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**Association of Colleges**

**Growing Sport, Growing Colleges:**

**The impact of student engagement in sport on employability**

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## Introduction and context

- This report presents the findings of a research commissioned by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and undertaken by the Sport Industry Research Centre (SIRC) at Sheffield Hallam University from June to September 2013.
- 'Growing Sport, Growing Colleges: A strategy for sport in Further Education Colleges 2011-2015' provides a clear vision and direction for Further Education (FE) and Sixth Form Colleges regarding the provision of sport and physical activity for students, staff and the wider community. It articulates the role that sport can play in helping FE Colleges achieve their wider objectives. It specifically includes encouraging participation in sport and involvement in leadership, volunteering and coaching opportunities to provide entry points to a range of industries.
- The purpose of this research is to provide further evidence of the value of student engagement in sport on the wider objectives for the College sector. The research focuses specifically on the impact of engaging with sport on future employability and progression to higher education. The report also draws on recent research undertaken by SIRC for British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) which examined the impact of sport on graduate employability. Whilst those involved in sport in the further and higher education sector believe that engagement in sport has a positive impact on a student's employability, for example the development of team working and leadership skills, the evidence to date is largely anecdotal and this report combined with the research work commissioned by BUCS is intended to address that evidence gap.
- In terms of the existing research literature, there is a very little which explores explicitly the role of sport in developing employability and the influence of extra-curricular activity sport and the transition to employment. Some attention has been paid to the positive influence of extra-curricular activity on academic achievement, for example students who participate are often more productive and develop good time management skills (DeMoulin, 2002; Gerber, 1996). Recent research in the United States has suggested that participation in team sport is the only extra-curricular activity that has a consistent and significant impact on students' grades at school (Irvin et al, cited in Bloom, 2013). In terms of longer-term impact on earnings, Eide and Ronan (2001) found that participation in varsity sports in the United States had a positive impact upon future salaries.
- For the purposes of this research, engagement in sport includes participation, competition, volunteering, leading activities and coaching. It is important to note that the research does not just focus on the impact for students studying sports-related courses but for all students in the FE sector.
- To deliver the research we have sought the views of university admissions tutors from a wide range of academic disciplines and employers. The research has also involved secondary analysis of Sport England's Active People data set to examine the relationship between educational attainment (up to level 3), engagement in sport

and future income. This also builds on work undertaken for BUCS which examined the same relationship for graduate level qualifications.

## **Research questions**

The following specific research questions were agreed for the project.

- Is there a relationship between participation in sport and/or volunteering, and future earnings for those students with level 3 qualifications as their highest achievement?
- Do employers (of College students) value engagement in sport and how do they view its impact on employability?
- Do university admissions tutors value/recognise engagement in sport when considering applications from students wishing to progress to higher education and how do they view its contribution to employability?

## **Defining employability**

It is important to define how we are interpreting the term employability in this project. Definitions of employability have become increasingly complex and have developed beyond simply being skills for employment to incorporate additional factors, including the development of values, behaviours, attitudes and competencies aimed at supporting career development. It is therefore not just about developing skills to gain a first job, but building the potential required for a longer term career. The most widely accepted definition is that of Yorke and Knight (2006) who propose their definition of employability as:

*'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'* (2006: 3)

## Methodology

### 1. Secondary analysis of Sport England's Active People data set

Participation in sport is tracked continuously through Sport England's Active People Survey. Launched in 2005/06, it is the largest survey of sport and active recreation ever carried out in Europe and has produced seven annual surveys.

Active People provides information on:

- Who plays sport – including breakdowns by region, gender, social class, ethnicity, household structure, age and disability.
- How they take part – for instance through club membership, tuition or coaching, through competitive sport or as volunteers.
- Who plays sport and how on a sport by sport basis.
- Who plays sport and how for different geographical areas, including local authorities, County Sports Partnerships and regions.

Secondary analysis was undertaken on the latest 2012/13 Active People survey which represents a sample of 160,000 adults. The purpose was to examine the relationship between average income, education and volunteering and sports participation. It should be noted that in the latest survey the income question was not universally asked of all survey participants, however those asked still provides a significant sample.

The first stage was to identify adults (16+) having a highest qualification: higher education below degree level or A-levels (or equivalent) or trade apprenticeships. This produced a sample of 36,957 of which 14,483 had completed the income question.

The sample was then cut again by the introduction of sports participation to divide the sample into two further sub-groups, one where the people in the group participate in sport at least once a week and one containing those who do not participate.

Finally, a further 'cut' was done relating to involvement or non-involvement in volunteering. The relationships relating to engagement in sport and income were then illustrated in a 'decision tree'.

## 2. Telephone interview with university admissions tutors

Given Colleges provide 31% of entrants to higher education (AoC 2013), it was felt important to evaluate the views of university admissions tutors regarding the impact of sporting engagement to provide an 'interim perspective' for students not going directly into employment.

A cohort of 45 admissions tutors were identified by trawling the websites of a range of universities. It was often the case that individual admission tutors were not directly contactable and enquiries were directed to a generic undergraduate admissions office address. This route was avoided in favour of those who could be contacted directly for a telephone interview.

Universities represented in the sample included:

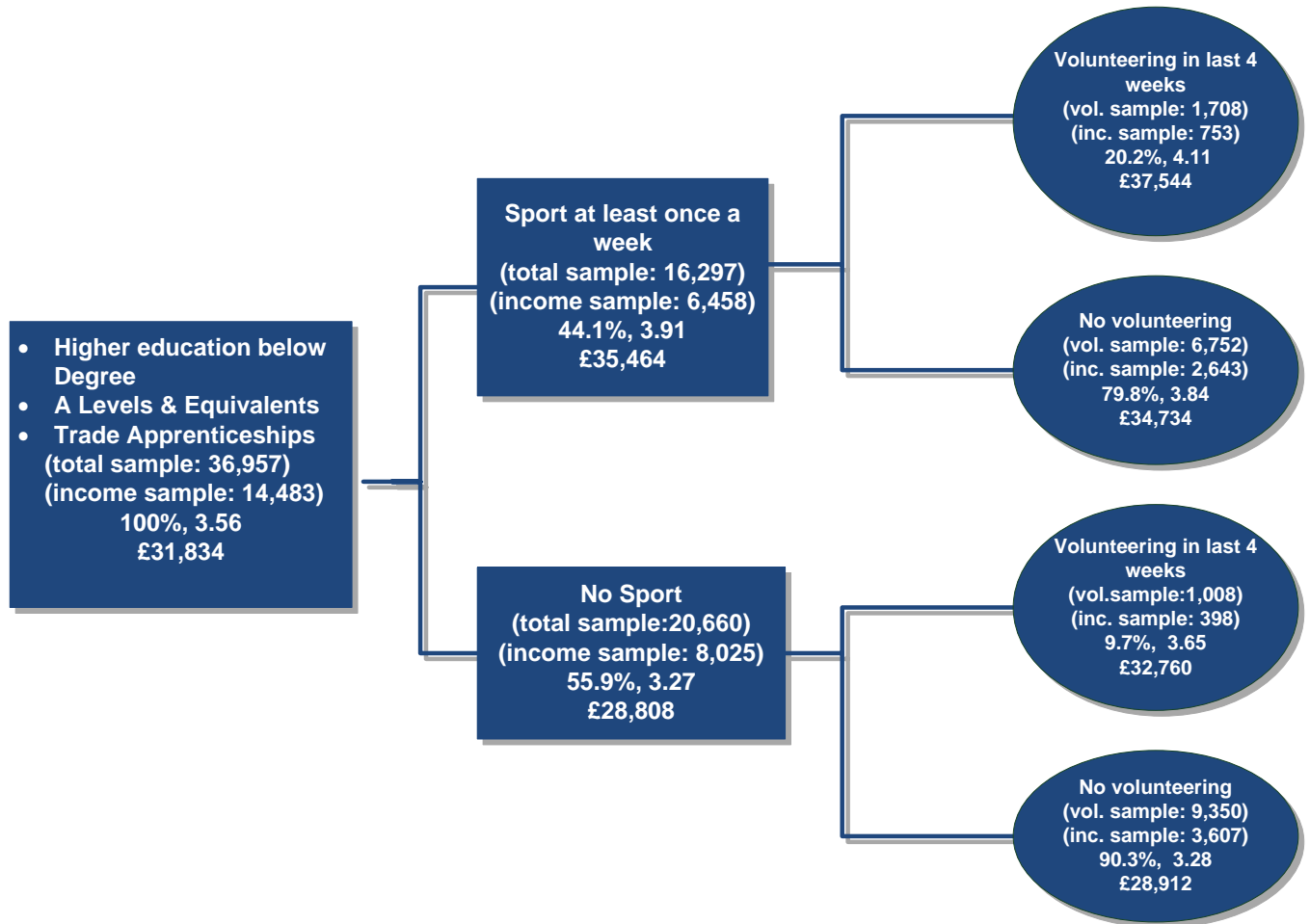
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Leeds Metropolitan University
- Leeds Trinity
- University of Huddersfield
- University of Bath
- Liverpool John Moore's
- Nottingham Trent
- Anglia Ruskin
- Salford
- Plymouth
- Middlesex
- Chester
- University of East London
- Loughborough
- York St John
- Oxford Brookes
- Coventry
- Edinburgh Napier
- Manchester School of Art

We obtained responses from 16 tutors (35%) who were willing to take part in a telephone interview. The tutors represented a wide range of academic disciplines including Business, Economics, Law, Computing, Education, Science and Engineering, Sport and Allied Health Professions. All telephone interviews were recorded and used the following interview guide.

- Do you think that student engagement in sport has positive benefits in terms of employability from your experience?
- What specific benefits can you identify?
- When students apply to your courses how much value do you give to the experiences the student has of playing, coaching, volunteering, leading etc?
- Do students make the most of using this experience to enhance their personal statements, can they articulate effectively the knowledge, skills, behaviours gained?
- Any other comments or observations?

# Findings

## 1. Active People secondary data analysis



Target group in APS corresponds to 36,957, reduced to 14,483 because of the income question.

It was further reduced in the volunteers question (last branches of the tree), resulting in the average income of the general 'No Sport' category being below both voluntary branches.

Key: %: percentage of the population under consideration.  
 Decimal number: APS mean value for income  
 £: calculated average income based on the APS figure.

The decision tree on the previous page provides a visual representation of the relationships between average income, education and volunteering. Our starting category on the left is adults (16+) having their highest qualification as 'higher education below degree level or A-levels (or equivalent) or trade apprenticeships.' Within APS there are 36,957 adults that meet this profile. However 14,483 answered the household income question, hence based on the reduced sample we derived an average annual income of £31,834.

Moving to the right of the decision tree, we introduce sports participation. The sample of 14,483 is divided into two subgroups, one where the people in the group participate in sport at least once a week and one who do no sport. This produces a group of 6,458 participants and 8,025 non-participants. These groups have annual average household income of £35,464 and £28,808 respectively. In short, those who participate at least once a week obtain an income almost £7,000 higher than the non-participants.

The third column of the decision tree illustrates the relationship to income when the question of volunteering in the last four weeks (at the time of survey) is considered. Those who take part in sport **and** volunteer (sample of 753) have an average household income of £37,544 which is nearly £6,000 higher than the average for the sample as a whole. The gap in average earnings widens to £8,642 when you consider the branch for non-participants who also do no volunteering (£28,912).

This type of secondary analysis has also been undertaken for students with graduate level qualifications as part of the research for [British Universities and Colleges Sport](#), producing similar findings which are summarised below:

- Graduates who took part in sport have a higher annual household income (£42,640) than graduates who did not (£36,296), a difference of £6,344.
- Amongst non-graduates we find a similar relationship to graduates, that is, those who do sport (£32,656) have a higher annual household income than those who do not (£24,648), a difference of £8,008.
- Graduates who took part in sport **and were also** involved in volunteering had an even higher annual household income (£45,032) than those graduates who took part in sport but did not volunteer (£42,328), a premium of £2,704
- Amongst non-graduates again we find a similar relationship to graduates but an even greater differential. Non-graduates who took part in sport **and** were involved in volunteering have a higher annual household income (£36,296) than those who do no sport or volunteering (£24,440), a difference of £11,856.

*Source: The Impact of Student Engagement in Sport on Graduate Employability (BUCS 2013)*

These relationships between earnings, sport and volunteering are similar to the relationships noted by Eide and Ronan (2001) who found that participation in varsity sports in the United States had a positive impact upon future salaries. The findings do enable us to form a hypothesis that this is a notion worth testing in the primary research. Further surveys



undertaken for BUCS with around 5,000 graduate alumni found a similar relationship to the findings in the Active People Survey data. Those who took part in sport at university had an average personal income of £32,344, which was greater than those who attended the gym only (£28,080) or did not engage in sport (£26,728). Those who did not engage in sport had the lowest levels of income. In short, participation and volunteering in sport is associated with a premium in salary of between £4,264 and £5,616 per annum.

It is also worth noting at this point the following findings from the BUCS graduate survey :

- Graduates who had also been involved in the organisation and management of university sport in addition to participating in sport reported that this experience had the greatest impact on developing key skills for employability.
- Furthermore, they were also the least likely to have encountered a period of unemployment in their career than other groups.
- Graduates who did no sport and no other extra-curricular activities at university were amongst the lowest earners and were the most likely to have had periods of unemployment.

*Source: The Impact of Student Engagement in Sport on Graduate Employability (BUCS 2013)*

The important point here is that these findings add to the evidence which suggests a positive relationship (but not causal) between engagement in sport, future employability and earnings for students in **both** further and higher education.

## 2. Admissions tutor interviews

A cohort of 16 admissions tutors engaged with the research and represented a wide range of academic disciplines including Business, Economics, Law, Computing, Education, Science and Engineering, Sport and Allied Health Professions. The findings from the interviews are summarised below.

### 1. Do you think that student engagement in sport has positive benefits in terms of employability generally from your experience. What are the specific benefits?

All admission tutors interviewed responded positively to this question, recognising that engagement in sport had benefits in terms of a student's future employability. Many were able to articulate the specific skills and personal attributes accrued. These included:

- Team working
- Leadership
- Time management and personal organisation
- Problem solving skills
- Goal orientation
- Better work ethic
- Self-discipline
- Positive attitude
- Being fit and being fit for purpose

*'Working in computing and designing programmes you have to be able to work in a team. Where we have had people involved in sport we find they are the better communicators and slightly harder workers.'*

*'You know how hard it is competing in sport at a certain level and we find there is a better work ethic. I have no evidence but students involved in coaching/officiating/lifeguarding constantly had stories to tell which I think helped enormously with job interviews.'*

*'In terms of employability it absolutely has benefits; some of the sports they are involved with are team sports and in general we see that it has a positive benefit in terms of wellbeing and positive attitude to life. Sport is about achieving goals and that is transferable.'*

*'We do have a number of students who come to us with a sporting background who want to use sport within youth and community work. I certainly see that as a positive.'*

*'I think if they have been a team leader or team captain or coach, it does show leadership qualities. A lot of my students do go into management roles and so any experience they have had working as a team leader is useful to them.'*

*'I think if someone lacks that work experience but has a sporting background especially in team sports then yes they can use that as a basis to demonstrate how they can add value to an organisation.'*

*'From an employability point of view, certainly I would look to see if they can illustrate working as part of a team, or as a captain to talk about leadership, linking it in with goal setting and motivating the team.'*

An important distinction was made by some tutors between students who just participated in sport and those who had a wider engagement. They felt it was this wider engagement that helped develop employability and well-rounded individuals with potential to contribute to university life.

*'I think it's more to do with how they help run the sport rather than to 'do' sport. Loads of students jump up and down a lot, but from my point of view and I think from an employer's point of view they might be very good at sport, but does that mean they are any good at a job and I think there is quite a difference there.'*

*'I think they are going to contribute more to the life of the university. We have a tradition of Wednesday afternoon everything is cancelled for sport, but when you speak to most students they don't do anything. I certainly don't mind them having the afternoon off, but it is traditionally for sport and recreation and although there are a number who do, the majority don't. Clearly for those that do meet people outside of their subject it gives them something to strive towards. It is about teamwork and achievement and getting out of bed, that kind of thing, they are all good things aren't they.'*

*'I guess that people who play regularly generally have to be pretty organised with their time and balance a range of activities and are more likely to be able to evidence things like working together in a team and leadership and the social side of it – the social side of sport generally creates well-rounded people.'*

### **When students apply to your courses how much value do you give to the experiences the student has in playing, coaching, volunteering, leading?**

The responses to this question varied in terms of the emphasis and weight given to sporting engagement. This was largely to do with the admissions process at each university, the subject chosen and competition for places.

*'As someone who's responsible for undergraduate admissions, I look at a lot of applications and they all tend to be very much the same. Anything that makes students stand out, such as engagement in sport, I think students who get involved in sport are making themselves look better.'*

*'I would have to say yes to that. It adds to the CV and personally I'm always impressed with applications if the person is actively engaged in sport and other activities.'*

*'I put quite a lot of store by it – it's not the only thing but it's one of the major ones, sport is more recognisable (in terms of skills and attributes) and it shows that they involved with more than just the basics.'*

*'The greatest weight I give is to those who have got in to the volunteering and leadership. Things like the young leaders programme, Junior Sports Leader Award,*

*that sort of stuff and are they doing stuff outside of playing for their football team so are they helping coach with their football team.'*

*'We are quite a heavily subscribed course, so the initial thing we look for has to be the predicted grades and their ambition to work within the profession. However I do pay a lot of attention to any extracurricular activities they do, particularly sport, because then it shows they have outside interests, I'm sure you find the same as me, we want a balanced student, not just a student that is academically good, but has a wider experience of life in general.'*

For some admission tutors evidence of engagement in sport was a pre-requisite in student applications. This included sport-related courses as you would expect, but also those involving youth and community type work were the wider involvement in volunteering was valued. There are some universities who have promoted themselves as 'sport universities' and want to attract elite performers, so sporting engagement would be a consideration in admissions work.

*'We are looking for experience they have in the subject area they have applied for e.g. coaching experience and quals. It shows commitment to the subject area.'*

*'Certainly for the youth and community work course we expect to see some evidence of experience in leadership with young people, whether that's in sport or other activities that's good. Someone with a Community Sports Leader Award or a Junior Sports Leader Award would be seen as a great asset. Commitment to volunteering is important.'*

*'In terms of offering places, the thing that has become more relevant now on the playing side is if they are an elite performer. In the last couple of years, our university has got into sport scholarships and so that has now started to have an impact on my decision making a little bit.'*

*'We certainly do value it. We would pick it up when we read their personal statements and it can also be included in references as well. The main factor that decides whether we make an offer or not is their predicted grades and their AS grades, but we also look at their personal statement and if they do play sport or organising sport then that is very much in their favour.'*

In other subjects the same applied, not to demean the value of sport but just to ensure that students were truly interested in the proposed area of study.

*'Something we bear in mind – when we shortlist but it's not part of the criteria – we look more at understanding of the role, relevant work experience.'*

*'If I am truly honest not an awful lot – I am looking for an interest in science and their grades. If they include other things in their personal statement and you are comparing two – being involved in sport does show they have some 'get up and go' and that might sway it but equally it might be something more arty or music which also involves discipline so sport doesn't have the monopoly.'*

*'If we applied this to computing students it would exclude a significant number!'*

In some universities that were less selective, offer-making was often delegated so admissions tutors did not have influence unless it was a non-standard application.

*'There aren't many that I get to read. I think if there isn't anything wrong with the personal statement and predicted grades our admissions staff will just make an offer straight away.'*

*'I'll be totally honest; our admissions process is automated so if a College or sixth form student applies we generate an automatic offer. So in most cases I don't actually see the application form. It is completely ridiculous; it is literally an automated response so it will pick out the standard offer.'*

### **Do students make the most of using this experience to enhance their personal statements? Can they articulate effectively the knowledge, skills, behaviours gained?**

The majority of admissions tutors interviewed reported that personal statements were generally a 'mixed bag' and, to a degree, there was a feeling that sometimes their engagement in sport was exaggerated because students had been told to. The main weakness is the ability to make the connection between being involved in sport and the experience that has provided.

*'I don't think they do, it's something that we try and get them to do when they're here. We have a well-developed world of work programme here. I think trying to get students to reflect on their skill development is difficult. I don't think they do a lot of that because it's not part of the school curriculum. We know employers are very interested in knowing what students do apart from their university studies.'*

*'No I don't think they do. In my experience students don't know how to sell themselves and that's one of the things that we try to teach them when they're at university. I think in that respect they could do with more assistance.'*

*'It is kind of a sideways jump; it is not a logical thing to say "oh, because I do this, this is what it says about me". We have to help them come to that conclusion.'*

*'I don't think they do generally. They don't sell the teamwork and organisation and application of it all, but maybe they are deliberately vague about it all. Certainly if you were doing it seriously you could put down how many actual hours you have put in and talk about the various attributes that it helps to enhance.'*

There was a minority view that when students prepare personal statements they generally do a good job in using their involvement in sport to demonstrate transferable skills. Good support from tutors was identified as a factor.

*'I think they get good support in schools and we spend time on it when prospective students attend open days.'*

*'There is a fairly strong emphasis – they don't seem to be underselling it, there is a strong emphasis on sport in society at the moment.'*

*'The personal statements go from excellent to really not very good at all but generally students are able to not just say I am the captain of the school football team, but are*

*able to move forward from that and demonstrate what skills or knowledge that experience has given them. Presumably they receive some coaching on how to write their statement.'*

Some tutors raised the issue of whether universities actually did enough to sell the value of engagement in sport to students and the importance of encouraging participation.

*'As a university we should be promoting the fact that we have students involved in sport in our department, it looks good. We had an elite swimmer and we didn't realise it and we could have supported him better in his studies. We should be more proactive with this.'*

*'University life is not just about academic activities; it's about the transformational experience for most people. It's important to be involved in a range of activities which maximise people's potential to change their development. No doubt sport is one of those activities. We always encourage students to have a full active social life including sport.'*

*'Sometimes it's really difficult to encourage students to see the value of taking part in sporting activities.'*

The inference from this might be that if students understood the value better, especially in terms of employability, it might drive engagement.

### **Concluding observations from tutors**

*'Every single employer that I have ever talked to about this does mention they are looking for someone who is a rounded person, and that means they are in some cases willing to sacrifice academic achievement for someone who has interests outside of study and you would definitely include sport in that.'*

*'Sport I think is quite a useful thing, no one thinks it's bad do they? It's always going to be seen as a positive.'*

To summarise, all the tutors recognised the value of engagement in sport for students progressing to university. The specific benefits identified included a range of personal skills and attributes that could enhance a student's performance, university experience and be attractive to future employers. An important point was that it is not just about playing sport but the wider involvement in volunteering, leading administration that was the real differentiator, and there was evidence this would be advantageous in a competition for university places. Perhaps the most interesting finding was the perception that universities do not do enough to **sell** the impact of engaging in sport which suggests the need for further work to make the case in both the FE and HE sector.

### 3. The employer's perspective

We can draw on the findings from the recent research commissioned by [British Universities and Colleges Sport](#) that captured the views of 120 organisations, many of which recruited to non-graduates. Examples of companies responding included the Armed Forces, Sainsbury's, Morrison's, Waitrose/John Lewis, Arcadia (Burton/TopShop) Arriva, Enterprise Car Rental and Network Rail.

A particular strength of the survey was the fact that no sport organisations responded which in terms of the findings actually helps reinforce the point that engagement in sport is valued by employers outside the sport sector who traditionally recruit from sport courses in FE and HE.

Below is a summary of the employer perspective from the [British Universities and Colleges Sport](#) project including examples of the comments provided by employers.

- The vast majority (c. 94%) of graduate employers were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of graduates having been engaged in sport whilst at university and the skills and strengths that this would bring them in applying to jobs at their organisation.

*'My view is that engaging in sport could have some significant benefits to candidates when making job applications. It would clearly depend on which sport they were participating in and their level of commitment. If it was a team sport and the candidate was a captain or took a leading role we would take this as seriously as a non-academic achievement and supporting factor with their application having the opportunity to practise and develop leadership skills.'*

*Waitrose*

- Many employers actively looked for mention of engagement in sport on graduates' job applications.
- Academic qualifications and subject-specific skills were deemed necessary, but the 'soft skills' such as behaviours, qualities and attitudes developed through sport were deemed equally as important by the majority of employers.

*'Sport can help develop many skills desired by employers including communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict management and competitiveness. It can be a great discussion point at interviews and an effective way to quantify and demonstrate measurable impact. Sport allows a greater level of flexibility for individuals to be themselves, to experience success and learn from failures.'*

*Enterprise Rent-a-Car*

- A wide range of positive attributes were described by employers as being developed through sport including, amongst many others, team working, communication skills, motivation, competitiveness and resilience.

*'Most sports develop interpersonal skills through interaction with other people whether its competitors, teams or squads. Where higher levels of sport involve training programmes this shows an ability to time manage and prioritise activities.'*

*Property Vision*

- For some organisations sport was a part of their workplace culture and therefore graduates who continued to participate in sport throughout their career would further develop their employability. Within the workplace, sport was seen to provide networking opportunities and continued development of team working skills, as well as good health and wellbeing.
- The majority of employers felt that leadership positions, organisational roles and other positions of responsibility within sports clubs and societies were particularly beneficial in providing 'added value' for graduate employability.
- Employers described that it would not be enough for graduates simply to list their participation in sport on an application form. Rather they are looking for graduates to be able to demonstrate effectively the employability skills and attributes that they have developed through sport.



## Conclusions

At the start of this project we asked the following questions:

- Is there a relationship between participation in sport and/or volunteering, and future earnings for those students with level 3 qualifications as their highest achievement?
- Do university admissions tutors value/recognise engagement in sport when considering applications from students wishing to progress to HE?
- Do employers (of College students) value of engagement in sport and how do they view its impact on employability?

The findings of this research suggest a positive relationship between engagement in sport, future income and employability from both the employer and admissions tutor perspective. Considering the findings of the research commissioned by [British Universities and Colleges Sport](#), which further considered the graduate perspective, there is a growing body of evidence which points to engagement in sport being a 'good investment' for students in both the FE and HE sector.

In terms of the 'Growing Sport, Growing Colleges' strategy there is perhaps an opportunity to be more explicit about the potential impact of sport in developing employability for students beyond those involved in sport-specific study. Perhaps with this evidence there is a case to extend the 'enrichment' theme to encompass the contribution to employment and longer-term employability.

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