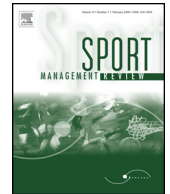




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Effects of different policy approaches on sport facility utilisation strategies



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ABSTRACT

The consequences of subsidising sport facilities have so far not been a focus of sport facilities research. In this article, we propose a conceptual framework for assessing the effects that different public subsidies have on the utilisation of private non-profit sport facilities. Based on theories drawn from the public administration literature three different subsidy schemes are introduced: New Public Management, Governance and Budget. How they will influence the utilisation of a sport facility is assessed using insights from institutional and motivational theory from political science along with the role the voluntary sport organisations play in sport facilities. The resulting conceptual framework consists of twelve different strategies. It is argued that it is likely that a sport facility will choose one or more of these, and which strategies it chooses will impact the level of utilisation. The aim of the article is to show plausible conjectures for future empirical research into how to increase sport facility utilisation via different policies and thus inform future research into the complex interplay between the public sector, sport facilities and voluntary sport organisations.

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1. Introduction

The sport policies of many governments focus on increasing participation in sport. However, there is little focus on how policies can be used to achieve higher sport facility utilisation as a possible tool to increase sport participation. To date, the research literature has focused more on how the performance of sport facilities can be improved through measuring and paying attention to financial performance and customer satisfaction (Howat, Murray, & Crilley, 2005; Liu, Taylor, & Shibli, 2009) and less on the crucial role that voluntary sport organisations (VSOs) have in many sport facilities. By focusing on performance measures borrowed from market-based approaches when analysing sport facility utilisation, there is a risk of not capturing the notion that the behavioural dynamics of the VSOs are quite different to the dynamics of the market. While policies based on financial performance measures might be adequate in relation to assessing how a sport facility is performing in general, such approaches might miss important learning points when it comes to implementing policies aimed at increasing utilisation. By introducing a conceptual framework we strive to set direction for researchers, politicians and bureaucrats who might consider undertaking analysis and decisions on policies targeting VSOs without using tools that

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include the perspective of the VSOs. We argue that there is a gap in the research literature and that it is necessary to include the role that VSOs play in sport facilities in order to assess the consequences of different policies directed towards increasing facility utilisation. We theorise how the possible connection between subsidies and utilisation can be understood from a theoretical perspective. We use examples from Denmark and Australia to develop and support a conceptual framework that we argue is widely applicable to sports facilities for two reasons. First, it is plausible that VSOs share some common traits (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Ibsen, 1992) that will make the role they play in sport facilities similar across different settings. VSOs have a democratic structure, they rely on voluntary efforts and they are dependent on direct and indirect public subsidies. Second, we argue that it is a widespread phenomenon that sport facilities rely both on public funding and having VSOs as user groups.

2. Why does one focus on public spending on sport facilities?

Using theories primarily from public administration we discuss how the public sector, as the main contributor to sport facilities used by VSOs, can improve utilisation of sport facilities through different types of policies. The level of local government is chosen as it contributes significantly to the development, operational and maintenance costs of sport facilities. In a Danish context as much as 70–80% of the income of the sport facilities comes from local governments (Rasmussen, 2012). In Australia, VSOs pay much less than the market based rent for leasing local government property such as sport halls, playing fields and swimming facilities, and hence receive large indirect subsidies (City of Gold Coast, 2013a). Further, cautious estimates of public spending on sport facilities indicate that the public sector both in Denmark and Australia amounts to more than 300 million EURO annually (Howat et al., 2005; Ministry of Culture, 2009).

Research on sports participation shows that participation in sport and physical activities could be higher in both Denmark and Australia, as participation in sport and regular physical activity in total is around 65% in both countries (ABS, 2013; Laub, 2013). Even though this is a relatively high rate of participation, higher utilisation could increase participation. Research has reported a lack of sport facilities available locally for the sports that Danish citizens want to pursue (Laub & Pilgaard, 2012). Enabling more persons to access sport facilities is relevant in this context for at least a couple of reasons. Firstly, increased participation in sport and physical activity can be a part of solving some of the health issues related to sedentary behaviour (e.g. diabetes, heart conditions, cancer). Secondly, increased participation can be seen as a way of improving the civic parts of society as increased participation in sport often takes place in VSOs and participation in such settings is often argued as one of the possible paths to increase social capital (Putnam, 2001; Østerlund, 2013).

3. Sport facilities and competitiveness

Being competitive is to have a strategy which can be defined as "...the creation of a unique and valuable position" by choosing activities different from rivals and which point in the same direction (Porter, 2008, p. 53ff). In this case we argue that this direction considers the central role of the VSOs as well as servicing other users to maximise utilisation, as utilisation is seen as the yardstick for the success of government policies. Increased utilisation can be achieved through increasing use by VSOs or by other user groups.

Hence, we argue that being competitive is showing a high degree of utilisation, which seems to be a widely accepted goal for sport facilities (Ministry of Culture, 2009; VicSport, 2006). It is also logical from a public good perspective that facilities funded primarily by the public sector should be used as much as possible in order to benefit as many as possible – and that facility utilisation should be delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible. For example, it has been argued in the Australian context that "as facilities become more sophisticated and elaborate, it's expected that they should be more efficient and effective and less draining on the public purse" (Government of Western Australia, 2014, no page). Further, the financial challenges faced by the public sector as a result of changing demographics and the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis could heighten the expectations of sport facilities being competitive and more financially viable. Being a competitive sport facility is therefore expected (Alexandris, 2010).

In summary, sport facilities need to balance several competing expectations as they seek to maximise utilisation in a manner that is economically viable. Maximising utilisation by increasing use by VSOs could be relevant as the lower labour cost base, through volunteer involvement, enables activities to be offered at a lower cost. However, VSOs might not be able to capture all potential users and user groups that could be accommodated in a sport facility. Hence, sport facilities need to balance the needs of VSOs with the goal of attracting other user groups in order to maximise utilisation.

We define policies targeting sport facilities as different steering models, which are attempts by local government to influence the development and utilisation of sport facilities without deciding how the development has to be. This is a complex discussion as changes in utilisation can occur for many reasons. In order to have a discussion on advantages and drawbacks of different steering models we need to make a few *ceteris paribus* assumptions. Firstly, it is necessary for sport facilities to be interested in maximising utilisation. Secondly, local government usually operates with constrained financial resources and may have a fixed amount to spend on different steering models. Hence, we focus on the dynamics of different steering models and ask: if local government is to choose a steering model given that it has a certain amount of money to spend on supporting VSOs in sport facilities, which steering model would most likely maximise utilisation? As Fig. 1 illustrates this article aims to increase the understanding of the possible differences between several steering models on the strategies chosen by sport facilities in relation to utilisation by VSOs and other user groups.

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