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# The Profile of Higher Education Sport Students in England: Implications for Successful Transition and Effective Teaching and Learning Practice

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## Abstract

*Limited studies have explored sport students experiences of transitioning into university, which is surprising considering the high annual numbers recruited to English Higher Education (HE) sport programmes. The primary study aim was to gain specific insight into the expectations, motivations, anticipated challenges and concerns of first year sport degree students who had recently enrolled at an English post 92 university. Three hundred and thirty-four participants completed a 23-question survey, with key findings outlining the profile of students. Most notably, this included a significant shift towards vocational entry qualifications, the dominance of expectations around employability and a general lack in confidence to successfully integrate, both socially and academically. Strategies and recommendations to inform future curriculum reform which best support the social and academic needs of modern day HE sports students are presented, as are limitations and avenues for future research.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Sport Students; University Transition.

## Introduction

HE is universally recognised throughout society for the role it can play in positively shaping life satisfaction, personal development and prosperity (O`Shea, Stone, Delahunty & May, 2018; Stivastra, Tamir, McGonigal, John & Gross, 2009). Globally over the last three decades, there has been unprecedented growth in numbers entering the HE sector. To illustrate, the proportion of the United Kingdom (UK) population with an undergraduate degree is high by international standards (Knetta & McCartney, 2018), with over half of all school leavers in Scotland now progressing into HE (Tett, Cree & Christe, 2017). In England, application rates for 18-year-olds from widening participation backgrounds increased to the highest recorded levels in 2018 (Universities UK, 2018).

However, a downside of the rapidly expanding size and diversity of modern-day UK HE student populations is the numbers withdrawing from their studies

1 within 12 months of enrolment (Berger, Blanco, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Kahu  
2 & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2012). This concern was further underlined by The  
3 [Higher Education Statistics Agency](#) (HESA), which reported how 26,000 first  
4 year English undergraduate students who began their degree in 2015-2016  
5 failed to progress beyond year one of their programme. Such statistics in the  
6 current economic climate are concerning for university leadership teams  
7 because of the substantial income losses and their social responsibility to  
8 supporting a successful transition for all their students (Beer & Lawson, 2017;  
9 Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Haylek, 2007; Thomas, 2012).

## 11 **Student Expectations and Motivations**

13 Due to the UK government's categorising of students as 'customers' (Dearing,  
14 1997) and introduction of tuition fees in the late 1990's, English HE  
15 institutions now have to operate under ever increased forces of marketisation  
16 (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017). This has especially been the case over the past  
17 two decades, with many students now adopting a consumer-based identity  
18 towards their university education (Balloo, Pauli & Worrell, 2017; Briggs,  
19 2006; Kreig, 2013).

21 Research has clearly established how student engagement, attendance and  
22 achievement is more likely to be positive and longer-lasting when their  
23 expectations are met (Byrne, Flood, Hassall, Joyce & Montano, 2012; Lobo &  
24 Gurney, 2014; Voss et al., 2007). It is also well accepted that students are  
25 more likely to disengage, underachieve, fail and ultimately withdraw from  
26 their studies when such expectations are not fully addressed (Bennett,  
27 Kottasz & Nociolino, 2007; Byrne et al., 2012; Leese, 2010). Research by  
28 Balloo (2018), Allin, Hayman and Coyles (2017) and Surgenor (2013) revealed  
29 how undergraduates expectations of academic staff were to be approachable,  
30 experts in the subject matter they teach and to provide frequent and high  
31 quality assessment support and guidance. Brinkworth et al., (2009) found that  
32 despite anticipating differences between high school and university life,  
33 incoming undergraduates expected frequent and immediate access to  
34 academic staff and for summative assessments to be marked promptly and  
35 returned with comprehensive feedback.

37 A significant research base has shown employability prospects, moving away  
38 from home, the development of new social networks and continuation of  
39 learning as being students' primary motives for entering HE. The study by  
40 Balloo et al., (2017) revealed career opportunities to be the most important  
41 reason for first year psychology undergraduates attending university. Byrne et  
42 al., (2012) compared the motives, expectations and preparedness of  
43 undergraduate accounting students from Ireland, UK, Spain and Greece.  
44 Career focus and self-development were the most highly rated factors,  
45 indicating students were motivated to enter HE to improve their employment  
46 prospects, develop professionally and that they fully expected their studies to  
47 support their intellectual growth. Lowe and Cook (2003) surveyed over 600  
48 incoming undergraduate students on their social and academic expectations

1 of university life, with the majority entering HE to satisfy family and peer  
2 expectations and to lead active and fulfilling social lives.

### 3 4 **Anticipated Challenges and Concerns**

5  
6 A successful transition from school into HE is reflective of students feeling  
7 they have settled promptly, confidently and happily, made new friends and  
8 developed a sense of belonging and identity with peers and academic  
9 personnel (Farhat et al., 2017; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Yet with  
10 expectations of university life not always matching actual experiences, many  
11 have found adjusting to social and academic demands to be both challenging  
12 and concerning (McMillan, 2013; Murtagh, 2012; Pillay & Ngcobo; 2010;  
13 Richardson, King, Garrett, & Wrench, 2012; Woosley, 2003).

14  
15 To illustrate, Thomas (2012) found difficulties in socially integrating, such as  
16 homesickness and unable to make new friends, to be key factors for  
17 withdrawing from university. Such problems are exacerbated with the  
18 diversity of student profiles now attending university, of which many no  
19 longer leave home, but instead commute each day. Berger (1997) found  
20 friendships formed in halls of residences were important sources for sense of  
21 community, with those not living in student accommodation more likely to feel  
22 marginalised. Wilcox et al., (2005) showed regular social support from peers  
23 and staff as being important for coping with feelings of isolation and  
24 loneliness. Part-time, mature and working-class students have also found it  
25 difficult making a successful transition into HE and have higher non-  
26 completion rates than those from more traditional backgrounds (Rubin, 2012;  
27 Tinto, 2010).

28  
29 It is also proposed that growing student numbers lack sufficient  
30 understanding of what HE level learning entails (Gamache, 2002; Lowe &  
31 Cook, 2003), and that many enter their studies feeling underprepared by the  
32 teaching, learning and assessment methods they are likely to encounter  
33 (Fahrat, Bingham, Caulfield & Grieve, 2017). A majority also find the abrupt  
34 shift towards learning independently to be difficult and generally have limited  
35 experience of learning collaboratively and communicating in front of large  
36 audiences (Hayman, 2017, 2018; Hockings et al., 2018; McMillan, 2013).

37  
38 Some evidence has shown how HE sports students engage more positively  
39 with constructivist learning approaches, especially where opportunities to  
40 discuss ideas, solve problems and to share and reflect upon personal  
41 experiences are regularly provided (Groves, Bowd & Smith, 2010; Hayman,  
42 2017; Peters, Jones & Peters, 2008). For example, Hayman (2018) reported  
43 how flipped learning helped change a final-year undergraduate sports  
44 coaching module, previously characterised by student disengagement, poor  
45 attendance and underperformance, to one exemplifying improvements in  
46 attendance, attitude, motivation to learn and achievement. **Employing focus  
47 groups, Gill (2019) explored the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of final**

1 year further education sports science students on their forthcoming transition  
2 into university. Key study findings were that many expected to face numerous  
3 academic and social barriers upon entry, including increased workloads,  
4 difficulty completing assessments to expected standards and failing to  
5 become more independent learners.

## 6 7 **Study Aims and Rationale**

8  
9 Research exploring undergraduate sport student experiences of transitioning  
10 into university is very limited, which is surprising taking into account the large  
11 and diverse cohorts recruited annually to UK HE sport programmes. This  
12 study arose in direct response to several years of high withdrawal rates across  
13 first year sport degree programmes at an English post 1992 institution. The  
14 primary aim was to uncover the expectations, motivations, anticipated  
15 challenges and concerns of first year sports students who had recently  
16 enrolled at an English post 92 university. Findings will be used to ensure  
17 future teaching and learning strategies are most suitably aligned with the  
18 academic and social needs of newly arriving undergraduate sports students.

## 19 20 **Methodology**

### 21 22 **Participants**

23  
24 In October 2016, all incoming first year undergraduate sport students were  
25 invited to participate in the study. Once institutional ethical clearance was  
26 granted, an initial recruitment email briefly outlining the study aims,  
27 objectives and procedures to follow, along with participant information sheet  
28 and consent form were communicated by the first author via the online  
29 Blackboard portal. Prior to data collection, consenting participants were  
30 informed how they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without  
31 providing any reasoning and assigned numbers to protect anonymity. In total,  
32 334 of the 415 eligible participants completed the survey (80% cohort  
33 completion rate).

### 34 35 **Design and Analysis**

36  
37 The study design employed a quantitative approach. Specifically, the survey  
38 structure was developed by the research team and informed by previous HE  
39 transitional studies (e.g., Allin et al., 2017) which had identified various  
40 relatable variables and key demographics. The survey comprised 23  
41 questions, including a mix of yes or no, Likert scale and multiple answer  
42 response questions, had no correct or incorrect answers and was piloted with  
43 three second year sport undergraduate students. This established an  
44 approximate completion time of ten minutes, with all wording considered  
45 appropriate and understandable for a first-year undergraduate cohort.  
46 Participants provide responses to three separate sections addressing: (A)  
47 background demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity,

1 previous study experience and qualifications (B) motivations for attending and  
2 expectations of their university experience (C) perceived challenges and  
3 concerns of university life. The sections comprised mainly closed questions  
4 which were designed to ensure prompt and simple completion. Participants  
5 were able to rate their expectations, motivations, challenges and concerns on  
6 a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

## 7 8 **Procedure**

9  
10 Time was granted in teaching week five (mid October 2016) for participants  
11 to complete the survey in a generic sport module lecture delivered to all first-  
12 year sport programmes within the department. Participants were briefed to  
13 answer each section honestly and to leave any questions blank which they did  
14 not fully understand. All research team members attended the data collection  
15 session, distributed then collected completed hardcopies of surveys and  
16 responded to any participant queries.

## 17 18 **Results**

### 19 20 **Demographics**

21  
22 The findings showed that of the 334 respondents, 248 (74%) were male and  
23 86 (26%) were female. More specifically, 167 (50%) were from Sports  
24 Studies undergraduate programs comprising Sport Coaching, Sport  
25 Development with Coaching and Sport Management whilst 167 (50%) were  
26 from Sports Science undergraduate programs comprising Applied Sport and  
27 Exercise Science, Applied Sports Science with Coaching and Sport and  
28 Exercise Nutrition.

29  
30 From the overall sample, 293 students (88%) were aged 18-19, 29 (9%)  
31 were aged 20-21, 8 (2%) aged 22-25 and 3 (1%) aged between 26 and 34  
32 years. Of the sample, 292 (87%) identified themselves as White British. The  
33 remaining 42 students (13%) identified themselves as either Asian, Black or  
34 British African, Asian British/Pakistani, Mixed White and Black African or Mixed  
35 White and Black Caribbean. One hundred and thirty-six students (41%)  
36 indicated they had a close family member, either their mother, father, sister  
37 or brother, who had successfully completed an undergraduate degree  
38 education. Over half of the sample (59%) were the first in their immediate  
39 family to attend university.

40  
41 Two hundred students (60%) entered university directly from school sixth  
42 form, with 126 (38%) coming from a college and 6 (2%) from other  
43 educational routes (2%). At the time of data collection, 225 (67%) were living  
44 in student accommodation with 109 (33%) residing at home and commuting  
45 into university daily. Most students (82%) cited multiple reasons (more than  
46 3) for attending university. The main reason identified was that 'a degree was

1 necessary for their chosen career pathway', with 'to gain subject knowledge'  
2 and 'personal development' the next highest responses.

3  
4 For 303 students (91%), they were attending their preferred first choice  
5 destination of study. In total, 238 (71%) attended an open day at the  
6 institution, whilst 96 (29%) did not. Multiple reasons were cited as having  
7 positively influenced their open day experience. The most popular was  
8 'university facilities', with 'regional social scene' and 'employability rates of  
9 courses' the next highest responses. Prior to their arrival at university, many  
10 students (85%) had experience of competing at varying standards (e.g.,  
11 grassroots/community to semi-professional) across a range of team and  
12 individual sports, with football, athletics and netball most popular. Of all  
13 students, just under half (48%) intended to continue their sports participation  
14 by joining a university sports team.

## 15 16 **Student Expectations and Motivations**

17  
18 Multiple reasons were identified by all 344 students for what they hoped to  
19 gain from their university experience. The main two reasons identified were  
20 employability and enhanced quality of later life (see Table 1).

21  
22 **Table 1: Student Motives for Attending University**

23

What do you hope to gain from your university experience? (multiple responses permitted)	
Response	Student Agreement (n=334)
Employability	84%
Enhanced Quality of Later Life	71%
Expanding Subject Knowledge	69%
Friendships	68%
Personal Development	68%
Enjoyment	57%
Practical Experience	57%

## 24 25 **Anticipated Challenges and Concerns**

26  
27 When questioned about their greatest anticipated challenge upon entering  
28 university, students provided more academic rather than social examples. The  
29 most prevalent responses for academic challenges were 'balancing studies  
30 with work and coaching commitments' and 'managing university workload'.  
31 Next came concerns with 'completing summative assessments to required  
32 academic standards', 'understanding subject area sufficiently', 'keeping up to  
33 date with work' and 'simultaneously managing multiple assessments'. For  
34 social challenges, the most popular answers were 'concerns with not fitting  
35 in', 'settling' and 'making friends'. Next came 'being away from family, friends  
36 and pets', followed by 'failure to become more independent'.  
37

1 Students revealed their greatest concerns upon entering university to be  
 2 social rather than academic. The most frequent were identified as 'not fitting  
 3 in or making new friends', 'homesickness', 'getting to know the campus and  
 4 city surroundings' and 'maintaining a suitable student and athlete life  
 5 balance'. A small number of academic concerns were revealed, which included  
 6 'managing assessment workload', 'passing assessments' and 'course being too  
 7 academically challenging'.

8  
 9 When surveys were completed, 291 students (87%) felt they had 'settled'  
 10 since arriving at University, with 40 (12%) replying 'not yet settled' and 3  
 11 (1%) stating 'no'. Of the 291 who reported a positive transition, 242 (83%)  
 12 felt they had made friends with at least one fellow student on their degree  
 13 programme, 233 (77%) were happy with their course, 175 (60%) had  
 14 positive first impressions of academic staff but only 114 (39%) had yet to join  
 15 a university sports team.

### 16 17 **'Not Yet Settled' Students**

18  
 19 Of the 334 students, 40 (12%) identified as being 'not yet settled'. Of these  
 20 students, 85% were aged 18 or 19, 15% were non-white British, 48% were  
 21 first generation and 63% attended school 6th Form. **The majority (93%)  
 22 entered from BTec backgrounds, a vocationally based qualification with  
 23 specific career focus enabling students to gain skills and knowledge in their  
 24 subject area, then apply them in real-life and applied scenarios.** For 85%,  
 25 they were attending their first-choice destination to study. The primary reason  
 26 for nearly half (43%) to attend university was to increase future employment  
 27 opportunities, whilst 35% did not attend any open day event.

28  
 29 In total, 20% of students knew five or less fellow students enrolled at the  
 30 university on arrival and 40% between six and ten. **Furthermore,** 38% were  
 31 commuter students with 62% living in student accommodation. Interestingly,  
 32 80% were members of a grassroots sports team prior to their arrival at  
 33 university, but only 40% were keen to join a university sports team. Their  
 34 greatest perceived university challenge was academic (unable to pass  
 35 assessments) but greatest concern was social (not settling in)

36  
 37 **Table 2: Comparison of 'Settled' and 'Not Yet Settled' Student**  
 38 **Characteristics**

39

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Settled (n=294)</b>	<b>Not Yet Settled (n=40)</b>
<b>Aged 18-19</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Non-White British</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>First Generation</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>Commuter Student</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>First Choice Destination</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Open Day Attendance</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>65%</b>



## 1 Discussion

2  
3 This study arose in direct response to several years of high withdrawal rates  
4 across first year sport degree programmes at an English post 1992 institution.  
5 The primary study aim was to determine the expectations, motivations,  
6 anticipated challenges and concerns of newly arrived first year university  
7 sport students and to provide future recommendations for effective teaching  
8 and learning practice. It also explored further the perception undergraduate  
9 sport programmes now typically recruit a wide demographic of learners,  
10 including greater numbers from non-traditional, first generation and  
11 vocational backgrounds.

12  
13 Students in this study were highly motivated to enter HE by 'employability and  
14 future career aspirations', with 84% agreeing with this as something they  
15 hoped to gain from their university experience. The next highest response on  
16 what they hoped to gain was 'to enhance quality of later life' (71%) and may  
17 suggest that from a student perspective these two may be related. That is,  
18 they may reflect the dominant belief that a university education will lead to an  
19 advantage in earnings potential and betterment over a person's life (Barkas et  
20 al., 2019; O`Shea, et al., 2018). These motives towards employability and the  
21 belief in a graduate earnings premium are similar to those of Hall et al.,  
22 (2016) who examined the motives of sport coaching students across two  
23 large HE post 1992 institutions.

24  
25 Embedding of employability into the curriculum is central for universities in  
26 matching student expectations. However, given that the transition to  
27 graduate level employment also rests on available opportunities in the job  
28 market, it is also important to ensure students are aware of and experience  
29 additional benefits of a university education. Whilst recent statistics suggest  
30 that the median salary for a graduate is still higher than a non-graduate,  
31 there are differences across degree subjects, gender and ethnicity (Britton et  
32 al., 2016). Hall et al., (2016) also found their sport coaching students lacked a  
33 critical awareness around this and how graduate earnings may not be easily  
34 nor immediately attainable. It was reassuring to note that responses for  
35 'subject knowledge' (69%) and 'personal development' (68%) also rated high  
36 in student's hopes. Only 17% of students hoped to gain cross cultural and  
37 international awareness through coming to university. This may simply be a  
38 lack of knowledge around the potential of such opportunities as studying  
39 abroad or that it remains a focus for a minority of students.

40  
41 That 94% of those who attended an open day were positively influenced  
42 showed the value of these activities for prospective students. Results seemed  
43 to show that this highlighted the 'high-quality facilities' (e.g., teaching,  
44 campus, library, sport, accommodation) as well as the 'social scene' in the  
45 local area. A potential issue, however, was that 29% of students had not  
46 attended an open day prior to arriving at university. This raises questions as  
47 to how such students discover the full extent of opportunities available to  
48 them at university. It may be that this was gained through informal means

1 and other students, through outreach events or the website. Further research  
2 would be needed to establish the extent to which university marketing and  
3 student engagement activities reached this subset of students, or what  
4 influenced their university expectations.

5  
6 The cost of tuition fees as an influencer in the decision to attend university or  
7 not was mixed, with 38% responding unsure. However, almost one third of  
8 students agreed or strongly agreed that tuition fees had impacted their  
9 decision. This seems a smaller figure than Wilkins, Shams and Huismanhe  
10 (2013) who found financial issues were more important than 'institutional  
11 quality or reputation', as a consideration affecting study choices for sixth form  
12 students in England. However, it may be that most of these students, who  
13 have already made their choice to enter HE, may have reconciled tensions  
14 around tuition fees. There may also be different responses based on student  
15 background which would need further investigation. Wilkins et al., (2013)  
16 further cited increasing anxiety around financial issues for students of all  
17 backgrounds which universities need to be ready to support.

18  
19 Almost all the first-year sport students were full-time, and 88% were aged  
20 either 18 or 19 years old. The number of black and minority ethnicity (BAME),  
21 mature and part-time students was low and below institutional and Higher  
22 Education Statistics Agency benchmarks. Our findings revealed 38% entered  
23 HE direct from a further education college. Further analysis revealed that 93%  
24 of students had completed a BTec sport qualification (either at college or sixth  
25 form) with some having completed both A level and BTec qualifications and a  
26 small number having completed A Levels only.

27  
28 **The prevalence of such large student numbers arriving with BTec**  
29 **qualifications in sport, rather than A levels, exceeded staff perceptions and**  
30 **may reflect the changing admissions points criteria at the university, guidance**  
31 **from schools, explicit reference to employability skills in the BTec Sport**  
32 **programme handbook (Pearson.com, 2016) and/or the dominance of**  
33 **coursework over exams in these types of qualifications. The implications of**  
34 **this, however, point to the need to consider the previous experiences of such**  
35 **students around class sizes, staff to student ratios and summative assessment**  
36 **processes, which may be different to what they are about to experience at**  
37 **university.**

38  
39 Findings revealed that 33% of sport students lived at home and commuted  
40 daily into university. Whilst many of these 'commuters' live relatively locally to  
41 the campus, this evidently has implications for their ability to form community  
42 groups associated with accommodations, and hence potential marginalisation  
43 (Berger, 1997). This means that attention needs to be focussed on how best  
44 to ensure this group can integrate fully and happily into student life in other  
45 ways. In addition to this, over half of the sample (59%) were the first in their  
46 immediate family to attend university. This confirms that a large group of  
47 modern-day sports students are 'first generation' and hence may not benefit  
48 from informal transmission within the family of what university life is like.

1 As previously identified by Allin et al., (2017), students revealed both  
2 academic and social aspects as challenges and concerns in the transition to  
3 university life. However, these were expressed in different ways. The highest  
4 number of responses to greatest challenges upon entering university were  
5 academic-related (65%), including getting to grips with assessment  
6 requirements, engaging with the course, managing workload, completing  
7 assessments to required academic standard, understanding subject  
8 knowledge and dealing with exams. Social challenges (35%) were related to  
9 being away from home, missing pets or family, settling in and being  
10 independent. In contrast, the highest number of student concerns (60%)  
11 related to the social elements around fitting in and making friends, with 28%  
12 of total responses referring to academic concerns, predominantly around  
13 assessments.

14  
15 When considering these findings, we believe academic challenge to be partly  
16 advantageous for students as they are entering an academic degree  
17 programme. However, the high number of responses relating to assessments  
18 and workloads echoes suggestions by Fahrat et al., (2017) that students may  
19 be feeling underprepared and suggests the need to reassure and scaffold  
20 students appropriately, particularly those unfamiliar with the type of  
21 assessments that they will encounter. The dominance of social concerns  
22 around fitting in reflects the findings of Wilcox et al., (2005) and Thomas  
23 (2012), thus reinforcing the need for universities to recognise the significance  
24 of this for students in transition, and the support needed in terms of early and  
25 frequent opportunities to mix and build relationships with a variety of staff  
26 and peers.

27  
28 The significance of sport to sport student's social integration and their  
29 identities, previously highlighted in Allin et al., (2017), is also reinforced in  
30 this study with the finding that 85% were members of a sports team prior to  
31 arriving at university. This is perhaps unsurprising, as sport participation most  
32 likely reflects their subject interest and motivation to study in this area.  
33 However, just under half (48%) intended to continue their sports participation  
34 by joining university sports teams. Given the knowledge that sport can help to  
35 establish friendships, the implications here need to be taken seriously to ease  
36 a successful transition and support a healthy and active sport student  
37 lifestyle. This could be in finding ways to build practical competitive and  
38 recreational activities in and around the curriculum, involving both staff and  
39 students, and encouraging an ongoing sense of connection with sport,  
40 whether in the same or new sporting environment.

## 41 **The Issue of 'Not Yet Settled' Students**

42  
43  
44 Overall, there was little difference between 'settled' and 'not yet settled'  
45 student demographics. However, closer inspection suggests there were  
46 slightly more commuter students and BAME students and that across the 'not  
47 yet settled' group, a higher proportion knew fewer peers when compared to  
48 'settled' students. We therefore suggest that these intersecting factors

1 increased their chances of having a more difficult time in settling into  
2 university life. This supports other research that highlights more issues in  
3 transition for less traditional and minority student groups (Tinto, 2012) and  
4 the need to pay attention to such students and their specific needs.

## 6 **Recommendations for Teaching and Learning Practice**

8 Based on the study findings, the following recommendations for academics,  
9 educational developers and senior management teams are proposed.

### 11 **Employability and Professional Skills**

13 The embedding of employability is common within post 1992 university  
14 strategies and many publications and case studies exist on this (see Norton &  
15 Dalrymple, 2020). Yet, given the multiple meanings of 'employability' itself  
16 (Watts, 2006), we suggest that it is important to discuss with students from  
17 the outset of their degree programme what employability means, and where  
18 they are in terms of having the skills, understanding, competences and  
19 attributes to be successful. Universities should also understand the career  
20 aspirations of students and if they stay the same or change through their HE  
21 journeys. Through this, we can ensure effective workplace learning, skills and  
22 career readiness are embedded in a way that reflects the changing nature of  
23 employment and includes a range of experiences which are authentic to a  
24 range of graduate employment situations (Hall et al., 2016; Helyer & Lee,  
25 2014). This involves developing generic transferable skills as well as those  
26 specific to sport occupations.

28 Employability can also be embedded through authentic assessments, which  
29 may include live projects or collaborative initiatives across industry, which as  
30 students' progress, require synthesis and critical thought. Ultimately, as Watts  
31 (2006, p.6) highlights, a concern of universities should be 'not just with good  
32 academic practices but with promoting the goals of employability through  
33 such practices'. Moreover, Knight and Yorke (2004) note that employability  
34 needs to be sustainable and not only linked to the obtaining of a student's  
35 first job after graduating. Showing students how employability relates to  
36 growth, self-reflection and self-efficacy can link to students' personal  
37 development goals and help them develop or retain a sense of agency within  
38 competitive job markets. Many students from the sport degrees in this paper,  
39 for example, have gone on to create their own successful businesses,  
40 highlighting the importance of developing enterprise and entrepreneurship  
41 skills (Norton & Dalrymple, 2020).

43 Other ways to open student eyes to opportunities can involve creating  
44 employability stories, from both guest lecturer employers and alumni, so that  
45 students can see the progression of former students and the range of  
46 graduate jobs that can be achieved in a way that is real and relevant to them.  
47 Taking ongoing opportunities for interactions with alumni can ensure they

1 remain engaged and connected to their degree programme and support  
2 future graduates.

### 3 4 **Social Integration**

5  
6 With social integration highest on the list of student concerns, we propose  
7 this as the priority area across the first year. Induction or 'Welcome Weeks'  
8 should be just that, providing positive first impressions and opportunities to  
9 meet peers and staff in a welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment.  
10 For sport students, drawing on a shared sense of sport enjoyment is  
11 recommended. This may be best achieved through including an inclusive  
12 range of sporting or recreational activities - including less traditional pursuits  
13 such as indoor climbing, teambuilding and/or multi-skill activities - ideally over  
14 an intensive shared period of time to encourage relationship building. The aim  
15 should be to involve academic staff to help develop a sense of identity outside  
16 the formal curriculum. As the course develops, social events (e.g., away days,  
17 team quizzes) or opportunities to watch and play sport can be advertised,  
18 alongside opportunities for practical sports involvement within and outside of  
19 both curriculum/taught modules. Whilst this might seem an onerous addition  
20 for course teams to consider, it can also promote considerable fun and  
21 enjoyment for both sides which can potentially be positive for both staff and  
22 student sense of well-being.

23  
24 Our previous research suggested commuter students can miss out on social  
25 groups which revolve around accommodation (Allin et al., 2017), so the  
26 creation of course social media platforms may help prospective sport students  
27 seek out and develop connections prior to their arrival. Considering the  
28 timings of modules to reduce gaps between lectures may encourage these  
29 students to stay on campus longer to meet peers after classes, and the use of  
30 small group teaching can help students feel valued, understood and part of  
31 university life from day one. More workshop style teaching can enhance  
32 sociability, build reading, research, writing habits and ease the transition to  
33 independent learning. Ensuring sessions are likely timetabled within open-plan  
34 settings with information technology facilities available is strongly  
35 recommended, although it is recognised that many universities may not have  
36 ideal teaching spaces for group-based learning. But with imagination,  
37 students can work together in a multitude of environments - even outside!

### 38 39 **Academic Integration**

40  
41 A key study finding was that sport students perceived the academic  
42 requirements of transitioning to university, particularly summative  
43 assessments, to be challenging (and in some cases, concerning). **This**  
44 **highlights the importance for providing early and clear information around the**  
45 **different types of assessment likely to be faced, how they may differ from**  
46 **student prior experiences, especially from the BTEC qualification process, but**  
47 **how they are achievable. Showcasing examples of a range of assessment**

1 types with top tips from second and third year peers would be useful so they  
2 can see where they can apply their strengths as well as a realistic appraisal of  
3 challenges.

4  
5 It is easy to forget in the move to electronic submission, that students may  
6 not be clear on when/how to submit electronically and these can be  
7 unnecessary stressors which are easily removed. Support on planning  
8 assessments can also be provided early on. Although reading through drafts is  
9 not permitted, one practice in a first semester, first year module in the sport  
10 degrees in this paper has involved personal tutors supporting the planning  
11 and writing of the first essay to be summatively assessed, giving feedback on  
12 an initial draft which is submitted and clear practical indication of the standard  
13 required prior to a final submission of the same piece of (improved) work.

14  
15 Regular formative assessment can both reassure students on an individual  
16 basis and help them understand where they are and where they need to be,  
17 thus minimising the assessment gap in expectations, and showing clearly how  
18 to improve for future work. Given that the early stages of university transition  
19 can be a particularly sensitive time for students, we believe it is important to  
20 provide additional academic and personal guidance to ensure they have  
21 accurate expectations and feel suitably confident, connected, prepared and  
22 supported. Ensuring academic staff are freely available to field questions and  
23 offer clear, accurate and consistent information during semester one is  
24 recommended. Peer assisted learning schemes are further examples of good  
25 practice and opportunities for students to ask questions.

26  
27 Although the use of Panopto in HE may be controversial (Bos, Groenveld,  
28 Bruggen & Brand-Gruwel, 2016), using it to video record assessment sessions  
29 may reassure students that they have not missed essential information.  
30 Current evidence is divided as to whether recording lectures positively  
31 influences learning (Draper, Gibbon & Thomas, 2018 ), but for those students  
32 who may take longer to digest information, who may want to review their  
33 understanding, or who may unavoidably miss an assessment session, they  
34 can provide a valuable inclusive support mechanism.

## 35 36 **Staff Development and Students as Partners**

37  
38 Many of our recommendations are for staff and management in terms of  
39 suggestions and examples of useful practice. However, many staff may need  
40 further development in terms of fully appreciating the role they can play in  
41 the successful transition of this profile of students. A useful approach may be  
42 to provide targeted professional development activities for academic staff to  
43 develop explicit awareness around their roles as personal tutors, which extend  
44 beyond the traditional view of seeing students only when issues arise (Yale,  
45 2019).

46  
47 The ability of tutors to build positive relationships with their personal tutees  
48 has important implications across the university years, particularly if they

1 remain with the same students throughout their entire university journey. In  
2 this way, they will not only play a leading role in supporting students' career  
3 development, but such relations can lay the foundation for working with  
4 students across all levels, encouraging them to become peer mentors or  
5 working with them as partners in ensuring that future first year students are  
6 well supported to meet challenges and have their concerns addressed.

## 7 8 **Future Research and Limitations**

9  
10 This paper is derived from survey data, which relies on both the way  
11 questions are presented and student interpretations for response. For some  
12 questions, students could provide multiple responses, thus making it more  
13 difficult to identify the most salient features. Given the importance of  
14 employability in their answers, it would also have been useful to have  
15 interviewed a number of both 'settled' and 'not yet settled' students to  
16 unearth more on motivating factors for sport students and how they view  
17 using their sport degree in future career aspirations. This survey has however  
18 opened several further questions around student hopes for a university  
19 education, which may be applicable or different across subject choices.  
20 Examples include: what does success at university look like to them? do they  
21 believe that a university experience is valuable, beyond employability? how  
22 much does academic study really matter to them and how important is it that  
23 they continue to play and involve themselves in sport?

## 24 25 **Conclusions**

26  
27 This study provides a timely insight into the nature and profiles of modern-  
28 day university sport students with potential implications for other degree  
29 subjects. Important key findings were the shift towards vocational entry  
30 qualifications (e.g., BTec), the heavy emphasis around employability and  
31 career prospects and the key expectations, challenges and concerns around  
32 their social and academic needs. Theoretically, some study findings closely  
33 resemble key principles of Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984). Broadly  
34 speaking, this theory implies how the more students feel academically and  
35 socially involved, then the better their overall learning experience will be.  
36 Therefore, 'involved' students in this study would be reflective of those who  
37 spend greater amounts of time studying, feel more confident and settled in  
38 their new surroundings, interact more frequently with peers and actively  
39 participate in student organizations and activities. Alternatively, the  
40 'uninvolved' students would be categorised as those who expressed greater  
41 concerns or challenges towards their university transition, spend less time on  
42 campus, withheld from extracurricular activities, struggled with or neglected  
43 their studies and rarely initiated contact with academic staff and other  
44 students (Astin, 1984).

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### 38 39 **Authors' Disclosure Statement**

40  
41 All materials included in the article represent the authors' own work and  
42 anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list.

43  
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46  
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