



# How to... 'engage with female students'

## *Why it's important*

Young females aged 16–25 will be at different stages of their life, some may be working or may have started a family and some may be studying full or part-time. Females will face different barriers to participation in sport and physical activity throughout their lives. This factsheet should help to understand the barriers faced by young female students and give some ideas on how best to deliver sport and physical activity to them.



### **Ease of access, time and venue**

It is important to make sure that the sessions are easy for female students to access. The more complicated the process is for participants to join the less likely they are to attend and to return.

The session time is important; some students feel that as soon as they return home after school or college they will not leave the house again to take part in an activity. The most successful programmes have delivered sessions straight after the school or college day has finished. Lunchtime activities are viewed as less desirable as they often weren't long enough and students didn't want to go to their afternoon lessons if they were sweaty after exercising. Some women and girls are keen to use community facilities in the evenings for group exercise classes and swimming.

The choice of venue is also very important, delivering sessions on the school or college site or very close by is ideal. Consider how the participants will get home after the activity; is there an alternative venue close to the main transport links that could be used instead? Young women and girls are happy using community-based venues as long as the facilities are suitable and it is a place where they are comfortable going.

### **Cost**

The majority of young females appreciate that there needs to be a cost associated with sports activities. Research shows that £2 or £3 was considered acceptable for an hour's session. Many students are used to hunting out bargains or deals where they feel like they get more for their money so consider using promotions to get participants attending the first few times and loyalty schemes to keep them coming long term. Promotions including buy-one-get-one-free for a participant and their friend or bring a friend to get a discount are all attractive for young females.

## **Factors to consider**

### **Barriers and reasons for not participating**

Our research shows that one of the main reasons why female students are not taking part in sport or physical activity is because they don't feel they have enough free time. The pressures of studying mean they are often snowed under with college work. When not studying they prioritise their free time with working part-time, relaxing, seeing friends or spending time with their family.

### **Partnerships with schools and colleges**

Some of the most successful programmes for attracting 16–18 year old women have been conducted in partnership with local schools and colleges. Using a school or college venue will make the activity easy to access and convenient. Scheduling activity as part of the students' timetable is a good way to get participants to attend on a regular basis. Make sure the activity is not portrayed as physical education or school sport. A number of female students are not participating because of previous negative experiences of school sport. Make it clear in the marketing material that the sessions are not being delivered by the school and that there is an external provider coming in to deliver the sessions.

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*For more guidance on choosing the right venue and time take a look at the 'Right time' and 'Right venue' Us Girls guides.*

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## Activity type

The way the activity is designed and delivered is very important to ensure it not only attracts new participants but also keeps them coming back. Female students have indicated that they are interested in sessions which focus less on competition and more on getting fit and having fun. They would like provision which includes a wider range of activities or different formats of traditional sports. Other factors such as having a good coach or instructor, female only sessions and the provision of equipment or kit are also important.

The inclusion of music provides a real motivating factor for young people. Having music on in the background can create a really fun atmosphere. Consider allowing the young people to create playlists of their own to bring to each session.

Again make sure the participants understand that you are not delivering a PE or school sport session, straight away this will put off a lot of young females who are not currently participating. Use your advertising or marketing to show that you are delivering something different.

## Friends

For young females having someone to exercise with is very important as they may not be confident enough to turn up and join in alone. Encourage participants to bring their friends or close female family members. A number of successful projects have been flexible on the age category for the activity meaning participants are open to bring their mum, sister, cousin or aunt to the sessions. Research suggests that exercising together is a great way for females to spend quality time with their mum or sister.

## Lifestyle

Understanding the lifestyle of young females who may be studying is key to delivering successful activity programmes for them. Research suggests that for some females, school or college commitments and work may be perceived as more important than physical activity participation. As young women get older academic demands may decrease and be balanced with other work and domestic commitments. Taking part in sport and physical activity is seen as a much lower priority than college, family, friends, hobbies, relationships and part-time work. So activities need to be made as simple to access as possible and allow participants to join in when they can – rather than feeling like they have to 'sign up' to a rigorous schedule of sessions.

## Links to training and employment

Links to opportunities for participants to learn new skills that might help with employment are a good option to engage with young female students. Young people are often looking for CV-enhancing skills or training. Working with young people to identify volunteering roles they can undertake as part of the programme may make involvement more attractive. Those new to the project may prefer to help out at sessions rather than participate at the very start of a programme. A number of projects have successfully identified potential future leaders through their activity and are supporting them to gain entry level coaching and leadership qualifications.

## Marketing and communication

The way you promote your activities to potential new participants is one of the most important parts of getting them there for the first time. Research suggests that students do not look closely at posters that are displayed on school or college notice boards but that they are much more likely to hear about different activity through word of mouth from either their tutors or fellow students. Getting the messages about your activity to the teachers and tutors may be the best way of getting them out to the students.

During a recent research study, students identified Facebook as a good way of getting messages to them. They are often already part of school or college groups so by posting information on those pages they are likely to see it.

When producing marketing materials such as posters, flyers or event website pages, research suggests that female students prefer photographs of real people taking part in the activity rather than cartoon pictures. This gives them an idea of what the session looks like and what they should wear. Bright colours and short sharp headings also make marketing materials stand out. Research shows that many students do not look at notices boards around college buildings so think innovatively about where to put up posters, the back of toilet cubicle doors is very popular and a place where females may actually take more notice.



## Working with schools and colleges

Be aware that where responsibility for sport and physical activity sits will be different in each school or college setting. In many schools or colleges the Student Services Team will be responsible for sport and in others it will be specific teachers and lecturers. In more 'sporty' schools and colleges where there is a sports academy, where sports courses are delivered or where there are sports facilities there may be a dedicated Sports Team which would be responsible for all levels of sport from recreational through to competition. It is important to ensure you are talking to the right person within the school or college and it can often take time to find them.

## Case studies

### Mytime Active – Us Girls Bromley

In Bromley, London, the Us Girls project is being delivered by Mytime Active. They are delivering weekly Us Girls sessions in Dance and Zumba for the students at Orpington and Bromley Colleges. It took time for them to build a good relationship with the college staff but they are both now fully on board and enjoying what Us Girls has to deliver in their setting. This project regularly consults with the students via questionnaires and being present at open days and college events. They have recently recruited new instructors to be able to deliver 'Freez' – a hip-hop dance style based on what the girls are saying they want. As part of the college talent shows Mytime Active are looking to support the delivery of a Dance Showcase towards the end of term.

### AoC Pilot

Derby College is one of three colleges in the East Midlands delivering Us Girls sessions. They are delivering martial arts/self-defence classes as a result of demand from the female students. They have delivered badminton sessions but these have not been as popular as the self-defence classes. The college is also planning to deliver an Us Girls festival in the summer term. As preparation for this they have hosted a Streetgames 'Organising and Managing Events' Workshop through the StreetGames Training Academy which 18 students attended. These students will be responsible for organising and coordinating the girls' festival which will consist of a variety of sporting activities.

## Top tips

- Make sessions fun, let fun and enjoyment be the focus of the activity and advertise this. Use music to create a motivating atmosphere.
- Provide activities that are low cost or affordable with no upfront costs or joining fees, consider using loyalty discounts or buy-one-get-one-free deals.
- The activity has to be easy to access – think about the venue and time carefully. Can you provide something close-by straight after college?
- Understand that students will feel added pressure from their school or college work – do you need to take a break during exam time and start again once exams are finished?
- Find an instructor or coach who is friendly, approachable and someone that the participants can relate to. This will help with retention.

## Further information

[www.usgirls.org.uk](http://www.usgirls.org.uk)

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