



The Value of Sport

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Sport connects people.



The benefits of a university education extend far beyond the individual graduate. There are countless examples of innovation, philanthropy and creative works contributed to society by university graduates. Universities are not just providing education; they are developing leaders of our community.

Universities are places of teaching and learning, of research and higher education. We are increasingly seeing that all of these functions are supported by an engaged staff and student body.



While a student’s decision to choose a particular university is based most heavily upon the academic offering and reputation, once enrolled, that student’s success is influenced by a range of factors which make up their experience. Part of this Student Experience is what occurs in and around their classroom learning, but the evidence suggests that the non-academic part of their student life is potentially equally important in influencing their success.

This is where sport can help universities create the optimal environment for student success.



Sport, in its broadest sense, contributes to this sense of connection that students and staff have to their university, and this is being seen in student well-being, engagement and retention, graduate outcomes, employability and the reputation of the university.

Sport connects people. Beyond the moments that they spend engaged in physical activity, sport gives people a sense of belonging. University sport allows this connection to develop with the university, providing benefits to the student and their university; benefits that last well beyond graduation.



This document draws on specific experiences from ten Australian universities – representing a quarter of the sector – as well as highlighting some of the local and international research that is showing us that this connectedness, this sense of belonging, is producing students who feel better, who do better, and who maintain lasting attachments to their university beyond their graduation. It is the experience these students have as a whole – their learning, their social engagement, the memories and friendships they build – that contributes to their well-being.



There is a growing body of work internationally that demonstrates that mental well-being, physical activity and student engagement point directly to better academic outcomes.

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What do we mean by “sport”?

Sport in this sense, enjoys a broad definition. It includes recreation as well as activity, and comprises all of the physical-exertion based extra-curricular clubs and formal activities that students engage in under the umbrella of their university. For some students, that means seeking the opportunity to represent their university in competition, others prefer no competitive element. However a student chooses to engage, this social engagement yields results that enhance the research and learning ambition of the university.

Our definition of sport also encompasses;

- the countless hours of volunteer work undertaken by students in managing campus clubs and events – experience that is translating to better graduate outcomes for them,
- the outstanding physical assets that universities provide to students, staff and the community, and
- the related opportunities for engagement with the broader community which build the university’s reputation.

The research referenced in this paper is showing us a clear pattern in Australia and internationally, that engagement in sport allows for greater connectivity with all students, and offers a particular opportunity to enhance connectivity with students from rural, regional, lower socio-economic status and Indigenous backgrounds.

A connected student is a more successful student. A university with a connected student body is a more successful university.

UniSport Australia (UniSport), on behalf of its 43 member universities, is developing a comprehensive approach to assessing the value that sport provides to Australian universities. This document examines the contribution sport makes towards universities’ strategic goals, and outlines our research commitment that will allow us to quantify this value. It is our hope that through this document and our future studies, that universities will continue to develop and support sporting activities and facilities as a key driver of student success.

Understanding the value of sport to university Strategic Objectives

Universities have long understood the value of creating a rich campus life.

Students who weave their social and active lives around their study life, find more reasons to be on-campus. This improves their likelihood of academic success, and course completion.

Their presence contributes to a sense of community and vibrancy which benefits university students and staff alike.

For community members who live in proximity to a university, the campus itself represents the university long before they gain an understanding of the research and teaching reputation of the institution.

For new and prospective students, a visit to the campus in person or on-line will be heavily characterised by images of the sport and recreation facilities, both passive and active spaces.

Students are telling us that they expect high-quality sport facilities to be available to them at university, that even if this is not their

primary driver in selecting a university, that it influences their opinion and choice, and impacts their satisfaction¹.

The introduction in 2020 of performance-based measures for funding under the Commonwealth Grants Scheme requires universities to demonstrate performance across four keys areas;

- graduate employment outcomes
- student success
- student experience, and;
- participation of Indigenous, low socio-economic status, and regional and remote students²

This change creates an opportunity for university sport to not only assist universities in performing in these areas, but also in the critical element of demonstrating continuous improvement across each measure.

¹ Melbourne University Sport, 2019 Student Wellbeing Survey, February 2020
² The Future of Australian universities focuses on achievement, Media Release, The Hon Dan Tehan MP, 2 October 2019



Image courtesy of The University of Newcastle

How can sport influence Student Recruitment?

As well as students having an expectation that the university will provide facilities and opportunities for participation in a wide-range of sport and recreation activities, university sporting programs are providing new avenues for reaching prospective students.

In a recent University of Melbourne Student Wellbeing Survey, 82% of the more than 10,000 respondents indicated that they considered this provision to be Important or Very Important³.

The same survey showed that students engaged in regular physical activity expressed a higher level of satisfaction with the university compared to the students who were inactive.

Later in the paper we will address the specific impact sport can have in assisting with recruitment and engagement of students from less-represented groups prioritised under Performance-Based Funding.

³ Melbourne University Sport, 2019 Student Wellbeing Survey, February 2020



Image courtesy of The University of Western Australia

How does sport drive Student Experience?

The link between mental well-being and physical activity is well-established, Australian universities are producing world-class research on the subject.

We know that lack of physical activity is a global issue. The World Health Organization calls it a 'disaster in slow motion'.

Physical activity has such a broad range of physical and mental health benefits. "Being more physically active can lead to better sleep patterns, which leads to more energy, which helps with concentration, which can prevent the onset of mental health problems or help people with diagnosed mental disorders achieve better treatment outcomes."⁴

"Numerous studies have shown that people who exercise regularly experience fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who do not exercise regularly. Trials have also shown that regular exercise of moderate

intensity can be an effective adjunctive treatment by itself for both melancholic and non-melancholic depression."

This link is increasingly apparent among students and there is a growing body of work internationally that demonstrates that mental well-being, physical activity and student engagement point directly to better academic outcomes⁵.

"Active college students enjoy better health and are happier than their inactive peers. College represents a key period to engage and influence numerous health behaviors among young adults, and the role that physical activity can play in improving both physical and mental well-being should not be overlooked by third-level institutions as they seek to improve student well-being."⁶

ActivateUTS' work with Commencing Student Attrition among all students at the University of Technology Sydney considers the link between students who are members of a university club

⁴ Mental Health Benefits of Physical Activity, Professor Alexandra Parker, vu.edu.au, 22 October 2019

⁵ Black Dog Institute, Exercise and Depression Fact Sheet 2020

⁶ Marie H. Murphy et al, Active Students Are Healthier and Happier Than Their Inactive Peers: The Results of a Large Representative Cross-Sectional Study of University Students in Ireland, Journal of Physical Activity and Health, Volume 15, Issue 10, pp 737-746



Image courtesy of The University of Western Australia

How does sport affect Student Success?

at Census date, and those who are not. Over the past two years, the data has demonstrated a startling correlation – students who are not members of a club, are approximately seven times more likely to withdraw from their course of study. While not a direct causative link, the trend has highlighted an opportunity for greater understanding of what drives and influences student behaviours, particularly with regard to this critical strategic objective of universities⁷.

There is a clear opportunity for further research on these matters, particularly to gain an appreciation of the economic return that universities can expect from an investment in sport. As part of our research agenda, UniSport and its members will be seeking to quantify the value that sport contributes to the bottom line of university education in Australia.

Assistant Professor Jana Bowden, Chair of Ethics at the Macquarie University Business School has articulated the danger for universities with declining engagement.

“This is troubling because unlike student dissatisfaction, which is often vocally expressed, disengagement is an insidious, silent crisis. Disengaged students are dispirited and withdraw from university life. They are apathetic and uninvolved.

Worse still, they are invisible. They don’t turn up. They don’t interact. They are inoperative and if given a chance to opt out of learning and university life, they take it.”⁸

Universities with strong Elite Athlete Programs report double benefits for such activities. Many universities have Elite Athlete Programs which provide valuable Ambassadors who can not only drive brand recognition, but assist in engaging with Alumni, key stakeholders, potential donors and the media, as well as creating opportunities for the university to reach out to the local community and provide options for engagement beyond its enrolled students and staff⁹.

These programs with high profile athletes can enhance the universities’ reputation, making them more accessible and seen as an important part of the broader Australian community.

The programs also offer tangible benefits to the students involved. Macquarie University’s Elite Athlete Program has involved approximately 200 students in each of the last five years and has had a zero withdrawal rate amongst the Elite cohort¹⁰.

Universities across Australia and internationally are seeking to assess the impact of sport on a student’s academic outcomes. La Trobe University’s studies reflect a 10% higher Weighted Average Mark for students engaged in university sport – at any level – than for those whose engagement with the university is limited to academics only¹¹.

The same relationship has been identified and researched internationally. James Fitzsimmons, Director Fitness and Recreation Sports at the University of Nevada has identified an explicit link.

“What we know is students who exercise regularly - at least 3 times a week - at an intensity of eight times resting (7.9 METS) graduate at higher rates, and earn, on average, a full GPA point higher than their counterparts who do not exercise.”¹²

¹¹ Interview with Nick Lambert, Senior Manager, Team La Trobe, 28 September 2020

¹² A Survey of the Role of a Campus Recreation Center in the Recruitment and Retention of Undergraduate Students, James A. Fitzsimmons, University of Nevada, Reno College of Education, 2012



⁷ ActivateUTS and Student Success Report 2020, and interview with Elizabeth Morgan-Brett, CEO ActivateUTS, 29 June 2020

⁸ Student engagement is an increasing worry for universities, The Australian, 3 November 2020

⁹ Interview with Nick Lambert, Senior Manager, Team La Trobe, 28 September 2020

¹⁰ Interview with Sophie Curtis, Manager – Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging, Chair- Ally Network Steering Committee, Macquarie University, 6 May 2021

Sport can help universities create the optimal environment for student success.

How can sport assist with Graduate Employment Outcomes?

Graduate Employment Outcomes is the most influential factor in the performance-based funding introduced by the Commonwealth Government in 2020¹³.

*"I would not be in the career position I am in today, if I had not had the opportunity LTUFC provided in learning leadership, communication, how to have difficult conversations and professional skills early in my career."*¹⁴

Samantha Greene
La Trobe University graduate, eight years on the committee of the La Trobe University Football Club

In a 2017 study of British university students which received responses from 104 different Higher Education Institutions, respondents who were actively engaged in physical activity rated themselves more highly on a range of skills associated with employability – notably teamwork and drive. The majority of these respondents engaged in their sport at university, and the sports ranged from mainstream competitive sports to more niche activities such as quidditch and korfbal.

This study concluded a clear association between activity levels in students and personal wellbeing, mental wellbeing, social inclusion and perceptions of attainment and employability¹⁵.

"People don't hire student athletes because they're stars on a football field ... What we find in every type of employment engagement is that there are certain traits employers desire – persistence, time management, communication skills, determination, internal motivation."

Vin McCaffrey
Founder and CEO, Game Theory Group¹⁶

This complements a study coming out of Sheffield Hallam University in 2017 that involved primary research with graduates, employers and university senior executives. The research found that engagement in sport was viewed as a sound investment from the perspectives of all three groups, with examples highlighting how sport provided 'added value' beyond subject-specific qualifications¹⁷.

Sport can help universities continue their valuable role in leading social change, particularly in reference to closing the gender gap in business.

The link between sport and career success for women, is being noted by organisations such as Ernst and Young and espnW, in their document "Where will you find your next leader?". Universities which encourage and facilitate participation in sport by female students can multiply the impact of existing programs that address systemic disadvantage for women.

The foundation laid by sport participation is critical to women's success in their careers. A United Nations report points out that "the participation of women and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In particular, women in sport leadership can shape attitudes towards women's capabilities as leaders and decision-makers, especially in traditional male domains."¹⁸

¹³ The Future of Australian universities focuses on achievement, Media Release, The Hon Dan Tehan MP, 2 October 2019

¹⁴ Journal of Physical Activity and Health, 2018, 15, 737-746

¹⁵ British Active Students Survey 2017/18 Report

¹⁶ Where will you find your next leader?, EY and espn, 2015

¹⁷ INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPORT POLICY AND POLITICS, 2017

¹⁸ Where will you find your next leader?, EY and espn, 2015

How can sport affect participation of Indigenous, low socio-economic status, and regional and remote students?

The National Indigenous Tertiary Education Student Games (NITESG) began in 1996 as a joint class project between thirteen students enrolled in a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies (Community Recreation) at the then Wollotuka School for Aboriginal Studies, at The University of Newcastle.

The first Games involved approximately 30 students. The event, a key celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, is now referred to as Indigenous Nationals. It has grown to host hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students from universities all around Australia and is a demonstration of sport's ability to initiate new communications networks within and between students groups, and to reinforce identity through positive role models¹⁹.

Similarly, there is evidence that sport plays a valuable role in engagement for students from other under-represented groups. At James Cook University, 26% of students come from low socio-economic or disadvantaged backgrounds, making it one of the highest proportion of students among Australian universities. A recent survey of students found that approximately 80% of students who sign up for Social Sport on campus do so for physical activity and 73% for continual engagement with friends, and more than 86% of respondents believe that interfaculty sport enhances their university experience²⁰.

As a result of participation in the Aon Uni7s Series the University of Canberra has seen an increase of successful recruitment in regional NSW²¹.

As universities seek to develop and demonstrate participation among less-represented groups, university sport offers innovative avenues for engagement to complement academic and social support programs.

The National Indigenous Tertiary Education Student Games is a demonstration of sport's ability to initiate new communications networks within and between students groups, and to reinforce identity through positive role models.

¹⁹ Australian University ratings and rankings 2020/2021: Undergraduate Social Equity ratings in Australia, gooduniversitiesguide.com.au

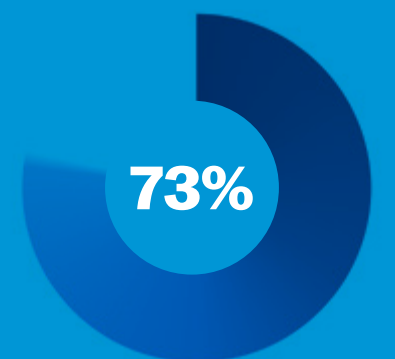
²⁰ JCUSA Sport Survey Report 2021

²¹ Interview with Liam McGrath, Director of Club Sports & Women's 7s, 31 March 2021

Why do students sign up for social sport?



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



CONTINUAL ENGAGEMENT



ENHANCED UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

JCUSA Sport Survey Report 2021



How can sport impact Relations, Influence and Connections?

Every university has a story to tell of partnerships with the broader community. Monash University and the City of Monash have long shared an understanding that they share the community. That “a student is a resident is a customer” and that neither party “owns” that relationship. This cooperation is evident in partnerships such as the joint facility development for baseball at Gladeswood Reserve, a relationship that benefits all members of the local community²².

Sport is proving to be an asset for universities under The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings’ assessment against the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in areas such as Good Health and Well-Being, Quality Education and Gender Equality²³.

Many universities find that their most loyal and engaged Alumni have come through university sporting clubs. Having had a valuable experience in these clubs as students, many choose to continue this experience many years after graduation, with alumni in sporting clubs embracing the opportunity to give back through philanthropy, volunteering, mentoring and more.

In 2018, University of Sydney received a bequest of \$6m from alumni Bruce and Jenny Pryor which acknowledged the importance that the university’s hockey club had played for them²⁴. This is one of a growing number of examples of alumni private philanthropy benefiting universities and building on the experiences alumni have had during their student years, and complements the countless and valuable hours of time and expertise gifted to universities through the clubs by alumni.

²² Interview with Martin Doulton, Director Team MONASH, 7 October 2020

²³ Impact Rankings 2020, timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings

²⁴ Sydney Uni Sport Announce Record Bequest for SU Hockey Club, subc.com.au, 6 December 2018

How did sport help Universities re-engage students post Covid-19?

It is no secret that there is a link between physical activity and emotional well-being. This was particularly evident in the 2020 mandatory lockdowns, with pressure placed upon Governments to enable individuals to engage in physical activity outside the home as early and as frequently as possible.

Most universities were very quick to adapt to new challenges presented by Covid-19 and lockdown and delivered on-line physical activity options for staff and students to complement the on-line learning. Deakin University’s experience with the participation rates for such was mirrored by many universities; high initial enthusiasm and engagement for online participation reduced rapidly.

In light of the link we are seeing between student engagement and academic success, this should not be too surprising for us: being part of something is what drives many students, the activity itself is secondary to the opportunities to connect provided by that activity.

Post-lockdown, University of Queensland experienced a very high uptake of the initial release of a limited sporting program. A survey of students engaging with this program indicated that students value the social certainty that sport provides; they know that if they show up for scheduled training or activities, so will their friends and team-mates. At a time when there are fewer people on campus and it less likely that students will bump into their friends, sport is giving them a focus that is assisting with the on-going engagement²⁵.

2020 has seen concerns raised in the broader community about the level of engagement of international students with Australian society. While it is unfair to say that universities have not sought to create environments where these students can connect and thrive, sport does offer an opportunity to increase this level of engagement.

Learn to Swim programs targeted specifically at International students have had success in several universities, with high uptake and completion rates²⁶.

²⁵ Interview with Bryan Pryde, CEO UQ Sport, 4 March 2021

²⁶ UNSW 2025 Sport Strategy Progress Report



Sport connects people.

Sport gives people a sense of belonging.

Although delayed by Covid-19, the major capital works program on sporting and swimming infrastructure will be the University of NSW's Wellness Precinct, incorporates design elements that will make these facilities more welcoming for international students. This is part of a broader program to ensure that the facilities and programs reflect the changing needs and wishes of the student population, as well as leading engagement and connectedness in a potentially isolated segment of the student body. The new facility takes a holistic approach to student well-being and mental health for all UNSW students²⁷.

It is quite likely that the return of international students to Australian university campuses will be accompanied by increased public scrutiny. This scrutiny will be on both the value of the investment made by universities in enrolling and supporting international students, and in the investment made by these students.

Sporting programs designed specifically to engage international students may offer the university an opportunity to get ahead of this scrutiny, but also to increase engagement amongst other under-represented student groups, particularly those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

These examples give us reason to be confident that participation in sport at universities drives greater levels of student engagement, engagement supports retention rates and retention supports academic outcomes. Sport delivers a range of benefits to the individual, the university and the broader community.

²⁷ UNSW 2025 Sport Strategy Progress Report

It is the experience students have as a whole – their learning, their social engagement, the memories and friendships they build – that contributes to their well-being.

The Future

Clearly there is work to be done in developing our understanding of the importance of sport to universities and the students and staff who make them up. UniSport, on behalf of its member universities, is actively pursuing a research agenda that will allow members to make informed decisions about investments in sport.

Over the next three to five years, UniSport will partner with various member universities and engage with QILT to quantify the value of sport and its contribution to the universities' own strategic goals.

We are currently scoping the research projects and invite any universities interested in partnering with us to contact us.

UniSport is actively pursuing a research agenda that will allow members to make informed decisions about investments in sport.

As an indication, some of the measures we consider to be most valuable to investigate include:

- understanding who is participating/engaging in university sport – is there a correlation between participation and degree or ATAR?
- analysing the value of participation/engagement in sport on students' health and wellbeing.
- identifying what sports/activities students are currently participating/engaging in and determining the future trends regarding sports/activities.
- understanding the link between undergraduate students actively engaged in university sport and retention rates, as well as academic success and the likelihood of continuation to post-graduate studies,
- determining the relationship between engagement in sport/activities and graduate employability, and
- the impact of university sport programs on future student enrolments.

A national university research project, undertaken by researchers from various universities, will provide the evidence we need to demonstrate the value of sport to the university sector.

Our research will be determined in accordance with the needs and priorities of our members and UniSport remains committed to assisting Australian universities be recognised as the world leaders that they are.



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