

Trialling and evaluating the impacts of the Mixed Ability model in a University setting:
A Living Lab Project
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Project rationale

The potential of physical activity to improve health and wellbeing, as well as to promote broader social outcomes such as equality, cooperation, respect, personal and community development is increasingly being recognised (Spaaij et al., 2014; Edwards, 2015; UN 2015). However, many potential participants still face a myriad of physical, psychological and logistical barriers to participating in sport causing many groups, such as those with disabilities, to remain underrepresented generally (Allender et al., 2006; EFDS, 2014) as well as within a University context specifically (ECU, 2011).

The Mixed Ability (MA) model has been developed by IMAS (International Mixed Ability Sports) and combines sport, education and advocacy to promote social inclusion. It focuses on integrating disabled and non-disabled players in mainstream sports settings and is accompanied by IMAS training and education around inclusion and diversity more broadly. Research shows that the MA model has significant potential for achieving broader inclusionary outcomes by shifting perspectives around dis/ability and raising awareness of the different barriers people face to participating in sport and society more broadly (Corazza and Dyer, 2017).

This project aimed to trial the MA model in a University setting in order to better understand if there is a need for a Mixed Ability offering at the University of Leeds and to develop an appropriate operational plan and evaluation methodology for the roll-out and promotion of the initiative if there is. This short report highlights the project timeline, challenges encountered, outcomes and reflections on the Living Lab. It is followed by a report from the Student Ambassador, Lewis Mitchell who was employed to organise the MA taster sessions.

Project timeline

February 2018: Student Ambassador recruited for the project

March – June 2018: Student Ambassador organised IMAS taster sessions at the University of Leeds

June 2018: Two IMAS taster days held as part of the University of Leeds Healthy Week

October 2018: Project presented as part of the LSSI/Living Lab showcase event

March 2019: Final IMAS taster session and panel discussion around equality and inclusion as part of Sustainability Week

Project challenges

Initially it was planned that the project would run from June 2017 – July 2018. However, there were various delays in arranging the workshops, which were initially meant to take place before the Student Ambassador was recruited. These were mainly caused by not being able to engage sports clubs in the project and find a suitable time to hold the workshops. As the project progressed, it became clear that the Student Ambassador was needed to organise the event and, as the year ran on, we decided to use Healthy Week as a vehicle to gain publicity. Communication throughout proved a huge challenge.

Although this was somewhat frustrating, it was not entirely surprising and aligned with previous research highlighting how hard it is for people to understand what MA sport is without actually seeing it in action. The means of communication available to us at the University were largely social media which didn't allow for explanations. It also perhaps highlights the nature of University sport as

being quite focused on elite competition as the clubs we approached were not really interested in engaging with MA sport.

Project outcomes

Despite the challenges, this project did raise awareness of MA sport amongst a small group of students and staff at the University, particularly through the Sustainability Week KinBall session and panel discussion, the LSSI/Living Lab showcase event and the Healthy Week taster sessions. Links were made between IMAS and the Sports Volunteering Officer and students got placements with MA boxing sessions in Leeds. In addition, external organisation including Yorkshire Carnegie, Aspire and Unorthobox were involved with the project through the Healthy Week taster days.

Reflections on the Living Lab

Although MA sport is likely to be effective in increasing participation in physical activity and promoting social inclusion in a university setting, there are significant challenges to promoting, communicating and establishing a Mixed Ability offering. Timings, the nature of sport at University and communication channels are all factors in this. If we were to pursue Mixed Ability and genuinely integrate it into research, teaching and operations, it would require buy-in from sports clubs and a real emphasis on communication of what MA sport is. IMAS would likely need to carry out multiple workshops to emphasise the key elements of the approach and these would need to be integrated into teaching in order to reach students. This may not be feasible at the current time!

Project finances

2 x ½ day workshops and 2 x ½ day taster days with IMAS = £550

1 x MAS Ambassador for 25 hours @£8 per hour = £200

1 x 1 hour KinBall session and panel discussion with IMAS = £200

1 x 1 hour hire of Sports Hall = £50

References:

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