Editorial: Community Sport Development: Managing Change and Measuring Impact

This special issue was inspired by recent developments within community sport which has seen a continual redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of community sports organisations. Central to these developments has been the increasing demand upon organisations to be held accountable in relation to their various funding agreements and the requirement to evidence a return on the investment given by multiple stakeholders (Brookes & Wiggan, 2009; Collins, 2010). At its core, community sport development is about addressing social inequalities and the need to understand and challenge these issues with society (Bloyce & Smith, 2010; Hylton & Totten, 2013; Mackintosh, 2011, 2020). Our intent has been to provide a special issue which offers insight into best practice examples of the management of change and measurement of impact within community sport across a wider variety of organisations and settings to address these issues (Hylton & Totten, 2013).

Our focus and interest from the outset has been to provide an interface between the academic world and the community sport workforce to provide a potential stimulus for future progression. It is worth noting, however, that at the point of conception, nobody predicted the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic and the far-reaching consequences and potential long-term impact that it has bought to community sport (cf. Doherty et al., 2020; Parnell et al., 2020). Perhaps then, the dominant themes from this issue may have greater significance as we find ourselves in this turbulent landscape where the community sport world will, more so than ever before, be impacted by financial constraints and a potential expectations to do more, with less. In particular, from our experience in working with and researching community sport – and as the studies within this special issue will attest – we see four broad, interrelated trends emanating from community sport within our current climate which are likely to be even more pronounced in a post-Covid-19 pandemic world.

First, community sport organisations are being required to respond to ever changing priorities of policy makers and political agendas. The emphasis of 'sport for sport's sake' in terms of public funding and government support has dwindled, with increasingly stringent requirements being placed on those who oversee and deliver sport within communities to demonstrate their contributions towards meeting a range of social policy objectives in order to secure funding (Coalter, 2007, 2015). Rather than viewing this shift as burdensome, we see this as an opportunity to demonstrate sports' potential to contribute to wider social issues including but not limited to public health, mental health, community cohesion, education and criminal justice.

A second theme is the increasing public, political and media scrutiny and interest in governance, ethics and integrity within community sport. How sport is governed, and by whom, will continue to be under close scrutiny (King, 2009, 2017; Parent and Hoye, 2018). Emerging from this are a broad range of issues regarding governing arrangements, board diversity, safeguarding and protection, duty of care, ethical practices and financial probity. All of which require further research to better understand the nature and extent of these challenges within and surrounding community sport organisations.

A third theme is the competing demands for the demonstrating the relevance of community sport, but commercially and at an individual level. Community sport has always had a long-term challenge in being able to demonstrate its relevance, but this has become important in recent years due to financial pressures (e.g. austerity), steering to increased reliance on a volunteer base (Findlay-King et al., 2018; Nichols et al., 2019) and the expanding commercial pressures relating to sponsorship, broadcast deals and other key revenue streams (Parnell et al., 2017). In addition, community sport organisations are also required to demonstrate their everyday relevance to the communities in which they serve in order to attract a younger, more commercially demanding, customer/membership base.

Stemming from these trends is a fourth theme regarding an increasing need for community sport and leisure organisations to understand, quantify and articulate an intended or realised impact with fair greater clarity and precision that previously (Taks, Misener & Green, 2015). Demonstrating program and policy effectiveness and impact is increasingly important for all sport and leisure organisations (Coalter, 2007; Houlihan & Green, 2010; Schulenkorf, Giannoulakis & Blom, 2019), but is particularly challenging for community-based organisations who, often with limited resources and capacity, must demonstrate accountability to a wide range of funding partners (Misener et al., 2013). Perhaps more than any other, this is an area in which the sport sector could do a great deal to help itself. Part of the challenge, which is explored in depth within this special issue, is around a skills deficit – the sector lacking the requisite skills and experience to effectively develop sophisticated metrics (Wicker, Breuer & Pawlowski, 2009). However, the greater challenge we suggest is a broader shift in culture and willingness within community sport settings to be able to understand and demonstrate its own intended and achieved outputs and outcomes.

In turning to the contributions of this special issue, the overriding consensus amongst the editorial team is that it will likely generate more questions than answers, although we feel the scope and possibility for action is plentiful. Much like sport development in general, we recognize that community sport development is a contested and debated term that has multiple meanings and is used in a variety of ways in different contexts (Hylton & Totten, 2013; Mackintosh, 2012, 2020). It is for this reason that the articles contained within this special issue share varying degrees of interest in and focus on community sport, across a wide range of contexts (NGBs, clubs, local authorities, sport development units) and sectors (public, private and not-for-profit). Nonetheless, they share a common interest in and focus on either those who are responsible for grassroots sport and attempting to address inequalities within our society.

The studies within this special issue fit broadly into three themes – *challenges*, *opportunities*, and *enablers* to manage change and measure impact within community sport. However, before delving into these, it is perhaps worth noting some more general comments surrounding the type of research that is on show in this issue. Firstly, this issue offers insight into a number of research approaches and theoretical perspectives that are relatively new to the community sport development field (for example, the use of the active voice and realist evaluation from Bailey & Harris). We hope that by showcasing these here we will inspire those working in this field to look to further our understanding of the value that these kinds of approaches may have. Secondly, it is clear that if we wish to understand mechanisms through which we can best measure and evaluate the impact of community sport, we need to move away from a reliance upon the voice of the end users and ensure that we capture the perspectives of the many, varied stakeholders associated with community sports programmes, (as shown in Sanders, Keech, Burdsey, Maras & Moon for example). This does, of course, include the end user, but also a consideration of the strategic and organisational factors, the policy and funding regulators, and the support network around the end user (including administrators, parents, coaches etc) appears critical if we are to truly understand the impact that is being made.

Challenges

This issue has undoubtedly reinforced that there are substantial challenges that surround measuring and evaluating impact in community sport. At the centre of this challenge is the complication of trying to define what success means within community sport development. Without a clear vision of what success looks like, and indeed this will be individual to organisation and context, community sport development is arguably trapped between striving for social return on investment vs. searching for sustainability and security (financially driven) (cf. Davies, Taylor, Christy & Ramchandani; Millar & Doherty; Sanders et al. for

varying insights here) . It is this juxtaposition which influences the strategic decisions that an organisation makes. Does it attempt to innovate and build organisational capacity to diversify the sport offer or does the necessity to comply with stakeholder policy stifle these attempts at innovation? We have found in this issue that the traditional outcome evaluations often fail to link to the programmes itself as the push towards KPIs often takes over. It is this narrative behind the outcome which may be one of the missing pieces of the puzzle when it comes to measuring impact. Whilst the academic world has developed frameworks to address a more holistic approach to understanding impact, this issue has revealed that the theory to practice divide is very real and the translation of knowledge between both parties may be impeded. There are learnings here for both academics, who potentially need to consider the simplification of theoretically driven frameworks, but also practitioners, who need to consider their own continual professional development and gaps in knowledge, especially in relation to the measurement and evaluation of their programme offers.

Opportunities

Whilst challenges will always exist, this issue has revealed a number of opportunities and possibilities worthy of exploration in our quest to find more comprehensive and effective mechanisms to manage change and measure impact in community sport. We invite both academics and practitioners to consider exploring the opportunities afforded in the content. Arguably one of the most prominent ideas that has been presented is the incitement to look beyond the more traditional outcome evaluation measures that have historically dominated our field, and look towards other disciplines to see what can be borrowed and applied. For example, in this issue we learn about the theory driven approach of realist evaluation from (Bailey & Harris). This attempts to develop an understanding of what works for whom and in what context. We also hear of asset-based approaches which has roots in the applied field of

positive psychology and the notion of strengths-based practices. As an approach this almost flips what we might see as the norm for community sport development in that the start point is appreciating what is good and what capabilities exist in individuals, associations and institutions, rather than working from a deficit lens and finding what is lacking. Indeed, there is potential here to see what other disciplines can offer ours, but in order for this to be achieved we need to consider how we are able to get the knowledge translation from the academic world to the applied workforce. It is abundantly clear from this issue that we may be able to enhance practice so much more if we are able to educate those responsible for community sport delivery. This may be through more formal qualification and training and CPD mechanisms, but perhaps we can also learn from disciplines that are grounded in informal learning as a vehicle for development and the role of mentoring and communities of practice, as an example.

Enablers

Our final theme looks to draw out a number of factors that this issue identifies as being some of the potential enablers if we are to enhance approaches to managing change and measuring impact. Special issues like this provide a platform to showcase the diversity of ideas and approaches that exist both in literature, but also in practice. Whilst this diversity is to be celebrated, and also expected given that community context is fundamental, it does arguably reveal that the lack of common framework to social impact assessments poses a real challenge to community sport and leisure organisations as competition for funding continues to intensify. Indeed, proof of successful delivery through social impact assessments will be crucial in successful bids, so perhaps key to ensuring a level playing field is the development of a common framework. This issue has shown that the frameworks of certification that exist in a number of international contexts (Doherty & Schlesinger) have potential for managing

interests in community sport, but the caveat is to find the balance between standardising an approach, yet allowing for diversity. This emphasises that strategic mapping of context is key from the outset of all community sport programmes and would need to be factored into any framework development. For many organisations, however, there is a struggle to focus on the strategic change processes required to continuously compete for funding and build capacity to enhance offers, due to the lack of resource and the informal nature of planning, where the day to day is the priority (Millar & Doherty). So, whilst organisational readiness and a workforce who are committed to taking initiative has been shown here to be fundamental to initiating change, organisations need existing capacity, on which it can rely, in order to achieve strategic developments. In addition, this issue presents an argument that sport policy-makers need to develop their awareness of how policy changes can create constraints and tensions for the community sport workforce operating at the lower level (see, for example, Thompson, Bloyce, & Mackintosh).

Perhaps then, this is where academics may be able to have their greatest influence on the applied world. Within this issue we see a call to academics to build links with industry stakeholders and take the role of being boundary spanners to help mobilise more theory driven, strategic thinking amongst practitioners. We see this as an important and necessary step forward in order to enhance discussions between academics and practitioners and why we felt *Managing Sport and Leisure* was the most appropriate outlet for generating such important dialogue. Future research within community sport should focus on the intersection between theory and practice as such research can potentially be a hugely powerful mechanism to enable community sport and leisure organisations to enhance their social impact. One way to achieve this is for researchers to work more collaboratively and directly in partnership with community sport organisations to develop long-term, sustainable relationships and research programmes. But the responsibility cannot just rely solely on the

shoulders of the academic world. If progress is to be sought, the culture of sport development organisations needs to be challenged. We encourage governments, national governing bodies and core community sport funders to be more open to diversity of monitoring, evaluation and research approaches. The current shift away from top-down, narrowly focused, quantitative outcomes and KPI measures towards more broader, qualitative based outcomes is a promising starting point in this regard and one that, in our view, opens up much more opportunity for collaboration between academics and practitioners.

References

Bloyce, D., & Smith, A. (2013). Sport policy and development: An introduction. London: Routledge.

Brookes, S. and Wiggan, J. (2009) reflecting the Public Value of Sport: A game of two halves? Public Management Review, 11: 4, 401-420.

Coalter, F. (2007). *A Social Role for Sport: Whose Keeping the Score?,* London: Routledge.

Coalter, F. (2015). Sport-for-Change: Some Thoughts from a Sceptic, *Social Inclusion*, 3:3, 19-23.

Collins, M. (2010) From 'sport for good' to 'sport for sport's sake' – not a good move for sports development in England? International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 2:3, 367-379.

Doherty, A., Millar, P., & Misener, K. (2020). Return to community sport: leaning on evidence in turbulent times. *Managing Sport and Leisure*. Advanced online publication. 10.1080/23750472.2020.1794940.

Findlay-King, L., Nichols, G., Forbes, D. and Macfadyen, G. (2018) 'Localism and the Big Society: the asset transfer of leisure centres and libraries–fighting closures or empowering communities?' *Leisure Studies*, 37:2, 158–170.

Houlihan, B., & Green, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Routledge handbook of sports development*. Routledge: London.

Hylton, K., & Totten, M. (2013). Community sport development. In K, Hylton (Ed.). *Sport development: Policy, process and practice* (3rd edition). Routledge (pp. 80-126).

King, N. (2009) *Sport Policy and Governance*, Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford.

King, N. (2017) *Sport Governance: An Introduction*, Routledge: London.

Mackintosh, C. (2011) An analysis of County Sports Partnerships in England: The fragility, challenges and complexity of partnership working in sports development, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7:3, 45-64.

Mackintosh, C. (2012) 'The shifting dynamics of local government sports development officer practice in England: New identities and hazy professional boundaries', in Harris, S., Bell, B., Adams, A. and Mackintosh C. (eds.) *Sport for Sport? Theoretical and Practical Insights into Sports Development*, Brighton: Leisure Studies Association, 113-130.

Mackintosh, C. (2020). *Foundations of Sport Development*, Routledge: London.

Misener, K., Harman, A., & Doherty, A. (2013). Understanding the local sports council as a mechanism for community sport development. *Managing leisure*, *18*(4), 300-315.

Nichols, G., Hogg, E., Knight, C. and Storr, R. (2019) Selling volunteering or developing volunteers? Approaches to promoting sports volunteering, *Voluntary Sector Review*, iFirst 1-16.

Parent, M.M. & Hoye, R. (2018) The impact of governance principles on sport organisations' governance practices and performance: A systematic review, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 4(1), 1503578.

Parnell, D., Widdop, P., Bond, A., & Wilson, R. (2020). COVID-19, networks and sport. *Managing Sport and Leisure*. Advanced online publication. 10.1080/23750472.2020.1750100

Parnell, D., Spracklen, K., & Millward, P. (2017). Sport management issues in an era of austerity, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 17(1), 67-74.

Schulenkorf, N., Giannoulakis, N., & Blom, L. (2019) Sustaining commercial viability and community benefits: management and leverage of a sport-for-development event, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 19(4), 502-519.

Taks, M., Chalip, L., & Green, C. B. (2015) Impacts and strategic outcomes from non-mega

    sport events for local communities, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 15(1), 1-6.

Wicker, P., Breuer, C., & Pawlowski, T. (2009) Promoting Sport for All to Age-specific

    Target Groups: the Impact of Sport Infrastructure, *European Sport Management*

    Quarterly, 9(2), 103-118.