**UniSport submission to the Australian Universities Accord**

**April 2023**

**Introduction**

UniSport welcomes the opportunity to make this submission in response to the Australia Universities Accord Discussion Paper. As the peak body for sport in the tertiary education sector in Australia, we work in partnership with universities to drive student success by demonstrating the value of sport through evidence-based advocacy and providing participation and competition programs locally, nationally and internationally. Together with our 42 member institutions across Australia, we are seeking to increase the understanding of the value of sport, not just for the Universities, but for the broader community for whom each successful graduate will play an important part.

Universities have long understood the importance of a vibrant campus life. From recruitment and retention to research and results, the more connected a student body feels to its University, the more successful they will be. From around the world we are seeing an increasing body of evidence that suggests that University sport plays a key role in driving these student outcomes.

UniSport’s four-year Strategic Plan outlines a bold program of credible research projects and partnerships that will allow us to articulate the benefit of sport, through the delivery of participation and competition programs locally and internationally, and through a relentless focus on delivering value to our members. UniSport’s mission is to be an integral partner to Australian Universities in their quest for educational excellence.

This position gives us a unique perspective on the potential for sport to contribute to excellence in Australia’s University sector.

**What do we mean by “sport”?**

Sport in this sense, enjoys a broad definition. It includes recreation as well as activity, and comprises all of the physical-exertion based extra-curricular clubs and formal activities that students engage in under the umbrella of their university. For some students, that means seeking the opportunity to represent their university in competition, others prefer no competitive element. However a student chooses to engage, this social engagement yields results that enhance the research and learning ambition of the university.

Our definition of sport also encompasses;

* the countless hours of volunteer work undertaken by students in managing the clubs and events – experience that is translating to better graduate outcomes for them,
* the outstanding physical assets that universities provide to students, staff and the community, and
* the related opportunities for engagement with the broader community which build the university’s reputation.

While a student’s decision to choose a particular university is based most heavily upon the academic offering and reputation, once enrolled, that student’s success is influenced by a range of factors which make up their experience. Part of this Student Experience is what occurs in and around their classroom learning, but the evidence suggests that the non-academic part of their student life is potentially equally important in influencing their success.

This is where sport can help universities create the optimal environment for student success.

Sport, in its broadest sense, contributes to this sense of connection that students and staff have to their university, and this is being seen in student well-being, engagement and retention, graduate outcomes, employability and the reputation of the university.

**Question 4: Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australia higher education be focused on meeting?**

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, most Australians will experience loneliness at some point in their lives[[1]](#endnote-1). An estimated 1 in 3 (33%) Australians reported an episode of loneliness between 2001 and 2009, with 40% of these people experiencing more than 1 episode, according to a study of loneliness using data from the longitudinal Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey[[2]](#endnote-2).

In surveys undertaken since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, just over half (54%) of respondents reported that they felt more lonely since the start of the pandemic[[3]](#endnote-3).

In its longitudinal study, COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey Program conducted by the Australian National University, found the largest proportion of people who had experienced the highest levels of loneliness 'most of the time' and 'occasionally' during the past week were 18–24-year-olds in the 4 analysed months (i.e. April 2020, August 2020, April 2021 and August 2021). Young people were more likely than other age groups to have felt higher levels of loneliness throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local and international research is showing us that connectedness, and a sense of belonging, is producing students who feel better, who do better, and who maintain lasting attachments to their university beyond their graduation. It is the experience these students have as a whole – their learning, their social engagement, the memories and friendships they build – that contributes to their well-being.

There is a growing body of work internationally that demonstrates that mental well-being, physical activity and student engagement point directly to better academic outcomes. A University of South Australia study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine (Feb 2023) surveyed nearly 130,000 participants and found that physical activity is 1.5 times more effective in managing depression than counselling or leading medications.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The challenge is to advocate to all Universities the importance of sport and campus engagement for all students as a responsibility to produce well rounded, and socially engaged graduates. There is clearly an opportunity for the university sector to contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of the 18–24-year-old age group, but also for this work to have a double benefit of producing better academic outcomes for these students. This virtuous cycle demonstrates a significant advantage in understanding the factors behind student engagement.

**Question 5: How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia’s ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change?**

UTSActive’s work with Commencing Student Attrition among all students at the University of Technology Sydney considers the link between students who are members of a university club at Census date, and those who are not. Over recent years, the data has demonstrated a startling correlation – students who are not members of a club, are approximately seven times more likely to withdraw from their course of study. While not a direct causative link, the trend has highlighted an opportunity for greater understanding of what drives and influences student behaviours, particularly with regard to this critical strategic objective of universities.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Research out of Sheffield Hallam University in England has calculated that £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates an economic and social return of £3.91.[[6]](#endnote-6) Australian universities and their students and future students would benefit from an equivalent study being undertaken in Australia.

Sport Departments and Student Wellbeing services need to work together to proactively encourage student participation in campus sport and activities. Universities should be focused on prevention rather than reacting to the growing mental health concerns of the student populations.

Furthermore, placing more emphasis on the student experience (away from academics) should be a compulsory part any undergraduate degree. For instance, Bond University have a compulsory Beyond Bond program, whereby students must attain 100 points to graduate, where points are awarded from internal engagement in clubs/sport and also through external engagement. Making such activities compulsory for all students ensures universities are taking a responsibility to develop the whole student and not just academic skills.

**Question 6: What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding?**

We know that lack of physical activity is a global issue. The World Health Organization calls it a 'disaster in slow motion'. The link between mental well-being and physical activity is well-established, Australian universities such as University of South Australia are producing world-class research on the subject.

Physical activity has such a broad range of physical and mental health benefits. "Being more physically active can lead to better sleep patterns, which leads to more energy, which helps with concentration, which can prevent the onset of mental health problems or help people with diagnosed mental disorders achieve better treatment outcomes." [[7]](#endnote-7)

“Numerous studies have shown that people who exercise regularly experience fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who do not exercise regularly. Trials have also shown that regular exercise of moderate intensity can be an effective adjunctive treatment by itself for both melancholic and non-melancholic depression.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

This link is increasingly apparent among students and there is a growing body of work internationally that demonstrates that mental well-being, physical activity and student engagement point directly to better academic outcomes.

“Active college students enjoy better health and are happier than their inactive peers. College represents a key period to engage and influence numerous health behaviors among young adults, and the role that physical activity can play in improving both physical and mental well-being should not be overlooked by third-level institutions as they seek to improve student well-being.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

The same relationship has been identified and researched internationally. James Fitzsimmons, Director Fitness and Recreation Sports at the University of Nevada has identified an explicit link.

"What we know is students who exercise regularly - at least 3 times a week - at an intensity of eight times resting (7.9 METS) graduate at higher rates, and earn, on average, a full GPA point higher than their counterparts who do not exercise."[[10]](#endnote-10)

Research undertaken by Ishihara et al (2019) identified a relationship between academic performance and sport participation. In addition, they found that students who quit sports activities was related to poor academic performance. Therefore, improved student retention and academic performance may be an outcome of student engagement in sport and perhaps other extra-curricular activities.

(Ishihara, T et, al (2020). *Relationship of participation in specific sports to academic performance in adolescents: A 2-year longitudinal study.* Journal Medicine and Science in Sport, 30: (p. 1471-1482)

**Question 8: What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?**

In a 2017 study of British university students which received responses from 104 different Higher Education Institutions, respondents who were actively engaged in physical activity rated themselves more highly on a range of skills associated with employability – notably teamwork and drive. The majority of these respondents engaged in their sport at university, and the sports ranged from mainstream competitive sports to more niche activities such as quidditch and korfball.

This study concluded a clear association between activity levels in students and personal wellbeing, mental wellbeing, social inclusion and perceptions of attainment and employability.[[11]](#endnote-11)

This complements a study coming out of Sheffield Hallam University in 2017 that involved primary research with graduates, employers and university senior executives. The research found that engagement in sport was viewed as a sound investment from the perspectives of all three groups, with examples highlighting how sport provided ‘added value’ beyond subject-specific qualifications.[[12]](#endnote-12)

British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS) November 2020 position statement THE VALUE OF UNIVERSITY SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY[[13]](#endnote-13) found that a positive correlation between sport and earnings that cannot be explained by level of education. A similar salary relationship was also found in the graduate survey with graduates participating in sport earning more than those that did no university sport. In addition, those who were also involved in voluntary and management roles through sport, were 21% less likely to have been unemployed than all other groups.

Sport can help universities continue their valuable role in leading social change, particularly in reference to closing the gender gap in business.

The link between sport and career success for women, is being noted by organisations such as Ernst and Young and espnW, in their document “Where will you find your next leader?”. Universities which encourage and facilitate participation in sport by female students can multiply the impact of existing programs that address systemic disadvantage for women.

The foundation laid by sport participation is critical to women’s success in their careers. A United Nations report points out that “the participation of women and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In particular, women in sport leadership can shape attitudes towards women’s capabilities as leaders and decision-makers, especially in traditional male domains.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Participation in sport and campus activities potentially links to development of in demand skills that reflect in modern education graduate outcomes. “Prospective employers have always expected b-school graduates to possess a certain set of skills, such as strategic thinking and problem-solving abilities. Today, employers are looking for even more—technical expertise paired with interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. So-called ‘soft skills’ like resilience, teamwork, and adaptability are in high demand among employers, says Sarah Ranchev-Hale, Imperial College Business School’s assistant director of careers. ‘The technical skills you can learn on the job or in school, but the soft skills are more challenging to get right,’ she says.” *(*[*https://www.mba.com/articles-and-announcements/articles/your-career-path/what-do-employers-want-from-business-grads*](https://www.mba.com/articles-and-announcements/articles/your-career-path/what-do-employers-want-from-business-grads)*)*

**Question 15: What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?**

**Question 16: What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?**

**Question 29: What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?**

Universities across Australia and internationally are seeking to assess the impact of sport on a student’s academic outcomes. La Trobe University’s studies reflect a 10% higher Weighted Average Mark for students engaged in university sport – at any level – than for those whose engagement with the university is limited to academics only.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Assistant Professor Jana Bowden, Chair of Ethics at the Macquarie University Business School has articulated the danger for universities with declining engagement.

“This is troubling because unlike student dissatisfaction, which is often vocally expressed, disengagement is an insidious, silent crisis. Disengaged students are dispirited and withdraw from university life. They are apathetic and uninvolved.

Worse still, they are invisible. They don’t turn up. They don’t interact. They are inoperative and if given a chance to opt out of learning and university life, they take it.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Question 28: What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?**

**Question 30: How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?**

**Question 32: How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education systems, including the use of remote learning?**

**Question 33: What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?**

The National Indigenous Tertiary Education Student Games (NITESG) began in 1996 as a joint class project between thirteen students enrolled in a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies (Community Recreation) at the then Wollotuka School for Aboriginal Studies, at The University of Newcastle.

The first Games involved approximately 30 students. The event, a key celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, is now referred to as Indigenous Nationals. It has grown to host hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students from universities all around Australia and is a demonstration of sport’s ability to initiate new communications networks within and between students groups, and to reinforce identity through positive role models.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Similarly, there is evidence that sport plays a valuable role in engagement for students from other under-represented groups. At James Cook University, 26% of students come from low socio-economic or disadvantaged backgrounds, making it one of the highest proportion of students among Australian universities. A recent survey of students found that approximately 80% of students who sign up for Social Sport on campus do so for physical activity and 73% for continual engagement with friends, and more than 86% of respondents believe that interfaculty sport enhances their university experience.[[18]](#endnote-18)

As a result of participation in the Aon Uni7s Series the University of Canberra has seen an increase of successful recruitment in regional NSW.[[19]](#endnote-19)

As universities seek to develop and demonstrate participation among less-represented groups, university sport offers innovative avenues for engagement to complement academic and social support programs.

Impacts of Covid-19 from 2020 saw concerns heightened in the broader community about the level of engagement of international students with Australian society. While many universities have sought to create environments where these students can connect and thrive, sport does offer an opportunity to increase this level of engagement.

Learn to Swim programs targeted specifically at International students have had success in several universities, with high uptake and completion rates.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Sporting programs designed specifically to engage international students may offer the university an opportunity to get ahead of this scrutiny, but also to increase engagement amongst other under-represented student groups, particularly those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

**Recommendations**

1. **Lead sector-wide research into the link between sport and student success to:**
   1. **quantify the economic return that universities can expect from an investment in sport**
   2. **understand the link between participation in university sport and graduate outcomes**
   3. **understand the relationship between sport and student academic success**
   4. **understand the potential for sport to assist universities in removing barriers to participation and in better supporting students from under-represented groups in higher education**
   5. **understand the link between organised physical activity and belonging to a club with student success and its potential to address public health challenges such as depression and mental illness, as well as long-term physical illnesses brought on by sedentary lifestyles and social isolation**
2. **Require universities to explicitly link their evidence for performance-based measures under the 2020 Commonwealth Grants Scheme with their support for university-based sporting clubs and associations.**

There is a significant body of evidence to suggest that university sport in its broadest sense offers an enormous and largely untapped opportunity to assist universities in best serving the changing needs of the Australian population. By better understanding this link, and by requiring universities to link their funding of sport to their obligations and ambitions around student health and well-being, there is a cost-effective and simple opportunity to address a range of issues currently preventing Australian universities from meeting their potential to meet and lead the needs of all Australians.

UniSport Australia is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Universities Accord and would be happy to contribute further to efforts to deliver a higher education system that meets the current and future needs of the nation.

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2. Baker D 2012. All [the lonely people: loneliness in Australia, 2001–2009](http://www.tai.org.au/node/1866), Canberra: The Australia Institute. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lim M, Lambert G, Thurston L, Argent T, Eres R et al. 2020. Survey of Health and Wellbeing – Monitoring the Impact of COVID-19. Swinburne University of Technology: Iverson Health Innovation Research Institute. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Singh, B et al, Effectiveness of physical activity interventions for improving depression, anxiety and distress: an overview of systematic reviews, British Journal of Sports Medicine, February 2023 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ActivateUTS and Student Success Report 2020, and interview with Elizabeth Morgan-Brett, CEO ActivateUTS, 29 June 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Davies, L. E., Taylor, P., Ramchandani, G., Christy, C. (2019). Social Return on Investment in Sport: A model for measuring the value of participation in England. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics [Online 24 April 2019] [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Mental Health Benefits of Physical Activity, Professor Alexandra Parker, vu.edu.au, 22 October 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Black Dog Institute, Exercise and Depression Fact Sheet 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Marie H. Murphy et al, Active Students Are Healthier and Happier Than Their Inactive Peers: The Results of a Large Representative Cross-Sectional Study of University Students in Ireland, Journal of Physical Activity and Health, Volume 15, Issue 10, pp 737-746 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. A Survey of the Role of a Campus Recreation Center in the Recruitment and Retention of Undergraduate Students, James A. Fitzsimmons, University of Nevada, Reno College of Education, 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. British Active Students Survey 2017/18 Report [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPORT POLICY AND POLITICS, 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS), The Value of University Sport and Physical Activity, November 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Where will you find your next leader?, EY and espn, 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Interview with Nick Lambert, Senior Manager, Team La Trobe, 28 September 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Student engagement is an increasing worry for universities, The Australian, 3 November 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Australian University ratings and rankings 2020/2021: Undergraduate Social Equity ratings in Australia, gooduniversitiesguide.com.au [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. JCUSA Sport Survey Report 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Interview with Liam McGrath, Director of Club Sports & Women’s 7s, 31 March 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. UNSW 2025 Sport Strategy Progress Report [↑](#endnote-ref-20)