



MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY SPORTS ASSOCIATION: SUBMISSION TO COMMUNITY SPORT CONSULTATION PROCESS

1. SUMMARY

- a. A strong university club sporting network has the potential to play a key role in the Government's preventative health approach by encouraging students and the wider community to embrace sport and physical activity. University clubs do a great job of providing affordable sporting opportunities for students, as well as maintaining these positive and inclusive communities long after graduation.
- b. Properly resourced university sporting clubs are integral to strengthening the pathways from junior sport through to elite sport. University sport provides the crucial bridge for talented young people who achieve success in junior ranks but do not immediately achieve success in the senior ranks. Good coaches, enjoyable competitions and readily accessible development opportunities are critical in encouraging young people to pursue their sporting dreams.
- c. A well-resourced university sport club network provides a valuable resource for talent identification, coach development, administrator development, as well as encouraging healthy, vibrant communities.

2. WHO IS MUSA?

Melbourne University Sports Association (MUSA) is the representative body for the 39 active sporting clubs of the University of Melbourne and their members (which collectively number several thousand). These MUSA clubs are inclusionary in nature: members do not have to attend the University to join. Club members are predominantly university students, however a large proportion are graduates who have maintained close links with their team-mates long after their studies have finished. MUSA clubs have not only produced a number of exceptional elite athletes, but provide a flourishing sphere for the social participant. MUSA aims to facilitate athlete development and community spirit by providing accessible, enjoyable and rewarding opportunities for all participants.

Encouraging sporting involvement, specifically amongst University of Melbourne students, is a fundamental aim of MUSA. A prosperous sporting family is integral to a strong university community and MUSA furthers this concept by encouraging involvement in competitions such as the Australian University Games.

3. MUSA'S BENEFITS

A. GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION

The transition from school to university often involves a difficult transition phase in the physical activity of young people. The structured sporting environment of school, including class physical education and extra-curricular sporting opportunities, provides a simple and accessible sporting network. A thriving university sporting program is vital in ensuring physical activity does not cease with the end of school. The exercising characteristics practised in early years of university are likely to form the activity habits continued throughout adulthood. It is for this reason that MUSA aims to provide enjoyable participation opportunities for University students of all abilities.

The links between physical activity, health and well-being are well known.¹ University sporting clubs provide important opportunities for students to make new friends and develop new interests. Club involvement can ameliorate feelings of stress from student workload, as well as reduce anxiety and enhance body image.² Clubs are inclusionary and build relationships that transcend race, socio-economic background or religion. Team environments develop readily transferable social skills and enhance the university experience for participants of all abilities. Indeed for many, University club involvement confirms identity and well-being way beyond student life.

B. TRAINING BASE

University clubs are largely run by volunteers, providing an invaluable pool of administrators who have learnt their skill through responsibility. Club Presidents, Treasurers, secretaries, coaches and umpires form a rich source of potential volunteers.

C. FACILITATING PATHWAYS

University sporting clubs are equipped to continue athlete development in the transition stages of elite athlete progression. A typical athlete development curve sees a large dropout of promising athletes between the elite junior stage, with many athletes representing their state or country at junior level, and open age stage. For most athletes, open age success is not immediate. This fact necessitates strong, enjoyable and adequately equipped university clubs to provide opportunities and enjoyment in sport at this critical stage.

Furthermore, the university club structure provides an invaluable talent identification pool, and, properly resourced, can work on recruitment initiatives through club coaches.

The University populace also provides a breeding ground for success, exemplified by the figure of 201 athletes from the Beijing Olympic team who were enrolled, deferred or recently graduated from universities.³

4. IMPEDIMENTS FACING UNIVERSITY SPORT

The aim of MUSA is to provide accessible sporting and recreation opportunities. Decreased funding (including introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism) has meant rising membership/participation costs. Given the impecuniosities of a large proportion of university students, the cost barrier to

¹ See, for example, VicHealth submission

² (MHCA, 2005) (VicHealth, 2007)"

³ Australian University Sport Submission

participation is a very real one. It is our opinion that removing barriers to participation for university students is paramount in encouraging young adults to lead healthy, active lifestyles. Sport must not become accessible only to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

A. FACILITIES

MUSA is increasingly confronted with difficulty finding enough appropriate sporting facilities. The effect of the drought has meant that the condition of the cricket club's main oval is embarrassing for a premier cricket club. Retention of players thus becomes difficult. The football club is confronted with an inability to source enough playing areas even to be able to train. Again, this limits the number of participants it can accommodate and new players it can recruit. The women's football club has been forced to impose a one hour cap on training sessions. The touch football club has lost its entire winter ground allocation and is faced with the prospect of turning the majority of its members away. Additional funding and facility development is urgently needed to address these issues threatening the lifeblood of our association. Otherwise, these shortfalls will only worsen with tighter water restrictions; as a result, our clubs will face extinction and our athletes will lose the opportunity to develop and reach their potential.

B. VOLUNTEERS

The University Sport network is also confronted with difficulty finding sufficient volunteers to carry out an ever increasing workload. Club volunteers face increasing time pressures in trying to deliver value to members, which has become increasingly difficult given the lack of funding. In addition, they have time and financial pressures in other facets of their lives, and the burden imposed on those who do volunteer is seeing a significant 'burn out' factor. Clubs now must have in place an array of policies, from risk management to selection matters. Many clubs are also subject to increased responsibilities of a legal nature that minimise the willingness of volunteers to lend their services.

In theory, clubs could pay students for their administration services; however this is untenable given the consequential increase in participation costs. Extra funding for administrators would have significant benefits, not only in minimising the burden on volunteers, but on in improving the structures and accessibility of our sporting clubs; yet most clubs would find it impossible to fund such a program in one year, let alone on a sustainable basis.

C. SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Following the introduction of VSU, universities have been significantly impaired in their ability to support teams travelling to the Australian University Games. The result is a weakened competition and a lower number of participants. This is worrying - the University Games are a key recruiting tool, encouraging a significant number of University students to continue sport, re-commence sport or take up a sport. The demise of the University Games also presents a problem for emerging athletes who are no longer young enough to qualify for junior competition. The University Games are an important progression in the long road to Australian Representation.

5. CONCLUSION

Funding university sport, particularly at the club level, has a great potential to **significantly increase sporting participation** amongst an important demographic of young adults. The networks created in University sporting clubs also see the formation of many lifelong friendships that nurture sporting participation throughout adulthood. University sport is currently chronically underfunded and at risk of becoming inaccessible to many students. The positive benefits provided by a strong university club network cannot be underestimated, and greater investment in clubs is essential to ensure these benefits continue into the future.