a more exciting opportunity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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