



RUGBY LEAGUE SPORT REVIEW PROPOSAL

PREPARED BY BUCS RUGBY LEAGUE SAG | JULY 1 2019

CYCLE TWO

SUMMARY

The remit of this proposal is to introduce a 6 team National League at the Premier Tier of the BUCS Rugby League Competition structure to begin in the 2020-21 season. The current 6 team Premier North and South will sit underneath the National League, along with the current Tier 1 and 2 provision and a deregulated derivative of the game at Tier 3.

It is expected that the new competition structure will have a positive effect on the playing experience of all Type 1-5 athletes within the BUCS Rugby League landscape as the current model has been judged as not 'fit for purpose', arching away from our overall aim of creating the best student Rugby League experience in the world. The focus however will lie with our type 4-5 athletes that compete at the top tier of HE Rugby League.

The RL SAG has reviewed insight developed from BUCS and Rugby Football League (RFL) match data over the last three years, feedback from student players and member institutions, which has highlighted the following:

- The number of "blowout" games in Tier 1 and 2 in Rugby League are higher than the SAG would hope to see
- Students feel the league structure needs amending
 - 76% of survey respondents state changes were need to the current competition structure
- Leagues of more than 6 are not well liked, they are perceived to be unfair and do not provide a great student experience.
 - Tiers 2A & 2B both have more than 6 team:
 - 2B has the highest number of walk overs (10), with clubs struggling to field the full squads
 - 2A has 50% blowout rate, with team in this league not playing home and away
- Students like to play home and away
- The current competition format does not support or foster development of new clubs or additional teams.

This proposal has been developed by the BUCS Rugby League SAG, with support and direction from senior staff as the RFL to ensure it aligns and supports their strategic objectives, creating an excellent University Rugby League offer.

The RFL believe University Rugby League and the competitions that sit within BUCS form a key part of their Sport England contractual interventions. As part of the Rugby Football League's reset and strategic plan for 2019 onwards, there has been emphasis placed on Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

This proposal has been prepared by the BUCS Rugby League SAG following a period of consultation with the Rugby League Higher Education Institutes across England and Wales (no Rugby League teams from Scotland or Northern Ireland presently) and in collaboration with the RFL. The SAG is composed of the following representatives:

- The Head Coach of Northumbria University (Current Rugby League and Championship Premiers since 2016-17)
- The Partnerships and Projects Manager (Sport) of Premier League Team University of Hull
- The Education Manager of the Rugby Football League
- A PHD Student Representative from Tier 2 University of Manchester
- An FE/HE Rugby League specific consultant
- A BUCS representative

The current BUCS Rugby League competition structure has been in operation since 2010 when the competition entered BUCS following a complete programme hand over from the Student Rugby League (a competition subsidy of the RFL). Under the Student Rugby League structure, University Rugby League had a National League called Super 6, which expanded to Super 8s in its final 2 years.

Currently there are 49 institution playing within the BUCS RL competition structure, comprising of 60 teams (49 first grade and 11 second grade) with 1700+ fully registered players (The Rugby Football League register their student players each season). **APPENDIX A** displays the structure for the upcoming 2019-20 season.

The Rugby League SAG developed informative surveys to help develop insight from 4 stakeholder groups involved with University Rugby League:

1. Registered student players
2. AU/SU Sport Administrators
3. Directors/Head of Sports of current Premier League HE Institutions
4. Coaches within University Rugby League Club.

Student Feedback

An e-mail survey was sent to the 1700+ registered University players from the RFL database with a 2-week consultation period. 176 students (10%) participated in the survey, which is a good response for this format of data collection.

Other Stakeholder Feedback:

- The SAG is are developing Insight form the data collected from this process which will influence and provide evidence in the final submission of this proposal.

Coupled with the data collection, a complete analysis of the results from 2018-19 season shows that across all divisions the 'blow-out' score line was 35% (recognised by the NGB as 30+ points margin of victory). In the Premier North and Premier South, the percentage blowout rate was 50% and 29% respectively.

The current season also saw 39 walkovers conceded and 10 voided game totalling 49 out of 306 scheduled games not taking place (16%).

Across the University competition 92 games were also recorded as 'blow out' score lines (30+ points), but most significantly, 141 games this season were either a blow-out and or not played at all. This totals nearly 50% of the programme and reflects the current structure is not fit for purpose.

As 80% (taken from RFL player data) of our student playing population use HE as an entry point into Rugby League we need to address the level of provision for each student athlete type. The 3-year analysis of fixtures and result provision can be seen below:

Men's Rugby League Competition Breakdown			
Component	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Scheduled Games (Inc. BYES)	393	349	336
Scheduled BYES (Competitions)	31	27	27
Scheduled Games (No BYES)	362	322	309
Walkovers	33	32	39
Void	18	14	10
Total Games Played	311	276	260
Total Games Not Played	51	46	49
Total % Not Played	14	14	16
Blowouts (30 points +)	145	121	92
Blowout %	47	44	35

2. PURPOSE

The aim of the proposal will be to use the data generated within the consultation feedback, along with the review of the HE Rugby League offer since the 2016-17 season to inform the new Rugby League structures. The evidence leans towards the contention that the Premier League has not been fit for purpose due to the imbalance in performances across the Premier North & South, not only diluting the student experience but raising apprehensions of player safety. Concerningly, the highest margin of victory in the 2018-19 season for the Premier North and South competitions was 104 and 70 points respectively. For the Rugby League offer in BUCS to continue to attract top level athletes and ensure they can be placed within a relevant competition, these challenges will be addressed via the below formatting and selection process along with the knockout competitions criteria:

League Format

2020-21 League Format				
Competition	Leagues	Games	Teams	Promotion & Relegation
National League	1 (National)	10 total: 5 home 5 away	6	Promotion: None Relegation: Playoff with Winner of Premier North V Premier South
Premier	2 (Premier North & South)	10 total: 5 home 5 away	12	Promotion: Winner of Premier North V Winner of Premier South V bottom placing of National League Relegation: Play off with Tier 1 Winners
Tier 1	4 (Northern 1A / Midlands 1A / Western 1A / South Eastern 1A)	10 total: 5 home 5 away	24	Promotion: Play off with bottom placing of Premier North and Premier South Relegation: Automatic to Tier 2 with winner / s of Tier 2
Tier 2	3 (Northern 2A / Northern 2B & Midlands 2A)	10 total: 5 home 5 away	18	Promotion: Automatic with bottom placing of Tier 1 Relegation: None

Selection Process

6 Team National League / 6 Team Premier League / Tier 1 & 2 selection:

The new National League and further structures can be found in **APPENDIX B** which displays how the implementation of the competition would look in the 2020-21 season. The new structures would be formatted via the following selection mechanism:

- Selection to the National League will be based on assessment of the current Premier League teams only over the past 3 seasons (2017-18 / 2018-19 & 2019-20) accounting for their results in the Premier League and Championship knockouts only and associated to BUCS points. The 2019-20 season for both league and knock-out will be weighted with double points to reflect current performance.

- The 6 teams who have attained the most points within the selection mechanism will therefore be offered a place in the newly formed National League.
- If 2 or more teams are tied on points, the institution finishing with the most BUCS points in the 2019-20 season will be the deciding factor. If the teams are still tied, the team that has progressed the furthest in the Championship knockout will then be the deciding factor. If teams remain tied (i.e. they have been knocked out at the same stage), the same process will be applied to the previous season / s until the National League spaces are all allocated.
- The 6 remaining Premier teams who have not been selected will remain in their current leagues. To fill the remaining Premier League spaces, the teams from Tier 1 who won their respective competition will be automatically promoted. There will be no relegation from Tier 1. Those teams in Tier 1 who have not been automatically promoted will be assessed on their BUCS points allocation over the past 3 seasons in all league and knockout competitions to determine their placing. If teams are tied, the selection process will follow that of the National League selection mechanism inclusive of all league and knockout competitions.
- BUCS will work alongside the membership and the SAG to develop a Tier 2 and below competition offer.

Championship, Vase, Trophy & Conference Knockout Competitions

Below are the proposed knockout competitions for the 2020-21 season:

2020-21 Knockout Structures			
Competition	Teams	Rounds	Final
Championship	6 (National)	3	Stand Alone
Vase	12 (Premier)	4	Big Wednesday
Trophy	16 (Tier 1)	4	Big Wednesday
Cup	24 (Tiers 1 & 2)	5	Conference Cup Final

3. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The SAG feels the proposal aligns with several strands of the BUCS Strategy, the contributions and expected impact are highlighted below:

Inter University Sport

The implementation of a National League will support an enhanced student experience for Student-athlete Types 5 and 4, through delivering a more competitive league with higher quality games in every fixture. There are no domestic / community opportunities for these student-athletes during the academic year of this standard, this will provide a platform to represent their University at a standard with matches their need to perform.

The restructuring of the leagues allows a rebalancing of the weaker teams in the Premier Leagues with the stronger teams in the Tier 1 competition and similarly in Tier 2, as this cascades down the offers structure. This will provide leagues that are more competitive in context and well balanced. The restructure still guarantees there is a progressive route to higher levels should an institution identify a motivational shift in the ambitions of their student-athletes.

The deregulation of the lower tiers provides an appropriate level of Inter University Sport to a group of students seeking an enjoyable, less regular competition.

Performance Sport

From the group of students surveyed 30% are seeking to or are already playing at an elite / semi-professional level. For this group of type 4 and 5 student-athlete sporting performance is of a very high priority.

The creation of a National League will deliver a high quality, competitive playing environment for these players within a University setting. Grouping the 6 strongest teams to regularly compete ensures the highest quality of fixture in each match, providing the students more opportunities at a higher level matching their needs and supporting their development.

The National League will also allow those Student-Athletes seeking dual careers especially those who have received the RFL Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) support.

Early discussions with representatives at the RFL and Super League have explored the pathways for student-athlete types 4 and 5 and linked them to the newly developed Super League Reserve Grade and existing RFL Championship programmes already in existence by NGBs, providing a clear progression and exit route when they graduate. This will ensure BUCS fulfils a significant role within dual career pathway provision for performance players.

Social & Recreational Sport

Review of the competition format at lower tiers provides opportunity to create programmes that allow those student-athlete type 1 & 2, or those new players to the sport, to participate in a safe and enjoyable environment. This will increase the number of fixtures played, increasing overall participation levels within the sport.

Physical Activity & Health

Many student athletes (80%) are new to or returning to Rugby League at University, this provides an opportunity to play and train in a team environment supporting their physical activity development and knowledge. Providing a competition framework throughout the game that is appropriate to the level of player there is a less likely to be drop out from the sport thus sustaining physical activity participation levels.

Profile & Influence

This proposal is driven by ensuring competition is relevant to all student-athletes types rather than profile raising, however the sport review process has presented opportunities to influence within the NGB and the professional game.

This proposal offers an opportunity for BUCS and the University sector to play a role in the progression of Rugby League aligning the student competition with both the grassroot and professional game.

Changes to the professional academy system in 2019/20 season will see a reduction in age from U19 to U18, this presents the prospect for the professional game to support dual career student-athletes in transition from FE to HE with an appropriate playing level.

Inclusion

To support Rugby League's long tradition of inclusivity and a sport that encourage everyone to participate it is vital there is a HE competition offer that matches players' ability levels, especially at the lower tiers.

The RFL recognise that universities play a critical role in the recruitment and retention of players within the game and that University Rugby League provides a suitable environment for new players. Hence, the league competition should be designed to suit the needs and sporting motivations of these new players to encourage them to stay involved within the game after University.

Professional & Workforce Development

To support the transition of the new structure there is an identified need to provide support for the rugby league workforce in University Rugby League, the SAG along with representatives from the RFL and

Professional clubs are working to deliver an offer which will be included and evidenced in the final submission of the proposal in October 2019

The involvement and direction provided by senior members of staff at the RFL has ensured the proposal considers alignment with the RFL Strategic alignment and hence continued support from the governing body with the implantation phase from September 2019. (See **APPENDIX C**)

4. CONSULTATION AND SUPPORT

In developing this proposal 4 stakeholder groups involved within University Rugby League were canvassed on their current perception of the Rugby League offer within BUCS to gain an understanding how we can move the game forward, genuinely creating the best Rugby League student experience in the world, namely:

1. Registered student players
2. AU/SU Sport Administrators
3. Directors/Head of Sports of current Premier League HE Institutions
4. Coaches within University Rugby League Club.

NOTE- The SAG are developing Insight form the data collected from this process which will influence and provide evidence in the final submission of this proposal.

1- Registered student players- May/June 2019

An e-mail survey was sent to the 1700+ registered University players from the RFL database

A basic Summary of student responses: (See **APPENDIX D**)

- 176 responses
- 31% from Premier Competitions (14% North & 17% South 17%)
- The remaining 59% came from students playing in Tiers 1 & 2
- 52% said they were motivated to play RL to compete in regular BUCS competition
- 32% could be identified at type 4 and 5 student athletes stating they are motivated to compete at the highest level university level with a progression to elite or professional RL
- 76% of respondents stated changes were need to the current competition structure, 58% of players felt the competition was good but would make some changes
- Of those it would be impacted by a restructure of the University Rugby League BUCS Leagues, to focus on a balanced league structure 85% were in support

2. AU/SU Sport Administrators- June 2019

An e-mail survey was sent to the AU/SU Sport Administration as per the BUCS data base, the SAG will be following the invitation up with a series of calls to increase the completion rate and develop a deeper understanding of responses.

Some specific feedback in support for lower leagues adjustment is shown in **APPENDIX E**, this will be developed further prior to October.

3. Directors/Head of Sports of current Premier League HE Institutions- June 2019

A short e-mail survey was sent to all Directors/Head of Sports of current Premier League HE Institutions along with an invitation for a 1 to 1 follow up call. The calls will take place during July with survey responses and call discussion used to develop the final proposal.

4. Coaches within University Rugby League Club- May/June 2019

A range of coaches from across the University Rugby Clubs were interviewed to canvas insight on players motivation "in reality" both from a training player perspective. It is hoped this will help provide a balanced overview of the current student-athlete requirements alongside team's ability and distribution student-athlete types.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The introduction of the National League may see minimal further resource added to the structures. The knockout competitions will mean that for the National Teams, some will play less games total within the season which will reduce cost of field hire, travel and resource associated to those games. Pendent on the teams selected within the National League, there may be additional distances to cover in comparison to previous years.

The RFL will continue to centrally appoint match officials and therefore there will be no added resource for the BUCS office and institutions, other than for BUCS to build and coordinate the additional 6 team National League.

6. WIDER IMPACT ASSESSMENT

It is anticipated the final proposal will provide a university rugby league competition that provides competitive matches across the tiers and encourages growth in the sport.

Aligning to the changes in the professional game will present dual-career opportunities in competitive environment.

The SAG acknowledges that the realignment of the league structure will not irradiate 'blowout' score neither will it be perfect in year 1 given the cycle nature of University sport, hence the SAG and BUCS will continue to monitor the leagues as well as developing on going insight with all stakeholder groups.

One potential wider impact that is still to be explored is minimum operating standards for specific tiers to contribute to matching student experience with the student-athlete motivation, this will be examined further with the RFL, BUCS and potentially effected institutions. An example of the RFL minimum operating standards for Reserve Grade rugby can be found in (See **APPENDIX F**)

The deregulated lower tiers will require communication and resources to define the options and deliver a level of consistency as well as wider sector knowledge. This will be supported by the RFL and communicated by the SAG to BUCS members and student clubs.

7. CONCLUSION

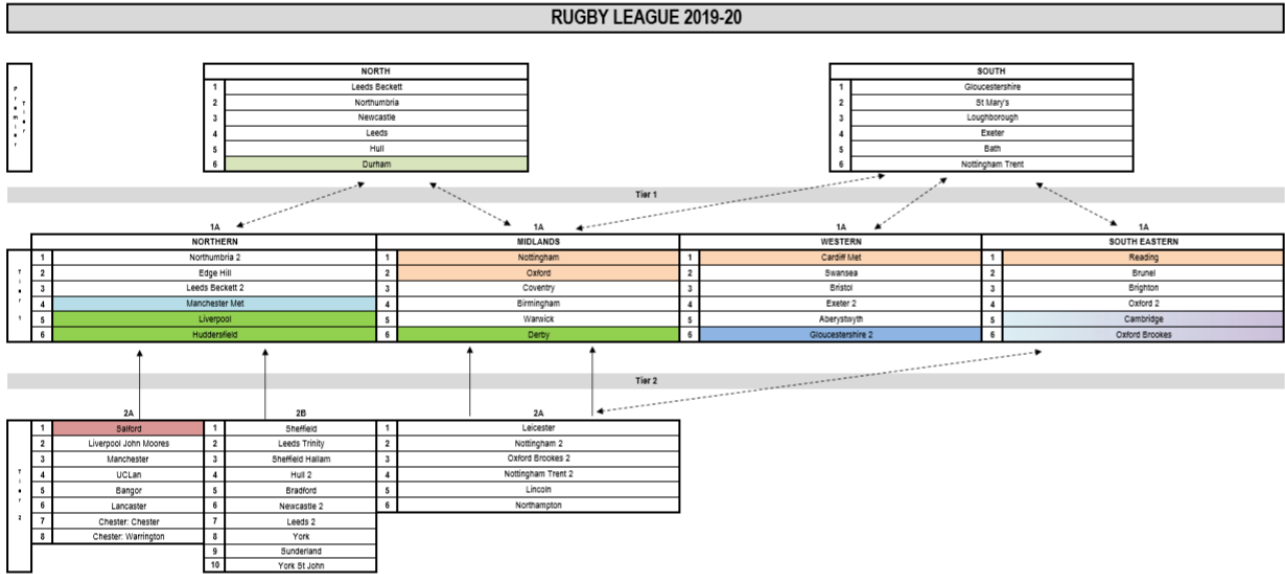
In presenting this first draft of the proposal the BUCS Rugby League SAG is hoping the review of the current competition structure can provide a new structure that will have a positive effect on the playing experience of all student-athletes types (1-5) within BUCS Rugby League.

The current model has been judged as not 'fit for purpose', the aim is to reduce 'blowout' score lines, increase the number of competitive fixtures, provide an entry-level tier to increase participation and also support dual-career athletes.

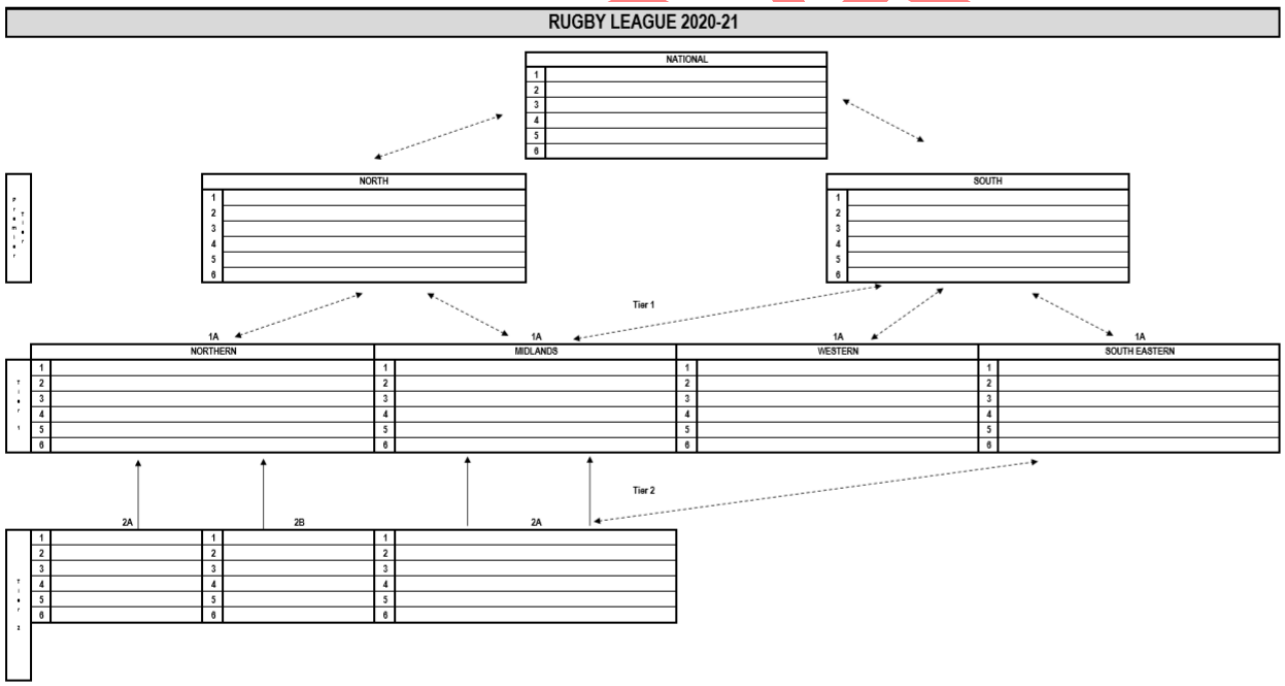
The remit of this proposal is to introduce a 6 team National League at the Premier Tier of the BUCS Rugby League Competition structure to begin in the 2020-21 season. The current 6 team Premier North and South will sit underneath the National League, along with the current Tier 1 and 2 provision and a deregulated derivative of the game at Tier 3.

The Rugby League SAG looks forward hearing feedback and suggestions from the Sport Review Implementation Group to ensure the University Rugby League experience is BUCS is the best in world.

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B



APPENDIX C- RFL Senior Manager Support

Director of Participation and Development

Hi Adam,

University Rugby League and the competitions that sit within BUCS form a key part of our Sport England contractual interventions.

As part of the Rugby Football League's reset and strategic plan for 2019 onwards there has been emphasis placed on the Higher Education setting and ensuring we have competition structures to support the following;

1. National League akin to BUCS Super Rugby
 - a. to raise the profile of Rugby League within Universities
 - b. potential to stream University games through Our League
 - c. to aid retention and progression of players within the professional game
 - d. to form partnerships between Super League clubs and Universities to raise standard
 - e. to drive a dual career pathway for talented athletes who are wanting to pursue a career alongside rugby league
2. Restructuring of the BUCS leagues to ensure that players have the opportunity to identify as Rugby League players
3. Consistent playing opportunities for those who want to commit to playing in a league (home and away format)
4. The introduction of a Women's offer within the Higher Education setting
 - a. This will be aligned to the 21,000 female players by 2021
 - b. Potential for progression to Women's Super League and England Women
 - c. Retention into the community club game

These are important milestones and objectives we need to achieve by 2021.

Regards



Marc Lovering

Director of Participation and Development

The Rugby Football League

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Head of Coaching & Player Development

Hello Adam,

The reintroduction of reserves will mean that clubs will need to find some extra players for their squads.

Clubs that have first, reserve and academy teams can have 75 players on register. As an incentive, we have challenged them to find players from outside of community clubs; i.e. RU and universities. These players will be 'free' registrations.

Making partnerships with Unis is advantageous to the clubs; players getting opportunities in a pro environment, facilities, education opportunities/scholarships.

I will ask the HOYs about how they may see it working.

Attached is a criteria we will be shortly sending out to clubs outside SL to apply for entry into the reserves.

You can easily apply this to unis wanting to be part of the elite competition.

However, defining the environment is harder; it depends what the purpose of the new elite league is. Is it to be solely a competition or an environment that we are saying is part of our talent pathway to produce SL and championship players and that is how we define success?

Any more mate and just shout!



Dave Rotheram

Head of Coaching & Player Development

The Rugby Football League

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Our League member #139144

APPENDIX E

Support for lower tier adjustment:

Hi Adam,

Hope all is well, I'm guessing baby can't be too far off now?

I've completed the survey but thought I should just add a little detail. I do think there is potential at the lower end but this is just my opinion and not one discussed through the team. I do think a more flexible and smaller sided option from (a new) tier 3 and below. I'm on the Rugby SAG and led on the men's rugby proposal through the first BUCS structure review. IT's not obvious from the paperwork but I've created a framework for growth in the structure and includes two entry points either at the lowest level or at tier 4. The idea being from tier 5 and below will see de-regulation and more flexible options. As numbers increase tier 4 will increase from two to four divisions before pushing the deregulation level down to tier 6 and below. Those who can compete to full regulations can go straight in at tier 4, this allows some of the big institutions to go in at an appropriate level and not be creating the massive scores which are putting some teams off playing.

You could look at something similar in RL. Create a tier 3 and below which allows for 9 aside fixtures and flexible to get games on. Teams who are established can enter straight at tier 2. IT would allow opportunity to grow the game. It might be a million miles away from what you are thinking but thought it might be useful and worth letting you know. Happy to chat if easier, good luck with it!

Cheers

Ryan Amos

Sport Performance Manager

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Support for lower tier adjustment:

Hi Steve

As discussed on the phone, I'm emailing to recap the request from UoM and the BUCS NW region.

UoM RL 1st team currently play in an 8 team 2A league, the top half (LJMU/Liverpool/UoM/UCLAN) are relatively competitive with each other, with the bottom half (Lancaster/Bangor/Chester/Chester Warrington) giving multiple walkovers most years and being very uncompetitive. We have also noticed that 2B has a similar issue. UoM also considered entering a 2nd team into BUCS for the 2019/20 season, with the current uncompetitive league structure being one of the reasons we opted not to. UoM and the NW Region (Apart from Chester) support the creation of a division 3 to allow the top/bottom half of the current 2A & 2B to play more competitive matches. This structure would also make entering a 2nd team for institutions much more likely as the tier 3 would be a more appropriate talent level for 2nd teams. There has also been a lot of dissatisfaction over the past two years with the better teams only playing each other once, the home/away format is supported by the majority of HW institutions. Overall, we would support a change in structure to better align the leagues with the needs of the teams in them.

Thanks, James

James Plowright | Club & Coach Development Coordinator

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APPENDIX F

Reserve Grade Criteria



APPLICATION FOR ENTRY INTO RESERVE GRADE COMPETITION 2020

NAME OF CLUB		
PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS APPLICATION	Name:	
	Position:	
	Email:	
LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT		EVIDENCE
Does this application have the approval of the club Board of Directors	click here	
Does the club have a 4 year strategic player development plan in place that has been approved by the club's Board of Directors	click here	
Are all potential staff compliant with RFL operational rules in terms of qualification, DBS, safeguarding and IMMOPF	click here	
Does the club have sufficient approved finance budgeted to sustain an 18 game reserve season	click here	
Can you supply a forecast of your projected income and expenditure for the proposed reserves programme?	click here	
Does the club have a Player Welfare Manager who is employed as per RFL operational rules	click here	
MEETING THE NEEDS OF PLAYERS		EVIDENCE
Does the club intend to offer a minimum 6 hour per week of training time for reserve team players	click here	
Do you intend to have private medical insurance for all players at the club?	click here	
Does the club intend to have a physio present at all training sessions?	click here	
Does the club have a formal relationship with a Further Education College and/or Higher Education Institution?	click here	
Where amateur players are concerned, will you encourage them to keep links with their community clubs?	click here	
PROGRAMME DELIVERY		EVIDENCE
Does the club have an operational delivery plan for U-12 to U-14 talent development	click here	
Does the club have an operational delivery plan for ETP 14+	click here	
Does the club have a Further Education partner and Category 3 Academy status	click here	
What interventions for strength and conditioning are you planning for reserve team players?	click here	
Is the (proposed) head coach of the reserve team fully qualified to UKCC Level 3 Coaching Rugby League?	click here	
Do the proposed match day facilities to be used by the reserves meet the minimum Academy standards?	click here	

PLAYER RECRUITMENT		EVIDENCE
Can you demonstrate how you will search for and recruit players that are not existing community club players	click here	
Do you have a dual registration agreement with a club in a higher league already in place for 2020?	click here	
Do you intend to use 'Reserve team dual registration'?	click here	
<p>In no more than 500 words, please provide a summary of this application stating how, by having a reserves, it is beneficial to your club and player progression and retention for the whole sport.</p>		
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1st DRAFT