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Faith, Sport and Disengaged Youth

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Abstract

Set against a backdrop of faith-based explorations of sport with disengaged youth, the present paper presents findings from a project which sought to re-engage young people with sport via Christian youth ministry. Locating project participants at the center of the analysis, the paper draws on empirical data from participant-observation and semi-structured interviews with six respondents to analyze the effects of sports training provision on the lives of those concerned. Although several sports ministry organizations work with both Christians and non-Christians, to date none appear to have been focused on the training of non-Christian young people to become sports leaders while at the same time exploring the Christian faith. The principal aim of the present study is to explore whether sports leadership training is a relevant and successful way of exploring a series of Christian beliefs, principles, and values. The secondary aim is to assess the impact of the sporting provision on the participants themselves. Findings suggest that all project participants reported that the Academy had a significant impact on their lives. The paper concludes that the project was successful in broadening the personal and spiritual life experiences of participants citing opportunities around inclusion, achievement, and increased self-worth as the most important outcomes.

Introduction

If we would know ourselves, as counsel on the ancient Temple at Delphi advises, the study of sports in all its connections to the rest of art and life would seem to be an ideal quest for understanding of self and the world (Bryant, cited in Parry, Nesti, and Watson 2010: ix).

The connection between sport and Christianity has long since been recognized and acknowledged (Watson, Weir and Friend; Watson and Parker). “Muscular Christianity” developed in the residential public schools and then in the churches and the armed forces

and was taken across the world via the British Empire. Similar movements developed in the United States. After 1900, commercial, voluntary, and state provision of sport increased, the latter markedly after 1970. But, in the UK at least, sports ministry appears to have been developing more recently (Collins and Parker). In the case of many Christian organizations such as Youth for Christ and Ambassadors in Sport (AIS), sport is used as an evangelical tool to attract people to hear the Christian message. Alternatively, for organizations such as Christians in Sport (CIS), it can be viewed as missiology, with Christian sports players encouraged to *pray* for their teammates, *play* in ways that honor God, and *say* something of the good news of Jesus (CIS). However, to date, though there have been secular projects, there have been few attempts to train non-Christian, disengaged young people to become sports leaders while at the same time exploring the Christian faith.

The decline in church attendance in post-war Britain has been well rehearsed. Recent figures suggest that in England only 2.7% of the population attend a church service each month, this against an overall drop of 6% in UK church membership between 2005 and 2010. Amidst these figures youth membership is often seen as particularly difficult to maintain (Brierley). Hence, Christian organizations are trying to find new initiatives that will enable people to explore the Christian faith (Smith and Walton; Goodhew, Roberts and Volland).

Sport, Youth, and Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is multi-faceted, low or no income is a major factor, but family breakdown, poor health, bad housing, poor social networks, inability or lack of confidence to access legal entitlements and exercise rights all contribute (Collins 2009; Collins and Kay; Age Concern; Parker, Pitchford, Moreland, and Farooq). On top of poverty from unemployment, and lack of direction through no involvement in training or education after leaving school (so-called “NEETs,” comprising 8.1% of 16-18 year-olds in 2011; Department for Education), peer pressure to share in anti-social behavior and lack of positive role models lead to youth disaffection and disengagement (Social Exclusion Unit). A holistic/multi-organizational approach is needed to combat these trends, but such ventures are often lacking in focus, will, organization, finance, human resourcing, and a commitment beyond the short term (Audit Commission).

Levitas summarizes three main reasons for social disengagement as having no money, no morals. and no jobs. Kirk, using biblical texts (Micah 6:8; Isaiah 58:6; Psalm 72:1-4), argues that “to do justice is to enable the disadvantaged to escape permanently from the trap of deprivation in order that they may become full, responsible members of the community. Justice includes; injustice excludes” (105). Of the many attempts to define community, one which has been used in recent years by the UK government states that community is: “. . . the web of personal relationships, groups, networks, traditions and patterns of behavior that exist among those who share physical neighborhoods, socio-economic conditions or common understandings and interests” (Strategic Framework for Community Development: 5). Following the initiatives of previous Conservative administrations such as Neighborhood Watch and Active Citizenship, New Labour brought to the table a more localized Third Way which championed notions of inclusion and solidarity, and which was explained by Giddens as a “practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighborhoods,

towns and larger local areas”(79). After due time and public disillusion, the 2010 Coalition government launched the “Big Society” in an attempt to return to local communities (Norman; Ishkanian and Szreter).

A national example of voluntary action was the 70,000 Games Makers at the 2012 London Olympics, and more locally for this study, Gloucestershire County Council’s “Big Community Offer” (2011), whereby local organizations with an adequate business plan could take over operations such as libraries and youth centers at a peppercorn rent. King shows that 63% of local authorities think they will become enablers rather than direct providers of community activities like sport. But such operations require organizational and social capacity that often needs building in areas like social equality, ethnicity and disability awareness, and knowledge of common needs and goals. According to Sugden and Tomlinson, sport can deliver such as these:

Sport is at once both trivial and serious, inconsequential yet of symbolic significance . . . Sport in many cases informs and refuels the popular memory of communities, and offers a source of collective identification and community expression for those who follow teams and individuals (3).

Sports development literature has shown examples of success of re-engaging young people through sports projects, beginning with Solent Sports Counselling (Collins and Kay) and Streetsport (McCormack), and then West Yorkshire Sports Counselling (Taylor and Nichols) and numerous other schemes (Kay; Collins 2009; Kay and Bradbury; Sandford, Armour and Duncombe; Sandford and Duncombe; Nichols, 2007). One that was sustained for a decade was Positive Futures, a partnership between the Youth Justice Board, Sport England, and the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Coordination Unit (Positive Futures), working with targeted groups of young people involved with crime and at risk in 119 high-crime localities. However, those with more noticeable success do not just provide sport as an alternative entertainment but involve leadership development and volunteering (Kay and Bradbury; Mawson and Parker; Farooq, Moreland, Parker, and Pitchford), and other pro-social skills (Nichols), which they can use in relationship to their home society (Sandford, Armour and Warmington; Parker and Meek).

Leadership development literature highlights a series of helpful circumstances from which leaders commonly emerge, such as having good role models, using outdoor activities, and role-playing as well as working hard (Rajan; Wright and Côté; Bentley and Turnbull; Kay; Coalter 2011). Some have to overcome low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and adverse consequences of stress (Gill). But leaders also have to be able to form and lead a team, helping them overcome storms, giving them norms, and ensuring they perform (Tuckman and Jensen).

To date, there appears to be little, if any, academic research on Christian ministries working with disengaged young people through sports leadership programs and whether this is an appropriate way in which to explore the Christian faith. This paper intends to address this need and provide new insight into this area of youth sports ministry.

Context and Methods

The research findings presented here are derived from a community-based project which sought to re-engage young people with sport via Christian youth ministry. The main aims of the project were: (i) to investigate whether sports leadership training was a relevant and successful way of exploring a series of Christian beliefs, principles and values, and (ii) to assess the impact of sporting provision on the personal and spiritual development of the participants themselves. The project was conceived as an offshoot from existing sports ministry work in the small town of Shipden¹ in the South West of England, which was administered by a local Christian charity. As a consequence of the community contacts that the charity had established between 2008 and 2011, one of its outreach workers (the first author of this paper) launched the project in the spring of 2011 as a “Sports Academy” aimed at local young people between the ages of 14-25 years. The project was advertised through posters and word of mouth in Shipden, its youth club, and some secondary schools; applicants were interviewed by a panel of key volunteers and youth workers. Six of the eight participants selected for the Academy feature in the present research, the seventh being pre-disposed and then recovering from a car accident, and the eighth showing less commitment.

The project ran for six months and was built around weekly sports coaching sessions, each of which was followed by a communal meal and coverage of the *Christianity Explored* course (<http://www.christianityexplored.org>). In addition, there was a teambuilding day in Week 3 and an outdoor activity weekend in Week 5. All participants took part in the Sports Leaders UK “Community Sports Leaders Award,” and were encouraged (and helped) to gain coaching qualifications in basketball, football (soccer), rugby, and gymnastics. In the summer of 2011 the group led a sports camp for local primary school children.

Shipden is a small rural market town with Anglican, Quaker, and United Reformed Churches and a mixture of affluent properties and social housing. The community hosts a primary school and a multi-games area (MUGA). The local part-time sports ministry focuses its work on the Year 5 and 6 primary school pupils via setting up sports clubs within the town’s social housing area. The study adopted methods of data collection traditionally associated with qualitative research (i.e., participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis (see Bryman; Silverman). The first interviews with participants were conducted after eight weeks of the Academy, and the second were conducted ten-eleven months later, that is, four-five months after the end of the Academy’s six month program. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Subsequent data analysis revealed three key themes related to respondents’ perceived benefits of their sporting involvement during the project: (i) opportunities and experiences, (ii) social inclusion and family environments, and (iii) achievements, self-worth, and personal transformation.

Opportunities and Experiences

For some years, politicians, social commentators, and academics have proclaimed the social benefits of sport: leadership, teamwork, and discipline are words and concepts which

¹ In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

are commonly used in association with sporting endeavor (Collins 2009). To what extent, we might ask, did the Shipden sports academy endorse or negate such claims?

All six respondents talked about the Academy in positive terms expressing the personal benefits of their experiences. Several came from disruptive family relationships and had low self-esteem and social capital (Sandford, Armour, and Warmington). At the time of the project, Malcolm and Trevor were unemployed and, as a consequence, classified as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), a label associated with distinct social disadvantage (Baldwin, Coles, and Mitchell). Both articulated connections between family background, a lack of educational engagement, and present life circumstance:

I've got quite a basic background with qualifications as far as it goes . . . I was supposed to go on to college, but it never really materialized and I just found myself in dead-end jobs . . . I became quite disillusioned, to be completely honest, with the way that life was panning out. I grew up with my three younger brothers and my Mum. Dad moved out when we was young . . . I probably misbehaved more than I should have . . . and maybe didn't reach my full potential . . . I probably started messing with, y'know, possibly the wrong crowd and just got a bit out of control (Malcolm).

I was a forklift driver . . . but I quit that which weren't the best idea, because it ended up that I had to lose my flat and move back home with mum . . . I managed to be independent for about six months. Ended up back at Mum's, which is where I've been for just over a year . . . To be honest I didn't do well at school at all, I got kicked out (Trevor).

Central to these personal narratives is recognition of being held back by a lack of educational attainment (see Baldwin et al.; Levitas; Roche and Annesley; Coles, England, and Rugg). Moreover, Malcolm reflected on how, before embarking on the Academy, he felt trapped by not knowing how to access opportunities that might change his life for the better:

I would generally spend my days moping around, feeling sorry for myself . . . I knew that there were ways of improving my life, and I knew that there were things that were achievable, but whether or not I felt committed enough to want to make those changes then was something I hadn't really thought of or really put to practice.

It was clear that what both Malcolm and Trevor were lacking were altogether broader and more holistic life experiences (Holroyd). At the same time they were also lacking significant others who could open up such opportunities and encourage them to expand their personal ambitions and boundaries. In Malcolm's case it was his primary school PE teacher who opened up the possibility of him taking part in the Shipden Sports Academy; a venture which he was clearly ready for “. . . It felt to me that something that I had been searching for my whole life, and . . . something had just popped up, and I personally thought it suited me. And I jumped at the opportunity . . .”

It is not uncommon for sport (and particularly sporting interventions) to be seen as an avenue for youth development (Holt; Mangan), re-involvement and re-integration into community life (Collins 2009), and personal growth via previously unexplored events. The

outdoor activity weekend in Week 5 of the Academy project provided a case in point. Malcolm described the weekend as “. . . absolutely amazing, something that I couldn't have saw myself doing a couple of years back.” Trevor and Bradley expressed similar feelings:

[It] will always stand out because I think it was stuff I had never done before . . . one of the best weekends I have ever had . . . I am actually getting up, meeting people and doing stuff which I never would do . . . (Trevor).

When we went away to [outdoor activity center] . . . That night we went out badger hunting with everyone, all that stuff, looking at all the badgers, and doing the activities together and just being with each other (Bradley).

The sense of collective enjoyment that Bradley articulates here emerged frequently during interviews. Indeed, it appeared that more than anything else the Academy was something that was just fun to be involved in; a place where participants could relax, feel safe, and simply be themselves. In particular, it provided something of a contrast to the monotony and boredom of life in a small rural town. For example, Ben talked of how “. . . I've lived in Shipden near enough all my life and . . . nothing never changes; still the same as it was when I was when I was a kid.” For Bradley, too, weekly Academy sessions provided respite from the lackluster routine that he had found himself in. “On Tuesday evenings . . . all I would be doing normally is just either being at home kicking a ball around with my mates, doing nothing really.” Moreover, because the Academy was aimed at developing both personal skills and community engagement, it became a platform for a new vision for Shipden, as Ben stated:

. . . [W]e are raising funds for the gym . . . I think it's what's needed round Shipden [as] there isn't such a thing. I think the majority of people round the area would be able to come out of them self. Just like I've been doing.

Of course, alongside assessing the impact of sporting provision on the personal development of participants, one of the central aims of the Academy project was to investigate whether sports leadership training was a relevant and successful way of exploring a series of Christian beliefs, principles, and values. This was done via participant exposure to the *Christianity Explored* course, which they all knew would form part of the Academy program, and which appeared to be well received. Trevor talked of how the “sessions on the Bible” were something that he could “actually . . . relate to.” Likewise, Ben described how he, Trevor, and Malcolm would “talk about it [the *Christianity Explored* course] quite a bit . . . because we all have different opinions . . . and we explore that . . . and sometimes have a laugh and a joke . . . so we are interested . . .” Hayden, too, felt comfortable with discussions around spirituality: “The Christian side of things has definitely not been forced on us. It opens your minds to it all really, it is an eye opener.” Murray explains that modern missiology has to be grounded and incarnational. The Academy seemed to provide a safe and palatable space for exploration in this respect, as Malcolm noted:

[T]he emphasis of the Academy has been put mainly on sports leadership. But I think I could probably speak for all . . . of us who have taken part in the Academy just because I feel I am close enough to these guys now to know how they feel about things. I can say that the Christian aspect of it has

definitely given us a lot to think about [in] our own lives and maybe probably made us more aware of our wrongdoings and possibly even made us in the long term, better people.

Social Inclusion and Family Environments

Significant among Academy participants was the formation of relationships at a personal and wider community level, both of which are an established and accepted feature of sports development programs (Shields and Bredemeier; Goodman; Kay). This produced a “family feel” to the Academy, where everyone enjoyed being part of a collective venture – coaches, leaders, and Academy members alike. Ben confirmed this stating, “[M]eeting the people from the rest of the . . . Academy has been my highlight – they are a bunch of good lads. They are good and fun, real fun people.” This sense of cohesion emerged primarily because the majority of Academy participants had shared backgrounds and various things in common. Having said that, some did not know each other beforehand, but this did not detract from the sense of collectivity in play, as Trevor noted:

I have seen Bradley walking around Shipden for years, but never spoke to him till the Academy. Same with Malcolm . . . It is like we are a close little family . . . and every week we get stronger.

In terms of the benefits of sporting intervention in relation to the development of social capital, there is evidence to suggest that the Shipden Academy was successful in its broadening of participant experience. Collins discusses the distinction between “bonding” and “bridging,” the former being the construction and maintenance of relationships between people in similar life circumstances and situations (such as friends and family), the latter being concerned with weaker connections across geographical, ethnic, and/or other social boundaries (2007). Here we have evidence of both the reinforcement of familiar relationships and the construction and development of those outside of this realm.

Participation also clearly promoted a sense of collective identity (Sugden and Tomlinson; Wilson and White). Academy leaders encouraged collective actions in the weekly group sessions but also through the outdoor activity weekend and a team-building day at a local university, acknowledged by members Malcolm, Brian, and Bradley as a significant step in bonding. After the first month, members were presented with their training kit (T-shirts, tracksuit, shorts, and a cap) at an evening event to which most brought their parents. The following week there was a photo-shoot for the local press. Members were expected to wear the kit for external events. Also after the Tuesday evening sports sessions (and before the *Christianity Explored* discussions), local church members cooked a meal at the Academy leader’s house. Ben attested:

The Academy is very caring people . . . To be honest . . . it’s overwhelming in one way, because it’s not what you expect from round here. Real nice, nice atmosphere. You can feel comfortable and not have to worry about anything. You’re in safe company all round . . . I was a shy, closed-in person. I never really got to know anyone. But once you do get to know everyone then it makes you realize that everyone is in the same boat . . . I have got people backing me who are like – go for it!

Shared values were also important – the sports qualifications, the commitment to weekly attendance, doing the “homework,” and the way in which the underlying faith-based values came up during the *Christianity Explored* discussions:

Religion and sport sort of do go together through the teaching and the morals. Like looking out for each other and respecting each other. I think they go together pretty good (Trevor).

Achievements, Self-Worth, and Personal Transformation

Evident in interview discussions with Academy members were vestiges of previous research findings concerning the personal benefits of sporting involvement and the motivational stimulus that this can provide (see Coalter 2004; Collins 2009; Muncie). Indeed, several participants experienced a real sense of change through their involvement with the Academy; Malcolm was just one example:

I think it has given me a new lease of life in a way that now when people say things about me, they usually say them in a way that is positive. I was used to being told of my mistakes. I think that helps somebody grow in confidence quite well, you know.

The gaining of qualifications had been a particular source of self-esteem for Malcolm (as it had for Brian and Hayden):

I'd receive an email that said “You have passed, become a Level 2 Fitness Instructor” an’ I’m like, “That’s why I am doing this. That’s what makes it brilliant” . . . A couple of years ago I couldn’t have seen myself doing this, and now I’ve actually got something to write on my CV that looks pretty impressive, so I am chuffed, yeah. So far we have done Level 2 Fitness Instructing, passed with flying colors – thank you very much! Level 1 Basketball, First Aid. And we actually begin Level 1 Football today.

Trevor also experienced a sense of life change:

At the moment it has changed my life. I have got First Aid, Level 1 Basketball Assistant Coach, . . . Gym Instructor’s Level 2 that qualifies me to work in a gym. That was my aim. I’ve always wanted to work in a gym or own a gym. Then I’ve got Community Sports Leaders Level 2. I never thought I’d get any of these. It makes me feel like I’m actually worth something now – so that’s pretty cool.

The sports leadership sessions were taught experientially, and people learned from their mistakes and through role playing of real life situations (Bentley and Turnbull; Martinek and Hellison), which Hayden and Bradley confirmed they enjoyed, especially the summer camp. Participants also relished the opportunity to take on added responsibility, for example, during their coaching sessions at the local leisure center; Trevor noted:

[T]he first teaching sessions with all the kids . . . that was like – this is actually it, this is actually the test, where I can see what I could do and what I can’t do . . . being on my own I am pretty chuffed with myself.

Such empowerment also involved a sense of risk, as Trevor acknowledged:

Staying away from home, looking after kids, I have never done that before either, so each one was like, being on our own as a group – that’s not too bad, we are all adults and we can cope but 40 kids, that’s just like – wow, I am actually in over my head here, what do I do if something goes wrong?

Central to sports coaching tuition within the Academy was a servant leadership model (Greenleaf; Hammermeister et al.). As time went on what became apparent to participants was that not only was this a model that Academy leaders verbally promoted but one that they actively lived out during the course of their everyday work. To this end, participants grew to greatly admire and appreciate the way Academy leaders conducted themselves, both personally and professionally. This engendered a strong sense of role modeling and mentoring (Gill), as Malcolm and Bradley explained:

I . . . have people like the leaders and [local church member] who I now live with, who during a really difficult time in my life . . . were all willing to support me and almost willing to pick up the pieces too (Malcolm).

You [Academy leader] and all our mentors – it’s just been brilliant with them, just to see them like willing to help us and get us through the course (Bradley).

These sentiments bear testament to the way in which such programs can (and do) act as useful avenues of youth intervention (see Nichols and Taylor; Nichols). Indeed, for the majority of the young people concerned, there was a feeling that the work that they did within the Academy did not simply represent a series of hollow promises but rather a sense of possibility and opportunity and a way out of the hopelessness of their present life circumstances. For Bradley and Trevor this meant a change in attitude towards their lifestyles and towards their futures. Both wanted to work as sports leaders. Bradley evidenced his belief in the value of the sports ministry activities that he experienced:

The community stuff we do . . . like going up to the old people’s home and helping them out . . . I do an obstacle course and like serving stuff at the [Public School] on Saturday, all the stuff that the community goes to – like you do at the cage [Multi Use Games Area] and all the basketball stuff we do. Brilliant for the community.

Being recognized as a leader in their own right boosted their self-esteem greatly:

It’s made a huge difference to my life. Like walking down the road, people say to me: “I remember you. I have seen you from [named location], I have seen you from [named activity trip], I know you” . . . And I realize “Wow – I must have made an impact on them” . . . It makes me feel pretty proud as before no-one knew me and I didn’t get out. My mum thinks it is amazing. She’s got all the pictures framed (Trevor).

Somewhat ironically, while Trevor’s self-image changed, his life circumstances had not; but that was not true of others. Malcolm stated that “. . . for me the Academy has quite

literally been life changing, I kind of feel that I was going no-where and you know, I was given a great opportunity . . . so I am just very thankful.”

Malcolm went on to complete a year in Higher Education, a year as an intern in Christian sport and youth work, and then to work part-time, while continuing to coach Shipden’s Under 17s football team. Both he and Bradley came to faith through the Academy, confirming Cotterell’s and Bosch’s assertions about joining God with work among people who are lost. In summary of his experiences Malcolm said, “[I]f the Academy hadn’t happened I would probably still be scraping by somehow thinking that I existed rather than lived.” Perhaps a fitting end and fitting tribute to the work of the Academy leaders is Bradley’s testimony:

I never used to be a Christian ‘till I joined the Academy. I became a Christian and am getting stronger and stronger in my faith every day.

I never thought I would believe in God but I do, I just want to thank you guys, my mentors, for giving me a massive impact on my life.

Conclusions

Building upon the findings of previous research, the aim of this paper has been to highlight the potential of sporting intervention as a means of personal and spiritual development for disengaged young people. Our specific intention has been to explore the value of providing sports leadership training underpinned by Christian beliefs, principles, and values. Focusing on the experiences of the young people concerned, we have attempted to show how participating in sport within such a context may yield a series of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual benefits that can impact both participants and those with whom they interact.

Members’ personal accounts suggests that the Shipden Sports Academy demonstrated the impact of collective sporting involvement for disengaged young people, all of whom had experienced social exclusion in one form or another, be that by way of poor educational attainment and/or unemployment. The Academy experience offered participants sports leadership qualifications, a wider range of life skills, and contact with a variety of organizations and sports settings (see Long et al.; Gould et al.; Ennis). Findings also suggest that Academy involvement equated to something more than a diversion from antisocial behavior; it aided levels of self-esteem and, in some cases, employability (Glyptis). At the same time, Academy involvement provided opportunities to explore the Christian faith.

To this end, it is clear that the Shipden Sports Academy contributed to the enhancement of a sense of social inclusion in the lives of those who took part through the building of a close set of personal friendships and broader community connections and relationships, and by developing participants’ sense of self-worth, and confidence in themselves and in their leadership skills (Bennis). By adopting and enacting a servant leadership style (rather than a task-oriented approach) and experiential learning, Academy leaders and mentors facilitated a climate of trust and respect, a common feature and crucial element of youth projects (Doh; Kempster; Kay; Martinek and Hellison; Wynter; Gould and Voelker).

While it is difficult to produce objective evidence of transformation, the testimony of two-thirds of the sample of members, consistent with their other remarks and personal achievements, was that the experience was, in one way or another, “life-changing.” In contradistinction to general statistical trends of declining Christian belief and practice among young people, this project shows there is still a role for churches in youth sport culture and training. The lack of inviting and non-threatening opportunities for youth to explore faith while developing life and sports skills and self-esteem suggests a real potential for churches.

There are limitations to this work. First, it is a small scheme reported by a Christian leader and mentor; second, it says little about the impacts that these leaders had on parents, siblings, friends, or the children they coached, all of which are avenues for future exploration. Nevertheless, it bears out the findings of many secular projects on the life-changing effects of sports skills training on personal image and self-esteem, employment competency, and improving relationships. The Shipden Sports Academy is an example of a Big Society project that operates without public money; this may be one reason why it is so successful. Charitable giving has, however, declined in the recession (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport).

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