

CASE STUDY



Getting female students active



INTRODUCTION



In England, there are currently 1.55 million¹ more men than women taking part in sport once a week.

Women in Sport and British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS), through activation funding by This Girl Can have supported 10 universities to get their inactive female 'students sweating like a pig, feeling like a fox and kicking right in the stereotypes'.

In response to the gender gap in physical activity, Sport England created the groundbreaking This Girl Can campaign. Designed to encourage women to take their first steps from inactive to active through dispelling fears they hold about being judged. Phase one saw a nationwide advertising campaign featuring women sweating and jigging as they exercised. In phase two Sport England have supported organisations to activate the campaign locally.

¹ Sport England, Active People Survey 10 Q4 (October 2015-October 2016).

WHAT DID WE WANT TO KNOW?

BUCS and Women in Sport wanted to further understand what works when engaging inactive and less active female students; bringing together common learnings for universities to apply to increase engagement in physical activity.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

Women in Sport:

- Delivered a workshop for Student Activators to support them to better engage women and girls at their institution. An activator is not necessarily a qualified coach or instructor; but will take some leadership responsibility for sessions and classes, and help to motivate and engage the participants in the activity.
- Delivered online peer support workshops for the student activators to allow them to share experiences of engaging women and girls sport sessions.
- Checked and challenged university sport development teams on their approach to engaging inactive female students.



WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

Across the 10 universities there were some brilliant activities going on and some key themes emerged as being central to successful project delivery.

These are broken down into four main components:

- **Understand Your Audience** – This section looks at how the universities used student feedback to guide the development of their This Girl Can programme.
- **Innovative Interventions** – This section examines how creating opportunities to try different sports can help engage inactive students.
- **Activators** – This section explores the impact that relatable role models can have on increasing participation at university events.
- **Engaging Target Groups** – The section looks at how the universities changed their methods of communication for targeting different groups.

1: UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

The This Girl Can campaign was built on robust insight about how women feel about being active, 75% of the women who took part in the research knew the benefits of being active but something was stopping them². The key to unlocking this potential lays in understanding women's barriers on an emotional and a practical level. Several of the universities took a similar approach, seeking to understand their female students:

Leeds Trinity University collected feedback from students at three coffee mornings across the university. They spoke to women who were engaged and disengaged from sport across all academic areas and age ranges.

"I feel more comfortable if it is just girls [in an activity] because I'm not worried about what boys would think."

Leeds Trinity University Student

University of Bristol used the daily Student Union tea tent to talk to students and raise awareness of their This Girl Can programme.

Nottingham Trent University developed opportunities for personal interaction. Social media is able to reach a high number of people, however unless there is a personal connection or ability for interaction with the message there is a risk of lack of engagement.

Using public spaces such as libraries, cafes and common rooms to promote physical activities enables messages to reach students in a more personal forum, in environments they trust.



² UK Female Aged 14-40 sports participation and latent demand, Sport England's Active People Survey, October 2013.

CASE STUDY - KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

Kingston University's Higher Education Sport Participation and Satisfaction Survey (HESPSS)

showed that there was a significant gender gap in participation, with **42%** of female students taking part **30 minutes per week** compared to **58%** of male students. Using this insight, feedback from previous programmes, student surveys, Student Activator suggestions and a 'This Girl Can' steering group, the project identified four core activities as a focus for their project; football, swimming, dance and self-defence.

"We aimed to break down as many barriers as we could to make these activities appealing to our female audience. Barriers identified through the feedback mechanisms included cost of classes, fear of being judged, lack of skill, time constraints, bad memories from PE sessions at school, worried about making a fool out of themselves, never done it before, don't know the rules, no motivation."

Ian Jennings, Sport and Active Lifestyles Manager

Kingston University focused on the key emotional barriers the This Girl Can campaign identified, some of the strategies they employed included:

- Women were encouraged to come along with a friend or a group they were already affiliated with. They found that approaching established groups of students, such as societies in the Students Union worked well.
- By creating new beginners dance sessions, the women started on a level footing, all having had little or no previous experience. This class was offered as part of their Cultural Diversity Week.
- They created a 'Just go for it' poster campaign that was on the back of all the doors in the female facilities across campus, including halls of residence to encourage the 'feel good factor' rather than just looking good.

The university also addressed some of the practical barriers such as the cost. This BUCS Girl Can sessions were all offered as free activities.



SOME COMMON LEARNINGS

- Ask the students for their feedback and suggestions.
- Talk to the non-sporty student community informally through established networks and organisations in an environment they are comfortable and familiar with.
- Use members of the societies to talk to their peers and encourage participation.

2: INNOVATIVE INTERVENTIONS

'Sport' for many women has baggage. Some of the barriers include; not knowing the rules, bringing the wrong equipment, not being good enough or wearing the wrong kit. To tackle these barriers across the 10 universities, there were a number of creative ideas to engage female students both as participants and in delivering activity.

Kings College delivered The Yoga Groove and Yoga Rave as one-off events where women could participate in a yoga session with disco music, face paint, glitter, glow sticks and bright clothing.

"This has been a great way of developing people's confidence and gives people the opportunity to try out different sports which they have never done before."

Yoga Rave participant

Warwick University enlisted the help of eight female bloggers to be the faces of their campaign. They were asked to write about their experience of exercise and activity in their life. The bloggers were given a clear brief on the reason for their involvement and the university delved deeper into their stories to draw out some key relatable information.

University of Birmingham ran an event called This Brum Girl Can Night In, it was an evening of 21 different sports or activities from Zumba to Ju-Jitsu, Korfbal to Disco Spin; offering something for everyone. The focus was on wellbeing, with a 'Chill Out Corner' providing leaflets and signposting on mental health support.



CASE STUDY - LEEDS TRINITY UNIVERSITY

Alongside delivering more female only sessions and incentivising regular attendance at participation, Leeds Trinity University focused on growing and upskilling their female workforce by:

- Recruiting and training This Girl Can Ambassadors for five clubs to create a link between students who take part in regular competitive activities and those who participate less formally.
- Recruiting and training six This Girl Can Ambassadors outside of the traditional university sports club to support and influence their peers to become more active.
- Recruited 10 female students through the This Girl Can classes to take part in coach education workshops to upskill them in their coaching practices and motivate them to become qualified coaches.

The ambassadors were offered on site and in house **'Introduction to University Sport Activator Programme'** training, which focused on marketing and session delivery. BUCS also hosted half day training session which included an insight based workshop **'Re-Thinking Sport for Women and Girls'** led by Women in Sport and a UK Coaching Behaviour Change workshop.

"Having the opportunity to take part in the This Girl Can training at University of Warwick has broadened my knowledge and awareness of how I can encourage more women to take part in sport. I've learned so much about the different barriers other women face, including mental barriers in association with the fear of judgement, and I'm more determined than ever to direct my energy into helping to break down the barriers."

Grace Moore, This Girl Can Activator



SOME COMMON LEARNINGS

- Identify key influencers within the groups, share their stories and amplify their voices.
- One size doesn't fit all, offer a range of different and non-traditional opportunities for sport and physical activity.
- Don't just talk about 'sport', for many students that has baggage, talk about other activities too.

3: ACTIVATORS

The This Girl Can campaign used ambassadors who were ‘doing their thing’ no matter how they did it or how they looked, to create a public conversation to give all women the sense that they were not alone in feeling judged. Universities involved in the project adopted a similar approach identifying Student Activators from their sporting and non-sporting communities.

This approach not only increased capacity to be able to deliver activity, but gave opportunities for individual students to develop their own leadership and influencing skills.

Learnings from the activators include:

- **Creating a supportive environment** – providing an excellent first experience that matches the expectation set out in the marketing is paramount. If you are advertising a social session then that’s what it has to be.

“When I was leading the running group, I tried to use non-sporty language and encourage a wider group of people to join in.”

Student Activator

- **Lead by example** – Activators need to be relatable role models that take part in the sessions and encourage group members to get stuck in.

“You can’t expect anyone to follow unless you are prepared to do it yourself.”

Student Activator

- **Make sure your own passion and excitement of the project comes through** - even if the women don’t immediately agree to join, they’ll remember that interaction and if it was positive and exciting, they’re more likely to change their minds.

“Sometimes if a group of friends go they may not all join in during the first week but they see it’s fun and go next time.”

Student Activator

- **Offer new sports** - they found students engaged in sports that they won’t have necessarily done at school, so hosting a number of different sessions for people to try and identify what is popular works well.

“I am a much more confident person as through my role I have gained lots of experience of leading sessions and talking to a wide range of different people. I also have a much greater appreciation for what motivates people but also what holds people back, so with this experience I have a better approach to motivating people.”

Student Activator

SOME COMMON LEARNINGS

- Create a positive and supportive environment.
- Share your passion and enthusiasm.
- Lead by example.

4: ENGAGING TARGET GROUPS

All the universities wanted to reach new audiences, with many identifying groups of students to target, they found that building cross university partnerships was essential to be able to achieve this.

University of East Anglia developed links with the Academic Schools through the Deans of Faculty, Heads of Schools and Personal Assistants. A direct promotion to academic peers was coordinated via the 80 Academic Activators whose role was to promote the social sport programmes to the students.

“We have also realised that targeting students through non-sporting routes is one of the best ways of encouraging students to be involved. Targeting students when they are in comfortable surroundings (e.g. societies) has been successful as they are then able to come along with friends and peers from their non-sporting extracurricular activities.”

Becky Wilkinson, Sport Coordinator



University of Bristol consulted with clubs and societies to understand the most appropriate way to deliver activity and tailor communications. Although there were challenges around initially gaining buy-in with the groups, those that did engage had a significant impact on the programme and shaped the content.

“Our usual ways of contacting and communicating with sport teams or clubs was different to liaising with the groups identified in our target audience.”

Lisa Daley, Sports Participation Coordinator

Kingston University's Self Defence class was made a safe space for all women by ensuring men did not enter the space, covering the windows and removing security cameras, thereby also enabling women who would usually wear a hijab to feel comfortable.

“The initial promotional posters were created using the ‘This Girl Can’ kickboxing image and message. However, feedback from students highlighted that the image caused concern therefore, the posters contained only text and no pictures.”

Ian Jennings, Sport & Active Lifestyles Manager

CASE STUDY - STUDENTS' UNION UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON (UCL)

The Islamic society, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) officer, BME Network and International student services

wanted to engage with the non-active female Muslim and BME community studying at UCL. The women were facing barriers to participation due to restrictions in clothing, requirements for privacy during activity and a lack of female role models and imagery in current sporting provisions.

When asked, **79%** of the females engaged in the Islamic Society wanted to access opportunities to take part in Kickboxing to keep fit and to feel more confident about their personal safety. Through initial meetings with UCL's Islamic Society, a few students were identified that would be able to support the project and promote the sessions.

"Be led by the group that you are trying to reach, listen to them and involve them as much as possible. Identify enthusiastic members of the group who can mobilise the rest of the community."

Sarah Tomlinson, Students Union UCL

It was a challenge to find female Kickboxing coaches with experience of working with Muslim communities, however a little persistence led to the creation of an six week programme of women only Kickboxing sessions delivered with female coaches and in a room made completely private.

"There are usually very few opportunities like this available for Muslim BME women. Therefore, this was invaluable. The instructors were amazing...One session, in particular stood out to me as the instructor taught us some self-defence skills. Overall the sessions were engaging, stimulating, and most of all, fun."

Participant at UCL



SOME COMMON LEARNINGS

- Recruiting activators from within the community you are targeting can help make the sessions more accessible.
- Consult with target groups to understand any cultural nuances that need to be considered for this audience.
- Find an instructor for the sessions that has experience of working with the group you are targeting.

SUMMARY



All of the universities engaged in the activation project, found the This Girl Can campaign was an effective tool for engaging with the ‘less-sporty’ students. Although they approached their own projects differently there were some similar themes.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Student Activators** – Having a relatable workforce can help create the right environment for the audience you are trying to reach. Engaging students in these roles offers them a development opportunity as well as getting a new audience moving.
- **Engaging new audiences means doing things differently** – Whether it is about communicating in new ways, running new activities or finding new coaches. Doing the same thing will only produce more of the same.
- **Consultation is key** – If you don’t ask then you won’t know, understanding female students is the only way to support them in being active. Understanding cultural nuances or just how they feel about being active can make the difference in tipping them into activity.

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