

## UNIVERSITIES INVEST FOR SUCCESS

In recent years universities have had to develop creative strategies to accommodate increased student admissions. The need to expand health and fitness facilities where space is limited presents a challenge for many.

### University Sport Birmingham

Zena Wooldridge, Director of Sport at University Sport Birmingham explained, "Our key objectives are to increase participation by building activity into our students' lifestyles, sustain and enhance the performance side and, more recently, to use sport to enhance our students' personal development and their employability once they leave the university. Ongoing investment in our health and fitness facilities is vital to help us achieve these."

The University built the existing facility, the Munrow Sports Centre, back in the early 1960s. Zena joined the University in 1990 as Sport & Recreation Manager, having worked at Loughborough University for 6 years following her Masters in Recreation Management. It was in the early 90s that Birmingham began to significantly expand its sport and fitness offering.

Zena commented, "At the time Birmingham had a real hodge-podge of equipment whilst the gym was free to the students. We were never going to be able to provide the right quality equipment without introducing a charge. The Guild of Students was opposed to charging and campaigned for the continuation of free but poor quality equipment. So, to test the market we developed the room next to the existing gym as a high quality fitness suite with new equipment, but with a charge. In this way we could make a direct comparison of student demand between the two adjacent facilities. Within 12 months, the students had voted with their wallets. Membership of the new facility soon swelled, clearly demonstrating that students will pay for quality."

The University has continued to invest in their sports facilities but has, in recent years, come up against two issues, lack of space and quality environment. The age and inflexibility of the building are real challenges. These constraints, combined with the intensity of use of the facilities, have meant that, in order to offer the best facility possible to their students, it was critical to invest in quality equipment.

Zena explained, "The equipment here is severely range-tested from 7am to 10pm every day. So it's critical we invest in well designed and constructed kit. Our initial decision to invest in new equipment in the mid-1990s was backed up by thorough research into the top end of the market. We inspected various equipment with a team of operational staff, an engineer to look at build quality, and two gyms users, one who was 5' tall and another 6' 4". We chose Cybex because of its good design and build and the quality engineering of parts."

She continued, "We were the first university to invest in Cybex and it has definitely paid off for us. The quality of the equipment and its longevity speaks for itself. We are still using the original equipment, which we purchased in 1996, in our training and induction room because it functions well and still looks like new, so we can't justify replacing it."

Now with over 3500 members, 80 stations of equipment and the same 400sqm facility, the pressure on space is an increasing issue. After many years of discussion, the University has now approved the capital business plan to move forward with a new facility, which will take Birmingham's sport well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the meantime, the priority is to continue to use the limited space as effectively as possible and to maintain a high quality experience for its members. This involves frequent re-investment in CV equipment, close attention to servicing and maintenance of equipment to ensure reliability, and regular re-decoration and re-upholstering.

Zena commented, "Our member attrition rate is very low both amongst our student and community members, even though we are not a sales oriented organisation. Our focus is to provide more of an educational support to our members and to ensure, via inductions, so that our members are well-informed and confident users, although affordability through value-for-money pricing is also essential, especially in a student environment."

Key to the centre's success has been an increased focus on customer service, with everything from initial customer contact to improved efficiency of business processes, such as easily accessible booking and payment systems. Additional and ongoing staff training has also been a vital component, including more staff involvement in setting and achieving targets and their involvement in discussions about the new facility.

The University has also been proactive about maintenance, sending the Assistant Manager for Fitness Services, Lee Costin, on an engineering course with equipment manufacturer, Cybex, so that any faults can be accurately and immediately diagnosed on site and quickly remedied. In a facility so short of space, a high degree of equipment reliability is critical.

### **St Andrews University**

Other universities focused on refurbishment include The Department of Sport & Exercise at St Andrews University who recently upgraded their CV suite with Cybex equipment.

The refurbishment, which took place over the summer, is part of an ongoing programme of work to update and modernise the University's sports facilities.

To date, the programme has included investment in a strength and conditioning room in 2003/4, the creation of a Body Work Shop with stretch area, new flooring and a smaller strength area, as well as the £55,000 refurbishment of the CV suite, which has been the latest project.

Commenting on their decision to use Cybex, Ryan King, Strength and Conditioning Coach at St Andrews University, explained, "Cybex were recommended to us but we also conducted our own review of suppliers by speaking to other universities. I really like the ease of use of the equipment and the fact that it was disability friendly. Cybex also offered us a very competitive price."

He continued, "The replacement of our existing mix of CV equipment with one brand has brought a uniformity of feel and use to our facilities. By modernising the gym our customers tell us that their workouts are more fun and enjoyable. They also like the feel of the equipment and its ease of use. The Cybex brand is well known and liked by the staff. From their point of view, the ease of use of the equipment makes inductions simpler and, as a facility, we have the reassurance of a long warranty and one where we only have to deal with one supplier for all our CV equipment."

### **London Metropolitan University**

New build is also becoming more commonplace amongst universities to circumvent the issues of expanding older buildings, which may be ill suited to the demands of ever increasing numbers of students.

The London Metropolitan University is a case in point with their Science Centre Gym in Holloway Road, London.

The new £30 million Science Centre building project includes an investment of £60,000 in fitness equipment for use by students and staff of London Met. Staffed primarily by fitness industry qualified students (of the 90 staff only four are full-time employees), the 48sqm gym has already gained 2000 members since opening just two months ago.

Ian Jennings commented: "Even though student admissions are down 11 per cent this year, our gym membership is up, which is a real testament to both the accessibility of the new facility and the dedication of our team of staff and students who work at the gym."

The Holloway Road facility includes Sports Therapy Laboratories, Sports Science Testing Facilities and a Sports Hall, as well as their state-of-the-art gym. Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council, the gym features a full range of IFI accredited equipment from Cybex including 24 CV stations and 8 resistance stations.

Student numbers continue to grow and, with an ever increasing awareness on obesity amongst the population, universities will need to continue their investment in appropriate and accessible health and fitness facilities. In the future, this will require a more creative response by space poor campuses and inner city establishments to create facilities that will impact the health of the next generation.

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