

Get started on the **right foot**

Activating women's sport
in Higher Education

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No two institutions are the same. No two women are the same. What we do know from the latest insight on female sport in Higher Education is:

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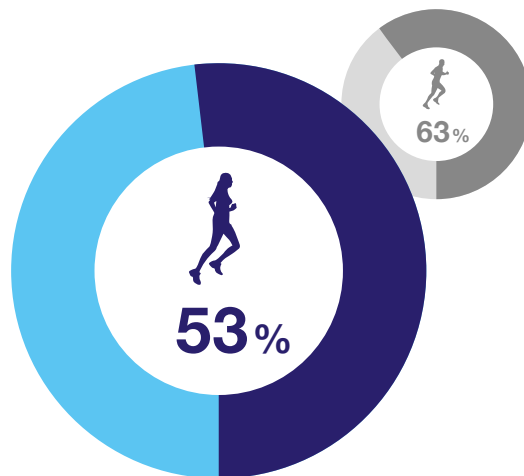
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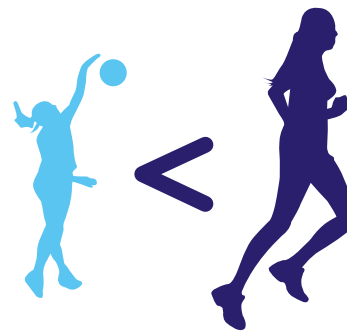
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53% of female students (742,000) are doing some activity each week compared with 63% of male students (680,400). 520,600 female students are doing no activity at all compared with 316,000 male students.



2

Female students are more likely to take part in individual sporting activities. However they do more sport than the rest of the general population, but not via university provision.



3

Campus-based female students are the most engaged in traditional sport via university provision. Non-campus-based female students are least active generally and this is where one of the largest differences between male and female students is seen.

Overview

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So, how can you **determine** what to do? How can you **design** a programme to meet the needs of more female students and how can you **deliver** that activity in a way that keeps them coming back for more?

On the following pages you can find a few suggestions that can help you determine, design and deliver your sporting provision for female students.

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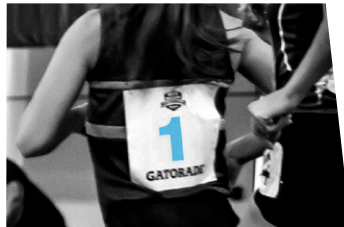
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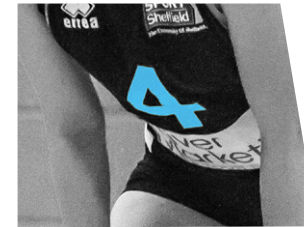
Who are your
female students?



A great fit



A programme for
'women like me'



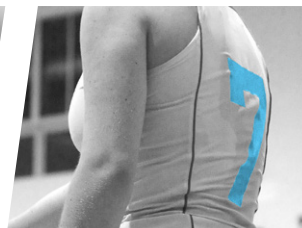
The strength of
social media and
word of mouth



Ensuring an
excellent experience
from day one



Ever evolving
and growing



Women-only
sessions have
their place



Every day's
a school day



Sustainability



Ensuring
consistency

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Who are your female students?

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The sports that were chosen were basic... they were based upon the current offering – football, hockey, rugby, volleyball – because we knew these sports were oversubscribed.

East Midlands University

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Who are your female students?



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Get to know your female students. What's important to them? What makes them tick?

What are their values and priorities? Looking good, feeling good, spending time with loved ones, achieving goals, developing skills, having fun? How does that influence the choices they make? Once you know this you can start considering how you can move sport up their priorities list.

To do this, [survey your female students](#) to understand what drives them generally and what motivates them to play sport. What sports do they want to play, with whom and in what format? What might cause them to drop out?

Don't assume that just because you have an overflow of demand for your BUCS competitive offer that this sport will meet the needs of a wider audience of women. Consider a [wider variety of sports](#), that many women may not have thought to try before.

Women are more likely to respond to surveys than men so you are likely to get a good response rate from your female students when you are looking for a wide breadth of answers. Women also respond well to focus groups and interviews where they can ask more questions and provide fuller answers.

Don't assume that just because you have an overflow of demand for your BUCS competitive offer that this sport will meet the needs of a wider audience of women.

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A great fit

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I got some student ambassadors on board and they worked alongside me, because what I really felt was this programme is for the students... They were feeding back to me or saying 'oh no', 'god no, don't do that', 'you know, we don't want to do that'. I think that has really, really supported the project.

Active Universities Coordinator, a London University

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Your female students should feel as though the provision has been designed for them... so make them part of the design process.

Create a panel of female students or run **focus groups** where the members can help you develop your programme at all stages as well as challenge and check ideas. Let them design the activity with you, from marketing to delivery.

Questions you might ask your student could include: When should the session be? How competitive? Just skills? Just games? Who should deliver it? What do they want from their leader? Should they be single-sex sessions or mixed? What are their pressure points? What might cause them to drop out? What should the programme be called? What should the marketing resources look like? What language/imagery works well or puts them off?

Create a panel of female students or run some focus groups where the members can help you develop your programme at all stages as well as challenge and check ideas.

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A programme for 'women like me'

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41% of women aged 16–24 would be motivated to do more exercise if they felt more women like them were having a go.

WSFF/TNS, 2012



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A programme for 'women like me'

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For many women the gym and fitness classes speak to them in a way that sport doesn't.

In general, the gym is a known quantity, women know what to expect, what to wear and that they don't need a specific level of skill. They can be anonymous. It isn't competitive and there is no judgement against others. On the other hand, traditional sport can seem too far away from where they see themselves and their abilities – too competitive, highly skilled or 'sport isn't for me'. Your programme needs to speak to your female students and they need to be able to see themselves taking part. The other participants need to be 'women like me'.

Female ambassadors are crucial to the success of the programme. Other students need to see women like them taking part, leading and promoting the sessions. These women need to be approachable and not so sporty that it puts potential participants off.



Offer skill development/refresher opportunities for beginners and returners to build up their confidence and progress together. There should be **exit routes**, which may or may not be competitive, for the group once they have passed beyond beginners. Once confidence builds, they are then more likely to try out new activities that they hadn't previously considered, for example team sports.

Consider offering modified sport sessions like fitness elements within the sport session, such as **FitNet**, **cardio tennis** or **add music**, to make it more fun. Make sure these elements of the session are well promoted.

You could also consider offering non-traditional, modern activities such as rock

Your programme needs to speak to your female students and they need to be able to see themselves taking part.

climbing or canoeing. These are activities where women can learn and improve together, but where they are not necessarily in the spotlight or letting anyone down if they are not very good.

Use real pictures of the types of students you're putting the sessions on for, wearing the sort of clothes that they need for the session.

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The strength of social media and word of mouth

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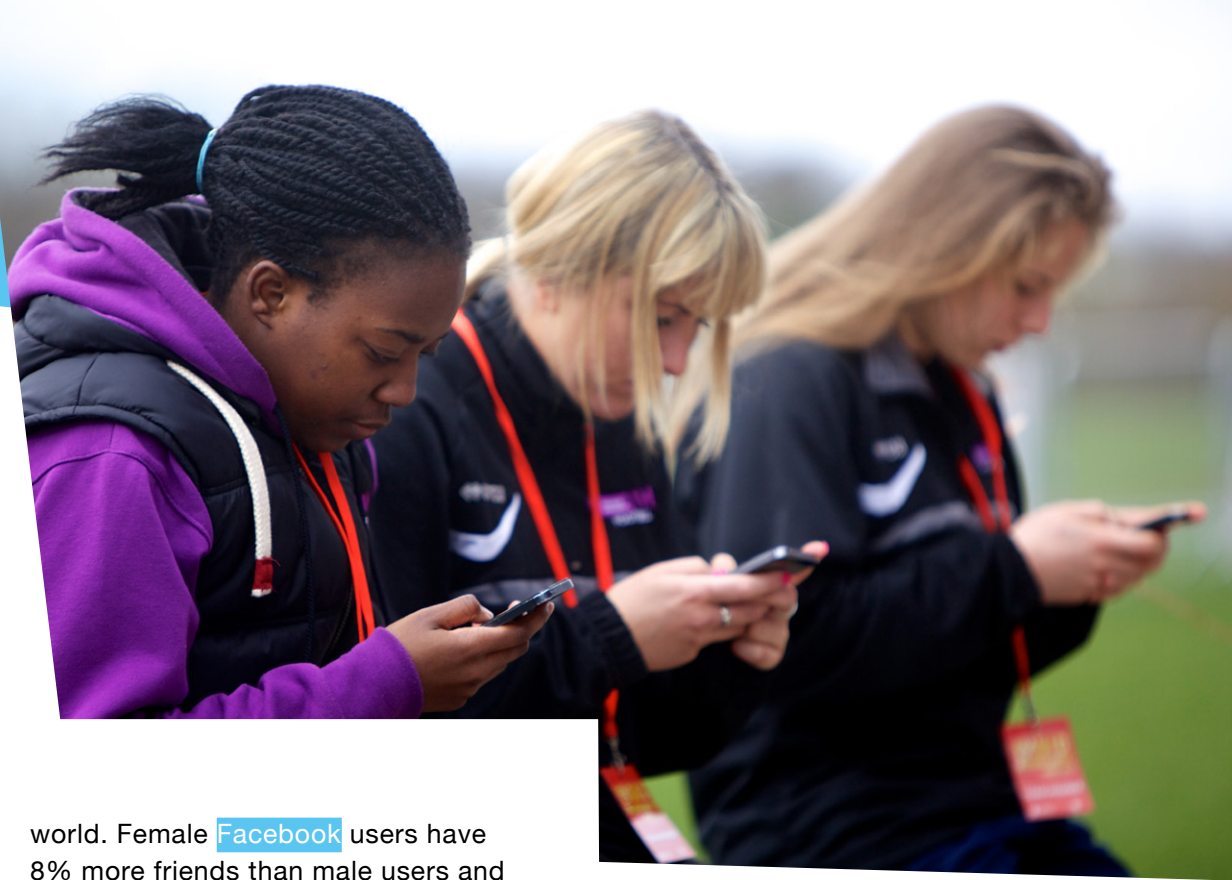


If you get three really good students come every session then they do all the hard work for you, you know, they're basically our army on the ground doing the promotion for us.

Active Universities Coordinator, A Yorkshire University

4

The strength of social media and word of mouth



Advertising your sessions on the sport centre notice board is fine... if you want the usual suspects to turn up after they've finished training for their BUCS team.

That's not what these sessions are primarily about. Advertising sessions in departments perceived as 'non-sporty' and promotion of activities in lectures by session ambassadors from that department have proven to be extremely effective in reaching a wider audience, giving them an opportunity to ask questions and get full feedback. You could also offer [taster sessions](#) at other events where women may be, that are not necessarily linked to sport.

Social media is now the biggest player in terms of promoting your programme and ongoing communication with a large audience. Despite the common misconception that men are more 'digitally savvy', women are more dominant players in the online social

world. Female [Facebook](#) users have 8% more friends than male users and participate in 62% of the network sharing. This is a massive opportunity to reach more women, who may not access information in other sporty channels.

65% of women access social media at least once a week compared with 51% of men.

You may consider developing online reward mechanisms for your first followers who may become advocates for you and spread the word. Women also want narrative, conversations and communities, so having

a Facebook page, [Twitter](#) account or [Whatsapp](#) group are all vital for continual engagement with your audience. Consider having ['social media breaks'](#) giving people the chance to tweet what they are doing mid-session to help promote it.

Word of mouth is also a powerful tool. Women value word of mouth more than men, and as a result they engage in more of it. Furthermore, women are more persuasive than men when it comes to their word of mouth recommendations, so encourage those people that do attend the sessions to tell their friends... and then their friends' friends.

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Ensuring an excellent experience from day one

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I was slightly nervous – when it comes to gyms I was always scared of being surrounded by a million and one super-fit people running at 200mph and not even breaking a sweat...

Sweat in the City research 2008

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Ensuring an excellent experience from day one

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Bad service is a real turn off. We don't stand for it in restaurants and shops. In fact, if it's bad we rarely go back.

The same is true for sports sessions. For many women, the first time they try something new can be a daunting experience if they are not sure of what is expected of them or if they are concerned they might be the slowest or least skilled in the group. For this reason, many women prefer to attend something new with a

friend rather than go there alone. When a new participant arrives the leaders should make sure they speak to them so that they know what to expect. They should be **friendly and welcoming, not patronising.** No one wants to think the sessions are aimed at the leader's friends.

Getting the right leader is crucial, as is supporting all your leaders to really understand what women want from the session, so they can lead them to that place in a way that will make them

For many women, the first time they try something new can be a daunting experience if they are not sure of what is expected of them.

return time and time again. Set up a new member **buddy system** for people who come on their own.

All advertising needs to be correct. A new participant may not return again if they have made the first effort and the session is not as advertised or on at the advertised time. You should also include logistical information – whether there are lockers, who to ask for when they arrive, costs... in fact anything at all that will help reduce the number of unknowns.

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Ever evolving and growing

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There are many women who love competition and for many women who currently don't enjoy it, it may actually be the level of competition on offer (too high or too low) or the negative behaviour of opposing players that has put them off.

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Offering enough appropriate levels of competition within the programme is important.

As people progress and improve, their needs may change and so the sessions need to adapt to meet these changing needs.

It's important to have [clear pathways](#) for women who have progressed beyond the current provision. BUT, don't assume improvement means that they want to play in a more formal setting; they may just want a higher level of competition within the informal setting. That said, make sure you still offer beginners' programmes for new participants.

It's often thought that women don't like competition, but there are many women who love competition and for many women who currently don't enjoy it, it may actually be the *level* of competition on offer (too high or too low) or the negative behaviour of opposing players that has put them off. It's no fun playing if your opponent is considerably better or worse than you. Offering enough [appropriate levels of competition](#) within the programme is important.

Ask your members what level of competition they would like. Look at the different competition options available within the university setting and also within the community. Consider mixed-gender sessions if necessary to ensure a critical mass of participants. Ensure there is a [code of conduct](#) for acceptable playing behaviour.

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Women-only sessions have their place

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Why the squash was so popular last year was that I think there was a safety there, the young girls knowing that it was a small group, it was women-only and beginners and actually it was led by a female coach as well.

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Women-only sessions have their place

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Don't assume that just by putting on a women-only session you will please all female students, as many women prefer mixed settings.

There may be times that it can be a useful entry point as women who may not feel confident playing sport may prefer to develop their skills with other like-minded women. Women-only sessions can be delivered in many different ways. A culturally sensitive women-only session would be led by a woman and also be carried out **behind 'closed doors'**. An alternative women-only session may be carried out in full view of all people, but all the participants are women as they want

to be active with other women in a less competitive atmosphere.

Consult with your students. Find out if they would like women-only sessions and if so, for what activities and levels and what they want them to look like, for example behind closed doors/led by a woman. Be clear what this women-only session is there to do. Are you and others clear about what the sessions will look like? Is this clear in all your communications? If running culturally sensitive sessions, consultation is even more key to ensure you really understand the needs of the participants and what they would be comfortable with.

Consult with your students. Find out if they would like women-only sessions and if so, for what activities and levels, and what they want them to look like.

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Every day's a school day

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[Ambassadors] have a training programme, and we monitor where they are at the entry level to where they want to be in that 12-month period, to the end. So if they would like to go and do a qualification in level one or level two in their respective sport... we would help fund that...

Active Universities Coordinator, a South West University



Offer opportunities for female students to gain qualifications and lead sessions – these women in turn may become your ambassadors.

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In a learning institution you should harness the fact that people are there to learn, to improve themselves, to increase their employability.

Women in previous programmes have been enthusiastic about taking on additional responsibilities and gaining coaching and leadership [qualifications](#). Offer opportunities for female students to gain qualifications and lead sessions – these women in turn may become your [ambassadors](#). Just make sure you offer

these opportunities to female students who are not necessarily within the sporting networks already, but across the various courses.

Leadership and qualifications aside, participating in sport has lots to offer a person more than just the health and social benefits. Taking part in a sport can show a more rounded personality for a CV and enhance employability. Research shows that women who take part in sport are likely to earn more than their non-active

counterparts. If you promote these aspects of sport, you may be able to encourage those students who are keen to improve their [employability](#).

Also, those students keen on personal self-improvement and skill development may be swayed to take part in something new, particularly non-traditional sports such as rock climbing, kayaking and fencing. You need to understand what drives students and tap into these drivers through your marketing.

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Sustainability

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47% of female students cite the main reason they don't take part in sport is due to work and college commitments.

Sport England Higher Education Sport Participation and Satisfaction Survey, 2013


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With limited resource we're always trying to get the greatest return on investment, so a focus on participation and throughput for sessions often results in the full potential of a programme not being realised.

In many cases the sessions are trying to [change behaviours](#) that have existed for some time. Don't give up on some sessions too quickly as it may take time for them to embed into the programme. If your programme is struggling to retain women then go back to the original principle of talking – find out what is not working, and ask them to help you tweak the design or delivery of the session.

Committed female students will come to your sessions regardless of when and where they are, but what about the rest? Text reminders to participants, or put updates on Facebook or Twitter to remind them to come. This nudge might tip a 'maybe' into a 'definite' attendee. Women are also more likely to turn up if they have committed to going with a friend – even if they want to drop out – because they don't want to let their friend down. So encourage friends to come together.

[26% of women age 16–25 say the main reason they do exercise is because of the social side](#) (WSFF, BMRB 2010). Offering social elements within the sessions and outside of the sessions – for example a theme

night – will also help to retain people in the sessions, as well as incentives such as getting a t-shirt if you attend 8 out of 10 sessions.

[47% of female students cite the main reason they don't take part in sport is due to work and college commitments.](#) (Sport England Higher Education Sport Participation and Satisfaction Survey, 2013). For those who do take part, you may find that they drop out of sport when deadlines and exams are looming.

Don't give up on some sessions too quickly as it may take time for them to embed into the programme.

You might consider how you promote the [mental health benefits](#) of regular sport during stressful times in your sessions and marketing materials.

Exercise is known to help alleviate stress and encourage better sleep, both of which will enable them during stressful and busy times.

While you want to ensure a critical mass of participants for your sessions to ensure that they are sustainable, you need to ensure that these efforts for decent participant numbers don't negatively impact on the quality of the delivery or the experience of each individual.

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Ensuring consistency

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People find that when something is a fixture in their timetable, it's a lot easier to plan around and become a regular habit.

British Universities & Colleges Sport

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Programmes have been more successful when they have been delivered on the same day and at the same time each week, because people find that when something is a fixture in their timetable, it's a lot easier to plan around and become a regular habit.

We become frustrated if something changes frequently – this is particularly the case for female students who may already be battling many priorities and who may not need much of an excuse to drop out. And this is likely to be a bigger problem for female sessions which may not be team-based and as such there is less pressure on them to turn up, as they are not letting anyone down.

Exam time can lead to facilities being out of use and so sessions might not run.

It's better to **run a different activity** that can be done elsewhere rather than cancel. If you don't have the facilities available, consider what facilities are close to where your students live. Can you use these facilities? If so, can they offer discounts to your students? Think about offering transport to take women to and from the sessions.

BUT – review these external sessions first for quality control and anything that might put people off. Are the reception staff well informed and friendly?

Exam time can lead to facilities being out of use and so sessions might not run. It's better to run a different activity that can be done elsewhere rather than cancel.



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- 1 Get to know your female students and use them to design all aspects of your programme. They want to see ‘women like me’ taking part in the sessions as well as leading them.
- 2 The right female ambassadors are paramount in helping to promote this.
- 3 Women-only sessions may have their place – just ask.
- 4 Social media and word of mouth are key.
- 5 Ensure an excellent experience from day one – the first time they walk through the door they should feel like royalty.
- 6 There should be pathways as your participants progress and improve, but these may not necessarily be more formal playing routes.
- 7 Offer training, qualifications and leadership opportunities, as these have proven very popular among female students.
- 8 Don’t expect to change behaviours overnight – it may take time for your programme to bed in – so don’t give up too soon.
- 9 But if you ensure consistency in provision – same time, same place – it is easier for it to become part of someone’s regular routine and therefore become part of their normal student life.
- 10 Just remember – it’s good to talk.

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