

CONSTRAINTS AND FACILITATORS TO PHYSICALLY ACTIVE LEISURE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Context

The purpose of this exploratory research is to add to existing knowledge about adjustment problems of international students to a new academic environment. As opposed to most studies that focus on aspects that hinder academic performance of international students, the goal of this qualitative study is to identify factors that have a positive impact on involvement and enjoyment of physical activity programs organized by Campus Recreation Services. This study presents a case of international students at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

Methods

Data were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews with students representing a variety of cultural backgrounds. The sample was selected to ensure an equal number of male and female subjects and to have four interviewees from three different categories of sport involvement in Campus Recreation Programs in Winter 2004: intramural leagues, recreational classes, and no involvement. Subjects were recruited through an international student association and through Campus Recreation programs. Factors influencing sport behaviour were divided in three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural factors. These are also the categories in the leisure constraint model (Crawford & Godbey, 1987), which is the dominant paradigm to explain participation in leisure activities. The holistic view of the model on leisure and the distinction between different categories of constraints make it a useful tool to study leisure in a systematic way. In the present study, 'factors' for leisure were used instead of 'constraints', based on Raymore's (2002) contribution that facilitators have to be included in the analysis to fully understand participation in leisure behaviour. The NUD*IST software program for qualitative research was used as a tool to manage and structure the data transcribed from the interviews. First, all interview transcripts were imported into this program. In a next step, all text units that carried relevant information about factors that affected sport involvement or enjoyment were coded. All text units carrying information about one specific aspect that influenced sport behaviour were grouped in a node (file) by the program. All 12 interviews were screened twice for text units that allowed coding for a specific node. When this part of the analysis was completed, the focus was directed towards exposing patterns and arrangements behind the data. This approach enabled the researcher to get an idea of all factors influencing the sport experience of each subject as an individual and for the sample as a whole.

Results

Intrapersonal factors appeared to have a very important impact on the sporting behaviour of international students. This influence did not so much concern ethnic self-expression, as was previously found by some authors (e.g., Paraschak & Tirone, 2003; Ragheb, 1998), but rather linked to favourite sport disciplines and the emphasis subjects put on sport. This emphasis, in turn, affected perceptions of factors such as time, available opportunities and social support for sport. All subjects also pointed out that their ideas about sport were linked to the sport culture of their country. Half of the students, however, acknowledged the value of sport in bridging cultural barriers. The data showed a pattern that distinguished exchange students from the rest of the sample. The former group, mainly consisting of students from South East Asia, was looking for better life circumstances through education, which pushed sports participation to the background.

Interpersonal factors were found to work in two directions. Some international students were motivated to become involved in sports to meet new people. Others, however, mentioned that a small social network was problematic for their sport involvement. Eight subjects only engaged in sport or physical activity with other international students. They had difficulties finding partners and a low awareness about available sport programs, especially when their circle of friends consisted of international students who were not very sport-oriented.

Subjects' perceptions of structural factors depended largely on whether sport was seen as a priority or not. Subjects for whom sport was really important were less likely to see factors of time, money, skill, and availability as barriers to their sport involvement. To illustrate: all five students who indicated that 'experiencing a new culture' was the major motivation for them to study abroad, desired to engage in sporting activities and saw few structural constraints. When subjects experienced ignorance and stereotypes from people in the local community, this seemed to reinforce ethnic enclosure, with negative effects on sport involvement. Finally, the study findings support the idea that differences between Canadian sporting traditions and the sport culture of the home country are easier to overcome for exchange students than for other international students.

Discussion/Implications

The results of the study indicate that Campus Recreation Services plays an important role in providing physically active leisure for international students who show an interest in sport, which was the case for all subjects in the sample. An important finding is that constraints to being involved in sport or recreational programs do not form absolute obstacles, but can be overcome through the right mediation. A specific policy oriented towards including international students in sport programs is recommended, where sport administrators take into account that international students have a culturally different sporting background. Any good strategy to attract these students will include close cooperation with the staff of International Student Centres. One effective approach could be to promote sport involvement as an excellent option for tasting the new culture. Recreational classes seem to offer the perfect context, as they can be offered at different levels (with no requirement of previous experience) and enable international students to participate as an individual (no requirement of a large social network). The main focus of Campus Recreation Services should be directed to the 'regular' international students, as opposed to exchange students who seem to experience few problems to adapt to the new sporting culture.

It needs to be noted that the division of sport influencing factors into different categories was somewhat arbitrary. The study, for instance, did not only show several connections between sporting factors in the intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural categories, but also numerous connections between sport factors across categories. Additional research is required to gain more insight into the nature of those links. Samdahl and Jekubovich (1997) pointed out a limitation of the constraint model that has a perspective that makes the leisure activity central, assuming that the constraining factors affect the decision to engage or not. In this view, the leisure activity itself is the driving force that motivates people to get involved. They challenged this idea, arguing that social motives are often the leading force in leisure participation.

Kivel (2000) drew attention to another critical point, warning about a research style which starts from an *a priori* construction of categories of identity such as race and ethnicity, and suggesting that searching for explanations of leisure behaviour on the basis of such categories leads to a tendency to reinforce constructing hegemonic identities. For this reason, it would make sense to invest in studies that look at the similarities of people across social categories. Qualitative research will also have to be complemented with quantitative studies. Finally, this study looked at international students as a minority group in a Canadian university, and in no way meant to ignore the existence of minority groups among Canadian students that deserve research attention as well.

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