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# Exploring the motivations and challenges West African female students experience engaging in university sport

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the motivations and challenges to the engagement of female West African university students, whilst participating in competitive and non-competitive extra-curricular sport and physical activity (ECSPA). The study was situated at a university in the North West of England that has a culturally diverse student population. The ECSPA program that operates at the university seeks to enable individuals to embark upon activities away from their academic schedule, wherein engagement in such activities is thought to nurture health, well-being and social development. Drawing on the intersections of ethnicity, culture and gender, the study aimed to identify the dominant constructs that influence West African students' motivations towards ECSPA.


An online cross-sectional survey of 168 participants with an average age of 34 years complimented by two focus group interviews involving 15 participants, was the primary data source for this study. The women in the study evidenced their key motivations for engaging in ECSPA, such as enjoyment, affiliation and appearance. However, a range of structural barriers to participating in ECSPA was identified including cultural insensitivities, unrelatable marketing and the non-alignment of ECSPA scheduling to the academic timetable.

## KEYWORDS

Culture; gender; higher education; physical activity; sport

## Introduction

This study explores the motivations and barriers to engagement in competitive and non-competitive Extra Curricular Sport and Physical Activity (ECSPA) participation, of West African female students attending a university in the North West of England. According to recent data published by Advance HE (2021), 57% of all higher education students in the UK are female. The female participants in the study are of a Black African ethnic background and have previously resided in Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal or Sierra Leone. They have either migrated to the United Kingdom (UK) or are on

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international student visas. Additionally, the undergraduate student domiciled population in the UK from a Black ethnic background (male and female) is 30.2% and specifically 22.9% of those are from a Black African background (Advance HE, 2021).

There is a scarcity of research specifically pertaining to African women's engagement in the various domains of sport and physical activity. Recognising the variances and complexities that would be experienced by those residing in different regions of Africa is multifaceted, however this study only focuses on those from West Africa. As outlined by Truskewycz, Drummond, and Jeanes (2021), literature pertaining to the intersects of gender, ethnicity, class and culture has evidenced challenges to engagement due to dominant structures and processes within sporting environments.

The ECSPA activities offered across the university commonly take place around the education schedule, during lunch breaks or at each end of an academic day. They espouse to contribute towards enhancing social competences such as self-confidence, self-regulation and building connection with others. It is indicated by Arias-Palencia et al. (2015) that the physical educational environment is a key enabler of physical activity for university students' assimilation and can positively contribute towards behaviour change and lifelong participation that enhances physical well-being (Peterson, Sirard, Kulbok, DeBoer, & Erickson, 2018). Accordingly, the university in focus in this study offers an activity schedule for females and males encouraging participation in ECSPA for all. In reality, a lack of gender equality is present as wider opportunities exist for males to participate in competitive sport teams.

Whilst there has been relative growth in research regarding females from minority ethnic backgrounds regarding their participation in sport and physical activity, the diasporic exchange has seen limited investigation despite the migration of students and global recruitment practices of universities in the UK (Miles & Benn, 2014; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019; Ratna, 2018). As highlighted by Liberatore (2017), diaspora refers to an individual or community of people who may have departed from their origin geographical location, known as their ancestral homeland. Exiting from an origin location allows individuals to experience other traditions and cultural spaces, in addition to sharing their identity and heritage with their new geographical society. This discourse is discussed by Uptin, Wright, and Harwood (2012) who highlights its relevance to young people who may have migrated to Australia from regions in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Indicatively, individuals who migrate may aim to balance social structure associations with their home country, alongside the embodiment of new cultural formations that evolve in their residing country. Conversely, Stephen (2018) expresses how distortions of educational knowledge and practical experiences can imply exclusion within a dominant society in relation to individuals who are encountering diaspora, wherein their attempts to negotiate a 'Western habitus' can create a measure of internal dissonance (Pang & Macdonald, 2015).

Although this study focuses on West African female students, data by Sport England (2020) claims that 58.5 percent of Black British women aged 16+ participate in at least 150 min per week of physical activity in comparison to 63.2 percent of White British women. Recent studies that explore differences between male and female adolescent participation in ECSPA have primarily been conducted within the secondary school contexts (see Jago et al., 2013; Okely et al., 2017). Missing from existing datasets are the voices of Higher Education Institution (HEI) students, and more so the physical activity

experiences and aspirations of ethnic female students (Diehl, Fuchs, Rathmann, & Hilger-Kolb, 2018).

### ***Education and cultural influence***

As suggested by Hylton (2013), sport participation can increase an individual's social capital (social network and connection with others) and the function of sport and physical activity enables students to socialise and integrate into new social environments. A study conducted by Cho and Price (2016) suggested 'approximately 74 percent of international students do not have any experience participating in intramural sports programs (ECSPA) in the United States' (p. 886).

UK data indicates that the migration of international students from West African countries, notably Nigeria where 12,665 students were active in the 2016/17 academic year, is common (Higher Education Students Agency [HESA], 2020). It is highlighted that the UK can be seen as a golden ticket for greater prospects, furthermore degree certification from the UK might symbolically hold a higher value for an international student, in comparison to homeland institutions (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). As explained by Takayama and Apple (2008), the West continues to be the 'global standard' of cultural practice, social progress and modernity. Moreover, Wenger (1999), Gareis, Goldman, and Merkin (2018) and Hendrickson (2018) explain how international students tend to confine themselves to forming social networks with those who have cultural and linguistic similarities, therefore attaching themselves to students from similar geographic or demographical backgrounds (Kutintara & Min, 2016). In this way, they are likely to form communities of practice with students they share similar cultural identities with. With this in mind, previous research of international students has primarily been concerned with student employability, attainment gaps and the various stages of transition into the UK university system (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018; Khapoya, 2016; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Fundamentally, an individual's motivations to study within the UK higher education system are influenced by various socio-economic, political and commercial factors. As a result, social integration enabled via higher education anchors cultural influences, cultural judgements, family constraints and diasporic concerns that may assist integration within the attributed educational domain (Taylor & Ali, 2017). The aforementioned research confirms a systematic integration of African students, that is fundamental to promoting a sense of belonging (Naik, Wawrzynski, & Brown, 2017) to promote structure and agency amongst those from an African origin (Asante, 2007).

As a result, the intersection between gendered structural barriers along with race and culture may impinge on the societal resistance and thus avoidance of ECSPA activities, which might be apparent within some cultural and educational spheres (Harkness & Hongsermeier, 2015).

Previous studies situated in the United States of America that refer to African American women imply the importance of cultural sensitivity when embracing culture within educational settings (Cooper, 2012; Huebschmann, Campbell, Brown, & Dunn, 2015; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). This sense of exclusion within higher education for students not born in the UK assimilates with Samatar, Madriaga, and McGrath (2021) research which contextualises isolationist behaviours and the need for belonging

within Higher Education spaces for ethnic minority women. To this end, high levels of inclusivity and accessibility for students within the university environment are likely to positively impact upon a student's participation in ECSPA.

### ***Gender, sport and physical activity***

The low engagement of adolescent females partaking in sport and physical activity is not a new phenomenon, Hargreaves and Anderson (2014) indicate the notion that historically women were oppressed by gender hierarchies and cultural rituals that prohibited female participation in sport. Theorising of masculine hegemony reveals a gender power dynamic that marginalizes femininity and positions women as subordinate to their male counterparts (Connell, 1987). Within this construct of masculine power and privilege, female activity participation was historically positioned within endeavours that were non-combative and passive in their orientation. Notwithstanding cultural and religious overlays on gender performativity, the range of physical activities permitted to females grew to include sports such as cycling, swimming and tennis. While gendered stereotypes are increasingly becoming more blurred, gender continues to shape the participation patterns of adolescents across the UK (Metcalf, 2018). Additionally, the gender equality movement has significantly challenged traditional practices of exclusion for women in sport and physical activity in Western societies, some countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) opportunities continue to be restricted (Harkness & Hongsermeier, 2015).

A range of factors are seen to permeate the global landscape of adolescent female participation in ECSPA, including family, religion, gender dynamics, cultural acceptance, financial hardship and self-confidence (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; O'Kane et al., 2020; Rosselli et al., 2020). A study of 25,745 adults from 27 European countries, explored gender differences in leisure-time physical inactivity. Results of the study revealed that 'European women were approximately 1.4 times more physically inactive in their leisure time compared with men' (Van Tuyckom, Van de Velde, & Bracke, 2012, p. 455). The women in the study lamented a lack of access to the same opportunities available to men and women and the differing demands of gendered responsibilities associated with parenthood and other cultural lifestyle expectations.

Sport and its association with physical and psychological well-being have become a prominent focus within public health policy (Shiroma & Lee, 2010; Williams & Fullagar, 2018). As explained by Mackintosh (2021) the increase in sedentary behaviour and growth of obesity in England has led to the English government identifying mechanisms that promote participation in lifelong physical activity. Tailored gendered initiatives such as 'This Girl Can' have confirmed the associated benefits to lifelong physical and psychological well-being that have further encouraged policy investment within organisations such as Women in Sport, who aim to increase sport and physical activity participation for women and girls in England (This Girl Can, 2020).

It is recommended by Sport England (2016) that adults should participate in 150 min of moderate exercise per week. More recently, the 'Active Lives Survey' survey (2021) suggests in the UK 'men (62.3%) are more likely to be active than women (59.8%)' in accordance with national physical activity 'active lives' data.

## Methodology

A mixed-method research design was adopted inclusive of an online survey and semi-structured focus group, with an aim to correlate statistical significance alongside an exploration of the participants' lived experiences (Hilger-Kolb, Loerbroks, & Diehl, 2020). Using qualitative and quantitative procedures in research design can augment the data set and present a rich exploration of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study was situated at a single university in the North West of England, offering the opportunity for a case study approach to the research to be undertaken. A purposive sampling procedure was implemented to reflect the diversity of participants and to interpret their lived experiences (Bryman, 2015) in relation to partaking in competitive and non-competitive ECSPA. A sample size of 168 participants from a targeted 200, aged 20–46 completed a self-administered online survey and a total of 15 participants from a targeted 27 took part in one of the two scheduled focus groups.

The ECSPA program at the university utilises internal resources of a multiuse sports hall (four-court) that throughout the academic year encourages participation in a range of activities. The 1-hour activity sessions include badminton, netball, trampolining, yoga, pilates, volleyball, table tennis, basketball and 5 a-side football. Additionally, the university has an external community swimming pool that can be utilised by students for free during off-peak hours and a 17-m (50-ft) climbing wall. Netball is the only competitive sport available for females; however, there are female-only specific 'social' team sport sessions available, in basketball and rugby union. The majority of sessions take place between 5.00 and 8.30 pm, whereas the fitness sessions (yoga and pilates) take place during lunchtime.

Prior to the start of the study institutional ethical approval was granted for the research. Subsequently, research invitation letters were sent to program leaders of the identified courses and of the 18 courses that were contacted 11 agreed to be presented with a research briefing. The inclusion criterions employed were that the female students were required to be born in West Africa and undertaking an undergraduate program at the university.

A feasibility pilot study commenced prior to data collection, to stress test the survey and ensure the focus group framework was valid and adhered to the aims and objectives of the study.

### Online survey

The online survey requested demographic variables inclusive of age, ethnicity and place of birth. Additionally, other criterion within the survey related to, motivation to participate in sport and physical activity, participation levels per week and sport and physical activity preferences. Within the online survey, participants were provided with the option to attend a follow-up group discussion (focus group). The participants ( $n = 27$ ) who opted-in to the focus group were randomly selected and 15 participants attended one of the two scheduled events.

The Physical Activity and Leisure Motivation 40-item Scale (PALMS) was utilised within the survey to measure participants' motivations (Molanorouzi, Khoo, & Morris,

2014). The scale develops correlations between the defined motivations; mastery, physical condition, affiliation, psychological condition, appearance, others expectation, enjoyment and competition ego. The PALMS was created to be a comprehensive tool measuring motives for participating in physical activity and has been recognised as demonstrating acceptable test–retest reliability, internal consistency, factor structure and criterion validity (Molanorouzi et al., 2014).

The survey data identified the five different countries where the participants were born within West Africa, namely Nigeria ( $n = 72\%$ ), Ghana ( $n = 14\%$ ), Sierra Leone ( $n = 8\%$ ), Senegal ( $n = 4\%$ ) and Guinea-Bissau ( $n = 2\%$ ). The mean age of the participants was 34 years (see Table 1), with an age range of 20–46 years.

### Focus groups

Two semi-structured focus groups were undertaken lasting between 40 and 55 min duration, to allow explorative discussions within a group setting. These discussions aimed to comprehend participant perceptions, experiences and recommendations for promoting engagement in ECSPA. Open-ended questions that allowed participants to reflect upon participation in SPA in their country of origin were included, to help better understand facilitation and delivery modes. Finally, questions regarding approaches to encourage lifelong SPA participation practices were also incorporated.

The research team included two academic researchers and a student volunteer, inclusive of two black British Caribbean women and one white British woman. Although race similarities are synonymous with the black Caribbean researchers, differences in ethnicity were present and may have affected the cultural understandings of participants. As summarised by Knez, Benn, and Alkhaldi (2014), sensitivity to the insider/outsider researcher dynamic can contribute to the removal of challenges that can be presented in inter-cultural research. Additionally, the researchers were mindful of the sociocultural differences and expectations that may be presented in different geographical areas of West Africa and therefore an intention to explore these cultural differences sensitively was ensured.

A thematic analysis process was followed via data interpretation to create initial codes and to allocate robust themes in preparation for the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aforementioned process was undertaken by the first author and then reviewed by the second author to ensure attainment of research validation, anonymity and concerns over any possible identifying features to the lived experiences of the participants were absent (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

**Table 1.** Activity preferences from survey data.

Activity/Sport	Percentage	Not selected
Dance	18%	
Gym (weights/cardio)	18%	
Swimming	15%	
Football	14%	
Running	14%	
Netball	13%	
Badminton	6%	
Yoga	2%	

The themes developed from the thematic analysis process are: (1) sport and physical activity engagement prior to living in the UK, (2) motivations to engage in ECSPA, (3) barriers to engage in ECSPA. Table 1 presents the profile of the participants who attended the focus group.

## Results and discussion

### *The Physical Activity and Leisure Motivation Scale (PALMS)*

The PALMS scale resulted in the motivations of the participants aligning with the following motives: enjoyment ( $n = 67\%$ ), affiliation ( $n = 64\%$ ), appearance ( $n = 59\%$ ), physical condition ( $n = 52\%$ ), mastery ( $n = 46\%$ ), others expectation ( $n = 37\%$ ), competition ego ( $n = 35\%$ ) and psychological condition ( $n = 31\%$ ).

### *Sport and physical activity (SPA) participation*

Overall, participation rates of participants were low whether participating in sport and physical activity on campus or away from the university campus, measurements evaluated within the online survey comprised of (0, 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8 and 9+) hours per week. Data suggests 70 percent of participants took part in 0 h of sport and physical activity whilst at university, in comparison to 58 percent of participants who took part in 0 h of sport and physical activity whilst away from the university.

### *Preference of sport and physical activity*

Participants were requested to detail their three modes of sport and physical activity in preference of (1) would attend this activity, (2) would consider attending this activity and (3) no interest in attending this activity. The 15 activities listed are activities offered at the university either as a recreational activity or team sport. Activity preferences receiving the highest selection were dance (18%) and gym (18%), a number of activities

**Table 2.** Focus group – participation information.

Name	Age (20–48)	Place of birth	Activity preference(s) *First two selected	Motivations
Eniola	21	Nigeria	Yoga/Gym	Enjoyment/Mastery
Chi	23	Ghana	Dance/Netball	Appearance/Competition/Ego
Veronica	25	Nigeria	Gym/Badminton	Appearance/Mastery
Amina	26	Nigeria	Running / Football	Appearance/ Competition/Ego
Sade	29	Nigeria	Running/Football	Enjoyment/Affiliation
Grace	35	Nigeria	Running/Dance	Affiliation/Others expectations
Abena	30	Ghana	Gym/Swimming	Others expectations/Psychological condition
Yaa	32	Ghana	Football/Gym	Competition/Ego/Enjoyment
Afia	33	Ghana	Netball/Swimming	Enjoyment/Competition/Ego
Damilola	37	Nigeria	Gym/Badminton	Psychological condition/Mastery
Margaret	38	Senegal	Gym/Netball	Physical condition/Affiliation
Joy	42	Nigeria	Dance/Badminton	Psychological condition/Appearance
Ebele	42	Nigeria	Dance/Swimming	Appearance/Physical condition
Mary	44	Nigeria	Gym/Swimming	Affiliation/Mastery
Ekua	46	Guinea-Bissau	Dance/Running	Others expectations/Physical condition



specified a (0%) preference including basketball, volleyball and Zumba. Table 2 displays the activity preferences of the participants, not including activities not chosen.

### ***Focus group results***

The narrative from the focus groups allowed four main themes to be identified. These themes highlighted developmental future objectives for ECSPA at the university: (1) sport and physical activity engagement prior to living in the UK, (2) awareness of opportunities, (3) attending sport and exercise opportunities, (4) schedule of opportunities.

### ***Sport and physical activity engagement prior to living in the UK***

Participants reflected upon their participation in sport and physical activity in the UK, in comparison to residing in their home country in West Africa. There were mixed opinions around their participation levels; however, many expressed their nostalgic satisfaction when they previously participated in their home country. Frequently, participants acknowledged that their activity levels were lower since moving to the UK. Sade exemplified this by stating, 'I exercise less now than when I lived back home, I don't walk or run as much because I drive, and this has affected my weight and how I feel. I would like to start running again, a run club might be a good idea'. Similarly, Afia commented about the way in which her lifestyle has changed, and this has impacted her participation in sport and physical activity. Afia explained, 'I used to do a lot of sport back in Nigeria at school, this was because I wanted to stay looking good. Now I have children and have other priorities, that take up time ... so, I don't get much time to do sport'. Both Sade and Afia's comments highlight the ways in which changes in activity levels can be attributed to a multitude of reasons.

It is important to note that many of the participants are in different age /life stages and therefore have priorities around work, motherhood and the likes. However, the participants often acknowledged that it was a combination of access to facilities and residing in different life stages which had led to a decline in their participation. Ekuia highlighted the way in which her participation had changed, Ekuia explains 'Before moving to the UK, I did some sports at school but was never the sporty type. I walked a lot when back home, I hardly walk now because I drive everywhere and I see how this has negatively affected my weight'.

Meanwhile, Abena discussed how her activity levels had dropped but how she was keen to re-engage in sport. Abena said, 'We used to run a lot at school and do long distance running, I have not done this for about 5 years. I used to enjoy it a lot though, I would join in if they did this at the university as I remember winning some of the competitions'. Meanwhile, Yaa and Mary both highlighted one of the challenges to engaging in sport and physical activity was the popularity of particular sports in the UK which limited the opportunities available to newcomers. Yaa explained, 'I used to play football and basketball with my family and neighbours, I wasn't that good but just enjoyed it. It seems football is popular here for girls but not really basketball'. Conversely, Mary explained that 'I loved doing track when at school, it doesn't seem as popular over here. I have never seen a track and field facility, but that would be good as it would bring back good memories'. It is interesting to note that both Abena and Mary appear

eager to engage in sport and physical activity but have not because of a perceived lack of access or ability levels to their preferred activities.

Whilst many of the focus group participants discussed their eagerness to re-capture previous physical activity levels or reengage back into sport and physical activity, Joy highlighted that she had never previously engaged in sport and physical activity however she had now become aware of the need to become physically active. For example, Joy revealed, 'I didn't do much sport back home either, I chose lessons after school that helped me to learn how to sew clothes. Sport is not really my thing but as I am training to be a nurse, I understand why it is important for your health ... I would probably like to do something like badminton'. Generally speaking, the focus groups revealed that the participants were keen to engage in sport and physical activity in the UK but faced a range of challenges implementing their intentions. Among the key barriers were access to preferred activities, awareness of opportunities and personal commitments.

### ***Awareness of opportunities***

The participants of the study expressed varying degrees of awareness of the sport activities available at their university. In doing so, the participants acknowledged the lack of promotion of activities, resulting in a lack of awareness of the activities available to access. In addition, poor visibility of facilities meant uncertainty of where to access which was a critical factor in individuals not participating in sport and physical activity. Veronica said, 'If they [university sport staff] came to our class and told us about the activities that are available, that would be good because people might want to go in a group, so they feel more comfortable'. Similarly, Margaret implied, 'Well ... I don't think there is much advertising, I saw people advertising sport at the fresher's fayre (university induction), but I haven't seen any advertising since. Some of the information said sports hall, but I have no idea where the sports hall is'.

Further, Eniola believed that not only did the activities require more promotion but that the sessions also needed to be at times that were suitable to students, suggesting lunch and break times between lectures. Eniola commented, 'I guess they could have more people trying to promote the activities at lunch or break times, as a lot of people don't know that you can play sport for fun, I think most people think it's just competitive'. A general lack of understanding was a reason why many of the participants did not engage in the program, despite their seeming enthusiasm toward sport and physical activity. Such enthusiasm appeared to be undermined by the poor timetabling of activities and their general lack of awareness about when and where the activity sessions took place.

The challenge of promoting sessions was emphasised by Chi who discussed that she received some information on the sport and physical activity sessions, however, this was communicated by email but became lost in the volume of emails she received from the university. Chi said 'I'm sure I received an email with a link to the activities available, but we get so many random university emails that I didn't bother looking at it properly. It would be good if the emails included the price for the activities, if it's cheap it might make me go as I don't have much money to spare right now'. As such, email is perhaps not the most effective way of communicating sport and physical activity

session, therefore a more person-centred approach and/or the use of social media could be utilised.

Fortunately, there was some level of awareness of the activities available at the University. However, such opportunities were not regularly engaged in due to several recurring challenges, such as balancing personal and programmatic commitments and costs associated with participation. Afia revealed that she had become aware of the sessions through her role as a student volunteer. She explained, 'I am aware of the sessions available because I volunteer at the university. When speaking to other students, many of them say they need to spend time completing the work set by their lecturers and therefore don't have the time'. Meanwhile, Grace expressed a keenness to swim but identified the cost of the swimming sessions as the key barrier to her participation. Grace explained, 'I noticed they have a swimming pool, I would like to try and learn how to swim. I did go in there to ask but it was quite expensive. If the university did discounted learn to swim sessions, that is definitely something I would sign up to'. Such comments reveal that 'awareness of sessions' was not the only challenge posed to engaging in the ECSPA program. While the university does provide free swimming opportunities (during off-peak times) this does not suit a number of the participants who are unable to swim and therefore require experiences that offer instruction and supervision.

### ***Attending sport and physical activity opportunities***

Many of the participants expressed that they would be keen to be involved in sport and physical activity at university if they had someone to attend sessions with. This was captured by Ebele who explained, 'I don't like going to new things alone and I find it difficult to fit in because I am 42, a lot of the university students are 18–21 (years old) so I feel very awkward'.

A number of the participants noted that many students tend to stay in their cultural groups, with one point of separation being those who were born in the UK and those that were born in Africa. Damilola explained, 'In class, we do some group tasks with some of the young students, but I personally don't socialise out of class with them. I have heard them talking about going on night out's (clubbing), but I have never heard them talk about going to sport sessions at university. ... I would love to go [to sport sessions], but I like to spend time with friends who are on other courses during my lunch. An idea could be for us to all go to these sport sessions but hmm I don't think they would be interested and I don't really have sportswear or suitable footwear to take part'. Joy further expanded this point by stating, 'I have made new friends on the course and sometimes have lunch with students who were born in England, they are all really nice. I think we stay in our groups a lot of the time because we can talk our language and have more in common because of our culture. A lot of my friends like to dance, and some go to the gym when not at university'. Similarly, Ekuia said, 'I have a few friends in the class of students who were born here, but mainly we African students stay with each other and they stay in their groups. It's nothing offensive, it's just how it is and I don't think my friends would go to the exercise sessions'. These insights further emphasise the difficulty of running a ECSPA program at the university with awareness of transnational social networks being a key factor in an individual's participation.

### **Schedule of activities**

Many of the participants in the study identified that their educational timetable did not align with the activity schedule the university promoted, particularly the lunch time sessions that were offered. This challenge was shared by Veronica who explained, 'I leave my house at 6.30 am most mornings to get to university on time. There is no chance I am going to stay any later than 5 pm to go to sport sessions. If there was an option to go around my timetable ... I might go'. Similarly, Ebele stated, 'Morning sessions might be good, a lot of people get to university early to avoid traffic'. Further to this Margaret explained, 'When I am at university, I try to use the time around classes to complete study tasks and to do additional reading. I have three children under the age of 9 years old, so when I am at home I need to cook, clean, and help them with their homework. I would find it difficult to go to any sessions because I don't have any time'. The complexity of being a full-time undergraduate student and engaging in sport and physical activity was further explored by the participants, as they highlighted the influence of the work experience requirements of their respective courses. Chi commented on the amount of time she spent on work placement and how it impacted her availability for sport and physical activity participation. 'In my course, we have to complete a high number of work experience hours, so I use all of my free time to complete these hours. I wish I had more time to do exercise, but I have to prioritise my university degree because my family is paying a lot of money for me to study in the UK' (Chi). Along the same lines, Amina spoke about her work commitments as a key reason why she could not engage in the ECSPA program. 'I could probably attend on a Tuesday lunch time, but on my other free days I work in a shop so I don't have the time'.

As such, many of the participants felt that attending sport and physical activity sessions was a low priority, and necessarily sat behind their study and work commitments. However, even when sessions were scheduled during breaks in the timetable, such as at lunch times, there were still challenges which stopped the participants in the focus groups from attending the sessions. Amina discussed the challenges of lunchtime sessions explaining, 'The sessions don't give you enough time to get ready, shower, have lunch and get back to your next lesson ... I would prefer if [sport and physical activity sessions] lasted for 30–40 min instead of 1 hour'. This highlights the complexity faced by those seeking to coordinate and run sport and physical activity sessions with the timetabling of sessions, a critical factor in engaging students. Given the likely responsibilities students have balancing study, work, family, placement and sport/physical activity it is apparent that what works, when and for whom is a complex formula that universities must navigate with care and consideration to maximise access.

### **Discussion**

While recognising the 'particularity' of the research methodology, we hope that the findings of this study can shed light on some of the factors that contribute to the decisions that international students make around participating in ECSPA programs while at university. Appropriate strategies need to be considered to mitigate barriers to participation and provide conduits to support the needs of such participants.

The ability to foster and increase participation in sport and physical activity for international West African female students, that is sustainable and well-marketed can be a challenge due to societal norms and cultural expectations. Participants spoke of a desire to attend with somebody else and the importance of their studies over their engagement in the ECSPA program (Shifman, Moss, D'Andrade, Eichel, & Forrester, 2012). Research previously undertaken by Joseph, Ainsworth, Keller, and Dodgson (2015) with African American women in higher education suggests motivations to participate, stem from extrinsic factors such as peer influence and family socio-economic background.

While the participants appeared to have a low level of engagement in sport and physical activity, many of them boasted high levels of engagement while in their home country. Furthermore, although the majority of the participants in the study did not take part in the ECSPA program at university, more than half of them have active nodes of engagement away from the university. To this end, their potential engagement with the ECSPA program could be fostered if it met their primary needs around availability and activity of choice (e.g. gym, dance, swimming, football, running). A focus on integration could be better aligned with specific health and well-being events or through coordinated practices associated with the student union and sports department. The ECSPA program would be further enhanced if it was actively supported/promoted by their tutors and academics. Foremost here would be a focus upon activities that promote lifelong participation and active lifestyle. Re-engaging participants through active transportation (namely, walking and cycling) could be a useful strategy for promoting the ECSPA program.

A clear advertising and promotion of the ECSPA program activity schedule is paramount to increasing participation, as many of the participants were unaware of the activities being offered. Distinctive communication (Kasongo & Abongdia, 2021) and marketing strategies could be enforced to attract participants that may include imagery that participants could self-identify with in terms of race and ethnicity. Further to this, sessions should consider race and ethnicity in their advertising around the university via direct personalised marketing and the use of social media (Sterkenburg, 2011). The display of relatable pictures and accessible language is crucial to attracting these women to the on-campus sport and physical activity environment.

Creating a strong awareness of the sport and recreation facilities that are available to students on campus is an important starting point. A number of the participants in the study confessed to being unaware of the gym and sports hall at the university. This may be due to these facilities being on the second floor of a building where there are no windows and as a result has a lack of natural exposure. Additionally, the fact that a number of the participants referred to cost and affordability being barriers to their participation runs counter to the activities being free to students, including swimming at specific (off-peak) times during the day. It is clear that several of the perceived barriers to participation in the ECSPA program are based on misconceptions that could readily be disarmed through targeted messaging. This would allow more deliberate focus to be given to the constraints associated with time and family commitments in breaking down barriers to female participation in sport and physical activity (Lovell, El Ansari, & Parker, 2010).

A peer-mentoring approach that connects domestic students who actively engage in sport and physical activity with the inactive could be used to target the participation of international students (Han, Pettee Gabriel, & Kohl, 2017). A deliberate effort should be made by academics to facilitate socialisation between different cultural groups within academic sessions, to encourage integration (Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, Jing, & Lifei, 2016) and to promote ECSPA participation for all.

The data from the study also revealed the need for strong cultural understanding in the interest of fostering inclusivity. For example, greater consideration of the types of activities that international students are likely to have engaged in would likely increase the appeals of ECSPA programs. Extending this, Azzarito and Solomon (2005) discuss the importance of understanding the intersectionality between race, gender and social class when establishing purposeful physical educational experiences. With this in mind Cho et al. (2013) explain how the intersectionality of gender, race and cultural inhibitors can be challenging to address within institutional settings. In the context of this study, there is a requirement to understand West African culture, a clear understanding and guidelines that outline ways to disarm potential barriers to engaging particular ethnic and cultural groups is necessary however scholarly work that positions the complexities of race, sport and the black diaspora in Britain is limited (Campbell, 2014; Carrington, 2004). Additionally, positioning gender and age alongside cultural knowledge is essential to understanding participant identities and nurturing their engagement in sport and physical activity (Miles & Benn, 2014).

Although most of the participants were from countries within the Commonwealth, some of the sports commonly played in the UK were unfamiliar to them (e.g. rounders and volleyball). When looking to engage international students a shift away from Euro-centric activities, towards a curriculum that emphasises, 'students diverse cultural backgrounds should be considered' (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2019, p. 54). To resolve such complexities, introductory sessions to activities where participants can have the opportunity to learn the rules and tactics may be beneficial. British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) organisation, champions competitive and recreational opportunities for participation in ECSPA within higher education as a means of connection between university, sport, physical activity, health and wellbeing however specific datasets regarding the intersect between gender and ethnicity are currently being further explored (Brunton & Mayne, 2020).

## Conclusion

This study allowed the opportunity to gain an understanding of West African women's positive desires to participate in sport and physical activity, whilst studying in a higher education environment in the UK. Similarities may be present and be relevant in other higher education environments when referring to this demographic group. However, future studies could focus on universities that possess strong sport and recreational resources and structures, as distinct from the relatively low level of provision offered by the university at the focus of this study.

The findings accentuate the importance of cultural understanding, identity and relatedness, when developing ECSPA sessions for West African female students. It

is necessary for HEIs to consider the wellbeing of students and to ensure a robust ECSPA schedule that accommodates specific intersectional demographic needs is available. While many of the participants had a clear understanding of the benefits of regular physical activity, the university ECSPA program was not as accessible to them.

Understanding the requirements of the demographic group in respect of their cultural diversity and how they connect with the university sport department and students union is pivotal to designing targeted student initiatives. Further, the insights gleaned from the study illustrated that the cultural relations of academic social groups, also contributed to the likelihood of students attending on campus ECSPA sessions. As such, connection and affiliation were important aspects of the student experience. It was also noted that activities that articulated with known forms of community participation, such as running, swimming and attending the gym were among the most popular. Such activities presented a level of comfortability based on a familiarity with known community experiences. The scheduling of the activities was also important to recruiting and sustaining participants, thus provoking regular communication and review around students' availability is required.

Importantly, it is necessary to have appropriate, relevant and relatable marketing strategies that promote a range of activities that incorporate cultural references. These may include pictures and/or specific languages of the demographic group and their activity preferences.

Furthermore, an understanding of the student demographics and their commitments outside of university is necessary, due to a high proportion of the participants being classed as 'mature students' and having an array of work and family responsibilities. Prominently, family commitments and gendered expectations were highlighted as key barriers to participation in ECSPA.

The university experience is seen by many international students solely as a pathway to academic success and employability. There is a need for ongoing work to promote the potential for meaningful connections and health and well-being benefits for students through their participation in ECSPA programs.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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