

LEARNING THROUGH SPORT: GATESHEAD COLLEGE SPORTS ACADEMIES

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Context

This presentation focuses on the power of sport to motivate and encourage young people to learn by integrating education with their desire for sport. In 2000-2001 Gateshead College adopted as a key strategic objective to increase participation in Further Education of 16 year-olds in Gateshead and beyond. Participation rates were lower than the North East average, which itself had the lowest rate of any region in the country. Many students dropped out of education at 16, or were unsure of their direction and dropped out at 17. 16 is also the age for many at which the link between education institution and sport is broken, leading to a fall in sports participation. Progression to HE is low.

A key component of the College strategy was to focus on the interests of young people, particularly in sport, and to show how that interest could enable the young person to succeed in sport, education and employment, through deploying Sports Academies.

Project/Partners

A brief chronology:

- The idea for an Academy focusing on Women's Football arose in connection with a staff member who was coaching for Sunderland Women's Football Club
- The College then convened a meeting of potential partners to consider the structure of provision at the Academy (full-time qualification plus nine hours training), accreditation, resources, support and development. Subsequently the Women's Football Academy was accredited by the FA, and began with 15 students in September 2001
- The enthusiasm for the Academy, and links with partner organisations such as Gateshead Council, led to forming further Academies in Netball, Men's Football, Rugby (League and Union), Athletics, and most recently Basketball.
- A new building at Gateshead International Stadium is currently under construction.

Partners

For each sport, the academy partners normally include the following:

Sport Specific: Governing Body, clubs (amateur and professional), leagues.

Generic: Sport England, Gateshead Council, Northumbria University.

Results

- Sports Academy participant numbers have grown from 15 to 170 in 2004-05
- A growing number of participants (from 7% in 2001-02 to 35% in 2004-05) are drawn from students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Progression to Higher Education involved 16 students in 2004
- Success in Sport was achieved at regional, national and professional levels
- The new Sport Academy facility recognised as a major initiative for the region, with £5 million funding.

Discussion/Implications

The success of the Gateshead College Sports Academies is based on the following principles:

1. Partnership

The partners mentioned in 3.2 above were crucial to the development in these ways:

- Sports club and leagues informed and promoted the development of the Academies
- The College discussed how the Academies could meet partners' strategic objectives, and
- Genuine partnership led to substantial support for funding bids to establish a new facility for the Academies at Gateshead International Stadium.

2. Strategy

The core activity of Gateshead College is not sport itself, but learning. It was important, therefore, to have a strategy that linked the two, provided a clear direction, and underpinned the investment required, to establish the Academies so that they could be sustained. The strategy states its key purposes as follows, to:

- use sport and learning to make a difference to the social, economic and community regeneration of Gateshead and the NE
- enable students to pursue their sport up to elite levels whilst continuing in education
- help students use their interest in sport as a pathway to Higher Education and employment
- raise levels of health and fitness amongst students and the communities of Gateshead and the NE
- increase access to and widen participation in learning through sport among disadvantaged groups and communities, and to
- contribute to related strategies of partner organisations.

3. High Quality Provision

The Sports Academies could not succeed unless all components of provision were of high quality. This included the following:

- A wide range of sport related full time qualifications at different levels.
- Additional provision to give learners coaching and other qualifications.
- Coaching by professionals qualified to at least level 3.
- Opportunities for competition to the highest College level.
- Opportunities for relevant experience (eg coaching primary school students), and
- Clear progression routes to Further and Higher Education

4. Support the Infrastructure for Sport

The College has sought to re-invest energy into the development of the local sports infrastructure. This includes the following:

- Coaching in schools
- Organising school tournaments
- Joint staffing and hosting of sports development officer posts
- Support, including financial support, for local clubs, and
- Sponsorship, eg for Netball England across Tyne & Wear.

Conclusion

The success of Gateshead College Sports Academies is due to a number of factors: they are the outcome of a strategic and principled approach, together with making use of opportunities as they arise. Although it is not straightforward to reproduce such a model *en bloc*, many of the features of this development lend themselves to replication in other contexts.

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