

WOMEN INTO SPORT

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Context

Northumbria University, with support from the European Social Fund (ESF), has recently run a 12-month sports leadership programme which enabled women from across Tyne and Wear to become qualified in a number of activities. The project, which was part-funded by a £230,000 grant from the European Social Fund, involved 70 women accessing a package of free sports leadership qualifications, in return for voluntary and paid work with the community. Qualifications ranged from learning to coach football to becoming qualified to work as a boxercise instructor or a lifeguard. Participants have taken up a diverse range of volunteer roles, including coaching, organising events and even working in community health clinics.

The nature of the Scheme

Individuals were targeted through community and women's organisations and information was distributed through local media. A key objective was to recruit those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, so efforts were made to engage these groups and encourage members to refer woman who could make a difference inside their own communities. This resulted in a large number of applications. Once selected, the successful applicants were invited to an induction event where they learned more about the scheme, and were able to select their preferred courses.

The training the women gained varied greatly from course to course. For the National Governing Body qualifications (such as football), individuals received intensive sessions for a number of days, often followed by a formal assessment. In contrast, the SportsCoach UK workshops were delivered in one evening, often over 2-3 hours. In some cases, the courses were tailored to the needs of the group, because some beneficiaries had a modest education. Once qualified and having received their enhanced Criminal Record Bureau clearance, then individuals were able to use their new skills in a number of different placements. Over the 12 months the beneficiaries received mentor support from the University. They also received free sports clothing and financial assistance with childcare and travelling expenses.

Results

Initially 77 women were accepted onto the programme from very different backgrounds: both employed and unemployed, students, single parents, refugees, ex-offenders, drug/alcohol abusers, homeless people, and from ethnic minorities. Although information was distributed through the English Federation of Disability Sport, no applications were received from individuals with disabilities.

Following the induction, ten women withdrew. By June 50 women of the original 77 were attending courses and completing their volunteer hours in their allocated placements. The latter varied immensely depending on the courses undertaken. Those who elected to take NGB coaching courses went on to deliver sports-specific sessions in local schools and clubs. Women who chose a Health and Fitness route volunteered with local gyms, shadowing experienced fitness instructors, and a number have even gone on to lead Boxercise and Spinning classes.

Implications/Discussion

In general, the Scheme worked well with the individuals doing exactly what they set out to do at the beginning – obtaining qualifications and experience and gaining an opportunity to establish/develop their careers in the sports sector.

There was a very clear pattern regarding individuals who did not attend their courses or placements. Almost all came from disadvantaged backgrounds or had a history of offending/drug and alcohol misuse. The people from these groups who stayed on the Scheme were found to have a better support

structure from friends/family and their individual case workers. For these people, the Scheme was seen as a way to rehabilitate and re-integrate them into their community, though this was not the case for most.

In terms of rehabilitation, schemes like *Women into Sport* can be a useful tool, but it will only be successful if it forms part of a comprehensive support structure for the individuals concerned.

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