

**IMPLEMENTATION PHASE**  
Joint State of the Art Study

**Intellectual Output 1**  
Activity 2

**STICK PROJECT** *2017-3506/001-001*

SPORT AND ACADEMIC  
TALENT INTEGRATION  
THROUGH EXCHANGE  
PROGRAMMES IN HOCKEY



**FOCUS GROUPS**



Co-funded by the  
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TALENT INTEGRATION  
THROUGH EXCHANGE  
PROGRAMMES IN HOCKEY



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## Activity 2

### **Focus Groups with Athlete Students**

*Lead partner: Nottingham Trent University*

#### **I. Background**

The focus groups as part of Task 1 of the Erasmus + Stick Project took place in the spring/early summer of 2018, with the methodology and processes, focused around semi-structured interviews, being designed by Melanie Wells, Sport Scholarship Manager at Nottingham Trent University. These were then distributed to dual – career experts in the universities across the project to be completed in country. The transcripts/notes of the meeting were then forward onto Chris Campbell, Performance Sport Manager at Nottingham Trent University who was responsible for presenting findings to the partner universities in Nottingham on the 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018, then then compiling this report.

#### **II. Objective**

The aim of this piece of work was to establish the current opinions and views of student-athletes on the Erasmus programme, and what would need to be put in place to make becoming part of the programme more attractive.

#### **III. Participants**

Four of the five universities involved in the project participated in the focus groups (Erasmus University Rotterdam were unable to arrange a focus group at the notice given). A summary of the participants involved were:

- Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) – Ten high performing athletes including four who had studied abroad in Europe/U.S.
- Universiteit Antwerpen (UA) – *three* national level athletes, with three others contributing via email included athletes who had been on exchange programmes previously.
- Nottingham Trent University (NTU) – ten national level athletes, none of whom have been on an exchange.
- Dublin City University (DCU) – three high performing athletes with some having studied abroad in Europe/U.S.

All participants had to give consent to participate, and these consent forms have been sent by each individual university to the project co-ordinator.



## IV. Results

Having analysed the transcripts and notes produced by the universities, there were six headline findings:

### a. **Sport makes the Erasmus programme more attractive**

There was a common agreement that the Erasmus project gives students an exciting opportunity to experience different cultures and different experiences. However, in most cases high performing athletes, when they come to university will want to be able to continue with their sporting careers and are increasingly making their choices of university based on the sporting offer available (whether this be internally, or locality of an external high performance programme). This was a clear point made in the focus group at UAB, where students stated that although finding somewhere to study at an appropriate level is a priority, it is under the condition of finding a club there and that with no doubt playing hockey is the priority. As a result, individuals would not take part in an exchange if this similar offer were not available at the university they were transferring to.

This point is well summarised by a comment taken from the DCU transcript:

*I feel like it always seems to be that if you were to go away, you go away either for hockey or for your degree. I wouldn't have wanted to choose. However, if there was the option to go away to benefit my degree but still play hockey, you know that I didn't have to give that up for a year. Then, you know then I would have considered it.*

### b. **Quality of hockey, academic and support programmes**

One of the major themes, which ran through all of the focus groups, was that the academic courses, hockey and support programmes must be of equivalent standard to their home programmes. Although relatively simple comparisons can be made between two hockey programmes and two academic programmes (of which a process already exists), the quality of support service programmes vary widely across Europe (both across countries and within countries) and therefore students are likely to come with very different expectations. For example, in the NTU focus group, the students would expect a replication of quite a high level of support, such as Strength & Conditioning, Physiotherapy and other areas of Sport Science support free of charge. UA on the other hand, do not offer any significant support service programmes and therefore the students said they wouldn't naturally think about the quality of these when considering going on an exchange.

### c. **Importance of the dual career programme**

Because of what we are asking student-athletes to do, it would be close to impossible for them to achieve in both academics and sport without a strong dual-career programme behind them. There were different views of the dual – career programme across Europe - from NTU, it was identified that without a dual career programmes, students may not have even considered university:

*I didn't want to leave University to be able to play hockey, I wanted to be able to continue with both and I could in the UK*

In the UAB focus group a very important point was raised that this responsibility to provide dual-career support should not fall entirely onto the university. Although they felt that it was important the university were fully aware of individual circumstances, they outlined that:

*Clubs have to comprehend the academic requirements of its players*



We also had two contrasting experiences delivered from the UA and DCU focus groups. In the UA focus groups, significant concern was raised regarding the lack of flexibility regarding travel and that there are no allowances for that, and that would be a real concern when travelling a country, which may have even more significant levels of travel. On the other side, DCU outlined the experience of student who had been to the U.S. and had almost full flexibility:

*when I was in the states, the academic supports you got, got first pick of classes. Because we had training you know 2-6 you couldn't be getting class at 2-6 so you would have to have your classes in the morning so you got first into classes. And you know there were some situations where you had to miss practice, depending on your course. Say maybe if you had a lab one day that would be a long lab but that would be allowed in those situations but then there's also the situations where we were away weekends and were away Fridays and Mondays so you needed the support of your professors and also to catch up on work that you missed because if you were away you were missing those.*

#### **d. Holistic Support Programme**

It is essential we remember that students who go on sporting exchanges are being asked to do more than the average student who is on the Erasmus programme. As well as studying and settling into a new country, they are also being asked to perform at a high performance level in their sport, often within hours of arriving in the country. As a result, it is very important that they are given additional support in the following areas:

- Accommodation – in particular in terms of location to ensure they can travel from university to wherever their sport takes place.
- Administration – DCU outlined that it took some of their students over a month to complete all of the required paperwork
- Language – in particular with DCU and NTU students, this was a real concern and would have a big impact on how they integrate with the team they are playing for

#### **e. Concerns regarding international hockey**

Different views were reflected across the focus groups on whether or not the individuals would be able to access international hockey whilst on exchange, which is particular relevant to hockey as a large proportion of players on international pathways are involved in the university system, unlike a number of other team sports

The view from **NTU** was the most negative regarding this:

*you won't be in the England U21 programme if you go because you won't be there for training and so you're unable to be selected. Your time playing at university age is crucial for your development.*

**UAB's** view was much more focused around the practicality:

*it is practically impossible to combine playing with your national team and studying abroad, currently even more since players/clubs will have to pay their own tickets.*

The view from **DCU** was much more positive:

*even though you're away, you're still very much in the mix and you're not forgotten about but you're also monitored as well as players are here whether that through them being able to have access to your videos if you've games, talking to the coaches all of that. You know, it should be the same as if I'm playing in Dublin*



Some significant further work would need to be done within individual countries to speak to the performance programme leads about how we might ensure that international hockey continues to be an option should we be wanting those athletes to go onto an exchange.

**f. Partners need to work together for the good of the athlete**

Athletes across Europe were concerned about the impact on relationships between themselves and their clubs if they went away for a year. Students from UA were concerned that they would be letting their club/team down, whilst students at UAB said:

*Your local team has to agree on your decision to go abroad and thus it would create a good link with the players to convince them they should come back to their local teams after the exchange, even if the conditions abroad are better (loyalty).*

Clubs therefore have to accept that this project should be about the development of the athletes first, and if that objective is achieved, it will assist with future exchanges improving the flow of players, but also leading to them getting players coming back with more experience who can make more significant contributions in years to come. Universities should also look at the length of exchanges, because as identified from NTU, students are more likely to want to go for a full season as opposed to short periods of time to ensure they get a higher quality experience, which is harder to get for just a few months.

**V. Recommendations (based on the findings of the focus groups)**

**a. Find ways to demonstrate to university decision makers the value of sport in student recruitment.**

Universities as a whole (and not just those involved in sport) will have to make adaptations to their programmes to allow dual-career athletes to flourish. To do so it is important that we as partners have ways to demonstrate to our leadership and management teams why they should allow these adaptations to happen. What is important to note however, is that it will be different university by university, but more significantly country by country, and partners should work on finding what their unique selling points to try and exert influence. An extra presentation on this was given at the Nottingham conference regarding what has been successful in the U.K.

**b. Propose there is a standardized programme of support in place, which must be provided between a combination of the university and the club.**

As outlined above, students will come with expectations as to the services they will be receiving, and it is therefore essential that standardized programmes are produced. These standardized programmes could look different between different countries (for example a UK/Ireland programme could look different to Spain/Belgium programmes) although this wouldn't be an ideal solution. It is also important to acknowledge that partners should be able to work as partners in the delivery of these. In the U.K. these may be delivered through the university, whilst in Spain they may be delivered through the hockey club (for example).



**c. Universities to commit a dual-career accreditation programme.**

To assist with standardization, there would need to be an agreed set of standards regarding flexibility in both sporting and academic programmes to allow athletes to achieve in both. The creation of an accreditation programme (one is currently being rolled out in the UK <https://www.tass.gov.uk/2017/09/08/dual-career-accreditation/>) will help universities to make appropriate changes and will act as a standard of which prospective exchange students can compare universities against.

**d. Train university staff on the demands of dual-career athletes.**

In line with the previous point, it is important that appropriate training is put in place with those working directly with student-athletes. This is especially important because in the majority of Europe, universities do not employ sports specific staff who would work on this.

**e. Decide what level of athlete do we need to be focusing on. Are those playing international sport unrealistic?**

Defining who we are targeting is a very important objective as it could help to define future direction of this project. We have a responsibility to ensure that student's international ambitions are not constrained by being part of this project, and our aim should be try and engage such students as much as possible. However, if we are unable to get agreements from performance programmes as to their release, it may be our major focus on this project is the group of athletes below that, who are currently playing high-level university or club hockey, as opposed to at international level.

## **VI. Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

*Methodology established to all consortium countries.*

#### **In attendance**

- Dual Career practitioner as the facilitator
- Assistant to take notes
- Up to ten student hockey players

#### **Invitation to participants**

- Students are invited to attend (in our case by the Head of Hockey) via email including a briefing note that explains the purpose of the focus group and how results will be utilised

#### **Materials**

- Consent forms for students to sign
- Copy of the pre-prepared questions and prompts
- Dictaphone or other suitable equipment to record the session

#### **Location**

- Private room on university campus big enough to accommodate up to 10 students, the facilitator and an assistant
- Room set up with chairs in a circle (if possible) with the facilitator at the head to encourage discussion



## Procedure

- Length of session 45 minutes, have students arrive 10/15 minutes beforehand to complete the consent forms
- Facilitator opens the session by welcoming the students, introducing themselves and the assistant and explaining their roles, timescales of the session etc.
- Provide an introductory briefing to explain the purpose of the focus group
- Ask students to introduce themselves if not known to each other or the facilitator
- Begin with some general discussion on the topic to get students talking and feeling more relaxed
- Ask pre-prepared open ended questions and prompts but allow for some flexibility depending on how the students respond
- Assistant is not involved in the discussion but listens and takes notes for discussion afterwards
- Finish by thanking students for their time and participation in the project

## Analysis and Reporting of Results

- Facilitator and assistant to listen to the recording and review assistant's notes to identify main themes of the discussion. Ideally this should be done as soon as possible after the focus group to avoid memory lapses and facilitate accurate recall
- Main points/themes to be summarised in a word document and shared with all partners

## Appendix B

### *Questions used at each Focus Group*

**Below are the key questions discussed but we allowed the natural flow of the conversation to dictate the questioning and therefore it is not absolutely necessary to ask the questions in this set order.**

- Has anyone ever studied abroad or taken part in a foreign exchange programme previously?  
If yes:        Could you tell us a little bit about your experience?  
                    What were the good points and the challenges?  
If no:         Has anyone considered doing an exchange before, what were your thoughts?
- What do you think the benefits of studying and playing sport abroad would be?
- What might be the barriers to it?
- If you were considering studying abroad, or if you already have, what concerns might you have about how that would affect your sport?
- If you were going to study and play sport abroad what services would need to be in place in the university and the club to make it feasible?
- What would be the most important factors in making your decision?
- What considerations would you have regarding the university club/professional club you play for here and leaving that behind?
- What would you need from the university club/professional club you were moving to?



- In Europe you do not always play for your University club and a professional club in the same way we do in the UK, bearing that in mind what are your thoughts on not playing for your University whilst abroad?  
*(Nb. This question may need to be reversed depending on the particular set up at your own University)*
- How important is the Dual Career support that you receive currently and are there any elements you would you need to have replicated at your exchange University?
- Is there anything else you would need in place other than what has already been mentioned?
- Is there anything that would be a deal breaker to taking part in the Erasmus+ programme?

### Prompts

- Does everyone else agree with that?
- Does anyone have a different viewpoint?
- What does everyone else think?
- Does anyone have anything to add?
- Are there any further points?