

THE VALUE OF UNIVERSITY SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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



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& COLLEGES SPORT**

FOREWORD

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

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.





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