

IMAS TASTER WORKSHOPS - LEWIS MITCHELL, MA AMBASSADOR

In collaboration with Leeds University Union (LUU), Staff Healthy Week and Sustainability Services, IMAS (or International Mixed Ability Sport) hosted two Mixed Ability taster sessions at the end of the second semester (2017/18) as part of a Leeds Living Lab project.

Mixed Ability is a model of sport that does not group participants on their (dis)ability. Unlike similar models, such as the Paralympics, MA is for the most part unadapted, with no classifications system. The result is a model of sports that encourages social inclusion by removing barriers to participation for people who feel unable to join mainstream grassroots clubs or groups due to physical or mental health issues, size, shape, age, disability, prolonged inactivity, or a perception of “not being good enough”.

The Sustainability Service provided funding for a MA Student Ambassador through the Leeds Living Lab. The purpose of the role was to act as a facilitator between the many stakeholders involved in the project, and in organising and assisting in the running of and evaluating the effectiveness of the workshops.

Beginning in March 2018, I met with Dr Jen Dyer (Sustainability Research Institute) and IMAS to establish the aims and objectives of the workshops. These were to: host the first MA workshops in a University setting, adapting them to the different setting; expose University of Leeds students to the mixed ability model; and assess the need and viability of further introducing the model at the University of Leeds. I also used this time to ask IMAS for their requirements and to plan the format of the sessions.

From there IMAS concentrated on arranging the individuals/groups that would be facilitating the sessions. Apart from themselves this also included Yorkshire Carnegie, Unorthobox and Yorkshire Dance. Using the contacts IMAS and Jen had within the University, I began to email the relevant people necessary to organise a location where we could hold the workshops as well as to send out communications advertising the events. I was also in contact with possible co-facilitators within the University. The initial plan was to run the sessions alongside sports societies and/or their coaches. Although, possibly due to the timings of the workshops, the responses to this were limited.

We were, however, fortunate that around the same time we planned on running the sessions, Leeds University Staff Healthy Week was also due to take place. This allowed us to ‘piggy-back’ on their marketing. Greg Hull, who was running Healthy Week, also helped us to secure an ideal location for the workshops (including a place for an information stand) directly in front of the Students Union, for the 3rd and 6th of June. Again, these dates also have limited the number of students we could reach, with many leaving Leeds immediately after exams.

Once the dates were set it was confirmed with each of the facilitators and the logistics, such as parking and equipment requirements, were arranged. The Sustainability Service and groups outside the University, like Leeds Disabled People's Organisation, were also contacted to attend and advertise the events.

The first event, on Monday the 3rd, was the quieter of the two days. In part down to the time of the year and lack of students about, but also because the area outside of the Union is used for food stalls on a Monday and these obscured the exposure of passing footfall. The fact that there were several events on for the Staff Healthy Week opening day may have also reduced those attending. On the Wednesday, however, there were more participants in attendance, from both outside and within the University. One such attendee was an individual involved in arranging student placements for sport, which may be one way in which IMAS can promote MA in a university setting.

I would be interested to see if there would be more people interested in MA if a similar workshop were advertised at an earlier stage in the academic year, maybe around freshers week. This was the first time Mixed Ability has been brought into a university environment. I believe that the multiple benefits of the MA model (social inclusion, improvement to health and well-being, less intimidating than regular clubs and flexibility) are applicable and areas of possible improvement in this setting. Those that took part in the sessions certainly suggested that was the case. Despite knowing that IMAS' long term goal is for MA to be the norm in every sports club/society, I think that it may be necessary to set up a dedicated project/society to expose potential participants to the benefits of MA in the university, which in turn might lead to the regular clubs employing the model.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the role in organising and taking part in the workshops. The position allowed me to develop skills such as communication, organisation, teamwork and time management, to name a few. It also provided me networking opportunities within and external to the University, and meant I had the chance to work with IMAS, with all the great things they're doing, for the second time.