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An investigation into participation in sport and recreation activities by 16-19 year olds in England

G. Hart¹, S.P. Kung¹

¹Sheffield Hallam University, Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield, United Kingdom

G.Hart@shu.ac.uk

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Contact details

Name author(s): Gemma A. Hart (1) & Shia Ping Kung (2)

Institution: Sheffield Hallam University

City and Country: Sheffield, England.

Email address for correspondence: G.Hart@shu.ac.uk

Aim of the paper and research questions

This paper explores participation rates in sport and physical activity by 16-19 year olds using data from Sport England's Active People (AP) datasets. It identifies whether or not there have been any significant changes over time in the recent era of the Government's 'five hour offer'. Analysis will also be provided by year group, educational establishment and region, assessing participation rates in sports highlighted in recent policy initiatives and strategic plans. The paper seeks to address the following research hypotheses':

1. Where more effort has been invested (in terms of initiatives and opportunities for the 16-19 age group) over time, we expect to see a smaller difference between the participation rates of 16, 17, 18 and 19 year olds.
2. We expect to see higher participation rates in all young people's age groups in AP3 compared with AP1, because of the greater concentration of effort and resources in the five hour offer.
3. We expect to see higher participation rates for young people in those sports which have featured heavily in recent initiatives to promote sport to young people. AP3 data may begin to capture the effects of the recent Sport England strategy focus on nine sports for reducing post-school drop out by 25%.

Literature Review

Fifty years ago the Wolfenden Committee (The Central Council of Physical Recreation, 1960) highlighted a 'gap' between school and adult sports provision and post-school drop-out in sports participation became commonly known as the 'Wolfenden Gap'. Addressing this gap has been a key sports policy challenge ever since, with mixed results (Brennan & Bleakley 1997). However, it is evident that over the last decade much has been done to turn this around.

The introduction of the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links Strategy (now PE and Sport Strategy for Young People (PESSYP)), supported by £1.5 billion of investment over a five-year period, has led to the development of Specialist Sports Colleges, School Sport Partnerships, Competition Managers, Community Sports Coaches and more recently Further Education Sports Coordinators (FESCos).

The policy aim is currently that all 16-19 year olds should be offered three hours of sport each week and the infrastructure is now in place to support this. The introduction of FESCos is a significant addition to this cluster of sporting initiatives (Youth Sport Trust 2008). The FESCos programme has enabled the 'forgotten sector' of 16 to 19 year olds to be brought to the forefront of sports development policy, including public money, sport development initiatives and partnership working.

Research design and analysis

This research presents the picture of participation rates amongst 16-19 year olds using data from 2005/06 (AP1) through to 2008/09 (AP3). The analysis also provides a more detailed focus on 15 key sports and activities. These sports have been strategically selected as a focus for 'retention' or reduced drop-out, by Sport England's Grow, Sustain and Excel Strategy (Sport England, 2008) and the School Sport and Club Links Strategy (DCMS, 2002). The research also draws on qualitative research amongst FESCo coordinators to assess the impact that the FESCo initiative is having on participation rates amongst this age group.

Policy implications

The analysis from AP1 and 2 thus far has revealed that overall post-school drop-out remains a real problem across the majority of sports and decreasing participation is the norm from ages 16 to 19. The findings thus far pose a policy dilemma – should interventions focus on increasing participation in sports with high drop-out or low drop-out? Identified low drop-out sports are different from those which Sport England has focussed on thus far.

References

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