

# **THE VALUE OF UNIVERSITY SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

BRITISH UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES SPORT (BUCS)  
POSITION STATEMENT AND EVIDENCE



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BRITISH UNIVERSITIES  
& COLLEGES SPORT

## FOREWORD

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### **BUCS Chair – Prof. Craig Mahoney**

For leaders of Higher Education institutions, the decision to fund a variety of activities is often a difficult one. These decisions are often based on scenarios that give estimates on: a return on investment; cost-benefit analysis; AMOSSHE's Value and Impact toolkit, for example; all of which provide measures of what that spend might return. Now however, and perhaps for the first time, we have some clear evidence rather than anecdotal or opinion-based views on which to assess the value of investing in sport and physical activity for the students and staff of Higher Education institutions across the UK.

Supporting our students and staff in their physical and mental wellbeing is, for most institutions, a "given". During a global pandemic placing these higher up the scale of importance is right but also very challenging. In the whole structure of higher education, this is a relatively small cost for a high return, which clearly engages students in a way that many other activities do not. This habitually creates a sense of loyalty and belonging to an institution for those students where there is a real risk of dis-engagement.

I would encourage my fellow senior leaders across the sector to read the BUCS position statement and evidence to understand how their institution can benefit from further promoting sport and physical activity, particularly in the current challenging times, but also looking to the future.

### **President of Universities UK – Professor Julia Buckingham CBE**

We have known for some time that sport and physical activity play a key role in many students' positive experiences of their time at university; making friends for life, creating a "family" and support network away from home, building employability and life skills and

supporting both their physical and mental wellbeing. Student mental wellbeing is being challenged perhaps more now than at any time with young people and students having been disproportionately impacted by the restrictions and uncertainty resulting from the global pandemic. UUK's Stepchange framework recognises the importance of healthy behaviours, including physical activity, on mental health and wellbeing, and the BUCS Position Statement provides fresh evidence about the importance of promoting being active and providing opportunities for our students.

This work serves as a timely reminder about how important sport and physical activity are to students, staff and the broader communities in which our world-leading universities are positioned. It also highlights how sport and physical activity can play a role in recruiting, retaining and providing a memorable and transformative experience to the students and staff who make up our rich and diverse communities.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND POSITION STATEMENT

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This Position Statement is a **call to action** for the university sector to act now to **increase engagement in sport and physical activity for all their students and staff, and make it an essential part of their university strategy**. Evidence spans the student journey and six core university strategic drivers, highlighting the benefits to universities under the following headlines:

1. **University sport and student recruitment**– illustrates the impact on students' choice of university, university's market position and 'brand pull' of university sport
2. **University sport, transitions, and retention**– improves social aspects, accelerated friendships and belonging
3. **Student sport, physical activity, health, and wellbeing**– shows increases in life satisfaction, happiness, and reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms
4. **University sport and graduate attainment**– sports participants gained a higher percentage of first class and upper second-class degrees
5. **University sport and graduate employability**– graduates participating in university sport earned more than non-sports participants, sports volunteers earned a further premium
6. **University sport and the civic and global agendas**– £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates an economic and social return of £3.91 (SIRC, 2020)

We ask all universities to **commit to re-looking at their positioning and extent of their sport and physical activity offer**, here and now, as well as in life post COVID-19. This positioning is one that acknowledges the value that university sport and physical activity can bring across the whole student journey, from pre-enrolment to graduation and beyond.

Providing opportunities for sport and physical activity are relatively **low-cost with high return** at a time when all spending is rightly being heavily scrutinised. It can impact many people across a range of backgrounds and provide a "glue" to hold a campus together.

This Position Statement is considered timely during the current economic, health and political environment impacting on the university student experience. **Keeping students and staff physically active is key for both physical and mental health during COVID-19**, particularly for new students who may miss out on the range of in-person social opportunities. Whilst many universities are operating in a 'blended learning' environment with

alternating patterns of all online, on campus and mixed provision, the **importance of keeping the on-campus experience** is recognised (DfE, 2020). Student anxieties have increased due to the pandemic (Cao et al., 2020), with those studying far away from their families suffering the most (Sahu, 2020). The UK's universities show continued commitment to supporting student wellbeing, as students adapt to the challenges of the pandemic and different learning and student experience this academic year (UUK, 2020a). Providing an **engaging, inter-active and social framework** for all students to feel a part of their university community is essential, and sport and physical activity can play a pivotal role in this.

The research evidence clearly supports the six areas of strategic focus, and critically shows that despite the benefits of keeping active being well documented, large numbers of students remain inactive. Where students are restricted to life in student accommodation with little or no on-campus experience, the risks are evident. The reduction of total physical activity during containment from COVID-19 lockdown negatively impacted psychological health and well-being (Maugeri et al, 2020). Online teaching alone may divert students away from learning altogether. Gains made when mixing with others from different social backgrounds on campus could be lost, and for some, impact attainment and graduate outcomes. Evidence illustrates how increasing engagement with university sport and physical activity can counter student isolation, nurture belonging and friendships, as well as increase attainment and graduate outcomes.

Furthermore, the loyalty and engagement shown by students to their institution leans towards the US system of **alumni engagement** and is clearly evidenced as a growing trend within the UK system. Sport enhances this **brand recognition and loyalty** and **creates a strong sense of belonging**. Whilst there are clear differences between the US and the UK universities' systems, including those for sport, the alignment here is with their similarities - key university strategic drivers.

**Maintaining a vibrant on-campus experience is difficult but essential** for those students who wish to take up the breadth of student offer. It is therefore imperative that we act now and take the opportunity of this pandemic to re-think and re-look at how university sport is positioned on and off campus, to enable the extent of benefits to reach students, staff, universities and their communities beyond.

# CALL TO ACTION

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This Position Statement is a **call to action** for the university sector to act now to **increase the engagement in sport and physical activity for all students and staff**. We ask all universities to commit to re-looking at their positioning and extent of university sport and physical activity offer, here and now, as well as in life beyond COVID-19. This positioning is one that acknowledges the value that university sport and physical activity can bring across the whole student journey, from pre-enrolment to graduation and beyond.

The BUCS Position Statement remains true to its core values of providing the best university sport experience in the world (BUCS, 2017).

**The aim of this Position Statement** is to drive:

- **Improvements in the student experience** and
- **Achievement of key university strategic areas** through sport and physical activity

This Position Statement is considered timely within the current economic, health and political environment impacting on the university student experience, to provide evidence to illustrate the value of university sport and physical activity as a key mechanism to support the breadth of university strategy and key aspects of the student experience. This follows formative research conducted by Brunton and Mackintosh (2017), reporting the outcomes from eight universities in the North of England. The research stated that the key purpose of university sport at their institutions is to enrich the wider student experience, to engage students in sport and physical activity and contribute to enhancing outcomes in student recruitment, retention, mental health, satisfaction, and graduate employability. This position statement provides the evidence for using sport and physical activity to support delivery of key university strategic areas. A scoping review and 'real life' case study inform this statement.

University sport is being used here to refer to informal recreational activity, competitive individual and team sports, as well as elite representative sport. Physical activity includes sport and active recreation more widely, but is not referred to here to include the broader use of the term as defined in the UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines (DHSC, 2019) that defines physical activity as "...any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure." (p.14) including ironing, gardening and moving heavy loads such as groceries.

Most research conducted has been carried out within the United

States (US), with studies within the UK increasing notably after the introduction of the new tuition fee system in England from 2012, along with the associated removal of public funding for most of the undergraduate teaching. With this new system came a cultural shift in the direction of improving the student experience in several dimensions, in particular, increasing the competitive environment around recruitment as well as bringing a prominence to graduate employability, with a focus on employment within the curriculum, heightened support for advice, and placements (Temple, Callendar, Grove and Kersh, 2014). Pressures on recruitment have led to enhancements in facilities and attractiveness of campuses where new or enhanced sports facilities form part of the recruitment package. The Higher Education sector for example spent over £350m in developing sports facilities between 2016-2018 (BUCS and Complete University Guide survey, 2019). Whilst there are clear differences between the US and the UK universities' systems, and those for sport, the alignment here is with their similarities - key university strategic drivers.



# 'REAL LIFE' CASE STUDY: SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

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Sheffield Hallam University is a post-1992 modern university; one of the UK's largest and most diverse universities with a community of more than 30,000 students, 4,000 staff and more than 200,000 alumni around the world. Sheffield Hallam University recruits more young students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in England than any other university, with more than 1,300 new students (21% of all) from <sup>1</sup> POLAR Quintile 1 (an area where fewer young people are likely to enter higher education). This university's size and complexity make it a useful example to illustrate the breadth in value of university sport and physical activity to both the student body and university business.

A key challenge to universities in evidencing the impact of student sport and physical activity on various strategic areas, is the availability of reliable data; both in universities measuring sports participation itself, as well as in being able to compare this easily to key strategic metrics. Currently, the National Student Survey does not ask students to rate their satisfaction with sport, and the change in metrics, such as employability moving to the Graduate Outcomes survey, means longitudinal data is not available for comparison. This case study data was taken from the most reliable year for reporting student sports participation (including gym use, gym membership, class participation, social sport participation and team sports club membership). This was correlated with 2018-19 withdrawals and attainment data of first year students compared to all students. These results were then tested against key known characteristics: ethnicity, commuter status, POLAR1 group, gender and age. A binary logistic regression analysis looked at both the relationships of each characteristic on their own, as well as in combination against both withdrawal rates and attainment, to understand the potential impact of demographic differences between groups. Figure 1 shows the demographic characteristics of sports participants compared to the full University population. Young students, non-commuters and students from POLAR groups 3-5 (most advantaged) are all more likely to participate in sport. White students and Home/EU students also show slightly higher participation.



Figure 1: Participation in sport at Sheffield Hallam University



Figures 2 and 3 illustrate a lower withdrawal rate amongst the sport participant group than in the University as a whole. More sports students also achieved a Good Honours compared to the whole student body (85% v 77%). These results could not be explained by differences in ethnicity, commuter status, POLAR group, gender or age; the relationship remained the same when those factors were held constant.

Figure 2: Withdrawal Rates for sports and non-sports participating students

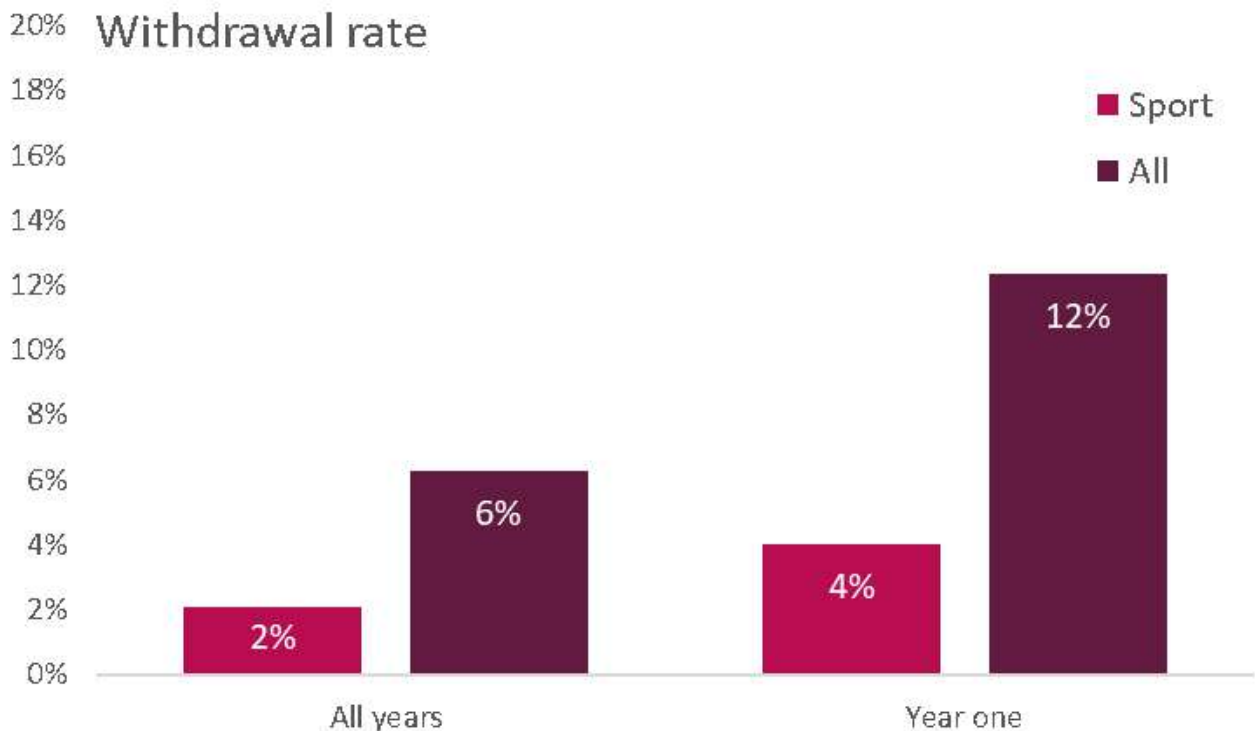
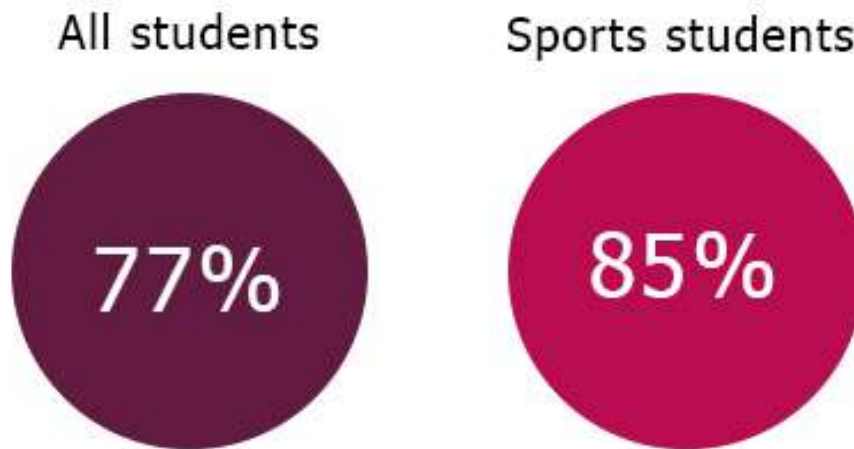


Figure 3: Good honours rates - 2018-19



This case study shows a clear correlation between sports participation and student outcomes that are not caused by the identified student characteristics. There may, however, be other factors outside of these common university tracked characteristics driving the correlation; it does not thus, illustrate a causal relationship, where sports students per se may be more able to overcome barriers by 'sticking' at university or be more driven and goal orientated towards success. The case study, however, together with the cumulative global sustained evidence to follow, linking sport to key university strategic areas, for over 30 years, provides weight to the value and place of university sport and physical activity.



# UNIVERSITY SPORT AND STUDENT RECRUITMENT

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University sport and physical activity is seen as an important factor for student recruitment and retention (Byl, 2002; Ciuffo, Johnson & Tracy, 2014). Specifically relating to the American sports system, this is about the prominence of their high-profile sports teams in US universities (Perez, 2012; Pope & Pope, 2014). Within the UK, the importance of university sport to student recruitment was voiced by a sample of 13 Vice Chancellors (or nominated deputies in telephone interviews) stating that university sport provided several benefits for the university, one being to attract potential students. With that, the strategic importance of sport was clearly articulated with sport seen as an important factor in student choice of university and for some, it was fundamental to the university's market position (Griffiths, Bullough, Shibli and Wilson, 2017). The facilities and investment in them were a key factor in attracting students to university along with the provision of key sports and wellbeing more broadly. Hardcastle (2018) talked about the 'brand pull' of university sport on student recruitment in higher education and found that the university sport apparel was the dominant theme in all nine focus groups conducted at a large UK institution, with students who were both part of a sports team and not commenting: "you're representing someone aren't you, you want to be part of the team" (FG6) and "it gives you like a group identity" (FG7). Even at the beginning of the student journey students had already started to align themselves with the university sport brand.

The university sport brand, however, stays far wider than the start of the student journey with alumni brand loyalty and institutional belonging created from relationships formed whilst a student; the sport brand itself, said to play an important role in achieving this loyalty to an institution (Vanderbout, 2010).



# UNIVERSITY SPORT, TRANSITIONS, AND RETENTION

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Once at university, it is now widely acknowledged that students' engagement with their university life is central to them staying at university to complete their course, as also shown within a recent literature review (Burke, 2019). It is recognised that the social or relational aspect of university life plays a key part in achieving a positive university experience, particularly to first-year students and those from non-traditional backgrounds (Scanlon, Leahy, Jenkinson & Powell, 2019). Sport can play a central role in this to enable students to feel a sense of belonging more quickly. For example, accelerated friendships were created following participation in an outdoor orientation programme involving a range of outdoor sport and physical activity during the early stages of first years' university experience (Pickard, Brunton, Mckenna and Utley, 2020). Outdoor sports were also highlighted in the Benefits in Outdoor Sports for Society (BOSS) study to have many advantages key to university students such as on intra and interpersonal development and mental health as discussed later (Eigenschenk et al, 2019).

When students are actively participating in sport, studies have shown an increase in student retention at university. McElveen and Ibele (2019) compared groups of students with their retention rates and found those students who were not involved in sport dropped out more than those who participated in either intramural sport or in elite sport as student-athletes; both participation groups were retained at a higher rate than the non-participation group at 4.65% and 10.48% higher. Many other studies have also shown improvements in retention linked to sport, where Lindsey & Sessoms (2006), for example, provide evidence that students report the availability of recreational sports facilities and programs have an impact on both their decisions to attend and remain at their institution. Forrester (2015) conducted the first nationwide study, to add weight to previous studies (Bradley, Bryant, & Milborne, 1994; Belch, Gebel, & Mass, 2001; Hall, 2006; Huesman, Brown, Lee, Kellogg & Radcliffe, 2009; National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA), 2010; Forrester, McAllister-Kenny & Locker, 2018), that found a significant association between participation in sport with retention when compared to the broader student population that were not participating in sport. They looked at the results from the 2013 National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Assessment and Knowledge Consortium surveying N = 33,522 students from 38 different colleges and universities across the United States. Significant differences were shown between students' campus recreational sports involvement/participation in terms of depth and breadth of participation on student retention. Students who

were more active considered campus recreational sports facilities and programs to be significantly more important when deciding to continue at their college/university when compared with Moderate, Light, and Non-Users. Findings from this nationwide study demonstrate the value of collegiate recreation to the college and university experience.

Thomas (2020) highlights the importance of creating a strong sense of belonging for student retention at university, but goes further to state that “this is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in...” stating that “...the academic sphere is the most important site for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging (p. 6)”. Crucially, this view is supported and highlighted here; it is critical to reach students not only through professional or student support services but via their academic course/programme, to have academic tutors enabling student engagement by promoting, encouraging and showing interest in student extra-curricular activities, with participation in campus recreational sports being a key part of this in addition to the core curriculum.



# STUDENT SPORT, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, HEALTH, AND WELLBEING

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The current BUCS strategy aims to engage more staff and students in Higher Education sport and physical activity to improve their health and wellbeing, by offering an extended range of opportunities to help attract higher participation. Given the current health pandemic of COVID-19 this could not be more relevant to students, staff and the wider society. Wang and Zhao (2020), in a study of 3611 university students (female: male = 1.48:1) aged between 18 to 24 from all over China, found that university students had higher anxiety than the general population after the outbreak of COVID-19, having a potential impact for those students starting or returning to university during such a health crisis.

BUCS' objectives focus on widening access to participation and overcoming barriers for those staff and students who are currently inactive (BUCS, 2017). The recent British Active Students Survey (BASS) Higher Education 2019/2020 Report, which utilises the shortened Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (WEMWBS, 2007), shows that just over three quarters (76.4%) of Higher Education students are classified as being active, which involves taking part in at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week. This level of physical activity may not however, be sufficient to enable students to gain maximum benefit for their mental health as cited later by Zhang, Zhang, Ma and Di (2020). In addition, "inactive (completing under 30 minutes per week) students made up 13.8% of the population, with 9.8% classified as fairly active (between 31 and 150 minutes)" (UK Active Research Institute/BUCS/Sport England, 2020, p.10). This is similar to the latest Active Lives National Survey (2018-19) when comparing activity levels of the 16-24-year olds (nearest majority sample in age comparison) with 74.1% active and 16.5% inactive. Physical activity levels in both cases have been classified according to the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Guidelines (DHSC, 2019).

When looking at differences between key demographic data, males were moderately more active than females at 79.7% v 74.9%; and White or White British were more active than BAME students at 77.5% v 72.9%. Similarly, the inactive proportion of BAME students (17.7%) were also higher than White or White British students (12.5%), with similar trends seen within the Active Lives (2018-19) data. A recent study focusing on students from low socio-economic groups (LSGs) also demonstrated lower levels of participation of the LSGs to the wider student body (Griffiths, Moore and Brunton, 2020). Regarding students with disabilities, Úbeda-Colomer et al (2019) found that a high proportion did not meet the WHO guidelines for recommended

physical activity.

The BASS 2019-20 survey focused on student personal wellbeing and mental wellbeing rather than disability per se and found that the student population had poorer wellbeing scores than the nationally representative data. Active students however, had better feelings of life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness, and anxiety. This is further confirmed by American students where higher levels of sport and physical activity were associated with more positive mental health in the first prospective assessment of health-related quality of life among undergraduate athletes and general college students (Snedden et al, 2019). The BASS 2019-20 survey differentiated being active by participation in the gym only, playing sport only, or both gym and sport. Participants in both sport and gym had higher scores for all personal wellbeing metrics whereas students participating in just sport, scored higher than those just using the gym in all metrics. When focusing on the impact on student mental health, "active students and those that participate in both sport and gym have better mental wellbeing than those less active or take part in sport or gym in isolation or not at all." (p.21).

Duffy et al (2020) found approximately one-third of first year undergraduate students confirmed clinically significant depressive and anxiety symptoms as they start university. Herbert, Meixner, Wiebking and Gilg (2020) also reported a relationship between regular physical activity, cardiovascular activity, mental health and wellbeing of university students and supported their hypothesis that "short-term aerobic exercise interventions can act as a buffer against depression and perceived stress in university students after 6 weeks of aerobic exercise of low to moderate intensity." (p.1). Many other studies have also shown similar outcomes confirming a relationship between students who are more physically activity reporting better ratings for wellbeing (Lothes and Nanney, 2020; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2020; Uddin et al., 2020; Nakagawa et al., 2020). Outdoor sports alone were highlighted in the BOSS (2019) study, mentioned earlier, following a systematic review, to provide significant improvements in mental health and well-being as well as a wide range of physical health benefits for individuals.

Thomas, Beaudry, Gammage, Klentrou & Josse (2019) found evidence of significant reductions in physical activity (light, moderate, and vigorous minutes) during the first year of university life for both male and female students. Perhaps not helping this, Chim & Winkens (2020) found students starting at university typically adopt unhealthy behaviours including sitting for long periods in class as part of their academic life. The issues of notable cohorts and sectors of the student body being physically inactive have unfortunately withstood the test of time with similar data also found by Hasse, Steptoe, Sallis

& Wardle (2004), covering 23 countries, that showed 23% of university students at the North-Western Europe and the United States countries being inactive and not participating in regular free-time physical activity or exercise. Ninety percent of the identified predictors challenging healthy physical activity, nutrition and mental wellbeing, were environmental/societal or institutional barriers (Aceijas, Waldhausi, Lamert, Cassar & Bello-Corassa, 2017). In this current environment with a pandemic, Zhang, Zhang, Ma and Di (2020) concluded that physical activity directly lessened the general negative emotions during COVID-19 ( $\beta = -0.12$ , 95% CI:  $-0.22, -0.01$ ) and highlighted physical activity as a possible mitigation strategy for improving mental health, stating a physical activity dose of about 2500 METS (metabolic equivalents) weekly, relating to an approximate equivalence of 60 mins of brisk walking 7 days per week, showed the maximal mitigation effect.

Universities are ideally placed to help tackle student mental health issues as part of their corporate responsibilities and values and, as stated by Grasdalsmoen, Lonning & Silvertsen (2020), physical activity is potentially one of the more modifiable risk factors. In support of driving this agenda, UUK (2020a) released an updated version of their strategic framework "Stepchange: mentally healthy universities" which encourages all universities to have a "whole university" approach to supporting good mental health for students and staff and specifically mentions the need for partnership work to achieve this including students' unions and guilds: "to actively support the social integration of students, support academic achievement and retention, and reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing" (p.19).





# UNIVERSITY SPORT AND GRADUATE ATTAINMENT

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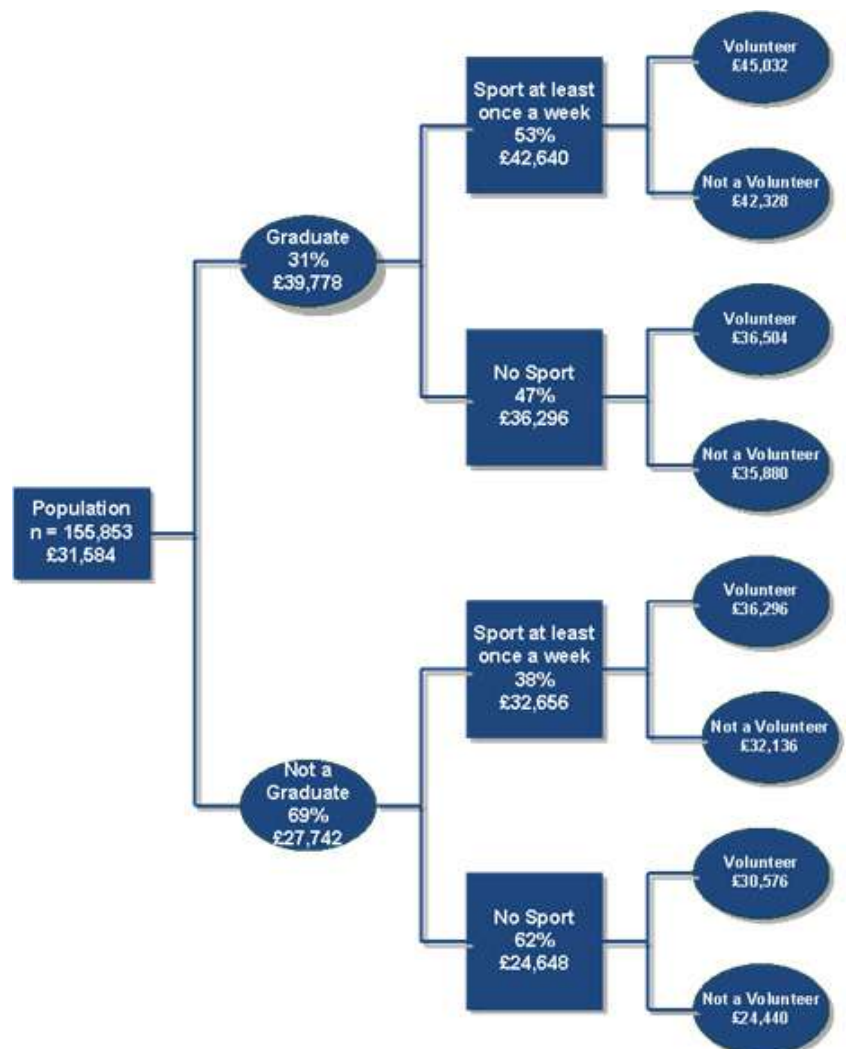
There is an increasing body of evidence showing the benefits of physical activity in improving cognition and students' learning abilities (Hillman, Erickson & Kramer, 2008; Sallis 2010; Nakagawa et al, 2020). Students' involvement in physical activity has been shown to improve self-concept, improve cognition, induce arousal, reduce boredom, reduce stress, stabilize mood, improve sleep, increase attention span and concentration (Coe et al., 2006; Biddle & Asare 2011). Both psychological and physiological mechanisms have been identified as key factors to explain the association between physical activity and academic achievement (Lee & Hopkins, 2013). When focusing on the benefit to academic success at university, participation in campus recreation correlates strongly with academic success (Haines, 2001; Gibbison, Henry & Perkins-Brown, 2011; Khan, Jamil, Kahn & Kareem, 2012; Bailey & Kang, 2015;). Budzynski, Seymour et al (2020) analysed a cross-sectional survey from 2016-17 (N = 11,650) where UK university students with higher physical activity reported perceptions of better outcomes in both academic attainment and employability. Danbert, Pivarnik, McNeil & Washington (2014) assessed the role of university recreational sport and fitness facilities on students' academic attainment and found a positive association between fitness centre membership and academic success and retention. Students who did not perform as well in examinations had lower use of the campus recreation facilities that was also found by Slade and Kies (2015). Furthermore, Al-Drees (2016) found a significant positive association between students' physical activity habits and high-Grade Point Average achievement for a group of medical students. There is also evidence that attainment of university athletes varies by ethnicity (Sellers, 1992, Vogel et al., 2019).



# UNIVERSITY SPORT AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

A key landmark study in the field of sport provides a significant advancement in the evidence of the impact of sport on graduate employability, carried out by Allen, Bullough, Cole, Shibli and Wilson (2013), later published by Griffiths, Bullough, Shibli and Wilson (2017) following peer review. Three key stakeholders were triangulated: graduates, from further analysis of the UK Active People Survey (APS-6) along with a survey of 5838 graduates; views from 13 UK Vice Chancellors or nominees; and views from 112 employers. The secondary analysis of the APS-6 (n = 155,853) found that graduates who participated in sport earned £6,344 per annum more than graduates who did no sport. Those graduates who took part in sport and sports volunteering earned a further £2704 per annum, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Secondary analysis of active people – the impact of education, participation in sport and volunteering on household income.



Whilst graduates also earned more than non-graduates, those who took part in sport earned a higher salary irrespective of educational level, thus showing a positive correlation between sport and earnings that cannot be explained by level of education. There may, however, be other factors to explain the difference but the triangulated data provides further confidence in sport as the key determinant. A similar salary relationship was also found in the graduate survey with graduates participating in sport earning more than those that did no university sport. In addition, those who were also involved in voluntary and management roles through sport, were 21% less likely to have been unemployed than all other groups. The value graduates placed on sport was further evidenced by their quotes, with two illustrated below:

"I felt that being a team captain in a university sport provided me with an opportunity to develop my leadership qualities and encouraged me to improve my ability to approach work in a more proactive and organised fashion. This has also given me situations and experiences to draw upon in job applications and interviews."

"I got a 2:1 (just missed a first!), in retrospect would I have swapped my experience at University for a first-class degree and done less on the sports side? I probably wouldn't."

Griffiths et al (2017, p.444)

Griffiths et al (2017) also highlighted the employer views who favour candidates who have not only taken part in sport but have taken on leadership roles as below:

"Also the leadership element, looking for the sports captains who want to take responsibility, want to take leadership roles – for us it says a lot about that person wanting to elevate themselves to that position – they are the people we want in our business" (p. 445).

Further studies support these findings and the value of sport on the development of graduate employability at different stages of the student journey (Pato, Brunton, Arcas, Isidori & Decelis, 2020; Mwita and Mwakasangula, 2019; Coffee and Lavalley, 2014; Lau, Hsu, Acosta & Hsu, 2014; Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon & May, 2011). Pato et al. (2020) implemented the European Sports Leadership Programme where students voiced improvements in a range of employability competencies after working as a Sports Leader. Coffee & Lavalley (2014) looked at "Winning Students" on a sports scholarship programme who are both athletes and studying a degree and found that unemployment levels were lower for graduate "Winning Students" compared to the wider graduate sector and the median salaries of full-time first-degree leavers in full time paid employment

was higher in Winning Students. Lau et al. (2014) looked at the impact of participation in extra-curricular activities during college on graduate employability of over 28,000 business school graduates in Taiwan and found that students who were core members in extra-curricular activities more favourably evaluated their employability attributes, such as communication, leadership, creativity and self-promotion skills. The extra-curricular activities included sport, where experience of being a member in sports clubs showed a stronger influence (average percentage differential 15.41%) on student leadership skills than involvement in other extracurricular activities (average percentage differential ranging from 8.60 to 12.08%) with sports being said to provide graduates with more opportunities to lead and take positions of responsibility with team sports or events, compared to non-sports core members.



## CONTRIBUTION TO UNIVERSITIES' CIVIC AND GLOBAL AGENDA

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Universities are being challenged about their engagement and societal value both locally, regionally and globally (Douglas, Grant and Wells, 2020). UUK sets out clearly the vast range of impact that universities have on all aspects of life in Britain (UUK 2020b). Regular commentary challenges universities about their value and universities are now identifying their 'engagement' or 'service' within their mission statements (Wells and Grant, 2019). Engagement identified as "working collaboratively with partners and communities, to create mutually-beneficial outcomes for each other and the benefit of society" (Wells and Grant, 2019). The considerable benefits of university sport and physical activity to their own community and wider society are rising to the fore, not least as outlined within this Position Statement. The recent Sport England commissioned research illustrates this through the economic value of being active; for every £1 spent on physical activity in England, £3.91 is generated (Sheffield Industry Research Centre [SIRC], 2020). The findings also highlight that community sport and physical activity produces £85.5 billion annually to the UK economy (in 2018 prices) through social and economic benefits. The social value includes physical and mental health, wellbeing, individual and community development at more than £72 billion. Focusing on universities specifically, about 31% of university students give a significant proportion of their spare time to volunteering in the community with over 725,000 students volunteer on average for 44 hours a year, contributing £175million per year to the UK economy (UUK, 2020c). Additionally, student sport provides numerous work hours via sports placements, coaching, local to global sports events and in opening their sports facilities to the public. This snapshot just touches on some of the civic and global value of sport.



# CALL FOR ACTION

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Sport and physical activity, to the individual, are voluntary activities; universities thus, need to consider the importance they place on promoting and championing sport and physical activity to enable all students and staff to regularly take part. The findings set out in this Position Statement are summarised below and aim to put sport and physical activity to the forefront of strategic planning and operational activities.

- 1. University sport and student recruitment**– illustrates impact on student choice of university, university's market position and 'brand pull' of university sport
- 2. University sport, transitions, and retention**– improves social aspects, accelerated friendships and belonging
- 3. Student sport, physical activity, health, and wellbeing**– shows increases in life satisfaction, happiness, and reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms
- 4. University sport and graduate attainment**– sports participants gained a higher percentage of 1st and 2is
- 5. University sport and graduate employability**– graduates participating in university sport earned more than non-sports participants, sports volunteers earned a further premium
- 6. University sport and the civic and global agendas**– £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates an economic and social return of £3.91 (SIRC, 2020)

The Universities UK (2020a) Step change: Mentally Healthy Universities report, also calls for universities to position mental health as a strategic priority (p.10), where physical activity is of primary benefit. Given the heightened concerns with the current health pandemic and impact on the higher education sector, keeping students and staff physically active is key for both physical and mental health. During COVID-19, particularly for new students, who may miss out on the range of in-person social opportunities, the importance is even greater. Furthermore, the health benefits of regular physical activity are undisputed in the literature (Guthold, Stevens, Riley & Bull, 2019; Herbert et al., 2020) and at least 1 in 4 students are not active enough to benefit their health, with the most inactive doing less than 30 minutes of activity per week. A greater focus on the value and place of university sport and physical activity is needed. This need is compounded for those students who are not only least active but also do less well in terms of degree attainment and outcomes (UUK and NUS, 2019). Universities are in a key position to capitalise on sport and physical activity as a key vehicle to delivering university strategy and contributing to longer term changes in society. This Position Statement is a call to action for the university sector to act

now to help increase the engagement of sport and physical activity for all their students.

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<sup>1</sup> POLAR – Participation of local areas by young people where POLAR 1 are areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged and POLAR 5 as the highest, and most advantaged group (Higher Education Funding Council for England Classification).



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