

Abstract –

The disability football player pathway: Aiming to improve participation rates at the University of Lincoln

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The Lincolnshire FA aims to support players with disabilities play football either as a part of a structured club, a team that plays in the school games, within the Lincolnshire Ability Counts League or more recreationally learning how to play. However, despite the FA's best efforts and their disability football strategy 2010-2012, only 141,000 disabled players are involved in the game, from a total population of 11 million disabled people in the UK. (The Football Association, 2012, p.12). Indeed, although football is arguably the most popular sport in the country, the participation rates with Lincoln are relatively low.

This project presents data from a programme evaluation (Rossi et al 2004, *Evaluation: A systematic approach*) of a project delivered in partnership with the Lincolnshire county F.A which aimed to investigate the barriers which prevent students which are partially sighted, blind, or those that suffer cerebral palsy, from participating in football. Furthermore, the study aimed to evaluate the impact of football taster sessions designed to increase participation among disabled children through the use of the 'Mars play' scheme. This scheme provides qualified coaches, who set up a football session for an hour, with no commitments for the players. However, the intention is that, if players were talented enough, they could be directed into of the disability player pathway in local player development centres. The primary aim of this research was to complete a programme evaluation of the scheme in order to investigate whether it met disabled students' expectations of disability football during the 'Mars Play' scheme at the University of Lincoln. Participants completed questionnaires which aimed to discover why participants' perceived barriers to participation in disability football, what is preventing them from playing, whether they were aware of how they can begin to participate and is whether they perceived disability football to be an appropriate activity for them. Once the results from the questionnaires had been analysed, interviews were completed with participants in the scheme in order to assess their perceptions of disability football, and to examine whether their perceived barriers had been addressed by our actions. With regards to the programme evaluation, the data will take both quantitative and qualitative forms with the intention of discovering whether or not the project met the intended aims. The implications of study findings were discussed in relation to the FA's strategy for inclusion in disability football.