



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

University of Birmingham tackles mental health with sport and exercise

University of Birmingham Sport is taking active steps towards making sport and fitness even more accessible for those with disabilities and mental health issues. In addition to hosting free, inclusive sports events in the summer, the University has recently been awarded funding for addressing student mental health issues through physical activity, enabling more support through sport on campus.

The University of Birmingham was one of 12 universities selected throughout the country to receive funding from British Colleges and University Sport (BUCS), following a proposal from the University regarding the commitments to using physical activity to tackle mental health issues. With 75% of the applications submitted aimed towards the Mental Health intervention it was a very competitive process, but the Birmingham bid to BUCS proved positive, and so Term 3 of the 2017/18 year and Term 1 of 2018/19 will see a focus on delivering three support areas to the student population of the University: Destresstival, Campus Try-outs, and a Referral Scheme, underpinned by a newly-appointed Mental Health First Aid trained workforce.

Within a student population of 34,000, over 1,000 students registered with the University's Student Services department in the 2016/17 academic year as having a mental health issue, and so far this year those numbers don't seem to be diminishing. University of Birmingham Sport saw a clear need to support both the students and Student Services, by growing the availability and appropriateness of physical activity opportunities and prevention tools.

The first initiative, which started this month, was the annual Destresstival event: a 4-week-long festival delivering free classes and activities for students and staff over the exam period, aimed at reducing stress. Including a range of classes from yoga to boxercise, the BUCS funding allowed the University to increase the number of classes per week from one to four, and broaden the range of options to cater for the different ways people like to relieve stress. So far, Destresstival classes have been extremely popular, with yoga and Body Balance classes specifically being over-capacity due to the uptake, suggesting that the additional classes available were much needed.

Campus Try-Outs will also be implemented in September this year to give students a clearer view of the sporting pathways available on campus. Many students will first experience sport at university by visiting the hectic and bustling Sports Fair in the first week of term, followed by potentially stressful trials in order to join a team. Campus Try-Outs will alleviate this daunting experience and would be an introductory session focused on the sports that offer the University's inter-campus recreational competition, Campus League. This league provides a competitive, inclusive and recreational sport programme for staff and students to get together and play against other college teams in an informal and enjoyable environment. The initiative has so far been instrumental in engaging a wide spectrum of people across the University in netball, basketball, football, hockey and touch rugby, and whilst the Try-Outs will also inform students of the financial and time commitments of joining a BUCS sports team, it will promote Campus League as an informal and relaxed alternative.

The longer-term Referral Scheme will offer Group Exercise vouchers to those who would benefit from a physical activity. The support from BUCS means that the University can now offer two free group exercise vouchers for 500 people and an additional five drop-in sports sessions across the terms – five times more than previous offerings. The hope behind this is that students will have enough time to find a sport or activity that works for them, and having a mixture of sports and classes also offers that broad range of effort, challenge and fitness.

Alex Taylor, Head of Performance and Coaching, says it is a much-needed step in the right direction towards tackling stress with exercise.

'We're so delighted to have been successful in our bid to BUCS. UBSport's aim is to improve mental well-being by developing the range of suitable, convenient physical activity opportunities for those with mental health issues, while also providing the tools to prevent or self-manage future occurrences of issues. We have one of the most accessible sports venues in its class on campus and we want to ensure that we can run programmes that are equally as inclusive to all users, now and in the future. The funding is the first step on our journey to support a better quality student experience, and hopefully create an environment that supports those who are struggling and reduces the stigma and lack of confidence around mental health.'

In its drive to develop inclusive sport and accessible activities, and following a successful Inclusive Fitness Festival in March which offered wheelchair workouts from Wheely Good Fitness, indoor cycle and classes with a BSL interpreter, the University will also be hosting part of the Birmingham Inclusive Sports Festival; a week-long festival of inclusive sport and physical activity taster sessions open to the public. On 1 July 2018 in the Munrow Arena, the festival will launch with free taster sessions, 'have-a-go' sports and other inclusive and disability-specific activities.

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Notes to the editor:

- The University of Birmingham is currently ranked in the top ten universities for sport in the UK.
- The University have invested in new indoor and outdoor sport facilities, including the £55 million Sport & Fitness Club which opened May 2017, new pitches, athletics track and a pavilion.
- The University of Birmingham is ranked amongst the world's top 100 institutions, its work brings people from across the world to Birmingham, including researchers and teachers and more than 5,000 international students from over 150 countries.
- The Sport Birmingham sixth annual Birmingham Inclusive Sports Fest (BISF) takes place on 11 June and 1 July: info [here](#).
- More information about the BUCS Active funding can be found [here](#).