



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Academy of Sport

AOS

AN INDEPENDENT SPORTS THINK TANK

SPORT OBSERVATIONS

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UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH ACADEMY OF SPORT SUBMISSION TO UK GOVERNMENT'S INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON FCDO'S APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Introduction

1. The Academy of Sport welcomes the opportunity to respond to the UK Government's International Development Committee call for evidence. The call is focused upon the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office approach to higher education and research as part of its development strategy.
2. This specific reason for this response is to include sport in higher education at the heart of the answers to 3 specific questions.
 - What role does sport higher education and sport research partnerships play in the FCDO's wider development strategy?
 - How has sport in higher education and sport research partnerships contributed to the UK's influence on the global stage?
 - How can the FCDO mobilise sport in higher education and sports research partnerships to achieve its commitments towards SDG4?
3. The Academy of Sport at Edinburgh University is an independent, non-governmental, non-partisan think tank dedicated to serving the sports industry. Its vision is that sport plays its part, and is seen to be playing its part, in addressing the challenges that face humanity in the 21st Century.
4. It is a member of the UK Soft Power Group (UKSPG) a leading non-governmental organisation, co-convened by the British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) and the British Council, aimed at amplifying the role of soft power in UK strategic planning. It contributed to the 2025 UKSPG Report Strengthening UK Soft Power: Strategic Recommendations
5. It is self-evident that three of the key pillars of UK foreign policy, defence, diplomacy and development must work in harmony. What is less evident is the extent to which the UK Government recognises the range of tools that it has at its disposal to enable both diplomatic and development outcomes.
6. One of these tools is sport. It has scale, reach, local and international popularity and can carry key messages. It works on a daily basis with Sport in UK Higher education connecting UK agencies, institutions, cities, and communities in mutually supportive ways with different parts of the world.

7. UK Sport and DCMS miss opportunities when significant funding announcements on the value of sport fail to connect or enable the international development agenda.
8. The Academy of Sport has supported, evidenced and argued for the use of sport as a UK diplomatic tool [See [Sport as a UK Soft Power Asset](#)] and this regard the UK Government has much to learn from places such as [Australia](#), [France](#), and more recently [Ireland](#). As recently as November 2024 the United Nations General Assembly reminded member nations of the UN Mandate given to sport as [an enabler of the sustainable development goals](#). Something that has been consistently championed by the [Commonwealth Secretariat](#) in their advocacy for the use of sport as a vehicle for development and peacebuilding.
9. The impact of USAID cuts has impacted upon US SportsAid and while UK Sport, UK Sports Research, and UK University sports partnerships may not fill this vacuum these and other UK assets should be part of the creative response that is needed.
10. US Sports Aid was effective. These efforts included sending Sports Envoys overseas to engage with local communities, bringing Sports Visitors to the US to learn about the US Sports Industry and practices, and facilitating Sports Exchanges to foster greater understanding.
11. Since its inception USAID worked to tackle tyranny, poverty, and disease – by providing humanitarian assistance in times of need and advancing the development of partners around the globe.
12. Cutting USAID has had impacts on peacebuilding. It has left Monaco’s significant Peace and Sport interventions to carry more of the load. There is space here that the UK Government and devolved Governments could help with through the international work on sport through its higher education networks and UK University sports research partnerships.

Sport, Higher Education & FCDO’s Development Strategy

What role does sport higher education and sport research partnerships play in the FCDO’s wider development strategy?

13. Sport in and through UK Higher Education and its partnerships present at least three modalities of expertise which are research and knowledge generation; teaching and learning and community engagement all of which go occur on an almost daily basis enabling international engagement, co-operation and effective cultural relations building.
 14. The work of the Commonwealth Secretariat through its work on sport for development and peace highlights the contribution of both higher education institutions and the testimonies of past Commonwealth scholars. The recently published report on [Global Sport and its Sustainable Development Goals Impact](#) evidences the impact of sport , the impact of sport through higher education partnerships and the use of sport as a cost-effective tool for international development. UNESCO’S [Social Impact of Sport Report](#) in relation to SDG 4 recommends: (i) Unleashing the power of sport through data and research; (ii) Investing in sport as a cost-effective solution and (iii) Making sport and physical activity a cross-sectoral integrated policy activity.
 15. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC) has just celebrated its 65th anniversary. Since 1960, it has funded over 31,000 people from across the Commonwealth to study at UK universities. Past recipients have included Lord Collins of Highbury, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).
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16. The impact of CSC was also evident at the 65th celebratory event in the testimonies of another CSC scholar Dr Lin Sambili-Gicheha, Sports Adviser in the Social Policy Development team at the Commonwealth Secretariat. She told the audience[1]:

"Today, as the Adviser for Sport for Development and Peace at the Commonwealth Secretariat, I see the relevance of my research play out in real time- across policies, programs, and initiatives that seek to empower young people, create safer communities, and harness the potential of sport to address some of our most pressing global challenges."

17. Sport in higher education can continue to play a significant role FCDO's development strategy by being:

- A core mechanism for knowledge and capacity sharing.
- A cost-effective modality for delivering development impact during budget constraints.
- A way to leverage UK comparative advantage in sports research and sport in higher education.
- A vehicle for addressing and enabling complex, cross-cutting challenges (climate, health, conflict) requiring research and innovation.
- A tool for building long-term partnerships that support both development goals and UK diplomatic interests.
- A means of contributing to the strengthening systems a not just delivering short-term services.
- An approach aligned with locally led development through capacity building and co-production.

Key UK Universities with Sport for Development Expertise:

- University of Edinburgh (Academy of Sport (dedicated international sports think tank), international sport for development programmes, policy and research, PE teacher training)
- Loughborough University (sport science, Sport for Development research)
- University of Bath, (sport excellence, IDEALS programme)
- Sheffield Hallam University (Sport for Development research and practice)
- University of Stirling (sport management, international development)
- Cardiff Metropolitan University (international sport partnerships)
- Durham University (sport development programmes)

18. Sport in universities should be more central to higher education partnership and soft power strategies because

- Delivers across multiple SDGs cost-effectively
- Provides UK expertise (sport science, policy, governance) aligning with 'grants to expertise' shift
- Builds soft power and bilateral relationships
- Engages youth and women (FCDO priorities)
- Has proven track record (IDEALS, International Inspiration, bilateral and multilateral partnerships through sport and education)"

19. Key Message: sport offers a high-impact, low-cost, strategically aligned contribution to FCDO's development goals through university partnerships.

[1]See Commonwealth Scholar makes big Impact in Sport for Development. March 2025.

Sport, Higher Education and UK Global Influence

How has sport in higher education and sport research partnerships contributed to the uk's influence on the global stage?

20. From Olympic and Commonwealth Legacies, to sport diplomacy strategies, to cultural relations building, to inclusion and disability to policy building, to use of artificial intelligence and data analytics, and much more sport in higher education and sports research partnerships have and continue to contribute to the UK's influence on the world stage.

21. Sport is recognised by nations, states and international organisations as playing a specific role in popular co-operation, understanding and promotion. *Research by UK Universities has begun to provide an evidence base for a better understanding of how sport in the UK and other parts of the world helps to foster co-operation but also trade, business and influence.*

22. Reports produced for the World Economic Forum in Davos suggesting that the global sports economy is currently generating about \$2.3 trillion in annual revenue, nearly 2 % of global GDP. A sector projected to grow to \$3.7 trillion by 2030 and \$8.8 trillion by 2050 under current growth trends.

23. *It is worth mentioning some international insights from this flourishing body of university research.*

24. Soft Power and Diplomatic Influence: A number of recently commissioned comparative reviews of how different countries do soft power and cultural relations rightly points out that different models are at play in different parts of world. [2]Whether it be a public diplomacy model (USA, Russia, Korea); a cultural diplomacy model (France, Brazil, Qatar, UAE, Turkey, India, Japan); a cultural relations model (UK, EU, Germany,) or a distinct Chinese model, sport operates as a tool within all of these models albeit in different ways.

25. The case of Ireland here is illustrative of what some countries are doing, and the UK needs to follow. Ireland launched its International Sports Diplomacy Strategy last year. The use of sport, including traditional sports, was certainly recognised as was the value of sport in fostering and developing diaspora engagement. The sports diplomacy strategy talks about investing in sport for our diaspora but also bringing an international perspective to our local communities through sport.

26. This is a co-ordinated stated vision, strategy and set of goals to leverage benefits for Global and Local Ireland. It states up front the value of sport in building connections between communities around the world, it states up front the economic benefits of sport to Ireland but also that it is a stepping stone to a full-blown Sports Diplomacy Strategy for Ireland. This is about positioning Ireland through sport.

27. Major sporting events are the single contributing factor in comparative soft power evaluations that talk of sport. Scotland and other parts of the UK have a good track record of attracting major sporting events. Event Scotland annual reports readily testify to our successful activity in this arena. The UK has the potential prospect of a Women's World Cup to look forward to and more.

28. Australia's new strategy for a green and gold decade rather than developing a narrative around a single event, aggressively present the perspective of a green and gold decade of major sporting events with the gold equating to sporting success and green equating to sustainability, legacy, and soft power messaging.[1] This is in addition to the launch of the third Australian Sport's Diplomacy Strategy 2032+

[2] MacDonald, S and Murray, A (2023). *Soft power and cultural relations: A comparative analysis*. London: British Council - [23] See [Lewis Hamilton on racism and the need for diversity in motorsport](#). [Accessed 9 April 2026].

29. Demonstrating Global Leadership: Global Leadership through sport involving those working in universities is a key but as yet not fully optimised asset. In 2020 Wales launched Towards a Welsh Sports Diplomacy Strategy, an evidenced consultation document funded by the British Council Wales.

30. Professor Laura McAllister, formerly Chair of Sport Wales, currently Vice-President of UEFA argued that “When it comes to Wales strategically using sport for international engagement it is a story of missed opportunities”.

31. The research report began to map Welsh sporting assets but beyond that it made the case of the value of sport diplomacy to Wales and the value of sports diplomacy to Welsh sport. She argued that sport builds the informal networks that creates and strengthen formal and official relationships and that sports people are some Wales’s best ambassadors. Sport helps Wales get close to the countries it wants to work with and in a way that is much more strategic than it used to.

32. The research report which enabled Wales to demonstrate a contribution to global leadership in this area resulted from key University expertise involving the Universities of Edinburgh, Cardiff and Bond University in Australia.

33. Edinburgh has recently partnered with the following Universities (alphabetical order) – Loughborough University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Swansea University, University College Dublin to submit a collaborative bid to the ESRC football as a soft power asset.

34. The London 2012 Olympics created unprecedented global influence through sport-education partnerships:

- International Inspiration programme (born from London 2012) reached millions of young people globally using UK sport expertise
- Established UK as leader in sport for development, not just sport performance
- Created lasting partnerships between UK universities and international counterparts
- International Inspiration (IN), the international development charity born out of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games with the aim of inspiring and transforming the lives of young people around the world through the power of sport United Nations

35. Sport and sports research in UK Universities have enabled some universities to position themselves in a range of different global rankings. Demonstrating global partnership and leadership in areas such as:

- Sports management, governance and policy
- Sport science and performance
- Sport for development, diplomacy and cultural relations building
- Physical education, literacy and pedagogy
- Sports Ecology and Planetary Health

[3] 2032 Brisbane Olympic Games Host: Brisbane, Australia Type: Summer Olympic & Paralympic Games (mega event) Dates: 23 July – 8 August 2032 (Olympics); Paralympics follow soon after This is one of the world's biggest sporting events — far larger in scale than the Commonwealth Games. 2027 Rugby World Cup Host: Australia Dates: October – November 2027 Scope: Expanded 24-team global rugby event spanning multiple cities. Other Major Events in Australia 2026 AFC Women's Asian Cup final hosted in Sydney & Perth — a major continental football event. NFL “regular season” game in Melbourne — historic as the first NFL regular season match in Australia (though not multi-sport). Australia also hosts annually major sporting fixtures like: Australian Open (Grand Slam tennis), Melbourne Cup Carnival, Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix These are among the world's most watched individual sporting events.

36. Led by Professor Richard Giulianotti, the UNESCO Chair in Sport, Physical Activity and Education for Development is generating a variety of projects to advance knowledge and understanding, and to influence policy and practice, in how sport, physical activity and education may be used most effectively for development purposes. This work is especially important for development activity with young people, marginalized social groups (such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, refugees, and women and girls), and communities in the global South.

37. Strategic Value UK Comparative Advantage: Sport including sport in universities and sports research in universities helps to amplify UK influence

Historical/Cultural Advantage:

- UK invented/codified many global sports and certified early sport and physical education training (Edinburgh's roots in this area go back to at least 1905)
- This creates cultural affinity and receptiveness to UK expertise including sports expertise in universities.
- Partner countries want UK sport partnerships (prestige, quality, innovation)

Institutional Excellence:

- Loughborough consistently ranked #1 globally for sport science
- Multiple UK universities in global top 10 for sport
- UK Sport, Scottish golf clubs such as Royal Dornoch, The Jockey Club and Premier League are institutional assets
- Attracts some of the best international students and researchers for sports research and education

Convening Power:

- UK hosts major conferences
- British Council, ACU facilitate global sport networks
- UK universities as neutral ground for global sport debates (Edinburgh and Bond University held the first bilateral sports diplomacy conference in 2023)

Model Exporting:

- Scottish Para-Football structure being studied globally
- UK safeguarding frameworks adopted internationally
- Sport community sport models influencing other countries
- Research methodologies (capability approach to sport) gaining traction
- Use of AI, Data Analysis and Ethics in sport

38. Evidence of Influence: Sport is one of the best cultural relations tools a nation can have if it knows how to use it. Something that is acknowledged in a recent British Council Report on [Sport, Cultural Relations and Peace Building](#) We need to go beyond culture without optimising sport. Sport needs to be central to cultural diplomacy efforts. We also need to include but move beyond the idea of SportsAid.

39. University expertise helped contribute to [Ernst and Young's](#) impact evaluation of the soft power, trade and investment from the City of London's hosting of major sporting events (MSE's) pointed out that MSE's have the potential to deliver £4 billion in soft power, trade and investment impacts by the end of 2030. The report observed that with enhanced strategic planning, effective collaboration and purposeful engagement MSE impact could be greater.

Summary: All of the above and more are illustrative of sport in and through UK Higher Education sector can enable and add value to a development agenda moving from: donor to investor; service delivery to system support; grants to expertise; and international intervention to local solutions.

Sport, Higher Education and SDG4

How can the FCDO mobilise sport in higher education and sports research partnerships to achieve its commitments towards SDG4?

40. The opportunity is clear: Sport-led higher education partnerships can significantly accelerate progress toward SDG4, while simultaneously advancing UK influence, soft power, and development effectiveness. The infrastructure exists (UK universities, British Council, ACU, UK Sport, Devolved Sports Councils, UK Soft Power Council, Universities UK), the evidence is growing, and the demand from partner countries is strong.

41. What's needed is further strategic intent and integration enabled through FCDO to mobilise this potential. Further integration of Sport into Education Partnerships Framework would be beneficial in terms of delivering mutual planned outcomes.

42. Sport-led higher education partnerships offer high-impact, cost-effective contributions to SDG4:

- Direct impact: Sport improves attendance, retention, learning outcomes, particularly for girls and disabled children
- UK expertise: World-leading universities (Edinburgh Loughborough, Bath) in sport science, PE teacher training, sport for development, sports diplomacy and inclusive sport
- Proven models: IDEALS, Scottish Para-Football, International Inspiration, Premier League Skills. Work of the Wallace Group, Edinburgh's partnership with Toronto is illustrative of both effectiveness and potential capability building.
- Multiple SDG4 targets: Sport contributes to primary education (4.1), vocational training (4.3), skills (4.4), equity (4.5), global citizenship (4.7), teachers (4.C)
- Cross-cutting: Sport partnerships enable education + health + gender equality + peace
- Soft power: UK sport reputation creates receptiveness to broader UK development engagement through sport. Devolved nations such as Scotland should develop sport exchange programmes with Malawi, Rwanda and other countries mentioned on the Scottish International strategy. Ireland's new Sports Diplomacy strategy champions the work of diaspora's working with and through sport.

43. Cambodia's Mighty Girls Programme serves as a model that demonstrates what can be done when the strategic intent, focus, and moderate funding can enable positive outcomes through intentionally local planned and owned programmes.

44. A number of sport-led education developments should be supported and encouraged further. These would include strategic mobilization, probably through FCDO, around the following:

- Further integration of sport into Education Partnerships Framework
- Create "Sport for Education" Community of Expertise (e.g. Edinburgh, Loughborough, Toronto)
- Leverage Existing University Sport Expertise to deliver capacity and capability building in support of SDG4 and new re-iterations of it post 2030. This would include Sport Research Partnerships on SDG4.
- Create dedicated sport-education scholarships (PE teachers, sport researchers, policy makers)
- Capacity building
- Policy support
- Target Specific SDG4 Sub-Targets

45. *Recommendation: Create dedicated Sport-Education funding stream (£10-15M annually) within FCDO's Communities of Expertise for Sport led Education, leveraging UK university sport expertise to support partner countries achieving SDG4.*

Summary

It is generally accepted that Britain has, in the past, excelled in soft power, but we live in a world of scarcity and increasing conflict, and the UK's strengths in this area are diminishing due to severe budget cuts. Creative solutions are necessary to offset potential adverse effects.

Sport in and through UK Higher Education can further enable knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and technical cooperation.

Sport in and through UK Higher Education sector can enable and add value to a development agenda moving from: donor to investor; service delivery to system support; grants to expertise; and international intervention to local solutions.

Research by UK Universities has begun to provide an evidence base for a better understanding of how sport in the UK and other parts of the world helps to foster co-operation but also trade, business and influence.

Sport offers a high-impact, low-cost, strategically aligned contribution to FCDO's development goals through university partnerships.

The FCDO has set out 'four essential shifts' in its development agenda and the contribution of sport in Higher Education through our university partnerships adds real scale, reach, popularity and added value to both sporting and non-sporting outcomes enabled through sport.

The creation of a dedicated Sport-Education funding stream (£10-15M annually) within FCDO's Communities of Expertise for Sport led Education, leveraging UK university sport expertise to support partner countries achieving SDG4 should be considered as a proposition that adds real value.



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