UNIVERSITY SPORT – INSIGHTS ON GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

Cardinal Newman's (1852) vision of a university was of an institution that was not a tool for business, the state, or of the Church, but a place to cultivate in its students the values of civilized reflection. Three forces - the Industrial Revolution, the progressive extension of the franchise and the rise of professional society have shaped the demand for and development of the university system since the 19th century. Walton (2005) notes that virtually all contemporary universities fulfil at least three missions or purposes, regardless of nationality or prestige: teaching, research and public service, the balance between these varies considerably. McCaffrey (2004) identifies four conventional roles of a university while Walton (2005) investigates the similarities and differences between 'traditional' and 'corporate' universities. It must be noted that in most countries, the state (directly or through agencies) plays a role in bringing together different institutions – the Church, Voluntary and Public Sector – into a coherent higher education system.

According to Bok (2003) in 1852 when two groups of oarsmen from Yale and Harvard raced against each other, that was the beginning of intercollegiate sport in the US. He notes that athletics as practiced by most major universities are the oldest form of commercialization of American higher education. Since then sport in the university has become a revenue producing programme which in certain cases sacrifices the normal admissions standards. Laker (2002) observes that culture, education and sport have strong links with each other. He maintains that sport aids the process of cultural and social reproduction, or it may be viewed as cultural strand that enhances our sense of community and provides a vehicle for cross cultural understanding on a global scale. Laker contends that sport provides a common language that can be used to communicate within and between cultures. This paper describes a research project at UCD focusing on sport governance and sport strategy with a view to assessing the extent to which it fosters a sense of community.

METHODS

The primary aim of the project is to consider the role of a university to-day and the extent to which sport contributes to its mission. The research objectives are as follows (a) to detail university sports governance arrangements - local and international; (b) to identify the factors which determine the design and implementation of university strategy for sport and (c) to ascertain the academic positioning of sport in a university. The project draws on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data draws on university published statements (mission statements, core values, guiding principles etc), media publications, university brochures and web pages, university newspapers and sporting and educational reports. Primary data are gathered by way of in-depth interviews. Convenience sampling was used to identify the interviewees which included the Director / Deputy Director of Sport; Sport Development Officer, Bursar, Club development officers at UCD. To deepen our analysis, details pertaining to sports governance and strategy at two leading UK institutions (University of Bristol and the University of Loughborough) will also be gathered using interviews and secondary sources. The data collection at this stage is supply oriented – the second stage will focus on the demand side, with input from current and aspiring students, community groups and university graduates using surveys and focus groups as data collection tools. The findings below are preliminary and will be added to as the project progresses.

RESULTS

Hums and Maclean (2004) refer to the hierarchical nature of certain sports bodies /organizations. They highlight the existence of organizational sub units / work units which have designated roles, responsibilities and a varying

degree of authority. Within UCD sport, governance arrangements are not clearly defined and the links to the Senior Management Team are vague. The Athletic Union Council (AUC) has played a key role since the 1950s – some interviewees consider it to be outdated. There are 22,000 students attending UCD which offers 60+ sports clubs with 8,000 members (College Records 2006/07). The leading clubs (in terms of membership) are the Association Football Club (UCD AFC), Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) - hurling, football, camogie and ladies football, and Rugby[1]. Many factors (including finance, human and physical resources) influence strategy formulation and implementation in a third level institution. Sport programme offerings are limited in UCD which has implications for student recruitment, elite athlete development and university marketing strategy. In recent years, many initiatives have occurred such as the establishment of a High Performance Unit in 2002 and development of new facilities) but a strategic plan detailing such developments has yet to be documented.

DISCUSSION

This research exercise identified key strengths of UCD sport – the variety of sports on offer, the soccer super league (72 teams) and the management competencies of club personnel (students). University sport is a 'hot' topic in Ireland (and elsewhere) in view of scarce resources allocated by the government for higher education and admission policies ('reserved places') adopted in certain Irish and US institutions. While much attention is given to the development of elite sports people in higher education, some aspiring athletes (soccer, tennis or golf) continue to opt out of the Irish educational system at an early age to join English professional soccer clubs or seek sports scholarships at US / UK universities. Many university students wish to participate in sport for leisure purposes and it is essential that this opportunity is afforded them. One of the main considerations for this university is to get an appropriate balance (for each grouping: elite and non elite athletes, community (staff and local groups) given the context, resources and facilities.

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1 UCD AFC and UCD Rugby Club both participate in their respective sports at the highest level, the former in the Eircom National League and the latter in the AIL All Ireland League.