

ALL IN THE SAME BOAT: MIXED ABILITY ROWING IN PRACTICE

Dr. Jen Dyer

Mixed Ability (MA) sport is challenging grassroots clubs to think differently about inclusion. Bradford Amateur Rowing Club (BARC) was the first to embrace MA rowing as part of the Mixed Ability Sports Development Programme (MASDP) led by IMAS and funded by Sport England. This research summary

charts the first year of MA rowing at BARC. The club's experience provides invaluable learning on aspects of MA rowing and MA sport as a whole including opportunities, challenges, timelines, personal stories, impacts and key learnings for the future.

Key findings

- MA rowing does not require significant infrastructural changes to the club and its facilities. This was one of the main reasons BARC opted to implement it, and might make it more attractive to other clubs too.
- At the outset, club members raised concerns about the introduction of MA, particularly around risk and ease of communication. Discussing these issues early on, in collaboration with MA trainers, will help alleviate these worries.
- The potential for a fully authentic MA offering at BARC was affected by a range of factors including: timing of sessions, opportunities for social interaction, membership models, recruitment and available resources. Clubs need guidance to be able to consider all these aspects carefully.
- Continued training across a club is critical to ensure members understand what MA is, and to reduce the challenges for those involved. BARC members have so far only received the initial IMAS training.
- Developing a network of experienced MA participants could provide valuable, ongoing support, guidance and reinforcement of good practice. Those involved with MA rowing at BARC would have liked more information and support up front.
- The culture of a club is likely to be key in whether an MA offering will be successful. BARC is viewed as a very welcoming club with an emphasis on participation.
- MA rowing at BARC has had significant positive impacts at the individual, club and broader societal level. MA has the potential to transform grassroots sports.

About BARC

BARC is a British Rowing affiliated club with around 150 members. It is situated on the River Aire in Baildon. BARC celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2017.

BARC embraced MA rowing as part of the Mixed Ability Sports Development Programme (MASDP) led by International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS) and funded by Sport England. The club is known for being friendly and welcoming, but wanted to become more inclusive and better represent the community. When Celia Hickson became President in September 2014 she made inclusivity a key development area for the club. MA rowing was seen as a great way to achieve this aim because IMAS advised that they could work with the existing club facilities rather than make significant financial investments to include 'disability rowing' facilities.

BARC chose to secure additional funding in order to purchase touring boats which are slightly more stable for beginner rowers. The club's charitable status enabled its members to apply for a variety of grants to support MA, raising over £10,000 in additional funds.

'Rowing is a brilliant sport. It's cardiovascular, non-weight-bearing, it's outdoors, with people, very social, and it's a team-based sport, so it should be available to everyone.'

Celia Hickson,
President of BARC



What is Mixed Ability?

Many people face significant barriers to participating in mainstream sport through, for example, disability, age, gender, background or poor self-perception. MA sport takes an innovative approach to breaking down these barriers. MA participants from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities share experiences and learning through interactive and accessible training and resources. This creates sporting environments that are safe, welcoming and non-judgemental. MA emphasises the importance of regular, frequent and sustainable activities, self-determination, club membership and opportunities for social interaction for all.

Introducing MA rowing

A focus group held before MA started revealed a mix of concerns and eagerness to proceed amongst BARC committee members.

Those who attended the IMAS presentation at BARC in December 2016 had an excellent understanding of the MA concept. Those who hadn't attended were less clear as to how MA differed from disability rowing.

'The Model that was described to us ... made clear that people with disabilities wanted to take part in the club properly. They wanted to take part in the social life of the club ... rather than being in their own kind of ghetto or their own enclave. So the whole point was participation in the wider club.'

Keith Myers,
BARC Committee member,
attended IMAS presentation,
Dec 2016

'People with disabilities wanted to take part in the club properly. They wanted to take part in the social life of the club.'



Early concerns

Resourcing MA rowing:
Volunteer resources are already stretched at BARC and MA will reduce capacity further.

Types of disability:
Most people felt comfortable and familiar with physical disability but less confident about supporting people with learning disabilities, largely due to fears over communication. This was particularly in relation to risk, concerning the ability of MA rowers to respond quickly in an emergency, which is critical given the dynamic context of a river system.

'I think, I'll lay my cards on the table and say I think I'd find it very difficult to coach someone with learning difficulties. Physical difficulties I can cope with, but learning difficulties is a bit tricky.'

Chris Morley,
BARC Committee member,
MA coach and volunteer coordinator

Early motivations

To give back:
There was a strong desire to give back to the club and to the sport of rowing through MA.

Coaching satisfaction:
Coaching new people, helping them meet their goals and improve was a key motivation for developing MA.

Inclusive ethos:
BARC promotes an inclusive ethos and MA was seen as contributing to this.

Club benefits:
MA rowing was seen as a way to increase and diversify membership, as well as shaping BARC's reputation for innovation.

MA rowing timeline



February 2016

IMAS-led stakeholder consultation in Bradford about Sport England bid to trial MA sport beyond rugby

September 2016

Sport England funding confirmed



December 2016

IMAS presentation at BARC to introduce the MA Model to the Club (five members of Committee present and British Rowing Disability Officer)



March 2017

BARC received £3,000 from the Rowing Foundation



June 2017

Research focus group with committee prior to start of MA rowing

MA rowing sessions started Tuesday 22 June with four beginners and around 25 members of BARC on the volunteer rota

August 2017

Land training continued as fewer volunteers available over the summer

October 2017 - March 2018

Training continued

MA beginner numbers dropped from four to two



May 2018

Sunday morning sessions started with one existing MA rower attending and two new members from the club joining the MA session

Research interviews with BARC members

March - September 2016

MA rowing idea introduced and discussed (led by the BARC President) at BARC committee meetings

October - November 2016

BARC, supported by British Rowing Disability Officer, submitted three funding bids to supplement Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme (MASDP) funding for equipment



February 2017

BARC received £5,000 from the Gannett Foundation



May 2017

BARC received £2,819 from the Peter Harrison Trust

Ordered new touring boats for MA rowing which are slightly more stable

MA participants recruited through existing IMAS activities, open days and presentations.

Volunteers recruited through BARC.



July 2017

Land training for MA crew using rowing machines and cycling

New touring boats arrived at BARC

September 2017

BARC's Autumn Regatta was the first club event to be attended by one of the MA rowers as a spectator and helper with logistics

First training 'on the water'



June 2018

BARC's Annual Sprint Regatta with the first MA crew race 'The 4-Michaels'

Research interviews with BARC members



April 2018

BARC 'War of the Roses' event attended by one of the MA rowers

Methodology

This research summary presents key themes and learning emerging from BARC's MA rowing journey. Data were gathered through:

- a focus group with seven members of the BARC Committee in May 2017;
- interviews with ten members of the club, including those involved and not involved in MA rowing, in May - July 2018;
- participant observation at BARC between May 2017 and July 2018.

Challenges and opportunities of MA rowing

Over the first year of developing MA rowing, there were some clear areas which worked well and others which were more challenging.

Peer education and training

BARC had only had the initial presentation from IMAS rather than the full MA peer training and accreditation. This had resulted in a lack of guidance and understanding around MA, which is explored further on page 11 (see ‘Language and perceptions’ and ‘Volunteers or participants’). Coaches and volunteers also reported frustration at being unable to support MA participants to improve because they lacked skills and/or experience.

‘The support we’ve had as volunteers from the broader club has been minimal and I feel I’ve been very much left to develop my own strategies ... I’ve reached my limit of what I know now and [Michael’s] rowing development has plateaued ... It would be really useful to have an experienced Mixed Ability coach that I could talk to, even once a month, who could advise me on techniques.’

MA rowing volunteer

Sustainability

Regular and frequent sessions are key to realising the benefits of MA sport. Weekly sessions for MA rowing have been going for one year and have now expanded to two sessions per week. MA participants pay £5 on a sessional basis rather than a one-off membership, which is a more financially accessible model and still sustainable for the club.

MA participant numbers at BARC is low and retention has proved difficult with only one of the original MA group continuing to participate in the Sunday morning sessions. BARC is reliant on IMAS networks to recruit disabled participants and at least one MA rower stopped attending after their carer changed and wasn’t supportive of the activity.

MA beginners rowing is volunteer-intensive and some suggested it was diverting volunteer resources from other areas of the club such as the Junior rowers.

The club environment

The culture of BARC, as a welcoming club that caters for all ages and supports social as well as competition rowing, made it easier to introduce MA to the club.

‘Socially BARC is very mixed club - more than some of the other clubs. And the focus has always been on participation rather than competition. You should feel like you want to come down and row, and not feel you’re not part of the main club if you don’t want to compete - whereas you might with some of the other clubs that are more competitive.’

MA rowing volunteer

Social interaction

Initially MA sessions were run on Tuesday mornings. This was helpful at the start because it was a very quiet time on the river so safer for beginners, with fewer distractions. But it didn’t encourage social integration. It also made those involved feel more like volunteers than participants (see ‘Volunteers or participants?’ on page 11). In recognition of this, Sunday morning sessions began in May 2018 and are proving effective in addressing these issues.

‘The Sunday morning sessions are starting to feel like it’s just another outing in a boat and it just happens to be with one of the MA participants.’

MA rowing volunteer

BARC is involved with many formal and informal rowing events. These were very effective for encouraging social integration into the club for MA participants, raising awareness of MA rowing at the club and beyond, advocating for MA rowing and MA sport more generally.

Key learnings

- MA training across a club is crucial to ensure understanding of MA and to reduce challenges for those involved.
- Preliminary training at the introduction stage could focus on the issues likely to arise, followed by additional sessions when specific challenges have been identified by supporters of the initiative. This way both the trainers and trainees will get the most out of the exercise.
- A knowledge-sharing network and/or peer-mentoring scheme across sports would be useful for those involved in MA.
- The culture of the club is likely to be critical in whether an MA offering will be appropriate.
- Decisions about when MA sessions run are critical in achieving social integration and equal participation.
- Informal club events are an excellent way to encourage the integration of MA rowers and raise awareness of MA more broadly.
- Alternative financial models, such as sessional payments, could increase accessibility of club membership for MA participants.
- Clubs need to work with IMAS to develop networks to recruit disabled and non-disabled MA participants.
- MA training needs to address issues around retention of MA participants such as the role of carers.
- Discussions around the resource implications of an MA offering are crucial.



Participants’ stories



Michael Kernan

Michael K got involved with MA rowing at BARC after trying it out at an MA taster day in Bradford. He has also played MA rugby for over three years for the Bumble Bees.

Michael has been coming to the Tuesday sessions which were originally marked out for MA rowing only, but is now a regular on Sunday mornings too where MA squads row alongside others. He can often be found in the clubhouse helping himself to hot drinks and generally enjoying everyone’s company.

Michael feels he has improved since he started and really enjoys the sessions. Those who are coaching him say he has the perfect build for rowing, excellent core strength and balance and his technique has improved enormously. He now needs to work on his concentration and not getting distracted by other things around him, especially as he recently progressed to a single.

Michael has attended all BARC regattas since he started and was one quarter of the famous ‘4-Michaels’ race, where he and his partner Michael narrowly beat another pair of Michaels!



Freya Stansfield

Freya’s company encourages employees to volunteer for two hours a month so she uses her time for the Tuesday morning MA session. She coaches the MA participants and says that it’s no different to any other group she has been involved with.

‘To be honest, it’s just like coaching anybody else who’s learning to row. You have to make everything simple; they make the same mistakes as everybody else. I think what I’ve learnt is to try and simplify things even further but other than that I don’t really find that much difference really. I haven’t worked with anyone of Mixed Ability before so it’s been a learning experience but I haven’t found it particularly challenging - it just works a bit differently. Things happen at a slower pace and you have to be a bit more patient.’

‘It’s just like coaching anybody else who’s learning to row.’



Michael Randle

Michael R joined BARC at the age of 72 through the Learn to Row scheme. He had seen the BARC rowers when walking his dog and wanted to try it. He has always been active and rowing keeps him fit but he also enjoys the social side of the club and regularly cycles and walks with other club members.

Michael was approached by Chris about volunteering with the MA squad. He was also involved in the infamous ‘4-Michaels’ race and feels that MA would sit very nicely in rowing clubs and events where the emphasis is on enjoyment as well as competition.

Michael said he really appreciates MA sports as a different model of inclusion for society which has extra relevance to him:

‘One of my grand-daughters has extra needs and so, over the past few years, I’ve had direct experience of being with her and encouraging her. It’s great to see something where people are actually involved in a community activity and not separated off all the time.’



Chris Morley

Chris has been involved with the MA rowing since it started and coordinates the volunteers. He says it can be difficult to get enough people for each session. Chris describes MA rowing as being ‘satisfyingly well outside my comfort zone’ and is keenly aware of being responsible for the MA rowers. He has worked most closely with Michael Kernan whose technique, he says, has improved. He also feels that he has seen Michael mature since he has been part of BARC, which he puts down to him not being afforded special treatment.

The impacts of MA rowing

Impacts on the individual

- Improved coaching skills
- A sense of ‘giving back’ to the club and sport
- A chance to explore a new sport for MA beginners
- An improved awareness of social difference for non-disabled participants in particular
- An ability to communicate with a broader range of people

‘Mostly people put back through coaching or umpiring, or you help run the club. This is a totally different strand. It is actually quite challenging because it challenges your own perceptions of what a person is or is not capable of.’

BARC veteran who has recently returned to rowing following retirement

‘It has reminded me how hard you have to work as a coach to communicate clearly. It’s taught me that at the lower skills levels, I must not over complicate it.’

Mark Edwards,
former BARC Safety Advisor
and MA rowing coach

Societal impact

- Challenging perceptions of (dis)ability and assumptions that MA beginners would be less able than other rowing beginners
- Raising awareness of social difference and encouraging reflection on barriers others may face in society
- Reducing fears of communication with those perceived as different to oneself

‘I’ll be honest and say I was expecting [the MA beginners] to be slower to get to this level. One thing I wasn’t sure about was how good their coordination and balance would be. And with both of them their balance is superb which

Club-level impacts

- Promoting a culture of accessibility, vulnerability and openness. For example, the more flexible, ‘sessional’ payment model for MA has allowed others to start conversations about struggles with affording annual membership
- Improving and diversifying communication strategies, for example, around social events
- Informing other rowing initiatives such as the Learn to Row programme where there is now ‘less talking and more doing’ as well as a reduction in ‘jargon’
- Offering an additional, welcoming space for rowing for those who are struggling to join in with other club activities temporarily, for example, because of mental health reasons or other commitments

‘The key learning from MA has all been around communication. How we communicate about the learning process, how we communicate whilst on the water, how we communicate about what’s going on in the club. The actual rowing is the easiest part!’

Celia Hickson,
President of BARC

makes a huge difference. As I’ve got to know them, I can see they spend every day being very active - probably much more so than an adult with a desk job.’

MA rowing volunteer

‘I did feel [a bit uncomfortable] but once I started becoming personally involved and being in a boat with [the MA participants], all that went away ... And I just thought “It’s done me some good really, being part of this training session” ... For me it has made it easier to be around people when I don’t understand what they’re saying.’

MA rowing volunteer

Beyond rowing: broader lessons for MA

BARC’s experience has raised some important debates around perceptions of disability and highlighted the challenges as well as the potential opportunities in fully integrating disabled participants into a mainstream sports club.

Volunteers or participants?

The MA model seeks to challenge societal perceptions of disabled people as requiring ‘charity’ by emphasising that everyone is a participant in sport, rather than labelling people either ‘MA participants’ or ‘volunteers’. The MA vision is that they are all participants. However, this is complicated by the fact that, in rowing, a certain skill level needs to be reached before any new rower can go on the water and join a rowing crew. This means volunteers are needed in order to help beginner rowers reach this stage and many of the existing BARC members who are involved in MA rowing label themselves as volunteers. While this may be relevant with beginner MA rowers, it is important that a transition is made to everyone being equal participants in their own right. The Sunday morning sessions where MA and non-MA rowers are on the water, are important in aiding this transition.

As part of MA training, this transition needs considering across different sports. For example, MA tennis is similar to MA rowing in requiring a certain skill level before a game can be played with more experienced players. However, in MA rugby and MA boxing, complete beginners can join in a training session with more experienced participants.

Language and perceptions

Lack of guidance and understanding around MA is evident in the language used by some of those involved, which included the dichotomy of ‘normal’ (us) and ‘them’ (MA participants). This is not in keeping with the MA ethos of ‘all of us together’, but perhaps reflects the complex interplay of broader societal perceptions of disability as ‘other’. And this may be amplified in a sporting context where the more common scenario is for disabled people to take part in segregated sports. Highlighting the differences between segregated disability sport and MA sport is a regular challenge when trying to explain and promote MA sport and is further complicated by the high profile of elite disability sport. One interviewee said:

‘To some extent there was a cultural barrier of actually understanding that [MA participants] are not ‘para-rowers’. Para-rowing has become well known within the rowing community because there are some formidable athletes out there who are physically disabled.’

BARC veteran who has recently returned to rowing following retirement

Welcoming or inclusive?

BARC members emphasised how inclusive the club already was. However, although BARC was clearly welcoming and wouldn’t turn any potential member away that approached them, it was still seen as exclusive because many would not approach the Club in the first instance. The President, in particular, highlighted the ‘elite and highly competitive image of rowing’ and

the long history of male domination in the sport. This could be a barrier to many approaching BARC. Clubs need to be aware of the difference between being welcoming, which is a very positive aspect of club culture for nurturing MA, and being inclusive, which may involve thinking more critically about existing barriers the members may not even be aware of.

Reflections on the first year of MA rowing at BARC

As the first club to offer MA rowing, BARC's experience to date has provided invaluable insights into MA rowing and MA sport more broadly. It has raised important debates around perceptions of disability, and highlighted the challenges as well as the potential opportunities for the individual - disabled or otherwise - the club, and the wider community, of fully integrating disabled participants into a mainstream sports club.

'What we have learned from this club's experience will be instrumental in providing a template for other clubs to try Mixed Ability sports. It's given us a fantastic insight into the barriers and enablers that help make Mixed Ability a standard part of a club's offer and shown how, without question, every member of a club benefits.'

Martino Corazza, Director of IMAS.



About IMAS

IMAS believes that everyone should be able to benefit from the transformational power of sport to create healthy and happy communities. To make this vision possible, IMAS provides interactive and accessible training delivered by participants from a range of backgrounds to create sporting environments that are safe, welcoming and non-judgemental. This has been shown to overcome a huge range of barriers for people who may otherwise struggle to participate, as well as benefiting clubs and the wider community.

Get in touch

If you want to introduce MA rowing at your club, or find out more about more about Mixed Ability sport please get in touch:

✉ contact@mixedabilitysports.org

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Sign the manifesto

IMAS' values are upheld in its Manifesto. To find out more about Mixed Ability sports, and sign the Manifesto, visit the website:

🌐 www.mixedabilitysports.org



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