

The Intricacies of Managing and Organising University Sport

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Abstract

Introduction

With the shift towards mass participation in many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) a more diverse student population exists and there is greater input and oversight by governments as a major provider of funds (McCaffrey, 2004). Governance, organization and management of many HEIs have undergone major changes with some institutions shifting away from Donnish and / or Democratic approaches towards a managerial approach. According to Donnelly (1996) sport provides an opportunity for the development of students' capabilities and competencies, which in many instances transforms the character of individuals. This paper draws on a recently completed project and provides insights on recent developments in university sport (local and international) with special reference to management and organizational matters.

Methods

The aims of the project were to - (i) identify the characteristics of university sport and document its changing role, (ii) ascertain the 'ideal' management and organizational structure for university sport, (iii) appraise the academic positioning of sport within the university and (iv) examine how sport might contribute to university community spirit. Both secondary and primary data were used to inform the project.

Secondary data sources included web pages (university, association, sport and educational bodies etc), journal and newspaper articles along with sports reports. Primary data were gathered using in-depth personal interviews with University Sport Managers (Athletic Department Directors, Marketing, Finance, and Performance Directors etc.) from universities in Ireland (4), the UK (4) and the US (3). Representatives (officers) from 15 (out of 60) UCD Sports Clubs also contributed to the project. The findings reported here refer to the first two aims only (detailed above).

Results

(i) Changing role of sport in a university.

Sport was formerly associated with competition (and winning!) - in recent years a more holistic definition has emerged which incorporates health, exercise and wellness. This change is reflected in the names of University Sport Centres/Departments and in services provided. The provision of quality sports facilities is vital to attract university

students especially aspiring elite athletes. Various versions of sports scholarships are offered by most HEIs and more attention is now given to student-athletes' academic progress particularly in leading US universities (Meyer, 2005). Many institutions employ a strategic approach to funding and sponsorship, ensuring alignment with the university mission/ethos. Elite sport can be quite separate from non elite sport (as with the US model) with funding, use of facilities 'ring fenced'. In Ireland and in the UK, this 'divide' is not as marked as many elite student-athletes train, study and learn with other students. There are exceptions when NGBs (Rugby Union, Golf, Cricket, Rowing) are involved in university sport – this also has other implications.

(ii) Management and organizational structure

The 'corporate type' strategic approach to university sport is evident in many UK universities (interview data). Key functional positions have been introduced (Finance, Marketing, and Planning etc) designed to make more effective use of scarce resources. In many institutions, a University Sport Senior Management team oversees sports development and the Director of Sport reports directly to a University Vice Chancellor. University Sports Clubs' are a vibrant part of university sport which, (according to the majority of interviewees) needs to be closely monitored by university personnel. Tension often exists between academic schools and university sport (Meyer, 2005) and efforts to align the two are evident in several UK institutions. Our project findings revealed that certain student issues can only be addressed by making organizational structure amendments. One such change will be the setting up a Student-Athlete Support Service to liaise between academic and sport department personnel with a view to enhancing the students' university experience (academic and sport).

Discussion

Over the years, UCD Sport produced many champions and world-class athletes, and was the first HEI in Ireland to introduce sports scholarships. New sports facilities have been introduced and more are planned which necessitates changes in management arrangements. University sport is a dynamic and challenging environment which demands team effort, and a strategic and visionary approach. With intense competition for the 'bright' student, it is tempting for authorities to introduce changes which might not enhance its academic reputation (reduce entry standards etc). It is evident from our data that authorities need to retain a balanced view of Sport's contribution to University matters, and review arrangements on a regular basis.

References

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