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ACADEMIC PAPER

# Creating a level playing field: a study of the admission and experiences of different groups on a university sport management course

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## Abstract

This paper explores the admission process and experiences of students enrolled on sport science courses at one UK university. Admissions data from the university identified that whilst a large number of women and ethnic minorities initially apply to sport courses, few attend open days and even fewer eventually enrol, compared to males and individuals of white ethnicity. To date, only one blind student has enrolled on the courses.

Interviews investigating six undergraduate students' experiences of the admissions process are analysed. The findings suggest that the difference is due to wider cultural issues rather than the university process, which is viewed positively by British Asian and female students. Conversely, a student with a disability was negative about the admissions process. This has far-reaching implications for university sport courses and for other institutions.

**Keywords:** Sport education; Inclusion; Exclusion; Ethnicity; Disability

## Introduction

Whilst increasing numbers of full-time undergraduates are seeking a higher education qualification, many groups in society are under-represented within particular academic fields. Amongst the many possible causes for this discrepancy could be the admissions process. Whilst the process is mostly fair and transparent, the quest for a fair process that reflects a diverse society has created "strong feelings and strident headlines" (Coughlan, 2003, para. 6).

This study aims to question the notion of a fair process (Coughlan, 2003) and to tackle an unusual issue: the admission and experiences of students on sport science courses at one UK university. Previous analysis by the author in an unpublished study of 2004-05 and 2005-06 university admissions data has revealed that whilst a large number of females and ethnic minorities make applications, fewer females and ethnic minorities attend open days and are eventually enrolled on the courses than males and individuals of white ethnicity. To date, only one blind student has been enrolled on the university's sport courses, which required staff to review the sport programmes.

These findings call for a more in-depth exploration of the reasons why this decline occurs amongst minority groups. The purpose of this study is therefore to develop an understanding of whether this decline is a result of the university process or the choices made by the students themselves, and whether students have faced any barriers within sport or education that may have restricted their enrolment. It is anticipated that these findings will be of practical significance to the admissions process of the sport courses at the institution and to widening participation policies, as well as being of interest to those managing the admissions process in other institutions.

This topic also provokes broader consideration of the (im)balance between inclusion in sport and exclusion from sport (Patel, 2007). Legitimate or not, departures from inclusion in sport often have the effect of excluding certain members of society from accessing sport (Hayes & Slater, as cited in Snape & Williams, 2003; Tannsjo & Tamburrini, 2000). Whether this extends to access and integration within sport education is a matter for investigation.

Essentially, the key concepts are inclusion and exclusion in sport and education, gender, ethnicity and disability. Broader themes relate to social support and integration within sport and education. The importance of this research is demonstrated by the social significance of sport in society, both as a leisure activity and a career choice. The enactment of relevant provisions within the Higher Education Act 2004 has prompted a revival in widening participation research. However, there has been little examination of the impact of gender, ethnicity and disability on access to sports-based courses (Arnot, 1985; Coleman, 1990).

## **Gender**

In 2006 it was recorded that 19 per cent of women participate in regular sporting activity, compared to 24 per cent of men (UK Sport, 2006). A possible explanation for this difference could be attributed to the traditional masculine values and historical male dominance embedded within sport (Ebben, 1998; Patel, 2004; Patel & Boyes, 2006).

Some form of 'gender specialisation' is also evidenced within education (Coffield & Vignoles, 1997). For instance, historically, boys and girls have been segregated in physical education (PE). Each played separate sports that were considered more suited to the feminine and masculine roles attached to their biological sex. Whilst attitudes towards sport in schools may have changed, such trends have traditionally contributed towards a lack of female participation and a more restricted career path into sport (UK Sport, 2006). Hendry (1978) found that involvement in sport amongst university students was determined by the background of their sports involvement at school.

Females represented only 40 per cent of sport-related jobs in the UK in 2006 (UK Sport, 2006). Instead, women remain concentrated in subject areas such as education, humanities and the arts, which are considered the woman's field, with the sciences and sport labelled as a 'man's field' (Carpenter, 1998; Hartley, 2006; Hums, 1994).

With such an imbalance in sport and in sport-related education generally, it is interesting to consider how these socio-cultural and sporting structures within sport and education affect the experiences of students applying to and enrolling on sport science courses. It is also worth considering the realistic impact upon sport courses of the institutions' gender equality schemes that aim to "pro-actively [promote] gender equality and to identify how this commitment will be translated into measurable goals" (Institution Specific Policy, 2007a).

## **Ethnic minorities**

The operationalisation of concepts such as 'ethnicity', 'ethnic minorities', 'Asians' and 'race' is problematic as it arguably "implies the acceptance of some notion of homogeneity of condition, culture, attitudes, expectations ... language and religion" (Ahmad & Sheldon, 1993, p. 127; see also Burdsey, 2007; Gillborn, 1995). Whilst ethnic minority groups are producing "greater proportions of applications and admissions to higher education" (Shiner and Modood, 2002, p. 210; see also Modood & Acland, 1998), there remain growing concerns about their admission rates to universities (Curtis, 2005; Reay, David, & Ball,

2005). It is believed that ethnic minority groups may be discriminated against during the so-called 'colour-blind' admissions process (McManus, Richards, Winder, Sproston, & Styles 1995; Robinson, Harrison, Law, & Gardiner, 1992), a term also attached to football (Burdsey, 2007).

In light of this, it would be highly assumptive to immediately assume that some form of discrimination is operating within the admissions process. Other factors may contribute towards the under-representation of ethnic minority groups on university-based sport courses. For instance, applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to apply for subjects with high entrance requirements such as Medicine or Law as a result of parental direction (Halpin, 2006). Asian heritage youngsters do not perceive their parents as engaging in sport or valuing PE and sport generally. Indeed, family and culture are highly influential factors affecting ethnic minority group participation within education and sport (McGuire & Collins, 1998).

Ethnic minorities are reportedly under-represented in a number of sports in the UK (Williams, 2001). An example in cricket is illustrated by Houlihan (2008) and in professional football, player, coach, trainer and manager posts are dominated by individuals of white ethnicity (Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research, 2001; Stone, 2005). Few Asian professional players and role models exist despite many British Asian males aspiring to play at an elite level (Burdsey, 2007; Ismond, 2003). Research suggests that the primary reason for not participating in extra curricular sport or careers in sport is parental influence and religion rather than discrimination such as racism (De Knop, Theeboom, Wittock, & De Martelaer, 1996; McGuire & Collins, 1998). Burdsey (2007) suggests that it is appropriate to view this as progressive generational difference.

Whilst the university policies exist to promote 'equality of opportunity' amongst different racial groups, it is interesting to evaluate how far this extends to considering the wider cultural influences that may determine an individual's participation in higher education sport courses (Institution Specific Policy, 2002; see also Mithaug, 1996). Furthermore, it is important to ascertain whether these policies are not simply influenced by the contemporary fascination with equality and widening participation and whether they ever achieve their objectives (Burdsey, 2007).

## **Disability**

Disability is defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as "a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long term adverse affect on [a person's] ability to carry out normal day to day activities" (Office of Public Sector Information [OPSI], 1995: Part I, Section 1). Individuals with a disability remain under-represented in both sport and higher education (Finch, Lawton, Williams, & Sloper, 2001). Participation in both areas is "a matter of equal opportunity and empowerment" (Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004, p. 303). Disability sport can encourage inclusion and create opportunities for education (Brittain, 2008). Legal protection of individuals with a disability in higher education (OPSI, 1995: Part IV) encourages universities to make reasonable adjustments to their teaching, learning and assessment strategies.

Students with a disability present a challenge to higher education staff and question conventional notions about teaching and learning (Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2004). These challenges relate to the built environment of an educational setting, along with perceptions of disability, better known as the "social model of disability" (Brittain, 2008, p. 17). At the researched institution, the implementation of the Disability Equality Scheme focuses on the improvement of admissions and pre-entry activity for students with a disability as well as the improvement of individuals' university experience and access to facilities (Institution Specific Policy, 2007b). Little research has been conducted to explore issues pertaining to the admission and participation of students with a disability on a practical sports-based course. Generally, there is a need for wider research into the needs and perspectives of students with a disability (Fuller et al., 2004).

In sport, participation rates for individuals with a disability are much lower than for fully able participants (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Sport England, 2002). Lack of suitable facilities, adequate equipment, information and competent support are amongst the many barriers facing disability participation. Similar to gender and ethnicity, low rates of participation are “influenced significantly by the limited experience many disabled people have during their school years” (Sport England, 2002, p. 65).

Overall, it is clear that the interaction between gender, ethnicity, disability, education and sport is “multi-factorial and highly complex” (Giulianotti, 2004, p. 161; see also Moogan and Baron, 2003; Williams, 2006). Sport provides a basis for the congregation of individuals from a range of diverse backgrounds and cultures. In addition to the sense of belonging to a group, participation can offer opportunities for the development of personal abilities and attributes, as well as increasing community cohesion (Bailey, 2005, as cited in Biscomb, McCarthy, Groves, & Griggs, 2006).

Although the value of sport in general is widely debated (Bailey, 2000; Gratton & Henry, 2001), it is clear that individuals do value sport, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or physical capabilities. It is important to identify why these ‘sporting’ minority groups are under-represented on sports courses and whether the institutions’ processes and policies are creating barriers rather than promoting access and opportunity.

## **Aims and objectives**

This study aims to understand why few females, ethnic minorities and individuals with a disability apply, attend open days and eventually enrol on a sport-based course. The study will provide an insight into whether the decline in minority groups results from the university process, the students’ decision process or other external influences.

Specifically, the objectives are to:

- Identify whether the students have encountered any barriers within their lives, education and involvement with sport that may have affected their career paths
- Develop an understanding of the experiences of the students on the sport course, from the beginning of their degree to their current position
- Understand how the course, campus and staff are perceived.

## **Methodological strategy**

The research employs a qualitative approach, given its increasing importance within sensitive fields such as sport, gender and ethnicity (Gillborn, 1995; Gratton & Jones, 2004).

## **Background data**

In the academic year 2005-06 the number of males applying and enrolling on the sport science course at the institution was much higher (876) than the number of females (333). Of this figure, a higher percentage of males (14.5 per cent) enrolled onto the course than females (12.01 per cent).

Of the total number of 96 applications from all ethnic minorities in 2005-06, only 11 students enrolled (11.5 per cent). In comparison, 1,076 applications were received from individuals with a white background in 2005-06, with 146 of those eventually enrolling (14.5 per cent). These data were retrieved from ‘Banner’, which is the university’s live database of applicants and students.

Enrollment of the first completely blind student took place in the academic year 2006-07. While students with various listed disabilities have been enrolled and successfully completed the courses in the past, none of their disabilities have required a revision of the entire sport programme. Blind or partially sighted students accounted for only 3.2 per cent of UK undergraduates in 2000-01 (Fuller et al., 2004).

With these figures in mind, the researcher aimed to obtain an interview sample that was representative of the demographics of the students on the course. Having obtained initial ethical approval and participant consent through university procedures, semi-structured interviews of between 30 and 45 minutes were conducted with six full-time undergraduate students on the BSc (Hons) Sport Science and Management course at the institution. This method was adopted to encourage the participants to talk about their own experiences as they perceived them, thus allowing respondents to elaborate on the questions. Previous research exploring issues relevant to women, religion and racial prejudice has supported the use of semi-structured interviews for such topics as it also allows unexpected data allowed to emerge (Carroll, 1993; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyzie-Gald, 2005).

Table 1 illustrates the student characteristics and their pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Students agreed to be referred to according to their characteristics.

Student	Sex	Self Rated Ethnicity	Disability	Year	Status	Interview Method
1	F	British Asian	-	1	Withdrawn	Telephone
2	M	Hindu Asian	-	1	Enrolled	Telephone
3	F	British Asian	-	3	Graduated	Telephone
4	M	British Asian	-	1	Enrolled	Face-to-Face
5	M	Caucasian	Blind	1	Enrolled	Telephone
6	F	British Asian	-	1	Enrolled	Face-to-Face

**Table 1: Student characteristics**

Their 'self-rated' ethnicity is recorded because self-identity and perception may be determinant of an individual's self-esteem in relation to school, sports participation, leisure pursuits and relations with other students (Hendry, 1978).

Owing to limited availability, four participants were interviewed by telephone. This is a less common method of data collection in social research (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006) because, arguably, it restricts effective discourse and opportunity for observational analysis. Although the remoteness of the interviewer in telephone interviewing can remove any potential bias created by the characteristics and responses of the interviewer and interviewee (Bryman, 2001), all of the participants knew my approximate age, sex and ethnicity as I teach on their course (Dunkwu, 1998; Siraj-Blatghford, 1995). Therefore, issues of bias, as a result of 'insider-outsider' borders, had the potential to emerge in my questions, data collection and analysis (Gillborn, 1995; Lopez, 2003). The dynamics of the interview can take the form of a "friendly conversation between co-ethnics" (Lopez, 2003, p. 11; see also Cotter, Cohen, & Coulter, 1982; Weeks & Moore, 1981), which is illustrative of my experience with some participants (Farish, McPake, Weiner, & Powney, 1995; Reinhartz, 1992).

A stronger rapport was identified in the two face-to-face interviews conducted, allowing for fuller answers and greater analysis of the results. In order to limit the power relations between the researcher and the participant (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006), informal conversations were made before and after the interview to help deconstruct the lecturer/student division (Frankfort-Nachimas & Nachimas, 1996). My dual role as an 'insider' and 'outsider' had the potential to influence the face-to-face interview questions and responses in a more direct manner (Siraj-Blatghford, 1995).

Face-to-face interviews were video-recorded and transcribed in full. The video recordings allowed me to observe my own interviewing technique as well as monitoring body language. The research questions were specifically structured around my concepts and themes. All questions were framed around the experiences of a minority student on a sport-based course. Questions on the interview schedule were therefore underpinned by the student's perception of themselves within a sport and education environment.

Interview data were organised and analysed by adopting a 'conceptual factor analysis' (Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989). Interview quotes are 'clustered' together according to 'underlying uniformities' or common themes. This procedure is then continued and developed to identify higher level themes until it is no longer possible to recognise a higher common theme (Scanlan et al., 1989). This method of thematic analysis (Gratton & Jones, 2004) enabled the researcher to monitor the relationships between the concepts and themes of the study, and the emergent themes within the data.

## **Key findings**

All participants decided to pursue a career in sport because they had a sporting background and enjoyed sports. Only two out of the six participants attended a scheduled open day at the institution but all visited the university prior to application. Feelings appeared mixed on this visit. Participant 3 felt that the "atmosphere in the City [campus] was maybe a bit better" because "there was just like more Asian people in there, but when I got to Clifton [campus], there was less". Conversely, Participant 2 reflected a different sentiment:

Quite pleased to see a range of different ethnic cultures. Because it was mixed I felt a bit more at home. Both students and staff. I thought before I came to visit that it would be one culture based. I thought it would be predominantly white based.

Some felt that "the people were very welcoming" and it 'seemed like a nice place to study'. However, Participant 5 perceived the atmosphere to be cold and 'production line-like'.

In general, the students' sense of belonging on the course, campus and university increased throughout their experience, with Participant 5 currently feeling "part of a group" as opposed to initially feeling isolated (Wilcox et al., 2005). Participant 6 noted that, during the establishment of friendships, "all Indians go together don't they ... I like to mix. I don't know why they do that".

In parallel to this trend, the sense of belonging experienced by Participant 1 appeared to decrease throughout her experience, resulting in her withdrawal from the course. Reasons for withdrawal were based on her lack of interest in the subject area.

The British Asian male and female participants did not appear to feel directly disadvantaged by any barriers that may have prevented them from studying or pursuing this subject area, despite demonstrating experiences that could suggest otherwise:

I used to feel a bit different towards people when I was in the swimming team because I was the only Asian person in that environment. But I don't feel like that now. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 said, "My dad goes, 'It don't look right. In our culture it doesn't look right for girls to be playing football with boys'". She also discussed access to sport amongst Asian groups. Not only did she feel that she lacked guidance from school teachers on how to participate in extra curricular sports, but she spoke of how 'my parents didn't know anything about sport, so I didn't know where to go from there'.

Indeed, references to family were made by all of the British Asian participants. Whilst their families were mostly supportive and understanding of their wishes to pursue a career in sport, generally speaking:

many older Asian people wouldn't understand that you are actually going into a good field with good opportunities and something that's not just easy. Coz basically, there's the stereotype you've gotta be like a doctor, accountant whatever, you've got to go into that field. (Participant 4)

Participant 6 intimated that "my Gran thinks I do biology because my dad would find it difficult to explain to her that I don't", thus highlighting generational differences (Burdsey, 2007).

Participant 5, who actively plays sport, found that the institution was “very, very low in disability sport participation”. As a result, he is unable to play sport at university, making him feel, in his own words, obsolete. In fact, none of the participants play sport at university even though they are active outside the institution. Reasons for this were related to laziness, sports injuries, lack of information, the availability of sporting infrastructure and also a feeling of not ‘fitting in’. For instance, Participant 2 is considering attending trials for the university male football team:

I think the football team are white so it would affect me going to trials because you would feel a bit out of place.

Participants generally lacked awareness of the demographics of the students on the course. Of those who identified female under-representation, they did not seem to have previously considered why this might be, with most vaguely recalling that ‘sport is seen as a more male dominated field really’ (Participant 6).

All students correctly identified the uneven ethnic balance on the course. However, Participant 1 felt “that’s not the uni’s fault, that’s because it’s just not an Asian’s background to follow. They are more doctors, law, maths, economics”. In fact, many of the participants perceived this imbalance as indicative of previous family influences and opportunities prior to university:

I never really had any [sporting] influence, but with white people they probably have a bit more in a sense. (Participant 3)

Participant 5, a white male student, suggested that the imbalance could be a result of better opportunities for white communities prior to university. Participant 2 argued that the lack of Asian role models within sport could explain this imbalance. He proposed that the institution should “push students from ethnic backgrounds to try more sport”.

Participant 5, who is blind, raised sensitive and unique issues about receiving little support throughout the admissions process. He commented on a lack of accessibility and, in his first year, on feeling unsettled, inadequate, on an uneven par with able-bodied students and at times “soul destroyed”. In spite of these negative encounters, he has made many friends and found some staff supportive.

## **Discussion**

Based upon the small sample group who were interviewed, it would be inaccurate to make generalisations about the findings. However, it is justifiable to highlight some of the valuable insights that these data offer. Despite concerns surrounding the under-representation of females and ethnic minorities in sport and related education, the experiences of these females and ethnic minority groups at the institution appear to be positive, with a clear sense of belonging to the course (Bailey, 2005, as cited in Biscoomb et al., 2006). The admissions process seems to have had little effect on the low admission rate of these individuals to sport courses (Coughlan, 2003).

Instead, the interview findings support the suggestion that gender specialisation within early schooling has a negative impact on the number of females who choose to pursue sport careers and to participate in sport (Coffield & Vignoles, 1997; Hendry, 1978). The continuation of stereotypical assumptions and perceptions of women in sport has contributed to this negativity and indirectly operates as a barrier for female students entering sport (Patel, 2004; Patel & Boyes, 2006). Given the special nature of sport and sporting culture, it is uncertain whether the university policy goal of gender equality can ever realistically apply to sport courses until measures are put in place to help eradicate traditional perceptions of women in sport.

The experiences of ethnic minorities in this study reinforces research findings that identify family and culture as important determinants of their participation in sport and career pursuits (Halpin, 2006; McGuire & Collins, 1998). The British Asian participants admitted that their parents perceived sport as a less valuable academic subject than mathematics or economics. Whilst their parents continued to support them in their endeavours, the findings highlight the progressive generational differences that have emerged in previous research (Burdsey, 2007). The under-representation of ethnic minority role models in professional popular sports in the UK, such as football, appears to explain in part the lack of ethnic minority students on the sport course and within the sports teams (Burdsey, 2007; Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research, 2001; Stone, 2005).

In accordance with the university Race Equality Policy, the 'monitoring of admission and progress of different racial groups of students' should include a more detailed investigation into the socio-cultural barriers for ethnic minorities entering higher education (Institution Specific Policy, 2002). Indeed, such policies should aim to be more congruent with the diverse "identities, lifestyles and aspirations" of different ethnic groups (Burdsey, 2007, p. 140).

The 'positive' findings relating to the university admissions process outlined above contrast with the admission and enrolment experiences of an individual with a disability on the sport course. The inaccessibility and inadequacy of the teaching and learning environment present a barrier to participation in sport and education, as suggested in previous research (Sport England, 2002; Tannsjo & Tamburrini, 2000). It seems that university staff on the sport course have not risen to the 'challenge' that students with a disability present to them (Tinklin et al., 2004). Furthermore, based on these findings, it is questionable whether the institutions' disability policies are working towards achieving "a culture of support and inclusion for all members of the University community" within sport (Institution Specific Policy, 2007b).

It was expected that this study would uncover more evidence of barriers during the admissions process. However, social research rarely brings us the insights we expect to find (Foster, 1990; Willie, 2003). There is a clear difference between the assumption of what may be occurring and the reality of what actually is going on. Whilst this is true in relation to the females and ethnic minorities, this study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of an individual with a disability on a sport course. It is recommended that university policies focus on the integration of minority individuals into sport courses, specifically working with the sport department to create and achieve realistic goals towards widening participation for individuals with a disability within their courses.

This study would have benefited from a wider sample of interviews, giving equal attention to the majority of the students on the course (McNamara and Harris, 1997), rather than considering "non-traditionalist students in isolation from men, the ethnic majority and traditional students" (Kettley, 2007, p. 342).

Minority groups identified in this study should play a more prominent but representative part in promotional course literature, which would also enhance the visibility of these minority groups generally. This paper recommends that the institution actively promotes sports participation amongst ethnic minority students and individuals with a disability in order to enhance integration further and ensure equality of opportunity. Wider visibility and participation may lead towards the introduction of more role models in sport for minority groups. The findings relating to participation in university sports clubs suggest that further research should be conducted concentrating on the admission, integration and experiences of individuals within this particular structure.

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