

**Undergraduate students' perspectives regarding recreational sport  
at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University:**

**A pilot study**

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Recreational considerations are thought to be second to academics as regards a student's choice of a university. These considerations are strengthened when a student experiences a sense of belonging, created by participation in recreational sport. Students' perceptions regarding recreational sports at the North-West University are, however, unclear.

**Aim:** The aim of this paper was to assist in the students' perceptions regarding recreational sport.

**Method:** The study was an extension of a pilot study carried out in 2013. A qualitative research design of semi-structured phenomenological focus groups was used. Sixteen students ( $n = 16$ ) participated, and were divided into two focus groups of eight participants each ( $n_1 = 8$  &  $n_2 = 8$ ). The focus groups' responses were recorded (together with field notes and observations) and were then transcribed, using Atlas.TI software. After coding the content of the focus groups, themes were identified, namely: reasons for participation in recreational sport; understanding of recreational sport; and constraints to participation in recreational sport. Validity of the data was improved by co-coding, comparing data to quantitative data, and triangulation.

**Results and discussion:** Results indicated that most students had misconceptions about the definition of recreational sport, but its benefits, such as an increase in psychological and physical well-being, as well as social and emotional enhancement, were well known among them.

**Conclusion:** The results support the concept that recreational sport is integral to the students' positive perception of a university.

**Keywords:** Perceptions, recreational sport, student, university, instrument design

## Introduction

During the 2012/13 financial year, the North-West University (NWU) reported a 69% decrease in net surplus (NWU annual report, 2013). A possible reason for the financial situation could be a decrease in student numbers and an increase in expenses, such as additional sport and recreation infrastructure (Turman & Hendel, 2004; Woosnam, Dixon, & Brookover RS, 2006). During 2012, the NWU experienced a 12% dropout figure of first-year undergraduate students (T. Eloff, personal communication, 24 May, 2013) while plans for upgrades and extensions to sport and recreation facilities were approved. Such upgrades offer unmistakable benefits to universities' strategic planning, as well as increasing student retention and persistence by adding to their feeling of belonging at university through recreational sport participation (Wade, 1991; Miller, 2011).

Recreational sport is an opportunity for students to gain physical fitness, overall enjoyment, participation, social interaction and learning opportunities, and includes formal and informal cooperative or competitive sports and physical activity (Eitzen & Sage, 1989). The literature suggests that a relationship exists between students' perceptions (which consist of awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and intentions of their surroundings), and their physical activity behaviours (Humpel, Marshall, Leslie, Bauman, & Owen, 2004). Thus a positive perception of recreational sport leads

to increased participation (Humpel et al., 2004). As a strategy, it confirms the observations of Monaghan (1984), who stated that recreation facilities were second only to academics with regard to a student's choice of university. An increase in the retention of students concurs with

the findings of Turman and Hendel (2004), who maintain that universities are investing a large amount of money to upgrade and build campus recreation facilities in order to maintain competitiveness in social, academic, and sport areas, as well as attract new students. In the current global economic situation, it seems that the university should focus on investing in specific sport and recreation upgrades and extensions that will maintain a competitive advantage while accurately reflecting what students want. Research regarding these perceptions of recreation attitudes and behaviours is therefore of great importance, as no studies on this topic have yet been undertaken at the NWU.

The present study aimed to add useful information to the process of assisting students' perceptions regarding recreational sport. The main purpose was to measure students' perceptions of recreational sport. Such information would sketch a clearer picture of what students perceive recreational sport to be, their current participation patterns, and their reasons for non-participation at the NWU.

## Methodology

This study was an extension of a quantitative pilot study completed in 2013, also with the purpose of determining students' perceptions

## Participants

Sixteen participants ( $n = 16$ ) were drawn from the same population as the 2013 study, using a purposive sample. The sample was divided into two focus groups of 8 participants each ( $n_1 = 8$  &  $n_2 = 8$ ). Both male and female, full-time, historically second-year students aged between 18 and 30 years were included, with an average age of 20 years. The sample consisted of students from day houses,

## Measuring instruments

The focus groups were semi-structured and the interview schedule was compiled beforehand. The interview schedule for the focus groups was based on literature, and designed to explore specific topics (Greeff,

## Procedure

Discussions were recorded, which made it possible to reconstruct the content and process the sessions in a relatively dependable manner (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). To ensure anonymity, all participants were given a letter (A-H), and the assistant to the interviewer wrote down the order in which the participants spoke. This

of recreational sport. A qualitative research design using focus group discussions was used to determine their perceptions of sport and to measure their reasons for participation in it.

campus residences, and private accommodation enrolled at the faculties of Arts, Natural Sciences, Education Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences, Engineering and Health Sciences. The sample consisted of 63% female and 37% male students, 75% of whom were White, 19% African, and 2% Coloured. Of the sample, 69% resided in campus residences, 12% were part of day houses, and 19% had private accommodation.

2011). It included the following sections: individual perceptions of recreation, reasons for participating in recreational sport, constraints hindering individuals from participating in recreational sport, and recommendations.

method enabled the researchers to identify which of the participants was speaking during the transcription of the audio recording. To distinguish between the focus groups, a 1 or 2 were added to the letters, (A1, B1, C1, etc. and A2, B2, etc.). After sampling, the focus groups were scheduled and conducted during a period of two weeks. Every focus group discussion had two researchers, one interviewer and one taking field notes.

## Data analysis

Data was analysed by using the field notes and writing additional memos, and recordings from the focus groups were transcribed. The last step of data-analysis consisted of identifying emerging trends and patterns,

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the NWU (NWU – 00068 – 13 – A1). Participants were given the choice of participating, and were free to withdraw from

## Results and discussion

Student responses (n=16) from the focus group discussions indicated that only one student had a basic understanding of the concept of recreational sport, and stated: "It's basically sport you do in your free-time to relax", while another affirmed: "It's not a hobby, yet you enjoy doing it." This understanding was based on key elements from Eitzen & Sage's (1989) definition of recreational sport. These key elements included that recreational sport is an opportunity for students to participate voluntarily, for a multitude of reasons, and to participate in formal and informal cooperative or competitive sports and physical activity. However, all the students (n=16) were aware of the benefits associated with participation in recreational sport.

Benefits that were experienced through participation in recreational sport included stress management, relaxation, socialisation, and an increase in overall physical and

comparing the identified trends and patterns, and finally coding the data by means of the Atlas.Ti programme. Validity was increased by co-coding and comparing data with the quantitative data obtained from the 2013 pilot study, as well as triangulation with literature.

the focus group study without any penalties. Furthermore, consent forms were signed and permission was individually obtained from all participants to be voice recorded. Again, anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms all the way throughout the process.

psychological well-being. Some of those most frequently mentioned benefits were the following:

"Yes endorphins are released and it makes you feel better and your stress levels decreases"

"Many people don't participate in recreational sport as individuals, rather when one participates there are people around you. It is therefore a way to experience a sense of belonging and receive recognition."

This corresponds with the literature which displays a significant increase in overall psychological and physical well-being, better stress management, social benefits (such as a feeling of belonging), as well as improved communication skills (Bryant, Banta, & Bradley, 1995; Henchy, 2013; Kull, 2002).

As identified from literature it could be expected that male and female students' perceptions about specific topics such as reasons for participation or non-participation

might differ (Kilpatrick, Herbert, & Bartholomew, 2005). The female students responded that they felt unsafe when participating in recreational sports, whereas the male students did not. A reason for this could be that the male students felt they would be seen as less masculine if they said they felt unsafe. The results also indicated that all students were more inclined to participate in recreational sport that is fun and new, rather than prolonged and obligatory. This corresponds with the definition of recreational sport, that participation is not forced or obliged, but rather intrinsically motivating and voluntary, and includes a state of mind (Priest & Gass, 2005). One male student indicated that the obligatory nature of the residence rugby made him feel that it was no longer a recreational sport. He stated that

“It becomes an obligation or so it feels to me and then it isn’t fun for me anymore and you lose all your interest in it.”

## Conclusion

Literature and the results of this study support the notion that recreational sport is integral to students’ positive perception of a university, in this case the NWU. Through recreational sport the NWU will experience benefits which include a better retention of students and therefore financial benefits, while students most often experience a sense of social and personal accomplishment, exposure to new experiences, and health benefits during participation in recreational sport. The focus groups underlined the importance of increasing the awareness of recreational sport. In addition, the survey instrument

Some students said that they were compelled to participate in order to achieve higher residence participation marks. Although feeling compelled is not recreational, it has a secondary effect, namely to increase the amount of exposure to new activities that a student experiences. As stated by participant F1, “at most residences if you have no participation marks it is the first thing that pops into your head, so you try to partake in as many different sports as possible, even if you don’t like them, just to increase your participation marks.” Unfortunately all students in the focus group (n= 16) could only name a few recreational sport activities such as squash, badminton, rock climbing and dancing, although they were aware that there are many more. The students attributed this to the inability of the NWU to create awareness among students.

demonstrated that it could be understood by all students, and that information gathered by it could help the NWU gain a better sense of the students’ perspectives of recreational sport. Information from this type of research could also be used by the NWU when considering marketing strategies and promotional materials.

This study was conducted with a small sample, and results cannot be generalised to the whole population. It was difficult to obtain enough participants for the focus groups. However, after both focus groups, the participants wanted to know if they could participate in focus groups again, and if they were going to

take place regularly. It is recommended that the NWU create a platform to engage students regularly to gain their view regarding recreational sport. During both focus groups, it was suggested that there should be an open day to showcase all recreational sports, to increase awareness among students. Some participants suggested that this open day should take place in open spaces on campus,

with opportunities for enabling students to participate in the various recreational sports, for instance table tennis and volleyball. In this way, they can experience the various recreational sports first-hand, decide if they like one, and want to pursue it further. It was also suggested that there should be at least four of these kinds of open days throughout the year.

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