

Universities as part of the community: a case study from the North East of England

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Introduction

Sport is a growing market within the United Kingdom and is becoming increasingly recognised by the Government for its ability to tackle social, regeneration and economic issues. Within the North East, sport is an important part of the region's culture (Regional Cultural Strategy, 2001), with people having a passion for their sporting heritage, traditions and heroes. Despite such regional pride, however, participation rates, at 28%, have not grown over the past ten years. Related to this is the fact that the health of the region ranks worst in England on most measures, with chronic illness rates 27% above average and one hundred thousand people classified as obese (Regional Plan for Sport, 2004).

One factor, which has a crucial influence upon the promotion of participation rates, is the role of the volunteer workforce. Across the United Kingdom, voluntary contribution to sport is of such a scale that when quantified, it outweighs all other voluntary activity and exceeds the amount of paid employment in sport. Despite its scale and importance, however, sports volunteering has not always received the recognition it deserves. Along with this is the fact that there are increasing pressures within society that threaten its sustainability at all levels.

The aim of the current paper is to illustrate an example of the way in which higher education, through partnerships, can make a real difference to community sport in general and volunteering, in particular.

Project

Since winning Sport England's Volunteer Award in 2001, Northumbria University became increasingly involved in the development of community sport, across the North East region. Community developments were originally initiated through the launch of the *Coaching in the Community* project, in 2001. This scheme provided opportunities for one hundred students, staff and community members, to access free leadership awards in return for a voluntary commitment to the community. Such a project was not only aimed at helping to address the local volunteering crisis in sport, but also to support the wider development of students, beyond their academic studies. In addition, the programme addressed the widening participation agenda, which was emphasised in the Government's White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education (2003)'. This was particularly the case for people from backgrounds, not traditionally associated with higher education.

Since the launch of *Coaching in the Community*, the University's involvement in volunteering has developed significantly. In 2002, a pioneering *Women into Sport* project, funded by the European Social Fund, was initiated. This action research scheme involved seventy women from across the region achieving leadership qualifications and voluntary experience. The research evaluated their experiences and the barriers they faced as they progressed. Supported by the Regional Development Agency, the project addressed a priority of the Regional Development Plan (2002), which was to 'reduce the level of disadvantage faced by women in the labour market'.

Results

Overall, the projects have been very successful, with an average retention rate of 94%. Over a two-year period, they have created two hundred and sixty new sports leaders, who have all contributed to the regional sporting infrastructure. Since the project was first established, however, a number of changes have been made. One of the main developments was the way in which the University's community programmes, in general and volunteering schemes, in particular, became more strategically in-line with regional priorities. As part of this process, the programme became focused on seven sports. These were those that the University had recognised as being influential to its ambition to become one of the top sporting institutions in the UK. Through these, the University interfaced with a regional network of partners to

develop a high regional and national profile across all aspects, from participation and coach education to performance.

As well as focussing upon priority sports, Northumbria also began to work in a proactive way with a small number of key regional organisations. These included the two local sports partnerships and the four local authority sports partnerships. To ensure that programmes targeted minority groups, there was also collaboration with the Women's Sport Foundation and The English Federation for Disability Sport. These changes made the scheme much more manageable than working reactively with small, individual organisations, as had been the case in the first year. Working in this way ensured that there was local determination of priorities and need, to maximally benefit the infrastructure of schools and clubs that was already in place. Utilising the knowledge of organisations representing socially excluded groups also helped to break down barriers for those who were under-represented.

Discussion

The development of Northumbria University's volunteering programmes revealed the immense contribution that Universities can make to their region, if they interface with the community, in a strategic, coherent way. It is very clear that there is an immense demand for sports leaders in the North East and, contrary to many beliefs, significant enthusiasm shown by students and young people who want to become involved. To take the developments forward, funding has been secured to extend the Women into Sport Scheme until 2006. Similarly, Coaching in the Community will continue, but will be delivered through a different model, involving an overall training package. This will form an award scheme, on which students from all subject disciplines can gain recognition and experience. The ambition is for this to become an accredited module, which can contribute to a student's degree. As a progression route from this, students who have 'graduated' from the module will be able to apply for Community Scholarships, in which they will receive financial support for working in a development role with the University's partners.

As a further strategic development, the University has established open, community clubs, within its seven priority sports. As well as being accessible to students, these are open to other people from across the region, with participation, competitive and leadership opportunities at all levels of the performance continuum. The integration of coaching and volunteering opportunities within these clubs not only benefits the individuals themselves, but also encourages the long-term sustainability of the programmes. To further facilitate such developments, a charitable foundation has also been established. This will run alongside Sport Northumbria to specifically engage the most under-represented young people from across the region.

References

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