



Ysgoloriaethau Sgiliau Economi Gwybodaeth
Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarships



Improving Health Through Physical Activity: Engaging “hard to reach” young females in the South Wales Valleys

Ellyse Hopkins is completing her KESS 2 funded PhD in collaboration with [Valleys Gymnastics Academy](#). The focus of her research is engaging young women from disadvantaged backgrounds into physical activity.

Background

“I completed both my undergraduate degree and master’s degree at Cardiff Met. I just loved the environment and got on well with the staff I studied under. As soon as I was finishing my masters, I kept an eye out for PhD opportunities, and found this KESS 2 funded PhD in partnership with Valleys Gymnastic Academy. What attracted me to the PhD was that it was in an area that I felt passionate about - engaging young women in physical activity, and that the topic was quite broad which allowed me to bring my knowledge and skills in sociology to the project. My research involved a three-phase study. I started by observing the girls in various settings and engaging in conversations surrounding their relationship with physical activity. The second phase built on the observations and involved interviewing the girls about the physical activity practices and understanding how exercise was prioritised in their day to day life.



The third study involved two strands. Firstly, I worked through a short-term walking programme with a young woman from one of the settings, engaging in a cycle of interviews to continually evaluate her experience and promote walking as a consistent habit in her life. Secondly, I interviewed club leaders and stakeholders from their parent organisations in order to assess the needs of the young women, alongside the possibilities and restrictions for physical activity experienced by the clubs and the overarching policies and regulations that guided them. The purpose here was to identify misalignments and thus areas of focus to promote engagement.”

Impact

“Academia can sometimes feel disconnected from the real world implications, so I hope that my research’s focus on the minor but significant details of the women’s relationships with physical activity will shed light on why we need to pay such close attention, as a tiny instance can have a powerful and lifelong impact on someone’s relationship with exercise. My research aligns well with the [Health and Human Performance Global Academy](#) and the Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research at Cardiff Met, as I explore how physical activity can help individuals to be the best they can be and fulfil their potential. This research is also shaped by the UN Sustainable Development Goal to “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,” as well as the Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act which promotes ‘A Healthier Wales’ where peoples’ physical and mental well-being is maximised, and people have the knowledge and power to make choices about their future health.

I also hope that all who participated in the research found it to be an empowering experience and feel more confident to take control of their relationship with physical activity. An output of this research will be a toolkit of knowledge for engaging young women from disadvantaged backgrounds in physical activity, so hopefully that will provide some practical tips that can be easily adopted in real life settings.”

Highlights and Looking Forward

Throughout my time on the KESS 2 programme I've been able to take part in multiple conferences. I was lucky enough to get to do a short presentation of my research at a Public Health Wales Conference, something I'll never forget! I'm also proud of my team's publication output from my PhD; it was a culmination of two years' worth of hard work and a great opportunity to get my name out there. I've recently started a new research post at Sport Cardiff. My role involves coordinating research and insight into various projects which seek to engage inactive populations in physical activity throughout Cardiff. It felt like a natural progression from my PhD and a great way to make an impact on the local community. I am also a member of the Cardiff Met's Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research Early Career Community so I continue to be connected to research at the university.



Advice for PhD Students



“My best piece of advice would be to trust the process. Doing a PhD can feel quite lonely at times, and you may feel a little lost along the way – it's completely normal. It's a marathon rather than a sprint so keep chipping away at your tasks and building towards your goal. It will all come together in the end.



Also, if you need help, always ask for it. The likelihood is there are others who are in or have been in your situation and being able to talk and share your experience will always take the weight off a little. We have some great people at Cardiff Met who will always help wherever they can so engage with them.”

“The idea for this project followed evaluation research undertaken for Calls for Action, a national intervention to tackle physical inactivity. My interest was in developing a deeper research process in which we could explore young females' lives and how physical activity is understood by them as well as considering the challenges for physical activity providers.

The opportunity to work with VGA has been fantastic. Located in the valleys, the company is very innovative and is an important SME focusing on improving lives through sport and recreation in the community.

From a research perspective the supervisory team, which also includes Dr David Brown and Dr Nic Matthews, is inter-disciplinary and brings sport development, policy, management and sociology together. We were so lucky to find Ellyse. She is a very strong researcher who has embraced the spirit of KESS 2 as well as developing new skills and managing the challenge of being a doctoral researcher under lockdown. Being a researcher under lockdown has required considerable agility and resilience.

Overall KESS 2 has offered great support and an invaluable package of research training. Importantly it equips doctoral students for employment and we're delighted that Ellyse is now working for Sport Cardiff.”

Dr Nicola Bolton, Director of Studies

“As a social enterprise it has been really helpful to be linked to Ellyse through the KESS 2 project. From the outset, Ellyse's academic work has helped us to gain insight into our member's motivations and for the team to better understand the young people with whom we work - enabling us to affect change in provision. We have been provided with unique information which has enabled us to shape our offer to engage with our members - and prospective members - more effectively, building upon previous pieces of work, such as the Street Games Us Girls project.”

Melissa Anderson,
Managing Director,
Valleys Gymnastics Academy



Publication

‘Beyond TTM and ABC: A Practice Perspective on Physical Activity Promotion for Adolescent Females from Disadvantaged Backgrounds’.

<https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/10/4/80>

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