

Challenging health inequalities through the Mixed Ability model

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The recent Marmot report 10 years on, highlighted how health inequalities related to disabilities are still stark^{1,2}. This has been even more apparent during the Covid pandemic, which it is now clear has disproportionately affected disabled people³ and exacerbated existing barriers to accessing the health and care system. In a 2020 Lecture on Disability Rights and the Pandemic, Baroness Jane Campbell said disabled people have been made “passive victims” of Covid⁴, and a recent Public Health England report highlights that deaths amongst people with Learning Disabilities were likely to be 3.6 times higher than those of the general population⁵.

Challenging these inequalities, advocating to improve health outcomes and breaking down barriers to improve health are absolutely integral to the Mixed Ability model. In providing safe and welcoming spaces for physical activity and social connection, Mixed Ability sport empowers those involved to improve their own physical and mental wellbeing. In addition, the IMAS Team are contributing to building a health and care system that works for everyone. One way they are doing this is by providing experiential learning opportunities for a wide range of current and future healthcare practitioners.

This research summary outlines how the IMAS Team have been working hard to reduce the wellbeing impacts of the Covid pandemic on their community, and how experiential learning, as part of the Mixed Ability model, could be harnessed in attempts to ‘build back fairer’.

‘I had never previously interacted with people with learning (and other) disabilities. I now feel much more equipped to communicate and treat such patients ... Being on this placement and the knowledge and experience I gained at IMAS will help me make a better doctor in the future’⁶.

Key highlights:

- The IMAS Team challenged narratives around social distancing with their **Mixed Ability Connects** initiative, emphasizing instead *physical* distancing which doesn’t carry the same risk of isolation.
- Weekly IMAS Trainers meetings were moved online. They continued to provide a safe, welcoming and non-judgemental space for support and advice, as well as contributing to bridging the digital divide for an even wider range of participants across geographical boundaries.
- The IMAS Trainers produced an impressive array of motivational resources to support the health and wellbeing of others in the IMAS community and beyond.
- The IMAS Team rallied against the narrative of disabled people as ‘passive victims’ of the pandemic and ensured IMAS Trainers were vaccinated early on as health and social care workers.
- IMAS are providing experiential learning opportunities to a variety of current and future health and care practitioners which is solidifying important concepts around health inequalities and impacting practice.

Reducing the impacts of the Covid pandemic on wellbeing

Physical isolation but not social isolation

Early on in the pandemic, the IMAS Team challenged the narrative around social distancing through their **Mixed Ability Connects** initiative. They know the risks involved with isolation for their community, and that keeping people connected is a priority for wellbeing. Therefore, they felt an emphasis on social distancing was flawed and dangerous for those who are likely to be most affected by social isolation. They suggested the narrative should instead be concentrated on *physical* distancing to try to mitigate this risk as far as possible.

The Team also worked hard to keep their community connected by moving their weekly IMAS Trainers' meetings online. This meant the Trainers still had access to a safe, welcoming and non-judgemental space where they are listened to, and where they can get non-patronising, non-coercive support and advice, with the focus being on autonomy and empowering people to make their own choices.

Co-production of motivational resources

The IMAS Team co-produced an impressive series of engaging videos, blogs and challenges, such as **Pandemic Positivity** and **Mixed Ability Connects**, to amplify the voices of the IMAS Trainers in raising awareness of barriers faced, tackling inequalities, challenging narratives around social isolation, promoting health and keeping people motivated to be active.



Building a health and care system that works for everyone

Access to COVID vaccines

IMAS mobilised partnerships and networks within the health and care system at an early stage in the Covid vaccine roll-out. This ensured IMAS Trainers could access vaccinations, through the Modality Partnership, as workers in the health and social care field who, in many cases, had health vulnerabilities. This not only reduced the likelihood of vaccine hesitancy, with peer-to-peer encouragement and support, it also reflected the importance of the IMAS Trainers' roles. Fundamentally, this also highlights the fact that the IMAS asset based approach really challenges the narrative of disabled people as 'passive victims' of the pandemic.

Experiential learning for healthcare practitioners

The IMAS Team have been developing networks within the health and care system in recent years in recognition of the contribution the Mixed Ability model could make to, for example, a combined approach to tackling mental and physical health, social prescribing and, most recently, Covid vaccine acceptance.

The IMAS Team regularly hosts interactive presentations with the IMAS Trainers for a range of current and future health and care practitioners including nurses, GPs and physios. In this context, the usual power dynamic is 'flipped' and the health and care practitioners become the students, hearing from the IMAS Trainers as experts in their own experiences of the health and care system.

Between April 2020 and March 2021
these included:



503

People reached

Practitioner	No.
 Bradford University Physio Students	98
 GP Training	81
 Public Health England with Activity Alliance 'Tackling Inequalities'	65
 Bradford University Pharmacy Students	140
 Sheffield University Medical Students	44
 Community Resilience' West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health Care Partnership	75

This learning extends to health and care students for whom IMAS host placements. In previous years, these students have participated in Mixed Ability sport, as well as carrying out research and co-producing resources but this year saw the placements moved online. The following case studies highlight the mutual benefits brought about through the placements.

Sheffield University Medical Students



Interaction with the IMAS Trainers is key to providing a meaningful experience and understanding Mixed Ability. Therefore, IMAS Trainers were paired with the medical students virtually, during this 2-week placement in November 2020, to co-produce a presentation, blog, video or event based around the impacts COVID has had on them.

Benefits to IMAS Trainers



The IMAS Trainers reported feeling empowered by the experience, saying that delivering presentations to, and working with, the medical students meant they could continue doing what they loved and keep sharing their stories. Katrina said the Karaoke event she co-hosted with 3rd year student Tom, helped her family realise how much she is capable of, and that it brought her and her family closer together.

Benefits to medical students



The medical students also reported learning a lot from the placement. In his [placement blog](#), Max outlines his learning around, for example, how the impacts of COVID interact with disability, the technology gap and the importance of a holistic, person-centred approach in healthcare.

"We've gone along and planted some seeds [with these students]. If the seeds grow and help them to develop then that's brilliant, because people will have better lives that they work with. And it may make them think of different ways how they work with people."
– Sam, IMAS Ambassador and Trainer



Sam Evans: University of Bradford 3rd Year Physiotherapy student



Sam undertook a 4-week placement with IMAS in November 2020 and still remembered very clearly attending an IMAS presentation during his 1st year. During the placement, Sam got the opportunity to play in a Mixed Ability rugby match with the Bumble Bees, where he says he really understood the power of Mixed Ability sport, and took part in a Mixed Ability boxing session with Unorthobox.

Benefits of the placement



During the placement Sam worked with two IMAS Trainers and reflected that in doing so he became more aware of his own communication methods.

"I didn't give [the Trainer] enough time to speak initially. I think when you work with someone you get to know them better."

Sam also said that the placement solidified key healthcare concepts such as taking an asset-based and person-centred approach, looking at intersectionality and health inequalities, and introducing the concept of social prescribing.

Immediate impacts on practice



During the Mixed Ability boxing session, Sam spoke with IMAS NeD, and fellow Mixed Ability participant, Mark 'Doc' Purvis about the beneficial effects boxing can have on people with Parkinson's. Following the discussion, Sam researched the effects of boxing on Parkinson's and found that the combination of repetitive skill practice and cognitive engagement has shown to improve balance and gait.

Shortly after this, Sam met a patient with Parkinson's who he described as active and looking for alternative ways to manage his condition. Sam decided to refer him to Unorthobox. He reflected that: **'It's always important to involve [the patient] in their goal setting and the exercises that they want to do. Unorthobox presented the perfect opportunity for the patient to engage in a new challenging activity and allowed me to put into practice what I had learnt while working with IMAS.'**

Contributing to 'building back fairer'

There is clear potential for the Mixed Ability model to contribute to a health and care system that works for everyone. Mixed Ability sport provides safe and welcoming spaces for physical activity and social connection, thereby empowering those involved to improve their own physical and mental wellbeing. Interactive presentations and placements with the IMAS Trainers bring to life and solidify key concepts such as health inequalities, intersectionality and person-centred care for a range of health and care practitioners. This work is likely to become even more valuable in the near future, as the impacts of long-Covid become understood. IMAS could play a critical role in rehabilitation of long-Covid sufferers, with their emphasis on social prescribing and asset based approach to health and wellbeing.



NIFTY
SUSTAINABILITY

This report is based on research carried out by Nifty Sustainability between December 2020 and February 2021. Methods included interviews across key stakeholders such as IMAS Directors in the UK and Ireland, IMAS Non-executive Directors (NeDs), IMAS Trainers, and health and care students. Data were also gathered from a desk-based review of relevant literature and attendance at relevant online conferences, as well as participation in, and observation of, the weekly meetings with the IMAS Trainers, and student placement presentations within the same timeframe.

References

- 1 [Health equity in England: The Marmot review 10 years on, 2020](#)
- 2 [LeDeR Annual Report, 2019](#)
- 3 [Nuffield Trust, 2021](#)
- 4 [Caroline Gooding Memorial Lecture, 2020](#)
- 5 [Public Health England, 2020](#)
- 6 [Sheffield University Medical Student blog, 2020](#)

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.

Sign our manifesto

IMAS' values are upheld in its Manifesto.

To find out more about Mixed Ability sports, and sign the Manifesto, visit the website:

 [**mixedabilitiesports.org**](https://mixedabilitiesports.org)

