

Universities and the Olympic Games: a Short Note¹

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Much has been written about the Games in 2012 and opportunities that they represent for universities. Sydney and Atlanta in particular have been studied for the lessons they offer London in 2012. Both of these events, and others elsewhere, provide specific examples of what universities have done to capitalize on their association with the greatest show on earth. In general though, certainly in the debate around economic and social legacy, the real association between universities and the Games has not been recognized.

The real association derives from the central role that universities play in providing the Games with their central actors, the athletes themselves. At the Athens Games in 2004, 52% of the British team had been to university or were currently at university, well above the participation rate in higher education more generally. These athletes came from around 70 universities across the country, not all of them by any means well known for their sporting achievement. (Of the US team, closer to 80% of the team had attended or were attending college or university, again well above the higher education participation rate of 60% or so.) And not only do the universities provide the athletes, they also are responsible for many of the trainers, coaches, experts and medical staff that form a central element of a successful Games.

The University of Hertfordshire is an example of how a mid-sized UK university is contributing to the Olympic effort as well as providing community sporting facilities. When the University invested £120 million in its new de Havilland campus, £15 million of this went into new sports facilities with a focus on every day student and community provision. Applications to the university rose 25% the year the Sports Village opened, students made regular use of the facilities and over 300 clubs and thousands of individuals from the community used them.

¹ An earlier version of this note was circulated at the Guardian conference on higher education earlier this month and included contributions from Nick Brooking and Jane Glanville.

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Now the University of Hertfordshire's sports services are part of a crucial network for an ever increasing number of genuinely elite athletes. Not all are in Olympic sports, most are not current University of Hertfordshire students (some are already through their education but some are pre-HE) and the length and intensity of the relationship varies. In the run up to the Athens Games, the University worked closely with the English Institute of Sport, with individuals and with Sports Governing Bodies to help with specific areas of elite work, to fill gaps in provision or expertise. At Athens, the university supported six athletes who were part of the very successful GB Paralympic team and added to the tally of medals won at Sydney in 2000. So while high profile names such as Loughborough, Bath and Birmingham continue as the power houses of elite sport, the range of institutions that are contributing at the elite level is in fact very wide.

Because athletic performance at the Games is linked so closely to the preparation that athletes receive at their universities, national performance of teams at the Games is to a very significant degree linked to the resources and overall health of the university system where a majority of their members were trained. During the first half of the modern Olympic era, European teams collectively held their own against the US team. For example, the UK, France and Italy together achieved an average collective medal points tally of 183 during the years 1900-1948 compared with an average US score of 148. In the second half of the period, between 1952 and 2004, and following the take-off of HE participation rates in the US, and the enormous growth in TV coverage of college sports with the attendant revenue generation opportunities for universities, the balance of achievement was reversed with Team US scoring an average 211 points and the equivalent Team Europe scoring an average of just 127 points. Is it too far fetched to suggest that Olympic medals could in fact be a rather accurate indicator of the relative health of the European and American university systems?

First and foremost then the Games are a wonderful stage on which to showcase Britain's university talent and to make the case, in a major way, to Government and to the public for the resources that underpin success or failure at the highest levels of Olympic endeavour. This opportunity has not as yet been fully understood or grasped.

Second, universities should do much more to explore the opportunities for greater TV coverage of inter-university competition across a whole range of endeavours. The Oxford and Cambridge boat race doesn't have to be the only show in town. Bringing 100,000 people (most of them not graduates of the local university) to watch a local college game all day on a Saturday or Sunday - as is completely standard in the US – may be beyond the feasible. There are cultural differences, differences in the way that we recruit for and finance our national sport, football, compared with the US. But surely there is scope for more than we currently have with potentially important financial implications for British HE.

Third the Games are an opportunity for individual institutions to promote themselves on a global stage. Type in the words 'Olympic' and 'Beijing' or 'China' and you will before long find yourself on the website of one university or another that is associated in some way with the Games but which is taking the opportunity to introduce itself to a global audience. British universities can and should do the same.

Fourth, because of the extent of the HE-Olympic link, universities should grasp the ancillary opportunities the Games present over and above sporting involvement and excellence. These include volunteering (staff and students) and training of volunteers, hosting training camps; utilising technical expertise available for media comment, language and translation; providing sport science and medicine resources; and, allocating all types of accommodation to visitors who will flock to London and the UK. Perhaps however the most exciting opportunities – and challenges – lie in the use universities and colleges make of the Games to reach out to young people, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and minority groups within the community on the back of sports and culture. Sport, and the spirit of the Games, can be harnessed to help tackle educational and social exclusion and raise aspirations.

London Higher, the Higher Education Regional Association for London, has taken on the lead role of coordinating the collaborative UK HE and also FE efforts. Under the

strategic guidance of a London-led but nationally representative steering group of heads of institutions, chaired by Baroness Tessa Blackstone, funding support from both the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Learning and Skills Council will be used to set up a coordination and communications unit and develop a UK-wide function. A business plan will be prepared over the coming months that will focus upon identified key areas of activity. Whilst details have yet to be determined, this is likely to include looking at innovative ways – often in partnership – to widen access and boost participation, encourage health living, and maximise contributions to the Paralympic Games and to the Cultural Olympiad.