

## The Value of Sport in Higher Education

**Australian and international research projects indicate university sport participation builds student experience and employability**

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### Background

This project is a collaborative effort between UniSport Australia (UniSport) and Bond University and aims to identify and synthesise sport-based research projects in the Australian higher education sector. The results of this study will assist UniSport to identify and understand key research priorities from the perspective of higher education stakeholders and to identify opportunities for future multi-institutional collaboration. Obtaining this data is crucial to ensure robust evidence can be collected (or collated) and to understand and demonstrate the value of sport across a range of higher education outcomes.

*Methods:* This study identified existing value of sport research projects undertaken by Australian higher education institutions. A scoping project, methods included a review of literature, and depth interviews with identified participants engaged with existing, value of sport research projects. Interviews explored:

- Relevant, completed projects to date but not published
- Active knowledge projects relevant to the topic that could contribute to the evidence base
- Interviewee perception of key research priorities; and
- Opportunities for future research collaboration

*Results:* The findings identified a number of members have completed various research projects aimed at evidencing the value of sport in higher education. The findings also indicate that there is a considerable need for further, more robust research in this area.

*Recommendations:* Higher education institutions completed a number of small research projects in Australia during the 2016/17 timeframe aimed at showing the value of sport to student experience. There is great scope for more projects in a variety of areas, and a need for robust methodology to grow a credible evidence base.

### Student experience: a growing evidence base

An abundance of research exists internationally, predominantly in North America and Europe providing evidence verifying the value of sport as part of the higher education student experience. Although this type of research is in its infancy in Australia, the Value of Sport in Higher Education study unearthed a number of projects initiated and completed by Australian universities, which form an evidence base that illustrates the value of sport as part of the student experience in the Australian higher education environment; these findings are included and discussed below. Fourteen (14) universities through respective spokes persons agreed to interviews to discuss research projects and findings.

## University of Melbourne

In 2017, the University of Melbourne's Business Intelligence Unit assessed the value of sport on higher education outcomes in a student well-being survey. The aim of the research was to investigate whether levels of sport participation influenced student experience and satisfaction. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire assessed student satisfaction rankings. The difference between the two groups measured was simply those who participated in sport, and those who did not.

The findings clearly indicated that students who participated in sport rated their student experience more highly than those who did not participate in sport. Additionally, 80% of all respondents indicated it was very important for the university to provide access to regular sport participation – interpretation: “sport matters” (T. Lee, Director of Sport, University of Melbourne, 17/10/17).

## The University of Newcastle (UoN)

UoN has investigated the experience for students-athletes that participate in both the Elite Athlete Friendly University (EAFU) and Uni-games programs. Professor Elizabeth Burd (Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching) and Andrew Yapp (Campus Programs Manager) have discovered interesting trends. Preliminary findings indicate that this cohort has elevated levels of achievement and retention (or graduation rates), over and above non-sport participants.

## RMIT

Like UoN, RMIT has also explored rates of achievement and retention aiming Unigames participants. RMIT's results are similar to those of Aon.

Both UoN and RMIT reported that, although these findings are encouraging, sample sizes were relatively small and more robust research methods are required in future.

## Monash University

Monash is a very active institution in terms of measuring student satisfaction with the sport participation and elite athlete programs. A few items reported added with other findings help put together a consistent picture:

- Quantitative data detailed that sport participants had higher course progression rates than non-sport participants.
- 83% of students involved in the Elite Athlete Performer Scheme indicated the program had aided both their sport and studies.
- The President of the Monash Baseball Club reported that, “my role enabled ... to put into practice some skills learnt in my degree which can carry through to my resume and LinkedIn profile”
- In the Monash 2016 Annual report, 96% of students who participated in the 2016 Unigames (Perth) indicated they felt better connected to the University after the experience of representing.

## Graduate employability

An area where all interviewees found common ground was the link between sport participation and graduate employability. When asked the question - Do employers recognize the impact engagement in sport has on graduates, and do you believe that is a factor taken into consideration when assessing suitable candidates for employment? The answer was a resounding “yes...but only if the graduate are able to articulate how they developed sport related skill development, such as leadership, team building and time management” (M. Doulton, Director, Team Monash, 17/10/17).

## Summary

In summary, there is an emerging body of evidence supporting the value of sport to the student experience. However, more and robust projects are required to make the case more scientifically convincing. In the words of leading sports researcher and UniSport Australia Director, Professor Russell Hoye (La Trobe University), “there is an obvious need for more research in the higher education context to be conducted “in a scientifically sound manner”.

*Report ends: With thanks to the 14 universities and university sport professionals who participated in interviews and shared their respective findings.*