

EVALUATION OF THE MIXED ABILITY SPORTS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

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FOREWORD FROM SPORT ENGLAND

Sport England exists to transform lives through sport and physical activity. We know that sport and physical activity can build confidence, provide social connections, even skills for employment, on top of the physical benefits it brings.

The vision we have at Sport England is that everyone can engage in physical activity, irrespective of their background. Whilst we have made progress towards realizing this vision over recent years, with higher numbers of adults active according to our latest research (Sport England, 2019), we also know that there is much more to do. This is particularly the case in relation to disabled people, where there remains a significantly higher likelihood of being inactive compared to people without an impairment.

As part of our continued drive to encourage disabled people to become active, we know that we must use a range of approaches to physical activity, which are underpinned by continuous learning. It is also critical to adopt an approach that embraces the diverse needs of disabled people and is responsive to their views and preferences when it comes to engaging with physical activity.

We have been delighted to work with IMAS to help fund their work and the further exploration of the Mixed Ability approach across several different activities ranging from rowing to boxing. The Mixed Ability model has the capacity to positively impact the lives of many participants and sporting communities.

Sport England has funded IMAS £161k over two years via the Take Up Programme to offer Mixed Ability provision in a total of seven disciplines. By the second year, IMAS had expanded the footprint to a regional level, including areas in South Yorkshire and the North West of England. More than 800 people participated across the different disciplines.

The following evaluation of the Mixed Ability Sports Development Model represents an important contribution to exploring how the reach and appeal of physical activity for disabled people can be broadened. A distinctive feature of the evaluation is its reference to the field of disability studies and the 'ableist' nature of sport and physical activity, which can pose challenges to disabled people. Using a carefully thought out approach, the evaluation demonstrates key insights into how the Mixed Ability model is employed, together with reflection on the beneficial impacts of the Mixed Ability approach. The evaluation also underlines the vital importance of engaging disabled people, acknowledging the approaches and time that this entails. Success is not something that can be achieved overnight, it is better to get this right than completed quickly.

The evaluation also provides an important reflection and analysis of how to deliver innovative approaches to engage people in sports and physical activity. The Mixed Ability model offers a wide, inclusive approach, creating a safe space where people can participate in physical activity, especially those who may have previously encountered barriers to participation. As such, this document is important reading for those who seek to use sport to maximise the truly life-changing difference it can make for people everywhere.

ADAM BLAZE

Strategic Lead, Disability, Sport England



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Mixed Ability Sports Development Programme (MASPD) aims to promote social inclusion through sport, education and advocacy. The Mixed Ability model is being developed and championed by the not-for-profit organisation, International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS) who first developed the approach through the context of rugby. Mixed Ability sport encourages social inclusion by integrating players regardless of dis/ability into a mainstream sport setting and emphasises the importance of sustainable provision, self-determination, club membership and opportunities for social interaction. The MASDP can be seen to contribute to a growing body of work on the use of sport/physical activity as vehicles for positive impact through, for example, cultural cohesion, gender equity, education and social inclusion. Moreover, it aligns with Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states that participation in mainstream sport should be a right for all individuals.



2. This report outlines findings from the evaluation of the MASDP, undertaken by researchers from the University of Leeds and Loughborough University between November 2016 and January 2019. The participatory evaluation was funded by Sport England and sought to provide insight into the impact of the programme and the experiences of various stakeholder groups. More specifically, the aims of the evaluation were to: assess stakeholder motivations, perceptions and attitudes; highlight challenges faced by participants/organisations in the various sports; report the impacts of the MASDP on participants, clubs and the broader community; and gain an insight into different participants' experiences as well as Mixed Ability sport more broadly.



3. Funding from Sport England for the MASDP has allowed IMAS to trial the Mixed Ability model in new sports beyond rugby, specifically rowing, cricket, boxing, tennis, golf, exercise, movement and dance (EMD) and bowls. Over the course of the evaluation, Mixed Ability came to be trialled in several other sports (e.g. swimming, cycling, wheelchair basketball and KinBall) although these were not a key focus of this research. In the first year of the programme (Nov 2016 – Nov 2017) activities were concentrated in the Bradford area but then extended to Leeds, York, Liverpool and South Yorkshire in the remaining programme period (Nov 2017 – Jan 2019). Over the course of the MASDP, IMAS delivered 9 open days and 47 presentations to grassroots clubs, National Governing Bodies, County Sport Partnerships, schools, colleges, support organisations and members as well as healthcare professionals. In total they reached over 1200 participants. In Bradford, Mixed Ability activities attracted 147 new disabled and 169 non-disabled members to 12 different sports. Replication has begun in York, Leeds, Liverpool and Doncaster.



4. A qualitative methodology was employed, to explore the thoughts and experiences of individuals who were involved with MASPD activities and facilitate participant voice. The research took an ethnographic approach, employing participatory methods throughout (e.g. timelines, mind-mapping, photo elicitation) sensitive to the communication styles and preferences of respondents. It also emphasised stakeholder engagement, tracking both the development of specific Mixed Ability sports and the journey of individual participants/clubs. Ethical approval was sought prior to the commencement of research activities and relevant procedures relating to safeguarding, consent and anonymity were followed. Core research activities included: observations of Mixed Ability activity sessions, individual interviews with stakeholders; participant interviews and focus group discussions and discussion/debate in three stakeholder workshops.

5. Raw data were collated and analysed to identify key findings and points of interest. Following a general inductive approach, data were analysed through the coding and mapping of themes which centred on the impacts, challenges and enabling factors for Mixed Ability sport. Throughout, case studies of individuals, clubs and sports were a valuable means of organising data and presenting findings, as the experience of the MASDP often played out in different ways across different contexts.

6. Findings are presented in 2 core sections. Firstly, a summary table identifies key themes, outlining relevant issues and providing illustrative participant quotes. Secondly, three detailed case studies (incorporating a range of different Mixed Ability sports) are presented.

- i. The summary table identifies three key themes: the impacts of Mixed Ability sport; challenges of Mixed Ability sport; and facilitators of Mixed Ability sport.

Theme 1 (Impacts): Several positive impacts from involvement in Mixed Ability sport were reported. These were noted across sports for disabled and non-disabled participants and were identified as being on an individual (e.g. physical health benefits, mental well-being, self-confidence and belonging), club (e.g. a shift to a more inclusive culture, recruitment of new members, more accessible infrastructure and practitioner development) and societal (e.g., shifts in perceptions of dis/ability, raised awareness of potential barriers to participation and enhanced communication) level.

Theme 2 (Challenges): Some factors were identified as inhibiting positive impact from the MASDP. For example, difficulties in defining Mixed Ability led to different interpretations and varied practical provision. Additionally, dominant social perceptions of disability shaped some individuals' attitudes towards their own participation (non-disabled participants often seeing themselves more as 'volunteers') and their expectations of others' abilities/capabilities. Finally, the educational component of the Mixed Ability model was found to be largely absent within practice, limiting its capacity to contribute to programme sustainability.

Theme 3 (Facilitators): A few factors were identified as facilitating a positive impact from the MASDP. For example, it was found that Mixed Ability worked best when it had been an 'organic' process driven by a 'Champion' and where the club/organisation was already actively working towards an inclusion agenda. Positive impact was also aided by having plentiful opportunities for social interaction beyond the activity itself and by having positive National Governing Body (NGB) support/engagement.

- ii. The case studies detail the Mixed Ability journeys and experiences of three different sports clubs: Bradford Amateur Rowing Club (BARC); Heaton Tennis and Squash Club; and York and District Indoor Bowls Club. In each case, a background to their engagement in Mixed Ability is provided and key individuals involved in the organisation/running of activities are identified (e.g. club presidents, coaches and managers). There is discussion relating to the core Mixed Ability activities undertaken in each context, with a focus on both 'what works' well in practice and what has been challenging. Participant stories are included in each case study, to detail individual experiences and present the views of participants (of all abilities) in their own words. Each case study closes with a summary of 'lessons learned' for ongoing programme development/practice.



7. Discussion of the research findings focuses on some of the broader, interconnecting issues related to each of the core themes and demonstrated within the case study narratives. Three core areas are presented:

- i. The challenges of defining Mixed Ability are discussed and research findings are used to identify a number of essential elements that underpin 'authentic' Mixed Ability, namely: a safe, welcoming environment; regular, sustainable provision; all training together as equals; reasonable adjustments (not adaptations); and the promotion of self-determination. It is argued that an increased impact is facilitated by locating activities in a mainstream club setting, having opportunities for social interaction and encouraging membership, with the ideal scenario being a context in which all skill levels are welcome/accommodated and mixed ability teams can engage in all club activities, including competition and travel. Underpinning all stages of development is the educational component of Mixed Ability.
- ii. The research findings indicate that Mixed Ability sport can, in some cases, shift perceptions around dis/ability. However, this is not always a comfortable or smooth process and some of the difficulties evident in the findings are noted, namely: the 'othering' of disabled participants; the pervasiveness of the 'charity model' of disability; the conflation of 'skill' and 'ability' (and associated expectations); and assumptions regarding recreational rather than competitive aspirations on the part of disabled participants. It was noted that Mixed Ability experiences offered valuable opportunities for reflection (for both participants and practitioners) and had supported positive changes in behaviour/practice for some coaches (e.g. relating to communication, planning and facilitating participant engagement/agency).
- iii. The research data clearly highlight that Mixed Ability sport is most successful when it is driven organically by a 'champion' who is engaged with/supported by IMAS. Some challenges were identified here, notably the difficulties of starting Mixed Ability activities in 'new' areas without a clearly identified lead and the problems caused by historical frameworks of elite sport within NGB structures. The implications for extending the reach of the Mixed Ability model are discussed and it is suggested that impact may be best facilitated here by working with committed individuals rather than targeting specific geographical locations. Likewise, it is noted that clubs that aspire towards inclusivity and seek to create connections with the local community are more likely to facilitate successful engagement with/impact from Mixed Ability sport.



8. Several recommendations are made with a view to informing the ongoing development of the Mixed Ability model. The recommendations for Mixed Ability provision are to ensure the peer education and training components are embedded within practice, to have an identified Mixed Ability 'champion' to help drive activities, and to develop a knowledge-sharing network and/or peer mentoring scheme to help share good practice. The recommendations for supporting and promoting Mixed Ability provision are for NGBs to increase their investment in Mixed Ability sport (and consider if/where current investment in disability sport might be usefully redirected) and for dialogue at the national level to examine how Mixed Ability sport might foster genuine and meaningful inclusion for disabled people and others facing barriers to participation. Finally, recommendations for funding bodies are for more sustainable funding that can better support an organic Mixed Ability process (i.e. allowing time for Mixed Ability champions to be identified, networks to be built and peer-education to be embedded), for funding to be directed into mainstream clubs and not just separate/adapted activity contexts, and for further investment to explore and evaluate the impact of Mixed Ability sports in different contexts.



9. It is argued that the Mixed Ability model represents a radical approach to promoting meaningful inclusion and challenging the ableist culture of sport and broader society. The research highlights that the Mixed Ability model has the potential for positive impacts (from the individual to community level) and that fundamental perception shifts around dis/ability can take place when disabled participants are fully integrated into mainstream sports clubs. For these positive impacts to be achieved, the educational component must be embedded alongside practical activities in order to ensure 'authentic' Mixed Ability provision and provide support/guidance to all involved. It is hoped that the information outlined in this report can help to highlight the positive outcomes of the MASDP and inform further refinement/development of Mixed Ability activities. Moreover, it is intended that the findings of this evaluation might serve to reinforce the potential of Mixed Ability sport to promote social inclusion and facilitate its ongoing impact on individuals, organisations and society.





SECTION1:

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines findings from the evaluation of the Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme (MASDP) undertaken by researchers from the University of Leeds and Loughborough University between November 2016 and January 2019. Following this brief introduction, the report goes on to introduce the Mixed Ability model, outline the research methodology, highlight key findings and explore the implications and recommendations from the research.



1.1 SPORT AND DISABILITY

Sport and physical activity is increasingly being recognised as a vehicle for positive impact through, for example, cultural cohesion, gender equity, education and social inclusion (Coalter, 2013; Sherry et al., 2015; Holt, 2016). However, disabled people's participation in sport remains low and questions have been asked about how best to enable their engagement. Disability sport is often offered through segregated provision and participation framed around the Special Olympics and Paralympics. However, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 30 states that participation in mainstream sport should be a right for individuals, and research into initiatives that promote interaction between groups from diverse backgrounds through sport suggests that social impacts can be transformative for all those involved (e.g. Peachey et al., 2011). The Mixed Ability model is an innovative approach to achieving this.

1.2 THE MIXED ABILITY MODEL

The Mixed Ability model aims to promote social inclusion through sport, education and advocacy. The practical element, **Mixed Ability sport, encourages social inclusion by integrating players regardless of disability into a mainstream sport setting in their local community, playing non-adapted sports. Mixed Ability sport emphasises the importance of regular, frequent and sustainable provision, self-determination, club membership and opportunities for social interaction for all.** In this respect, it differs notably from other approaches that promote a separate and/or adapted approach to participation. The Mixed Ability model was first developed through rugby where it grew organically from a lack of provision for disabled people to play full-contact rugby. In rugby, the model has been shown to have positive impacts at the individual through to the community level (Corazza and Dyer, 2017).

The Mixed Ability model is being developed and championed by the not-for-profit organisation, International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS). IMAS delivers practical Mixed Ability sports provision and training to organisations across the sports, disability, healthcare and education sectors around inclusion, diversity and the Mixed Ability model. It also works with national organisations across these sectors, such as with national governing bodies (NGBs) and the NHS to inform policy and practice around sport and inclusion more broadly. IMAS trainers are all Mixed Ability participants, from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities, who share experiences and learning through interactive and accessible resources. See the IMAS website for more information: www.mixedabilitysports.org.

“There was a guy [at the presentation] yesterday who said ‘but we already have sessions every Tuesday for the disabled kids from the local special educational needs college’. We need to be very clear from the outset that Mixed Ability sport is very different from that.”

- Mark Goodwin, IMAS Director

1.3 THE MIXED ABILITY SPORTS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (MASDP)

Funding from Sport England for the MASDP has allowed IMAS to trial the Mixed Ability model in new sports beyond rugby, chosen through a consultation with representatives from the disabled community in Bradford – the area in which the Mixed Ability model was developed. Initially, seven sports were identified to trial Mixed Ability: rowing, cricket, boxing, tennis, golf, exercise, movement and dance (EMD) and bowls. These sports were therefore the initial focus for this evaluation. However, during the course of the research, Mixed Ability was also trialled in additional sports, namely: swimming, cycling, wheelchair basketball and, most recently, KinBall. While not a key focus of the research, individuals and organisations involved with these additional sports have also contributed data to the project through their involvement in, for example, stakeholder workshops.

In the first year of the programme (Nov 2016 – Nov 2017) activities were concentrated in the Bradford area but then extended to Leeds, York, Liverpool and South Yorkshire in the remaining programme period (Nov 2017 – Jan 2019).

Although relatively small-scale, this evaluation of the MASDP can be seen as part of a bigger picture with regard to enhancing inclusive sporting opportunities for individuals and supporting the development of policy and practice in this area (Thomas and Smith, 2008). Within the following report, the findings presented will be considered in light of this broader context and implications for future programme design and development will be considered.

Over the course of the MASDP, **IMAS delivered 9 open days and 47 presentations** to grassroots clubs, National Governing Bodies, County Sport Partnerships, schools, colleges, support organisations and members as well as healthcare professionals. **In total they reached over 1200 participants.** In Bradford, Mixed Ability activities attracted **147 new disabled and 169 non-disabled members to 12 different sports.** Replication has begun in York, Leeds, Liverpool and Doncaster.

SECTION 2:

THE RESEARCH



This section details the research aim and objectives, the research approach and methods and data analysis. The research element has informed the development of the MASDP over the course of the project and is providing ongoing recommendations for the future sustainable development of the Mixed Ability model.

2.1 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Researchers from the University of Leeds and Loughborough University undertook the Sport England-funded evaluation of the MASDP. The overall aim of the research was to carry out a participatory evaluation of the MASDP. More specifically, the objectives of the evaluation were to:

- + Assess different stakeholder motivations, perceptions and attitudes;
- + Highlight challenges faced by participants/organisations in the various sports;
- + Report the impacts of the MASDP on participants, clubs and the broader community;
- + Gain an insight into different participants' experiences as well as Mixed Ability sport more broadly.

2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

As a participatory evaluation, we used a range of activities in order to encourage an inclusive approach to data collection, to meet the range of objectives through looking at the structure, delivery, and participant experience of Mixed Ability sport, and to ensure all participant voices could be heard. In this way, the evaluation aligns with growing calls for researchers to make space for participant voice, particularly in those studies where there is potential for findings to shape further programme design/delivery (e.g. Ollerton, 2012; Kramer-Roy, 2015; Hollomotz, 2018). The research took an ethnographic approach, employing creative qualitative and participatory methods throughout, sensitive to the communication styles and preferences of respondents. In order to facilitate the collation of data from a range of participants (occupying different roles and with varying levels of communication) a number of participatory research methods were used. For example, timelines, mind-mapping, photo elicitation and observation were used alongside, and incorporated into, interviews, group interviews and focus groups to create more inclusive approach. The research emphasised stakeholder engagement, in some cases tracking the development of specific Mixed Ability sports and in others tracking the journey of participants or clubs in order to gain a holistic perspective of the relevant issues. IMAS were involved in, and helped to inform, every stage of the research process, with key staff also being involved in research interviews at various stages of the project. Beyond this, the research team kept IMAS updated and informed of research findings at every stage, which enabled research findings to be fed into (and inform) the development of their educational work and Mixed Ability training content and resources.



Data were collected between November 2016 and January 2019, spanning just beyond the length of the MASDP, in order to capture data from key events including IMAS' first training event at BARC. A large amount of qualitative data were collected throughout the project using a variety of methods:

- Active participation and/or participant observation in Mixed Ability sports across boxing, tennis, bowls, golf, rowing, cricket, swimming, KinBall and EMD (~85 sessions observed and/or participated in).
- Active participation and/or participant observation in other relevant events including IMAS-led taster days, IMAS training sessions at sports clubs and the launch event for the IMAS Accreditation scheme (n=8).
- Formal, in-depth individual interviews using participatory methods, with a range of stakeholders including Mixed Ability participants, coaches, club representatives, Mixed Ability champions, IMAS representatives and national governing bodies of sport (n=19).
- 10 small groups interviews with Mixed Ability sport participants, family, coaches, Mixed Ability drivers and IMAS representatives (n=22).
- 1 focus group with Bradford Amateur Rowing Club Committee members prior to starting Mixed Ability at the Club (n=7).
- Three multi-stakeholder workshops with attendees representing the sports, disability, education and healthcare sectors, from local through to national level (n=81 attendees).

Detailed notes were also taken during participant observation and workshops, and reflections noted after active participation in Mixed Ability sessions and/or events. Interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and detailed notes made, including the transcription verbatim of key quotes.



2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed through coding and the mapping of themes (see Picture 1), following a general inductive approach (see e.g. Thomas, 2006). Key themes were around the impacts, challenges and enabling factors for Mixed Ability sport. These are broken down and explored in more detail in the following sections. We found, throughout, that case studies of individuals, clubs or whole sports were a valuable means of gathering data and presenting findings. **This was because key aspects of Mixed Ability often played out in different ways across the case studies and these could be usefully compared; exploring the themes in different contexts to highlight not only similarities but also complexities and nuance.**

The research was granted full ethical clearance by the University of Leeds AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Ref: AREA 16-077) and the research team observed ethical principles related to best practice guidelines throughout. Although ethical approval was granted on the basis of participant anonymity through the assigning of pseudonyms, in the later stages of the project it became clear that some participants wanted to be named in research outputs alongside their stories and pictures. Therefore, in each case, the potential consequences of deciding to waive anonymity was discussed with each individual to ensure that their decision was informed. In places, terminology used within the presentation of findings is true to that being used by the individuals and organisations who took part in the research and not chosen by the research team.



PICTURE 1

Mapping analysis of data from
Bradford Amateur Rowing Club



SECTION 3:

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the research findings first through a summary table of key themes and then through the case studies of Bradford Amateur Rowing Club, Heaton Tennis and Squash Club and York and District Indoor Bowls Club, where the key themes can be observed in the different contexts.

3.1 SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

IMPACTS OF MIXED ABILITY SPORT

There was a strong sense within the data of positive impacts being reported from involvement in Mixed Ability sport. These impacts were noted across sports for disabled and non-disabled participants and were identified as being on an individual, club and societal level. For example:

- **Individual:** reported physical health improvements such as weight loss, increased mobility, strength, fitness, improved skills, coordination and core strength. Mental wellbeing was also perceived to be improved through, for example, increased confidence, self-empowerment, self-determination, a sense of belonging and being part of something fun.
- **Club:** reported shifts in club culture towards being more inclusive through, for example, disclosure of struggles with mental health and conversations about alternative financial membership models, as well as more accessible infrastructure. New members were attracted to clubs with an Mixed Ability offering and clubs involved felt they were becoming more representative of their local community. Club coaches, in particular, reported increased reflection on practice and improved communication skills.
- **Societal:** reported shifts in perceptions around dis/ability and social difference, as well as raised awareness of barriers faced to sports and societal participation for different people, which they reportedly applied to other areas of their life such as work. Fears around communication difficulties with people perceived as 'different' were largely allayed through spending time with Mixed Ability participants, even with those not directly involved in Mixed Ability sport. This was reported to also extend beyond those they met through Mixed Ability.

“I did feel [a bit uncomfortable] but once I started becoming personally involved and being in a boat with [the Mixed Ability 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.”

- Member of the BARC
Mixed Ability rowing squad

CHALLENGES OF MIXED ABILITY SPORT

A number of factors were identified as inhibiting a positive impact from the MASDP. For example:

- It was evident that **defining Mixed Ability, and how it differs from 'disability' sports provision** in particular, was a challenge. This led to different interpretations in terms of practical provision.
- **Dominant societal perceptions of disability** led to challenges in promoting authentic Mixed Ability sport. For example, non-disabled players often labelled themselves as 'volunteers' rather than equal participants. In addition, many assumed that disabled participants' skill level would be lower and were reluctant to be involved as they assumed they would not have a meaningful sporting experience.
- **The educational component of the Mixed Ability model** is largely absent so far from the MASDP. This is down to a number of factors including lack of funding at the Club level to pay for IMAS training, lack of understanding of the role of education in the sustainability of Mixed Ability and the need for Mixed Ability activities to have been running for some time before they can be usefully reflected upon.

FACILITATORS OF MIXED ABILITY SPORT

A number of factors were identified as facilitating a positive impact from the MASDP. For example:

- It was suggested that Mixed Ability works best when there was more of **an 'organic process' driven by a 'Champion'**. This is someone who drives the Mixed Ability agenda in a club, an organisation or independently, and often has personal experience of facing barriers to sports participation and is passionate about removing them for others.
- Some participants suggested that impact was facilitated when clubs/organisations were already actively working towards inclusion and offered **a more 'welcoming' environment**.
- Impact was facilitated where there were **plentiful opportunities for social interaction**, although it was recognised that this was easier in some contexts than others, such as in team sports and those where the venue had socialising spaces.
- It was noted that **positive NGB support and engagement** was an important driver for Mixed Ability sport and could facilitate impact through funding and supportive policy.

“I'll be honest and say I was expecting [the Mixed Ability 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 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.”

**- Member of the BARC
Mixed Ability rowing squad**

“I've always been very fit and sporty and then to be in a position where I couldn't do it made me think of other people in that position.”

**- Sarah-Jane Murray, founder
and Director of Unorthobox**

“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.”

**- Member of the BARC
Mixed Ability rowing squad**



“IF THE FUNDING WAS THERE THEN I THINK WE WOULD SLOWLY BUT SURELY BECOME A MORE INCLUSIVE SPORT AND MORE CLUBS WOULD BE OPENING THEIR DOORS TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. THEN IT WILL SELF-FULFIL AS PEOPLE AT BOXING CLUBS SEE PEOPLE WHO HAVE, MAYBE LOST A LIMB, MAYBE WHO ARE PARTIALLY SIGHTED OR WHATEVER, THEN I THINK IT WILL BECOME MORE NORMAL.”

RON TULLEY,
Head of Community Development,
England Boxing

∟ WHAT IS MIXED ABILITY BOXING?

Mixed Ability Boxing allows participants of all abilities to take part in the same non-contact boxing sessions, regardless their age, gender or skills, providing a safe, enjoyable and non-judgemental environment, as well as building progress pathways. Please scan below to watch.



3.2 CASE STUDY:

BRADFORD AMATEUR ROWING CLUB (BARC)

➤ EVALUATING THE IMPACTS OF MIXED ABILITY SPORT

This section is taken and adapted from the full BARC case study available through the IMAS website. Please scan below to read.



WHAT

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

JOURNEY

IMAS delivered an initial presentation to the BARC Committee in December 2016 and the club subsequently began offering Mixed Ability rowing in June 2017. The sessions initially ran on a Tuesday morning, beginning on land and then progressing to the water in September of the same year. An additional Sunday morning session began in May 2018 when beginners had progressed enough to be able to row in busy times on the river. In June 2018, the first Mixed Ability race was held at BARC's Annual Sprint Regatta featuring the now infamous "4-Michaels" race.

BARC members were invited to follow-up IMAS training in January 2019, which focused on coaching Mixed Ability rowing and reflecting on experiences so far. IMAS and BARC are currently arranging a further training focused on communication.

WHO

Mixed Ability rowing at BARC was initially championed by the President, Celia Hickson but a team of 20+ volunteers were recruited, on a rota system, to coach the beginner Mixed Ability rowers. Now that Mixed Ability rowing also takes place on a Sunday, more BARC members are involved and it depends who is on the river as to who rows with the Mixed Ability rowers. IMAS is supporting with training around coaching and communication.

WHY MIXED ABILITY?

BARC decided to embrace Mixed Ability rowing because 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. Mixed Ability 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.

WHAT WORKS?

A Mixed Ability offering **did not require significant structural changes** to BARC which meant the club could experiment with Mixed Ability without investing heavily.

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 Mixed Ability to the club.

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

The legal structure of BARC as a charity meant it was able to apply for funds for touring boats which are ideal for beginner rowers as they are slightly more stable.

PARTICIPANT STORIES

Michael Kernan, member of the BARC Mixed Ability rowing squad

Michael got involved with Mixed Ability rowing at BARC after trying it out at an Mixed Ability taster day in Bradford.

He has also played Mixed Ability rugby for over three years for the Bumble Bees. Michael has been coming to the Tuesday sessions which were originally marked out for Mixed Ability rowing only, but is now a regular on Sunday mornings too where Mixed Ability 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!



Michael Randle

Michael 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 Mixed Ability squad. He was also involved in the infamous '4-Michaels' race and feels that Mixed Ability would sit very nicely in rowing clubs and events where the emphasis is on enjoyment as well as competition. Michael said he really appreciates Mixed Ability 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.”

- Michael Randle, member of the BARC Mixed Ability rowing squad

📌 Freya Stansfield

Freya's company encourages employees to volunteer for two hours a month so she uses her time for the Tuesday morning Mixed Ability session. She coaches the Mixed Ability 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.”

- Freya Stansfield, member of the
BARC Mixed Ability rowing squad





CHALLENGES

Initial Mixed Ability training took place on a Tuesday morning which meant the **Mixed Ability rowers were not fully integrated into the club** but they needed to reach a skill level where they could row safely on a busy river.

Beginner rowers need volunteer coaches to help them progress. Some members of BARC were concerned that Mixed Ability rowing was diverting much needed volunteer resources from other areas of the club such as the Junior rowing.

Because 'volunteers' were needed to support the beginner Mixed Ability rowers to gain skills **there is a danger that Mixed Ability rowers do not become seen as equal participants**, given the engrained perception of disabled people as the recipients of charity.

BARC were unable to fund the associated IMAS training during the first year of Mixed Ability. This led to some misunderstandings about Mixed Ability (e.g. the volunteer/participant terminology) and some volunteers feeling they would like more guidance particularly around coaching and communication.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Mixed Ability 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 Mixed Ability, particularly around risk and ease of communication. Discussing these issues early on, in collaboration with Mixed Ability trainers, will help alleviate these worries.
- The potential for a fully authentic Mixed Ability 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 Mixed Ability 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 Mixed Ability participants could provide valuable, ongoing support, guidance and reinforcement of good practice. Those involved with Mixed Ability rowing at BARC would have liked more information and support up front.
- The culture of a club is likely to be key in whether a Mixed Ability offering will be successful. BARC is viewed as a very welcoming club with an emphasis on participation.
- Mixed Ability rowing at BARC has had significant positive impacts at the individual, club and broader societal level.
- Mixed Ability has the potential to transform grassroots sports.

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

- **Celia Hickson,**
President of BARC and
Member of the BARC Mixed
Ability rowing squad

“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 Mixed Ability participants.”

- **Member of the BARC**
Mixed Ability rowing squad

3.3 CASE STUDY:

HEATON TENNIS AND SQUASH CLUB (INCLUDING BOXING, TENNIS AND EMD)

➤ HOW TO BECOME A MIXED ABILITY CLUB

In 2016 Heaton Tennis Club started their journey to becoming more inclusive and representative of their local community. Two years down the line, they host very successful weekly Mixed Ability boxing and tennis sessions. In this short clip, Heaton's manager Alex shares the journey with us! Please scan to watch.



WHAT

Heaton is a sports club in North West Bradford offering a variety of sports such as tennis, squash and racketball. It also has gym facilities, fitness classes and a bar/restaurant. Although traditionally a members' club, Heaton now invites non-members to use the facilities

JOURNEY

An initial IMAS presentation was delivered to the Heaton Committee and a taster day was held in November 2016. Heaton began offering Mixed Ability boxing through Unorthobox and Mixed Ability EMD through Bradford Council shortly afterwards. MASDP funding was used to pay coaches.

Mixed Ability boxing has continued weekly on a Thursday 6 – 7pm but Mixed Ability EMD was not attracting enough participants to be financially viable and stopped at the end of 2017. Heaton also offers weekly Mixed Ability tennis on a Friday 11 – 12.30 which, after some false starts, has attracted 10 – 15 players weekly since February 2018. Heaton has recently been awarded Sport England funding to improve their facilities and increase accessibility to the bar and restaurant area through installing a lift.

WHO

Mixed Ability sport at Heaton is supported and promoted by the Club Manager, the Committee and increasingly by the members. Heaton takes the lead on Mixed Ability tennis, funding the Head Coach's time. Mixed Ability boxing is coordinated and led by Unorthobox, a not-for-profit organisation, and Mixed Ability EMD was led by teachers from Bradford Council as part of their Dance for Life programme. IMAS supports the club through recruitment and taster days but has yet to carry out Mixed Ability training with the club.

WHY MIXED ABILITY?

Heaton was keen to promote Mixed Ability for a variety of reasons. Primarily the Club Manager saw it as an opportunity to reduce the amount of 'down time' on the courts while being able to offer something 'completely different' and not having to make huge amendments to the club and facilities. In addition, he welcomed Mixed Ability as a way to engage with, and include, the local community and to break down the elitist image of the club and of tennis as a sport.

WHAT WORKS?

As a multisport centre, Heaton has become a 'hub' for Mixed Ability sport, which means it is well placed to build a reputation as a Mixed Ability club and gain IMAS accreditation. It also means IMAS has somewhere obvious to host taster days and to signpost people in Bradford seeking Mixed Ability activities.

Heaton has a well-established network of members and sponsors, through which it was able to quickly mobilise support to widen the squash court door where Mixed Ability boxing takes place, in order to accommodate a power wheelchair.

Other groups use Heaton as their base, which has also proved useful for Mixed Ability sport. For example, members of the University of the Third Age (U3A) group currently make up the majority of the Mixed Ability tennis participants.

Heaton has good facilities for a number of different sports already in place as well as a space for socialising at the bar and restaurant, which is important for promotion of social interaction and inclusion.

Mixed Ability activities run by the club itself (currently Mixed Ability tennis) are economically viable as the club pays for the coaches' time and the club benefits through having more people on the courts.

Having Mixed Ability sport at Heaton has helped the club secure facilities funding from Sport England to improve the space available for Mixed Ability activities.

The support from IMAS has been particularly helpful in putting Heaton in contact with community groups and local organisations to raise awareness of the club and its activities.

“Mixed Ability has massively changed the club! When we first mentioned the words 'Mixed Ability' and 'disability' it was like [sharp intake of breath] just because it's a very traditional club, it was a members-only club so the fact that non-members would be coming in, it's 'well this is a tennis and squash club, you can't start doing boxing and dance..' But now, [the members have] seen the effect it's had on people and the fact that these participants go and socialise upstairs and they've met them and they've got involved themselves, it's massively changed and they're all 'we want more Mixed Ability sports, we want more classes on'. And they're happy to volunteer for open days now too.”

- Mixed Ability tennis coach at Heaton Tennis and Squash Club

THE ROAD TO ACTIVITY - JOHN'S STORY

Discover how John wrote to IMAS earlier in 2018 asking what Mixed Ability activities were available for him and his wife after a period of inactivity. And how their lives have been changed for good! His amazing story shows that we can achieve whatever we dream of. Please scan to watch.



“If I was a dead car battery, I would say IMAS have been our jump leads”

- John Higginson,
Mixed Ability tennis participant



PARTICIPANT STORIES

Sarah-Jane Murray

Unorthbox was established by Sarah-Jane after she developed a long-term health condition which prevented her training regularly. This meant she wasn't able to 'keep up' with others at her boxing gym and found it too difficult to join in. Sarah started working with IMAS and the MASDP funding allowed her to pay for coaches for the Mixed Ability boxing sessions at Heaton. The sessions have been running weekly since November 2016 and have attracted a range of disabled and non-disabled participants as well as those with long-term health conditions, returners to boxing and many who said they have wanted to box but wouldn't have the confidence to step into a boxing gym. Sarah would like to expand Mixed Ability boxing at Heaton when the new facilities are in place, and potentially become an England Boxing affiliated boxing gym.



Darren Calderwood

Darren was involved with Mixed Ability boxing at Heaton from the first session. He had always been a fan of boxing but hadn't tried it himself and wouldn't have wanted to go to a boxing gym, or the gym in general, as he finds them 'a bit daunting'. He joined because he wanted to improve his fitness, lose weight and learn some new skills. The Mixed Ability nature of the sessions means he has got more out of it than he expected. He has really enjoyed getting to know his fellow boxers, likes that they help each other improve and is proud to be involved with it. Since starting, Darren has lost weight, is using his asthma inhaler far less regularly and says he is more confident in all aspects of life and in his 'own ability'. He now helps Sarah-Jane to coach newcomers and is thinking about taking his coaching qualification and starting contact boxing. He has helped IMAS with some promotional events and would also like to start playing squash at Heaton.

“I didn't know I'd be interacting with the other participants as much I am. I thought it'd just be a bit of exercises and warming up and press-ups and sit-ups and pad work and that kind of thing but doing the games with everyone, that's a lot of fun.”

- Darren, Mixed Ability boxing participant

Rick Brooks

Rick has played squash and tennis on and off all his life and now regularly plays racketball at Heaton. He got involved in Mixed Ability tennis through a friend in the U3A group. He enjoys the sessions, thinks the coaching is very good and finds the interaction with the disabled participants adds an extra interesting dimension to the sessions. He thinks Mixed Ability is a good thing for Heaton and the initiative has been accepted well. However, he described how the Mixed Ability tennis group are particularly welcoming and 'likeminded' and wonders whether other groups at Heaton would be the same. Rick hasn't come across Mixed Ability as such before, but he and his wife were PE teachers before they retired and they always tried to make their lessons inclusive with activities that everyone could get involved in rather than focusing on competitive sport, so he is familiar with, and a supporter of, the ethos.

“We know what our [Mixed Ability] group's about on a Friday and we're perfectly happy to encompass that. Now whether you would be if you wanted to take it to a higher level then I don't know. If you seriously wanted coaching and you wanted to improve...you know...we're there for social tennis really.”

- Rick Brooks, Mixed Ability tennis participant

Antony Binns

Antony first got involved with Mixed Ability boxing at an IMAS open day at Heaton. He chose boxing because he had watched it on TV and found it interesting. He is a tetraplegic power-chair user and comes most weeks with his mother, Sally, who waits for him upstairs in the restaurant. Sally commented that she felt very confident leaving Antony with the Mixed Ability group and emphasised how Antony's involvement has had a positive impact on the family. Since starting Mixed Ability boxing, Antony's arm mobility, strength and coordination has improved quite dramatically. He says that means he can now use the TV remote and has better coordination with his fork when eating. He also says that the Mixed Ability boxing has improved his confidence and he really enjoys the 'banter' he has with the coaches and his fellow boxers.

“I never felt as though I had to stop with him either. From the word go. Normally it's like “do you want me to [stay]?” or I'll ask or hang around but I just felt so confident [with this group]?”

- Sally Cross, Antony's Mum

“IT'S MADE ME MORE CONFIDENT ABOUT DOING OTHER THINGS. WHEN I START LEARNING NEW THINGS AND IF I HAVEN'T DONE IT BEFORE I GET REALLY NERVOUS ... AND SINCE I'VE COME HERE I DON'T FEEL I GET NERVOUS ANYMORE.”

ANTONY BINNS,
Mixed Ability boxing participant

CHALLENGES

The EMD sessions at Heaton did not appeal to the members so the numbers of participants at the sessions were low, with the majority being experienced disabled dancers. Representatives of Heaton suggested that members perhaps would have preferred a Zumba-style class that required less skill and experience and was more about fitness.

In the first instance, Mixed Ability tennis sessions were run by a visually impaired (VI) tennis coach who was keen to promote VI tennis and alternatives such as short tennis. These sessions didn't appear to attract many participants and weren't aligned with the Mixed Ability ethos of promoting the same mainstream tennis game with only 'reasonable adjustments'. When run as Mixed Ability tennis by Heaton coaches, sessions were slow to attract participants and it wasn't until the day, time and name was changed to 'Tennis for all' that it started to become popular, particularly amongst the U3A members.

Although the club has excellent facilities for socialising, these are not fully accessible as they are upstairs with no lift. In addition, Mixed Ability boxing takes places on a squash court which is quite small and means the activity cannot be promoted as widely as hoped so is running at a loss since the MASDP funding has finished. The new facilities should solve both of these issues.

Heaton representatives suggested that some members are reluctant to get involved with Mixed Ability activities because there is often a perception that Mixed Ability sport won't be to the same level as they play. They see getting involved with Mixed Ability as volunteering rather than just another opportunity to play their sport and so don't prioritise it.

Heaton is still seen by many participants as a 'members' club' rather than a community club, which the Club Manager feels may put new people off coming or joining.

Discussions around 'membership offers' revealed some complexity. Offering a 'Mixed Ability membership' is an option to make the current Mixed Ability activities more sustainable but still financially accessible, being less than a full annual membership. However, there is a worry that this may offend existing members who pay more, or may result in having to reduce all memberships. Paying on a sessional basis, however, can be too expensive for some who would like to do two or three Mixed Ability activities at Heaton each week.

Coaches at Heaton initially expressed concern over coaching a Mixed Ability activity without having training in disability coaching.

Often Mixed Ability sport is driven by a 'Champion' that really understands the ethos and/or has had personal experience of facing barriers to sport. This is perhaps a key to sustainable Mixed Ability activities, yet can be harder to find in a multisport club like Heaton.

“When we've got more space it'll work more like a traditional boxing gym. So we all warm up together and then we can work to different levels.”

- Sarah-Jane Murray, founder and Director of Unorthobox

“When I introduced Mixed Ability to Heaton, the coaches said “ooh, well what do we there then?” and were quite standoffish. Not that they didn't like the idea of it but they were afraid of what they needed to do, legislation, rules, health and safety and all these different things to think about. And that's what they were worried about. And I said “no, you don't have to do anything, just adapt, just give them a racket and let them play” and I think that's what I've observed...”

- Alex Prytulak, Manager of Heaton Tennis and Sports Club

KEY LEARNINGS

Multisports clubs could be excellent 'hubs' for Mixed Ability sport given that there could be a choice of Mixed Ability activities, existing members to participate, a range of facilities (including social areas) and the scope for other organisations to offer activities using them as a venue. However, the Heaton Committee have thus far only had an initial presentation from IMAS. Further training from IMAS to a broader group with a view to club accreditation would help with ensuring that the Mixed Ability offering is 'authentic' and is having maximum benefits as well as reducing concerns around e.g. coaching Mixed Ability participants.

Terminology around Mixed Ability is important and may impact who is likely to be involved.

All relevant stakeholders including club members need to be consulted on what Mixed Ability activities they would like to get involved with. This will help with recruitment and potential identification of Mixed Ability Champions as well as full integration of Mixed Ability participants into the club.



3.4 CASE STUDY:

YORK AND DISTRICT INDOOR BOWLS CLUB (YDIBC)

WHAT

York and District Indoor Bowls Club is a members club with nine indoor 'rinks', offering competitive and social bowling. It also offers a weekly disability Boccia session and 'visually impaired' (VI) bowls on a Wednesday afternoon.

JOURNEY

The disability Boccia sessions were established by husband and wife team Ray and Gill Clark in February 2017. Following an IMAS taster day at the Yorkshire Blind and Partially Sighted Society (YBPSS) in January 2018, a 'Mixed Ability' bowls session was developed alongside. The 'Mixed Ability' bowls attracted mainly visually impaired bowlers.

A charity Mixed Ability bowls tournament was held on 27th January 2019 with over 60 disabled and non-disabled participants from within the club and from other local clubs.

WHO

Ray and Gill lead the Boccia and bowls sessions and have a couple of regular 'volunteers' from the club. They are trying to recruit more members (especially younger ones). There are up to 12 VI bowlers who come regularly.

WHY MIXED ABILITY?

Ray and Gill have been bowlers for over 40 years and have coached disabled bowlers during that time. Disability Bowls England introduced IMAS to Ray and Gill to explore options for Mixed Ability bowls in York.

“It's not just about having one open day, it feels like we're giving something back to the community, we want to be representative of our local area not just a members club. From small beginnings where around 10 people met up to play Boccia once a week we now have another 8-10 visually impaired people regularly playing bowls. A small minority of members resist, wanting to maintain something like a private members club, but lots of our members have begun to volunteer following the lead of Ray and Gill. It's a win-win situation, a sustainable activity with increased membership for the club.”

- Assistant Manager, York and District Indoor Bowls Club



WHAT WORKS?

VI bowlers said that **attitudes towards disability bowls have improved** since they were young with many saying there was no provision for a long time and that they 'hadn't been welcome' at the club in the 1970s.

The bowls sessions are very sociable and many of the players arrive early for lunch at the club and stay on for a drink afterwards.

The bowls leaders and 'volunteers' were praised highly by the bowlers for their **coaching skills and friendly attitude**.

The Club has been supportive and reimbursed Ray and Gill for the equipment they have bought for the sessions.

Gill and Ray feel that **perceptions of disability at the club have been changed** in at least one staff member, who was initially reticent about disability bowls and, especially, the presence of guide dogs in the club.

The partnership with IMAS has helped in terms of disabled bowler recruitment.

Volunteers have developed **creative techniques for supporting VI bowlers** such as standing in the line of the jack and clapping to highlight the direction the bowler is aiming for.

The VI bowlers are generally keen to compete against other VI, disabled, sighted or non-disabled teams. Indeed, two participants suggested that bowls isn't really affected by sight, it is more about feel so there would be no reason they could not compete equally. However, one VI bowler expressed some apprehension about the need to be 'understood' by those he was playing with and against.

At least two of the VI bowlers are going to **join the club as members** and hope to come at weekends to play with and against sighted bowlers.

The VI bowlers feel they are **integrated into the broader club**.

The charity Mixed Ability bowls tournament was very well attended and was 'true' to the Mixed Ability ethos. It was well received by members and seen to have changed some perceptions of disability at the club.

“We have so much fun. It's not just a game of bowls, we do it for the fun aspect as well.”

- **Sam Keever, Mixed Ability bowls participant**

“[The tutors are] really smashing the way they explain things and they show you the different moves and the dressing down they give you and the encouragement they give you. And it's something you can do, I would say, almost as good as other beginners.”

- **Jenny Serle, Mixed Ability bowls participant**

“I mean why not? Why can't we be playing the same sports in a tournament? Blind against sighted people or people in a wheelchair or people that haven't got a disability. Why not?”

- **Sam Keever, Mixed Ability bowls participant**

“AS SOON AS I WALKED IN EVERYONE SAID ‘OH HELLO, HAVE YOU COME TO PLAY BOWLS?’ THEY WERE THERE INTRODUCING THEMSELVES STRAIGHT AWAY. AND THE LADY BEHIND THE BAR WAS GREAT AS WELL, FANTASTIC, AS IF THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH US.”

“WHICH THERE ISN’T!”

INTERVIEWER

“WELL, NO THERE ISN’T.”

SAM KEEVER,
Mixed Ability bowls participant

PARTICIPANT STORIES

Ben King

Ben used to do a lot of blind sports such as cricket, javelin and shot put when he was younger and travelled around the UK with it. He isn't so mobile now and so bowls represents a leisurely option while still being exercise and doing 'something different'. He remembers in the 70s that the club wouldn't let VI bowlers in case they 'ruined the rinks' but feels welcome here now. Ben can see the bowls about half way down the rink but has trouble with facial recognition. His perception of Mixed Ability bowls is playing people in wheelchairs and he said he had no experience of that and wasn't sure 'how it would go on'. He would consider playing sighted bowlers but would rather it be someone he knew so that they 'understood' him.

“I'd sooner [try bowling with sighted] people I know first because they understand me a bit and then others would learn from it. If you're going to somebody and they don't understand VI then they don't know how to answer your questions you know...where the jack is and that sort of thing.”

- Ben King, Mixed Ability bowls participant

Simon Cross and Vicky Russell

Simon and Vicky joined together in February after they attended the YBPSS open day. They have both done VI sports in the past and really enjoy the bowls sessions. Simon said he would have no problem with playing with sighted players and already does with pool and darts. He thinks bowls is more about adjusting the 'feel and the power' of the bowl rather than about sight. They are considering joining the club as members so that they can come at the weekend and also use the bar. Both also considered Mixed Ability bowls to be playing with people in wheelchairs and are not sure it would work as the wheelchairs would need to be specially adapted.

“It's more about the feel and the power. You can bowl your first bowl as a tester and then the tutors say whether it's too hard or soft and then you change accordingly.”

- Simon Cross, Mixed Ability bowls participant

Sam Keever

Sam joined the bowls sessions in early 2018 after she was introduced by a friend from YBPSS. She can't tell the difference between the colours of the bowls so needs someone to support her with that. She really enjoys the bowls sessions, especially the atmosphere because they are all 'in the same predicament' and feels integrated into the club. Sam understood the concept of Mixed Ability and said she feels it would be an option for her through this group.

“Because everybody, well most of us, are in the same predicament, blind or partially sighted and they [the tutors] treat us the same as anyone else. And you can always have a laugh with them...and we can have a joke about it [being partially sighted]. If it weren't like that I don't think I'd enjoy it so much.”

- Sam Keever, Mixed Ability bowls participant



CHALLENGES

The sessions at the club are **currently disability bowls rather than Mixed Ability**. Non-disabled members involved with the sessions see themselves as 'volunteers' and one non-disabled volunteer interviewed was clear that VI bowlers would not be able to compete with sighted bowlers on an equal footing.

While the VI bowlers feel they are integrated into the club, it was not clear that other members felt the same. Indeed, when the researcher arrived at the club and asked after the Mixed Ability bowls session, she was told 'the handicap bowlers are over there'. Ray feels the majority of bowlers, particularly those who are competitive, would see a disabled team mate as 'lessening their chances'.

Ray and Gill have found it **difficult to recruit non-disabled bowlers from the club** and when they have tried playing with disabled team mates their competitors' attitudes have 'not always been supportive'.

Ray and Gill are both in their 70s and are concerned that the disability bowls and Boccia sessions will not carry on if they stop organising them or are no longer around. They work on a voluntary basis and get no financial reward for running the sessions, which makes them **unsustainable in the long term**.

Ray and Gill would like **more support from IMAS** on issues such as recruiting able-bodied volunteers and getting the disability sessions better integrated into the club. IMAS has not given any presentations to the club members.

KEY LEARNINGS

Bowls has the potential to be an excellent Mixed Ability sport because there are **many creative minor adjustments** that can be made to support disabled players.

Disabled participants also have perceptions of disability as 'other' and can find it comforting and enjoyable to spend time with people with similar lived experience of disability as themselves

It can be **extremely hard to break down perceptions around dis/ability** and to create an 'authentic' Mixed Ability offering especially in traditional, members only clubs. Ongoing guidance and support from IMAS trainers would be helpful to start shifting perceptions and ensure Mixed Ability means Mixed Ability rather than disability bowls.



“SOME OF OUR [BOCCIA] TEAM HAVE BECOME MEMBERS HERE AND I INTEND TO JOIN AS WELL. IT’S THE FACT THAT THIS TAKES US ON THE PATH TO MIXING WITH THE REGULAR MEMBERS AND NOT JUST PLAYING AGAINST VISUALLY IMPAIRED OPPONENTS THAT I LIKE. MY SIGHTED TEAM MEMBERS USE VERBAL PROMPTS TO GET ME CLOSE TO THE JACK.”

MARGARET BELL,
Mixed Ability bowls participant

SECTION 4:

EXPLORATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section explores the research findings further around the key themes identified above: i) impacts of Mixed Ability sport (ii) challenges of Mixed Ability sport; and (iii) facilitators of Mixed Ability sport. More specifically, it unpacks some of the broader, interconnecting issues related to each of these themes, focussing in particular on the challenge of defining Mixed Ability, the capacity of Mixed Ability to 'shift' (or not) perceptions of dis/ability and, finally, the means by which we might better enable positive impacts from Mixed Ability sport.

4.1 DEFINING MIXED ABILITY

The research findings highlight that Mixed Ability sport has clear potential for positive impacts from the individual through to the community level, as evidenced through the case studies above. However, one of the key factors that may inhibit these positive impacts is the difficulty in defining exactly what 'Mixed Ability' is, leading to different interpretations in practice.

A key output from the research, therefore, is pinning down the key elements of Mixed Ability, as distilled in Figure 1 which can be used by IMAS in their initial presentations and further training to prompt discussion around 'authentic' Mixed Ability. The essential elements are those that absolutely must be present in order to be in line with the Mixed Ability ethos (as set out by IMAS) and to set Mixed Ability apart from, for example, segregated disability sport, Special Olympics and Paralympic-style provision. However, in order to increase the potential for positive impacts, further elements such as opportunities for social interaction would be helpful. Data show that if there are opportunities for Mixed Ability participants to join in the broader social life of the club alongside a Mixed Ability activity, this will encourage perception shifts

around dis/ability and further break down barriers to participation. This is evidenced particularly through Mixed Ability rowing where Mixed Ability participants include themselves in all aspects of club life such as the bar and regattas. In Mixed Ability activities where this is not (yet) happening, participants still get the benefits associated with physical activity and social interaction, but the broader societal impacts are not being felt. This is the case so far in Mixed Ability swimming, which is held in a school pool with no area for socialising, and Mixed Ability bowls which is held in a mainstream bowls club but is not fully integrated into the broader social aspects. Although the various sports trialled in the MASDP had differing contexts, advantages and disadvantages, the 'ideal' Mixed Ability scenario is still perhaps rugby. This is because all skill levels can participate right from the beginning in a team setting, rather than with tennis or rowing, for example, where a certain skill level has to be reached in order for new participants to fully integrate into the club.

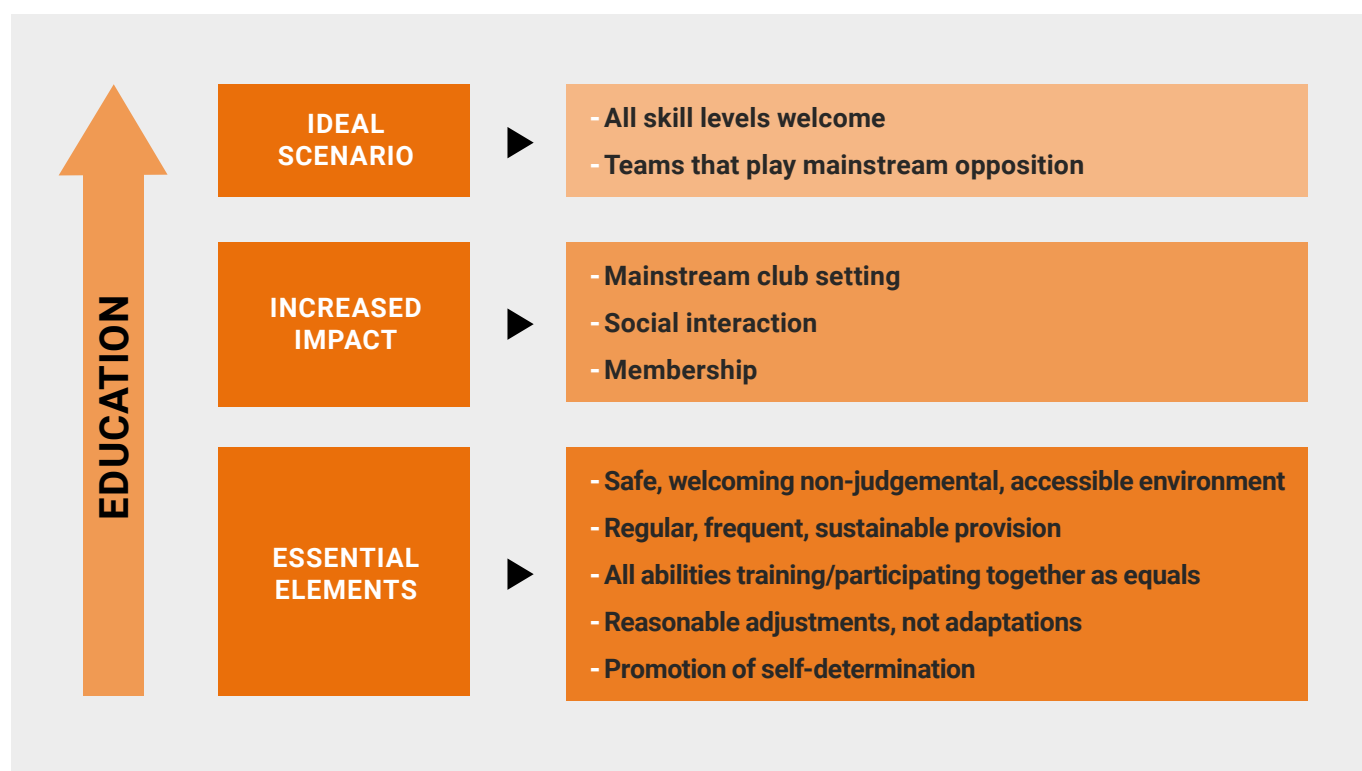


FIGURE 1

Defining Mixed Ability:
Essential elements,
increased impact and
the ideal scenario



4.2 SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF DIS/ABILITY

The research findings show that Mixed Ability sport can, in some cases, **shift perceptions around dis/ability and social difference as well as raising awareness of barriers faced to sports participation**. This is not always a comfortable, smooth or complete process and the challenges in doing so spoke volumes about engrained societal beliefs and ableist norms around sport.

Most commonly, perceptions around dis/ability align with the ‘othering’ of disabled participants and the charitable model of disability (see e.g. Cameron, 2014). In most cases, **early perceptions were that non-disabled people involved with Mixed Ability sport were ‘volunteers’** as with York and District Bowls club. In others, for example in BARC, non-disabled people started by perceiving themselves as volunteers but, as the Mixed Ability rowers improved and were able to row at the same time as other club members, the ‘volunteers’ started to perceive themselves as equal participants. In other cases, non-disabled participants saw themselves as equal participants but also enjoyed the additional aspect of being able to support disabled participants to improve, as in the case of Darren and Mixed Ability boxing (see case study 2).

Further interesting findings relating to perceptions of disability include the view expressed by some interviewees that disabled participants would be less skilful than non-disabled participants and would improve more slowly. This represented a conflation of ‘skill’ with ‘ability’ and did not always reflect the reality of the situation. For example, in the Mixed Ability boxing sessions at Heaton, **a participant with learning difficulties was by far the most skilful member of the group and the most likely and interested in progressing to contact boxing and, at BARC, club members expressed surprise with the excellent balance and coordination of the Mixed Ability rowers**. In addition to assumptions around lower skill levels, there was also an assumption that Mixed Ability sport would be less competitive. At York and District Indoor Bowls Club, an interviewee spoke of how Mixed Ability bowls would only really be feasible for people who enjoyed social bowls rather than competitive bowls, and BARC members felt that other rowing clubs in the area would not be open to the idea of Mixed Ability rowing because they were more focused on competition. Mixed Ability tennis participants stressed the welcoming and social nature of their group and queried whether all sessions at the club would be as suitable for Mixed Ability participants.

Throughout the research, **it was interesting to observe how people distanced themselves from disability despite, for example, having age-related mobility issues or hearing aids**. It seemed that everyone had in mind an image of ‘the disabled person’ when the word disability was used. For some, disability conjured up images of ‘wheelchairs’, and indeed this was the case for the VI bowlers when asked about whether they would enjoy Mixed Ability bowls. For others there was

“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 Mixed Ability participants.”

- Mixed Ability rowing volunteer

“I get a bit emotional sometimes... you get a sort of proud feeling inside to know that you’re involved in something really good.”

- Darren Calderwood, Mixed Ability boxing participant

“When I thought of disability I straightaway just thought about someone that was in a wheelchair. And it isn’t just that.”

- Representative of Heaton Tennis and Squash Club

“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, Mixed Ability coach and volunteer coordinator

a difference between 'physical' and 'learning' disability and the level of familiarity or dis/comfort they brought with them. Many used 'othering' language, which included the dichotomy of 'normal' (us) and 'them' (Mixed Ability participants). Being involved in Mixed Ability often encouraged reflection on perceptions of dis/ability and many interviewees reported changes in the way they thought about dis/ability and difference more broadly. This aligns with IMAS' emphasis on experiential learning and their views that sport is a valuable vehicle for this given the practical aspect of Mixed Ability and the space to reflect after the activity on perceptions.

Within the study, coaches, in particular, reported fundamental shifts in perceptions around dis/ability as well as an increased reflection on their practice. Many coaches explained that they had been nervous before coaching disabled participants and hadn't felt prepared or trained. However, all coaches that had been involved in Mixed Ability subsequently stressed that specialist training was, in fact, unnecessary and reflected on the fact that Mixed Ability coaching is just the same as any other coaching in that you treat everyone as individuals and work out with them what their preferred learning style is. Rowing coaches spoke about how being involved in Mixed Ability sport has encouraged them to revisit, and review their communication style and skills. In addition, in bowls, some coaches noted that they had to be more creative in their approach to coaching and supporting participants to improve. In boxing, one coach suggested he was more alert to people's moods and body language and in tennis, the broader range of skills and experience in a Mixed Ability session meant the coach needed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing participants more control over session content and focus. Fears around communication with disabled participants were common with other participants as well, and interviewees also stated that unpredictable behaviour and stepping outside social norms were also sources of discomfort. A small number of participants felt this would never change, while the majority found that initial fears were allayed when they had spent time with Mixed Ability participants, and that they were no longer worried about communication difficulties with people they might meet in future.

IMAS training explaining these aspects would be useful when Mixed Ability is introduced into a club and then repeated after the activity has been running for some time. This could encourage reflection and prompt discussion around perceptions and fears. It would also be useful for those involved to establish a peer network to share experiences and challenges as they come up.

“I don't think it matters [whether you have a background with disability] as long as you understand people. You can never know every single thing about every condition. As long as you use your common sense and make sure it's safe and speak to the individual it's just like coaching in general”

- Sarah-Jane Murray, founder and Director of Unorthobox

“I was nervous to start with and thought I'd have to go on all these courses and do all these different things when actually you don't have to do anything different at all. It's about finding out from people how best they want you to coach them.”

- Mixed Ability tennis coach

“Generally people are very nervous about working with someone they haven't worked with before. It reminds me of the Last Leg programme and the “is it ok?” questions Breaking down stereotypes socially by getting people to interact with everyone is really key to Mixed Ability.”

- Paul Mainprice, Mixed Ability boxing coach

“The more we dug into it, the more we found that you don't really need to go on a course, it's more an attitude of mind ... come in and show me what you can do.”

- Ron Tulley, Head of Community Development, England Boxing

4.3 ENABLING POSITIVE IMPACTS FROM MIXED ABILITY

The research data clearly highlight that **Mixed Ability sport is most successful when it is driven organically by a 'champion' who is supported by IMAS**. A champion is someone who drives the Mixed Ability agenda in a club, an organisation or independently, and often has personal experience of facing barriers to sports participation and is passionate about removing them for others. This was evident with Mixed Ability boxing, being led by Sarah-Jane of Unorthobox, Mixed Ability rowing, championed by the BARC President, Celia Hickson and in Mixed Ability swimming which was set up by Helen Howes after she attended an IMAS presentation at the MS Society. In contrast, Mixed Ability tennis lacked a specific 'champion' and had a number of false starts before Heaton managed to attract a viable number of participants. Mixed Ability EMD was run externally by Bradford Council and didn't attract enough participants, and Mixed Ability cricket didn't really get going at all because no 'champion' was identified.

IMAS expressed concern at the start of the MASDP about this being an issue with a 'region by region' expansion model. Up to the point where they were funded by Sport England, **IMAS had always been approached by individuals or clubs interested in starting Mixed Ability rather than 'cold calling'**. Their attempts to get Mixed Ability started in Manchester (one of the original locations for Year 2) were thwarted by not finding champions to drive Mixed Ability forwards and they expressed frustration at wasted resources. In future projects, IMAS noted that they would like to be supported to follow up promising Mixed Ability leads rather than having pre-defined locations to work in, although they acknowledge that this would require a very flexible approach from funders.

The issue of champions and drivers for Mixed Ability played out at national level in trying to get NGBs on board with promoting Mixed Ability sport in clubs. If an individual within the NGB understood and saw the value in Mixed Ability sport, it was far more likely that IMAS would be supported and this is critical in extending the reach of Mixed Ability sport. The Head of Community Development at England Boxing, for example, stated that the IMAS model works well for boxing and he would rather promote Mixed Ability than disability boxing. He is supportive of Unorthobox's work but is aware that this initiative started with a focus on Mixed Ability and is keen to explore how it can be translated to boxing gyms, where the majority of participants would identify as being non-disabled. He explained that he **needs interactive resources and workshops to start promoting Mixed Ability and is working with IMAS to develop resources**, but is concerned that they don't have the capacity to support them with this. A further issue raised by the ex-chair of British Rowing, who is now an IMAS Ambassador, is that NGBs would like to be more inclusive but are working within a historical framework of elite sport. In order for Mixed Ability to be supported, they need to show that clubs will get something from it and perhaps clubs need to be rewarded for inclusionary outcomes as well as winning.

“If the funding was there then I think we would slowly but surely become a more inclusive sport and more clubs would be opening their doors to people with disabilities. Then it will self-fulfil as people at boxing clubs see people who have, maybe lost a limb, maybe who are partially sighted or whatever, then I think it will become more normal.”

- Ron Tulley, Head of Community Development, England Boxing

In addition to Mixed Ability Champions, a key enabling factor for the development of Mixed Ability was welcoming clubs who aspire to be inclusive. **Community sports clubs that want to represent their local community, genuinely increase participation in sport and have a positive impact are more likely to be places where Mixed Ability activities will thrive.** These clubs tend to be more open to the possibility of removing barriers to participation. BARC and Heaton are examples of this. However, welcoming clubs often assume they are already inclusive and this is not always the case. BARC members, for example, felt the club was inclusive. Although BARC was clearly welcoming and wouldn't turn any potential member away that approached them, through Mixed Ability rowing, BARC members began to realise that many would not approach the Club in the first instance and face a range of barriers to participating. The President of BARC, in particular, highlighted the 'elite and highly competitive image of rowing' and the long history of male domination in the sport. Heaton's Manager also spoke of the elite image of the club and the impact being a member's club has on its community image and appeal. **Clubs need to be aware of the difference between being welcoming, which is a very positive aspect of club culture for nurturing Mixed Ability, and being inclusive, which may involve thinking more critically about existing barriers the members may not even be aware of.** The IMAS taster days at Heaton were an effective way to break down this image and show the community that the club encourages them to join.

The educational element of the Mixed Ability model is, again, key to clubs understanding the difference between being welcoming and inclusive. The BARC training in January 2019 highlighted that club members had begun to reflect on many of the issues discussed here and were then able to ask advice and support from IMAS in going forwards. Many supported the idea of a peer network to share ideas, challenges and achievements around Mixed Ability sport and IMAS encouraged them to see themselves as experts in Mixed Ability rowing.



SECTION 5:

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has highlighted the many complexities of introducing, running and sustaining Mixed Ability sports. However, the positive impacts of Mixed Ability sport are also evident. This section highlights the recommendations from the research that are relevant for informing the ongoing development of Mixed Ability.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MIXED ABILITY PROVISION

- The peer education and training element must be embedded and central to the ongoing development of Mixed Ability sport in order to increase the understanding and potential to achieve ‘authentic’ Mixed Ability, provide essential support for those involved and to increase impact at the individual, club and broader societal level.
- Mixed Ability activities are more successful and sustainable where they are championed by a Mixed Ability driver or ‘champion’, who is passionate about taking the activity forwards such as in Bradford with Mixed Ability boxing, Mixed Ability swimming and Mixed Ability rowing. Therefore, IMAS need to prioritise following up and supporting these leads from e.g. taster days and presentations, rather than ‘cold-calling’ sports clubs.
- A knowledge-sharing network and/or peer mentoring scheme could be established across sports where those who have been involved with Mixed Ability sport for longer can share experience and ‘best practice’ with new recruits.

“I asked IMAS for ideas because I want to offer something for Mixed Ability participants but sometimes I don’t know how to word it or how to put it across. I struggle a little bit with what’s the correct thing to say. That’s why I’d like to do the [IMAS] training and meet more people who are involved.”

- Alex Prytulak, Manager of Heaton Tennis and Squash Club

“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.”

- Mixed Ability rowing volunteer

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING MIXED ABILITY PROVISION

- National governing bodies could increase their investment in Mixed Ability sport (and consider if/where current investment in disability sport might be usefully redirected). This may involve thinking differently about monitoring and evaluations of outcomes. For example, it is easier to count number of disabled participants who become active than to evaluate the more complex benefits that Mixed Ability has the potential to achieve.
- Dialogue should be encouraged at the national level around the potential for Mixed Ability sport to challenge the ableist nature of sport and how Mixed Ability could be harnessed to better foster genuine and meaningful inclusion for disabled people and others facing barriers to participation

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDING BODIES

- Funders need to be aware that with initiatives like Mixed Ability sport that are 'organic', short-term funding may not allow time for networks and supporting structures to be built, champions to be identified and peer-education to be embedded.
- Funding directed into mainstream clubs for promoting Mixed Ability could be an excellent way to maximise benefits given that mainstream clubs are the key area for positive impacts from Mixed Ability.
- Additional investment to explore and evaluate Mixed Ability in different contexts would enable further development of the concept.

5.4 REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The participatory nature of the evaluation proved highly valuable in exploring the concept of Mixed Ability. Mixed Ability is a complex and challenging concept and the case studies highlight the myriad of factors involved in each different context. This would not have been captured by simple monitoring processes. We would encourage Sport England, and other funding bodies, to continue with qualitative evaluations of programmes and being open to innovate methods and participatory approaches.

CONCLUSION

The Mixed Ability model represents a radical approach to promoting genuine and meaningful inclusion and challenging the ableist culture of sport and broader society. In this way, Mixed Ability fulfils Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in a way that disability sports provision perhaps cannot. The research highlights that the Mixed Ability model has the potential for positive impacts at the individual through to the community level and that fundamental perception shifts around dis/ability can take place when disabled participants are fully integrated into mainstream sports clubs. These perception shifts have the potential to permeate through to the community level and beyond dis/ability to social difference more broadly. In order for these positive impacts to be achieved, the educational element of Mixed Ability must be embedded alongside practical sports provision in order to ensure 'authentic' Mixed Ability provision and to provide support and guidance to all those involved. National governing bodies and policy makers seeking to make impact around sport, inclusion and dis/ability could seek to encourage dialogue around the Mixed Ability model, develop supportive policies and direct investment towards ongoing activities and trialling new ones.



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EVALUATION OF THE MIXED ABILITY SPORTS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

“ We were incredibly grateful to get this opportunity to trial Mixed Ability in sports beyond rugby, and we have been amazed at the outcomes. What we have learned will be instrumental in implementing the Mixed Ability offer and creating a more inclusive society. The research has given us a fantastic insight into the barriers and enablers that help make Mixed Ability a standard part of a club’s offer, what’s working, where and why! ”

- **Martino Corazza, Director of IMAS**

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