

B7. Sustaining sports development: A new phase

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Sports Development as a field of study is the outcome of the diversification of UK physical education and leisure management programmes in the 1990s. The proliferation of the subject in UK Higher Education Institutions can be explained by the growth of the 'active leisure' sector of the UK economy, which has been boosted by the Government's commitment to deploying the 'power of sport' as a social intervention. This commitment can be traced back to the Deputy Prime Minister's Policy Action Teams (PATs) of the late 1990s, particularly PAT 10 the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: The Contribution of Sport and the Arts*. (DCMS 1999)

From this point onwards, a wide range of government departments began to recognise the contribution of sport to fiscal and social economies, and also its value in relation to community development and sustainability agendas. Subsequently, the policy initiatives of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2002); the Department of Trade and Industry (2002); the Department of Health (2002); the Home Office (2003; 2004); the Department for Education and Skills (2003) as well as the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2001; 2002; 2002a; 2003; 2004) have helped to raise the profile of sports development as a practice and potential profession.

The consequent growth of 'sports development officers' working in community and neighbourhood settings is reflected in the establishment of Sports Development as a legitimate field of study in higher education. To a certain extent the field is underpinned by applied social science and management theory inherited from its predecessors, however a genuine challenge for Sports Development programmes is to find ways of embracing the principles of sustainability and empowerment that are now beginning to characterise work in the sector. Increasingly, the *modus operandi* of sports development workers is 'enabling' or 'facilitation' through partnership working, rather than direct delivery of sports or physical activity interventions.

At the University of Gloucestershire, teaching staff have been attempting to generate a curriculum that connects directly with these issues, while at the same time trying to create an active environment for learning. Rather than devise teaching-led solutions, staff have instead created a vehicle for learning that enables students directly to experience community development work. A student-owned company, PhASE (Physical Activity and Sport Enterprise), now operates as a delivery agency in the local social economy. In addition to interaction and trade with the sector, the PhASE programme empowers students to allowing them to take control over planning and strategy, and offers them a greater stake in course management and curriculum development.

Aims

PhASE was established by graduating students at the University of Gloucestershire in 2006 as a voluntary association. The rules of PhASE are published (PhASE (2006), and include the following mission:

To sustain and develop a venture that provides community opportunities in sport and physical activities while developing the skills, knowledge and experience of students at the University of Gloucestershire.

PhASE is a one-member, one-vote organisation, based on the principles of social enterprise. Members run sports and physical activity interventions in community settings, with an emphasis on social inclusion and equity. Some profitable enterprise may be pursued by PhASE where it enables the cross-subsidy of other more appropriate or financially challenging projects.

An elected Board of Directors has strategic and operational authority, and oversees projects that are run by learning sets at Level 2 of the current BSc Sports Development programme at the University. Students are therefore able to deploy and develop a range of subject-specific and transferable skills as they progress through their degree. For some, the focus will be on management or strategic awareness (for example, of the role played by the project in sustaining local communities), for others the emphasis will be on more micro-level, operational skills of value in a wide variety of commercial, governmental and voluntary settings. Others may, in time, come to see PhASE as an alternative set of lenses through which to view organisational politics and citizenship, and therefore as a basis for critical analysis.

Rationale

PhASE was initiated for a number of reasons. While the needs of the active leisure sector were of some importance, educational factors were also of concern. Sports and leisure courses have, for twenty years or more, demonstrated a commitment to placement and experiential learning. However, placements in industry settings have tended to be associated with essentially submissive roles, offering students limited decision-making ability or responsibility. Neighbourhood and community settings have, meanwhile, often lacked the human resource infrastructure to support students hoping to make an impact. Despite course rhetoric to the contrary, placements in sport and leisure have rarely offered students the levels of independence and authority that Baxter Magolda (1994; 1996) and others claim are necessary for epistemological development.

In response to these issues, PhASE began its life as a proposal by staff and students in 2003. It was given real impetus however by the META project, a demonstration initiative funded by the UK's Higher Education Academy, which embraced the project and provided financial capital. The rules were finally published in the summer of 2006 with the agreement of staff and students on the programme. This followed the successful validation of a new version of the BSc Sports Development degree, which was significant in two key respects. Firstly, the new degree incorporated experiential modules, in which students created proposals for community events or interventions and then carried them out under the auspices of PhASE. Secondly, and perhaps more controversially, the powers of PhASE to accept, reject or refine proposals were enshrined within the Validation Document.

PhASE has therefore been devised to enhance sustainability and sustainable development in a number of respects, which students both experience in an abstract sense, and drive forward practically. Firstly, the business itself should sustain itself in terms of human and financial capital, as long as it remains an attractive proposition for students. Secondly, the community impact of PhASE can be sustained because the enterprise can repeat events or interventions on an annual basis, or choose to adopt certain activities as its core business. Thirdly, PhASE is explicitly committed to social inclusion, equity and community development. Fourthly, PhASE is accountable as a social institution. It has a democratic foundation and can, it is hoped, support students in their development as active citizens.

How the activity has been implemented

PhASE has enjoyed several distinct periods of development. The first related to the initial development of the idea and the involvement of a range of stakeholders in refining the concept and contributing to its objectification through the publication of the PhASE Rules. Although staff, external consultants and members of the META team have been involved at this stage, it is important to emphasise the role that students have played in this context. Two successive sets of graduating students devised and published the Rules, utilising staff and university resources but always having the final say. These students were not selected by staff; they volunteered for the task having completed modules that examined sports careers and organisations.

The second concerned negotiations between PhASE and the University to secure effective operational relations. Questions of ownership, insurance and indemnity were resolved at this stage. The establishment of PhASE as a voluntary association rather than a registered company limited risks to both the students and the University. The third stage concerned the adaptation of course structures and module descriptors to accommodate PhASE. This was achieved through the validation of a new BSc Sports Development in 2005.

The fourth stage was essentially operational, establishing the first Board of Directors and allocating staff to run the related modules and to take responsibility for liaising with the PhASE Board. PhASE is now fully operational, and committed to an evaluation strategy which will seek the views of students and contributing staff on a regular basis.

Sustainability focus

PhASE has been designed to encourage students to consider social and economic sustainability in the context of the role of sport in community development. A pre-requisite of the PhASE experiential modules is a unit entitled *Sport and Social Inclusion*, which examines the contributions of sport to sustainability agendas. PhASE enables students to experience these agendas directly, and to make informed decisions that can positively influence community and personal wellbeing.

The PhASE Board of Directors are regularly faced with decisions related to sustainability. Prioritising some initiatives over others, funding some projects and not others, and advising groups on the development of their

proposals, all involve student interaction and negotiation over the nature of sustainable interventions, enhancing their skills and understandings of challenging concepts.

Active learning

PhASE is an active, trading, legal enterprise. PhASE members are engaged with a variety of live projects, typically involving the delivery of sport or play activities to specified neighbourhoods or communities. In order to manage these activities successfully, PhASE members – sometimes individuals and sometimes through the PhASE Board – have to liaise with other external agencies. This liaison can sometimes take the form of negotiation over timing, location, product or price.

Most PhASE activity is associated with experiential modules on the BSc Sports Development programme. These modules allow for the assessment of students in relation to planning, reflection, practice and evaluation.

Feedback

Feedback from graduating students who experienced PhASE has been very positive. Students enjoyed the live nature of the activity and to took pleasure in the opportunities and, perhaps surprisingly, the risks associated with such a project. As one student recalled:

This is the only module where I can remember punching the air in celebration before I got my mark back. We managed to negotiate a major deal with the owners of a stadium so that we could run our event. It felt like a real achievement.

An interview-based student evaluation of the experiences of Board members revealed enthusiasm for the experiential nature of the project, contrasting PhASE with other more 'delivery'-focused modules:

There are so many modules where we are guided by the lecturers so I think to do something different, to figure things out for ourselves, work in a group and make our own decisions rather than being told exactly what we are going to do...I think it's a really good idea.

This experience is just as important to my learning as being in a lecture or seminar. We can do what we want within reason so we

decide on our own learning. It's a particularly important part of my course.

I think PhASE is a brilliant experience. I think it is one of the most beneficial things I will take away from University because I am currently doing sports development work on a daily basis. That's the problem with university, so much of it is theory based. Until you get and do it you don't know how much you actually know. PhASE is just a big interactive experience. I don't think we are necessarily learning anything new but we are gaining through the experiences that will help us so much in the future.

Board members continually emphasised the point that they considered the actualisation or application of knowledge to be the key to their learning in this context. Although PhASE rarely introduced the members to new concepts or ideas, it did enable them to engage directly with those concepts, to confront them and to work with them. In some instances, it helped students to understand the value of the knowledge that their course had been trying – arguably unsuccessfully – to impart.

I've started to look for ideas now. Rather than wait for lecturers to say 'read this, read that', I've realised that there are times when I can search out books and journal articles that can help me to my job better or to understand what's going on and why people act in a particular way.

The confidence of students on the Board appears to have been increased by the position taken up by staff in relation to PhASE. Rather than seek to guide the Board on a daily or weekly basis, staff chose an empowering strategy, essentially waiting in the wings in a consultancy mode. Students appeared to appreciate this 'distancing':

We don't want it to go completely wrong, so I do think it's good that we have got them there just in case, but they have never told us that we can't do anything or tried to change what we do, so I think that's good.

It surprises me every meeting, as this goes along, how free we are to do what we want. They've never said to us, 'You can't do this'. We have asked them for advice and when we have done they have

been helpful, but even when we've chosen not to take their advice they have been fine with that. It's gone where they would have wanted and they've been quite excited about what we have done and pleasantly surprised. There is a support system and I think if anything went wrong they would pick up the ball and get it back on track.

In terms of the ability of PhASE to empower students, several Board members commented on their increasing confidence:

Putting my ideas across I have improved, and being able to fight my own corner, because sometimes it can be quite difficult to make everyone see that what you're saying is right and make other people accept it.

I wouldn't say that communication is one of my strong points but it is something that I could improve on which has helped me to become more confident as well.

This confidence appears to manifest itself most clearly in relation to communications between staff and students:

I feel the experience has enabled us to speak more openly to staff and it's a bit easier to approach them. I think staff have started to acknowledge me because I'm a member of PhASE.

I think just being around the office a lot more you get to know more of the tutors. You know how far to go and what is expected of you, especially in the office, and you learn how to approach staff.

It has also enabled staff to understand how to approach us. With our different capabilities and personalities maybe it can be difficult to know how to approach a student sometimes, but we have developed friendships a little bit so it is easier to talk to us.

While these observations suggest that PhASE is becoming an effective learning mechanism, there are many aspects of the enterprise that are yet to be analysed and evaluated.

Strengths and weaknesses

PhASE evaluations have so far focused predominantly on the experiences of Board members. The 'workers', those members of PhASE who are charged with delivering initiatives and interventions, are yet to be heard. Whether their experiences are as positive is open to question. Equally, the voices of academic staff have not yet formally been considered. While it is clear that some staff have welcomed PhASE and embraced the core principles, it may be that others are more reticent – and possibly with good reason.

The evaluations of external stakeholders will also need to be gathered before a rounded view of the successes of PhASE can be concluded. These evaluations will be the focus of future publications, and will be tracked on the PhASE website (PhASE, 2006) in the coming years.

Programmes

PhASE membership is currently open to BSc Sports Development, BSc Sport Education and FDA Sports Development and Coaching pathways at the University of Gloucestershire. PhASE experiential modules are hosted by the BSc Sports Development programme.

Key words:

Sports; social enterprise; empowerment; community

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