

Written evidence submission by British Universities and Colleges Sport [MRS0064]

Introduction

British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) is the national governing body for higher education sport in the UK. BUCS works with member institutions to get more students active more often, through traditional competitive sport and providing physical activity opportunities.

Executive Summary

1. Poor body image is a significant social issue, and is particularly pronounced amongst young people and those who are active, or want to be active, in sport and physical activity. It presents a very serious challenge for the health and wellbeing of the population and future generations.

The impact of poor body image

Who is particularly at risk of poor body image?

2. Most commentary around poor body image in the media and online focuses upon women, and the scale of the issue here is broadly recognised. That being said, poor body image affects people of all genders, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, age; it can affect anyone.

What are the long term effects of poor body image on people?

3. BUCS does not have the data to comment at length here, but we would draw the Committee's attention to a 2019 report by Women in Sport's – *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls* report¹. This highlights that "one-third of girls aged 14-16 are unhappy with their body image", and furthermore "8 out of 10 girls with low body esteem avoid seeing friends and family or trying out for a team or club".
4. These statistics are alarming, and present a significant public health risk amidst the increasing mental health crisis afflicting our children, young people and adults. Likewise, poor body image and any reluctance to be active at a younger age can be expected to have a significant negative impact on participation in sport and physical activity at university and beyond. This can only be expected to exacerbate the growing public health crisis longer term.

What is the impact of media consumption on people's body image, does it impact their mental health?

5. As above, BUCS are not best placed to comment here, but we would again draw the Committee's attention to Women in Sport's *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls* report. This details that "43% of girls aged 11-16 would like to look more like the pictures of girls and women that they see in the media".

What is the relationship between poor body image and mental health conditions including eating disorders.

¹ Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls, Women in Sport, April 2019 – <https://www.womeninsport.org/research-and-advice/our-publications/reframing-sport-for-teenage-girls-building-strong-foundations-for-their-futures/>

6. In 2017, BUCS worked with Student Minds to produce a *University Sport and Mental Health* resource². This highlighted that “29% of students experience clinical levels of psychological distress associated with increased risk of anxiety, depression, substance use and personality disorders”. Whilst not explicitly evidencing a relationship between poor body image and eating disorders, the resource detailed some of the signs and symptoms that readers might watch out for if they are worried that a student might have an eating disorder.
7. Women in Sport’s *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls* report also explains that “7 out of 10 girls who don’t feel good about the way they look will stop themselves from eating or otherwise put their health at risk”.

Media

What is the effect of particular content on people’s body image when using social media?

8. We would highlight the *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls* report again here. This describes that “evidence has shown that girls who are heavy social media users are more likely to experience low mood, low self-esteem, negative body image, reduced sleep, cyberbullying and poorer wellbeing”.
9. The Committee should similarly note that the same report highlights that “59% of girls aged 11-21 report that pressure from social media is a main cause of stress for them”.

What are the responsibilities of companies and the media in ensuring diversity in the images we see?

10. Companies and the media should be encouraged to publicly commit to ensuring diversity in the images that they publish. Over recent years, many of our member universities have been working to make sure that the images they use are representative of the diversity of their student population. BUCS has sought to do the same, and will continue to diversify the portfolio of images and video content that we use across our digital channels.

What adverts or campaigns stand out in promoting a positive body image?

11. Sport England’s *This Girl Can* campaign has been fantastic at promoting positive body image for women and girls of all shapes and sizes since its launch in 2015. They have commented extensively about discovering that a fear of judgement often holds women and girls back from getting active, and have embedded tackling this at the heart of the campaign’s messaging and imagery. It is hugely powerful as a result.
12. BUCS and our member universities have consistently supported the *This Girl Can* campaign since its launch, helping to amplify the campaign’s message to students and partners across the higher education sector. We have run a week of action around the campaign each year since 2015, with positive body image one of the key themes running throughout the sector’s activation.

September 2020

² University Sport and Mental Health, BUCS & Student Minds, March 2017 - http://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/university_sport_mental_health_resource.pdf