

## UNIVERSITIES AS PART OF THE COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY FROM THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

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### Introduction

A key priority for the North East of England is the revival of its social and economic infrastructure. The ultimate goal, by 2010, is for the region to become vibrant, self-reliant and outward-looking, with the aspiration, ambition and confidence to unlock the potential of its people (ONE, 2003B). This is underpinned by a long-term strategic programme promoting enterprise, learning, skill development and knowledge exchange.

The *Regional Economic Strategy* (ONE, 2003B) acknowledged the role sport can play in widening access to economic opportunities and addressing social inclusion, particularly in relation to skill enhancement, health improvement and using the physical environment. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, through one case study, how sport in Higher Education can play a part in enhancing the economic and social needs of a region.

### The Project

Although the people of the North East have a passion for their sporting heritage, traditions and heroes, participation rates in sport have not grown over the past 10 years. Nationally, 32% of the population play sport at least 4 times in 4 weeks, but regionally, this figure is only 28% (SE, 2003). When looking at the wider economic statistics, the challenge for the region becomes even greater. The North East economy has the slowest growth of any in the United Kingdom and has four wards in the top ten most deprived in the country.

Over recent years, the North East's five universities; Northumbria, Newcastle, Durham, Teesside and Sunderland, have been making an increasing contribution to the regeneration of the region. Through independent work and collaborative initiatives, through *Universities for the North East*, Northumbria University, in particular, is engaged in substantial initiatives to widen participation, benefit the regional economy, attract national and international talent and encourage graduate retention. Sport is one key area through which these ambitions are being achieved.

Sport has been a key part of the Higher Education experience for both students and staff for many years. However, it is only in recent years and with the recognition of sport as a social tool that some universities have started to work in partnership to maximise the use of their facilities, expertise and resources (Collins, 2004). Previously purely recreational or associated with teacher training, university sport is now becoming much broader, not only raising the potential of students and staff in new, innovative ways, but also helping the local community.

Northumbria University works with a number of key partners to develop participation, community and performance sport in a coordinated, strategic way. Simply opening facility doors to students, staff and the wider community is a thing of the past. Rather, the university is developing a 'hub' of sporting activity around each of its facilities through volunteering, education and enterprise initiatives, open clubs and performance support services. These activities not only increase participation, provide pathways and raise profile, but also contribute to the wider social and economic needs of the region.

### Results

Over the last seven years, Northumbria University has sought to develop the highest standards in sport development. During this period, a number of facility developments, local partnerships in sport, participation programmes and high performance sport services have taken the University to a position where some of the very best opportunities in sport can be offered to students, staff and the local community. In the delivery of all initiatives, Northumbria works closely with key regional and

national players in a number of target sports. Such partnership work begins in the planning stages, with the University linking into whole sport and regional plans.

These partners are: National Governing Bodies of sports; County Sports Partnerships; Local Authorities; School Sport Coordinator Partnerships; Further Education Colleges; Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme); Youth Sport Trust, and the English Institute of Sport.

Strategic steering is also given by Sport England, The Regional Sport Board and the Regional Development Agency, *One North East*. Working with a focussed number of key regional partners and specific sports across all levels of performance ensures that progression pathways are created and that developments are in line with regional priorities.

The community aspect of Sport Northumbria involves a number of volunteering, education, enterprise and participation initiatives. Examples are Coaching in the Community, Women into Sport, Vacation Camps, Short Courses, Youth Sport Trust young leader schemes (Toplink) and the more recent Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme Heroes initiative (providing role models). These schemes, which are delivered through the SportEngland-selected focus sports and funded externally, enhance the local economy in a number of key ways. As all initiatives engage the University's own students in delivery, they enhance student contact with local employers, provide part-time work opportunities and increase employability. They also provide opportunities for students to develop enterprise skills, through establishing their own ideas and initiatives.

Through targeting members of community, the University's initiatives promote lifelong learning, increase professional development, widen participation to Higher Education and raise the cultural awareness of young people. To ensure that programmes target minority groups across the region, there is also collaboration with the Women's Sport Foundation and The English Federation for Disability Sport. Through its high performance sport programme, which includes Team Northumbria scholarships, Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme Bursaries and high performance support services, university sport brings a number of other key benefits to the region. These include attracting national and international students, promoting expertise and raising young people's aspirations. By working closely with National Governing Bodies and becoming a part of their Whole Sport Plans, the University is also raising the profile of specific sports in the North East region. Only through such developments, along with continued investment in sports science and support, will high quality athletes be attracted to represent and stay in the region.

## **Discussion**

The paper reveals the immense contribution that Universities can make to their regions, if they work with partners in a strategic, coherent way. Through sport, universities not only help their own students to develop their employment potential and skills, but also help to attract and retain national and international students. By engaging members of the community through sport, particularly underrepresented groups, universities can also play a major role in raising aspirations, breaking down barriers and encouraging people to take up, or return to, a higher level of education.

## **References**

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