

Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies: A psychosocial evaluation of accredited sport-based interventions with prisoners.

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Introduction

In 2021, Ulster University (UU) partnered with the Irish Football Association Foundation (IFA) to develop the IFA's sport-based intervention, the 'Stay Onside' programme, into a series of UU accredited Personal and Professional Development (PDD) modules, under the series title: '*Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies*'.¹ Two reports published in June 2022 document the findings of the psychosocial evaluation of modules included in the series. The modules were delivered to individuals on the separated regime² in the high-security Maghaberry prison. Those who complete any one of the Level 4 modules included in the series are awarded 10 credits towards an undergraduate Honours degree at UU. A unique feature of the modules is that they are combined *education and sport-based interventions*. **This policy brief presents the key findings and recommendations from a psychosocial evaluation of two modules: *Introduction to the Sociology of Football (PPD385)* (Murray et al. 2022a) and the follow-up *Football and Society (PPD386)* module (Murray et al. 2022b).**³

On each module, participants were expected to conduct approximately 14.5 hours per week of independent study using assigned module textbooks provided to them.⁴ Due to the high-security restrictions⁵ placed on prisoners on the separated regime, these textbooks were the principal learning resource. Academic assessment was a key component of both modules, on the *Introduction to the Sociology of Football (PPD385)* module, participants were asked to deliver individual presentations on the theme of football fan violence. *On the Football and Society (PPD386)* module, participants were tasked with working as a group to develop and deliver a one-hour coaching session. The participants were provided with autonomy to select the aspect of football they wished to focus on (i.e. defending, passing, shooting), but the session had to be shaped around the concept of leadership.

¹ The original 'Stay Onside' programme continues to be delivered to prisoners not on the separated regime across the prison estate. The bespoke 'Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies' series of modules is currently only available to prisoners on the separated regime, and therefore they are the only prisoners that receive credits towards a degree at UU.

² The Steele Review Panel recommended in 2003 that loyalist and republican prisoners with paramilitary affiliations should be accommodated separately from each other, and from the rest of the prison population, on a voluntary basis. Prisoners can apply to enter separated conditions. Separated republican prisoners are housed in Roe House, while separated loyalist prisoners are housed in Bush House. Therefore, UU and IFA had to deliver two identical sessions on each occasion they were in the prison. The first hour consisted of one-hour of taught material/classroom-based discussion, followed by one-hour of practical football training and coaching on an outside artificial football pitch.

³ For more detail about the rationale, learning objectives and content of each module please see: Murray et al., 2022a and Murray et al., 2022b.

⁴ John Hughson, Kevin Moore, Ramón Spaaij and Joseph Maguire's (2017) edited book: *The Routledge Handbook of Football Studies*. London: Routledge; and Jamie Clelland's (2015) book: *A Sociology of Football in a Global Context*. London: Routledge.

⁵ High-security prisons are those with the most secure levels of custody in the prison estate. Different houses or units within prisons can also have higher levels of security restrictions based upon perceived threat of prisoners escaping or from doing harm to themselves, other prisoners, or prison officers.

Methodology

The evaluation focused on five research aims:

1. to understand participants' experiences and attitudes towards the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* series;
2. to explore the benefits, and identify areas that could be improved, of the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* series;
3. to conduct primary research with prisoners and facilitators/organisers involved in the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* series;
4. to assess the impact of the module on prisoner well-being and opportunities for engaging in volunteering, education or employment;
5. to provide material that could potentially contribute to the development of more appropriate policies and practice for sport-based interventions in the prison system.

The primary method utilised for the evaluation was qualitative, semi-structured interviews with module participants and module facilitators/organisers. In the *Introduction to the Sociology of Football (PPD385)* module, 10 interviews were conducted at the end of module delivery (n=7 prisoners, n=3 facilitators/

organisers). The same number of interviews were conducted at the end of the delivery of the *Football and Society (PPD386)* module (n=7 prisoners, n=3 facilitators/organisers). These interviewees largely comprised the same cohort of prisoners and facilitators/organisers across both modules. One to one interviews were conducted by the lead author (CM) within a private room in the prison setting.⁶

The seven participants that took part in the *Football and Society (PPD386)* module completed three validated psychological instruments to assess resilience (Brief Resiliency Scale, Smith et al, 2008 well-being (Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale-7, Tennant et al., 2007) and general health (General Health Questionnaire-28, Goldberg and Hillier, 1979). Participants completed these measures at baseline (on the day module delivery commenced) and then again at endpoint (on the day that module delivery concluded). Mean average and standard deviation statistics are presented in Table 1. Across the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale mean scores increased between baseline and follow up. An increase in score is indicative of psychological improvement. There was little change in scores in resilience between the start and end of the module.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation scores for the psychological scales at baseline and end point.

Psychological Wellbeing Scale	Baseline (Mean/SD)	End Point (Mean/SD)
Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale(WEMWS)	60 (6.4)	61 (4.9)
Brief Resiliency Scale	3.7 (.33)	4.5 (.56)
General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) Mean Total Score	11.2 (4.2)	8.0 (5)
Somatic	3.6 (3.3)	1.7 (2.1)
Anxiety	.71 (1.5)	.57 (.71)
Social	6.6 (.53)	5.3 (2.9)
Depression	0 (0)	0 (0)

⁶ Ethical approval to conduct the research was secured via NHS/HSC Research Ethics Committee B alongside the UU School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences Ethics Committee.

Means values decreased for the total score for the GHQ-28 from baseline to endpoint. Higher scores on the GHQ-28 indicate a greater possibility of psychological distress. The GHQ-28 was further analysed by averaging four separate factors of the scale: anxiety/somatic, social dysfunction, somatic symptoms, and depression. Mean scores decreased for anxiety/somatic, social dysfunction, and somatic scales. There was no change in depression, this may be due to all participants scoring 0 at baseline and this remaining unchanged. The issue of a low sample size prevented the use of inferential statistical tests being calculated on the data. A larger sample size is needed to enhance statistical power to detect any changes that might be occurring. Further, the inability to connect key demographic data with these measures limits the type of analysis that can be undertaken. Overall, the trends in the data from baseline to module completing are encouraging, and in the direction expected of an effective intervention on improving psychological functioning and reducing distress.

Key Findings

There were six core positive impacts identified by participants across both modules delivered to separated prisoners:

- The mixed nature of the sessions (football training *alongside* classroom learning);
- The development of academic and practical knowledge;
- Building of ‘soft skills’ and relationship-building (between participants; between participants and facilitators; and between participants and their families);
- Impact on perceptions and behaviour;
- Increasing physical fitness;
- Accreditation and future education and employment pathways.

Mixed nature of the sessions

It became clear from the analysis of interview data that the mixed element of both modules – linking practical aspects of football skill development with coaching practice alongside classroom-based

discussions on topics such as racism/sexism, football fan culture, psychology, health and wellbeing and leadership – were viewed as crucial, both to the initial appeal and subsequent success of the module. This was also cited as a major factor in informing six participants’ decisions to return for the second module in the series:

‘... I enjoyed it so much the first time. I enjoyed the banter, I enjoyed what I was doing, and that was a big factor of how I got on well with everybody previously. I didn’t realise that there was another bit to the programme, so I wanted to do that... it wasn’t put across in too serious a way where it wasn’t interesting, and it had a real aspect to it regarding bringing the different people in and the conversations we had.’ (P 1)

‘Physical and mental benefits, both sides of or aspects of that... I was just attracted to the football, I enjoy playing football and the whole discussions and the debates and the whole process of football, you know to be in management and training and all that.’ (P 3)

Development of academic and practical knowledge

Participants frequently cited the impact that the module had on their levels of knowledge on various facets of the sociology of football including the impact of commercialisation on supporters of the game in the aftermath of the 1990 Taylor Report, current debates on the ‘criminalisation’ of working-class supporters for ‘cultural singing’, the role of women’s football and the impact of racism and intolerance on supporters and players. Most interviewees were able to discuss, in impressive historical and academic detail, the key themes underpinning the taught sessions:

‘The stats sort of indicate... there is an incremental rise of black players within the game and obviously that increased with the Premier League and foreign football and investment and all. But the significant thing to take out of that is it wasn’t until 1993, that’s 20 years later, that there was an incentive from the British Government to the anti-racism campaign which at that time was to ‘end racism’ and in 1997 that became the ‘Kick it Out’ campaign...

Another survey was done from 1990 onwards was with 2,500 supporters at the grounds into racism. So, from 1990 to 1999, 67% witnessed racism, 2000-2009, 61% witnessed racism at the grounds and then 2010-2014, 50% witnessed racism.’ (P 7)

The presentation method of assessment for the first module was also generally praised for facilitating participants’ in-depth learning about a particular topic of their choosing:

‘I thought the form of assessment we used for this module was very good. I enjoyed doing it... You don’t want to be giving them [participants] everything they need, you want them to go and think for themselves as well.’ (P 2)

The second module in the series similarly enhanced the knowledge of participants. In this instance, **Football and Society (PPD386)** focused on topics such as psychology and mental health in football, the importance of positive leadership in coaching and the role played by physical fitness and strength and conditioning. Participants were often able to relate elements of the taught module to their own experiences in terms of mental health, coming from working-class areas and growing up with poverty and deprivation, or through a renewed focus on physical fitness and/or education/employment pathways for the future:

‘I enjoyed that [mental health and wellbeing in sport session] from having to go to a psychologist myself... It was interesting to hear him talking about some of the mindsets to certain things... (P 1)

As part of the second module’s assessment, participants were asked to develop, deliver, and reflect on a coaching session shaped around the concept of leadership. With a practical focus on principles and drills, this session on coaching was one that participants roundly praised in terms of its impact. In particular, the applied, reflective nature of the assessment encouraged participants to think differently about their practical input:

‘Just reflecting on how the thing could’ve changed differently, how you could’ve done things different during the drill, and then obviously depending on

what age group you’re working with, you know, that’s how you could do wee tweaks within the drill, the drill itself was ok, but just tweak it for their age groups and dictate the numbers etc.’ (P 3)

Building ‘soft skills’ and relationships

Module participants and module facilitators/organisers felt that both modules had helped improve the communication skills, teamwork, and self-confidence of participants:

‘I would have a bit more confidence to take a coaching session there, which I probably wouldn’t have had 6-7 weeks ago... like, I’ve never took a coaching session before and at the end I was taking a session and I was very confident, you know?’ (P 5)

Participation in both modules was said to have helped in terms of improving relationships and building trust at three spheres: with module facilitators/organisers; with other prisoners; and, with family members. Some participants also felt that they had deepened their relationships with other prisoners because of their involvement in the modules:

‘... with the IFA course you have got to know [other prisoners]. When wee [name removed] was doing it and he was next door to me, and I think in five years we hardly spoke, but that there I found myself speaking to people a bit more on “What did you think about that today?” you know and the reflections of your sessions afterward.’ (P 1)

‘... there are 15 of us living here, maybe 16 of us now... you might not see someone from one end of the day to another, so we got interacting with each other here a bit more than we normally would. That was a positive aspect of the programme.’ (P 4)

In terms of strengthening relationships with family members, several participants spoke at length about how their involvement had given them ‘something to talk about’ with family members (particularly partners or sons), or increased their confidence to get involved in coaching with their children upon their release:

‘I wanted to do the course and as you know my wee lad, he’s getting into football and I used to always

bring him down to train and to football matches, and I always wanted to be more involved, instead of just standing on the side of the pitch. The other reason, I don't want him taking the road that I took you know what I mean, as in how it went wrong and just give him a better upbringing than I had basically.' (P 6).

Impact on perceptions and behaviour

There was some indication by participants that what they had learned impacted their perceptions of others, including being more aware of the impact their use of language may have on others:

'I probably would be more aware of racist issues and religious issues in football, that kind of thing, and especially the language they use... It's not that I wouldn't have been familiar with it but, probably didn't think that some of the things can be said could be so offensive, you know that way?... Just the way I talk to people and the language that I use and just being aware of it and to be sensitive to it, that'd probably be the main thing, you know?' (P 5)

'I'm not so much more biased in my own views... A lot of the things as in racism, sectarianism, it's good to hear other people's sort of story as such...' (P 9)

Several interviewees spoke about how they thought their changed views may impact upon their behaviour because of their participation in the modules:

'In a sense if I went to one of my wee lad's matches and certain people were there from different backgrounds, I'll not sort of have the same approach, you know what I mean? I'll understand more that people are just there to play football, you know what I mean?' (P 6)

Increasing physical fitness

Improvement in physical fitness was identified by most participants as a positive outcome. Alongside the weekly hour (or hour and a half) of playing football, participants began training themselves two/three times per week and this increased physical activity was also felt by some to have improved their mental health.

Accreditation and future education and employment pathways

Alongside the physical element of playing football the main 'selling points' of the interventions were the football association/university link and the fact that modules were university accredited and could be used towards future study at Ulster University. Most module participants were keen to build their CVs whilst in prison. The modules therefore dovetailed with other academic/training qualifications that participants were working towards (for example, some were doing A-levels and others were doing degrees with the Open University⁷). It was believed that the accreditation status of modules on the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* series encouraged and further supported these education pathways:

'... But with this giving us some credits towards a degree or a cert or a diploma, it would definitely encourage me to want to build on those points and take the next step or take a diploma or a degree and even go further. This would definitely encourage me to take that extra step.' (P 2)

Challenges

While there were clear positive impacts associated with participation in both *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* modules, there were also five key challenges encountered during the delivery of the modules:

Covid-19 impact and prisoner release;

- IT/Facilities;
- Conveying module information;
- Accessibility of academic material;
- Scheduling/timing
- Covid-19 impact and prisoner release.

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Maghaberry pre-Christmas 2021, and the release of participants before the final sessions of the *Introduction to the Sociology of Football (PUP385)* module could be completed, resulted in the number of participants dropping from eleven prisoners (November 2021) to seven (by March 2022). All seven prisoners who started the second *Football and Society (PUP386)*

⁷ Although a challenge that was highlighted was that such formal educational provision was reserved for sentenced prisoners, and not those on remand.

module in March 2022 completed it in May 2022. More continuity over the six weeks for the second module encouraged a higher rate of participant retention.

IT/Facilities

All the participants and module facilitators/organisers welcomed the opportunity to conduct the modules together within the prison environment. However, on several occasions, participants raised the issue of quality of equipment provided to deliver the sessions. For module facilitators/organisers, this sometimes related to the antiquated nature of some of the equipment they had to use for delivering presentations.

Another point to bear in mind is that, again for security considerations, separated prisoners cannot use the internet to conduct their own research for their presentations creating challenges for the encouragement of more independent learning. This led to an over-reliance on textbooks and impacted on the degree to which participants could prepare for classroom sessions and the level and quality of interaction.

Conveying Module Information

There was a consensus that the way information about the modules was provided to prisoners could be improved. This related to the initial advertisement of the module, but also information relayed to the prisoners on a weekly basis about module delivery.

Accessibility of academic material

While most participants welcomed and enjoyed the academic elements of the modules, particularly studying the provided textbooks and assigned reading, several participants admitted to struggling with some academic elements of the modules. It was also suggested by several participants and module facilitators/organisers that a broader range of readings could be provided in future modules in the series including non-academic materials (e.g. newspaper sources), to make the process inclusive for those prisoners less used to academic study, and for those with lower levels of literacy. It was suggested that while prisoners were given whole textbooks, but only assigned a single chapter to

read, the size of the book itself may be daunting. Participants proposed that it may be worthwhile exploring whether there is a more accessible way of furnishing individuals with reading material in a less intimidating form, including printing out chapters (copyright permitting).

Scheduling/Timing

The final challenge associated with the first module in the series delivered to prisoners on the separated regime were occasional scheduling conflicts between module delivery and alternative academic courses that individuals were also enrolled in, particularly Open University courses. It was suggested by both participants and module facilitators/organisers that a summer delivery of the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* modules may better suit those participants who were also Open University students:

'... the number of them are actually either completing a degree or some form of education and sometimes it just clashed with the sessions there ...' (F 1)

'... we've got nothing on (June-September), the only thing we've literally have on within them months are the gym and visits... I wouldn't mind sitting down and doing essays and stuff like that (between June-September). (P 6)

Discussion and Recommendations

Participants spoke in positive terms about the impact of the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* modules across several key areas. These included; the impact of the football element of the modules on improving mental and physical health; the significant impact of the taught/academic element of the modules on levels of knowledge, confidence, communication skills, attitudes and behaviour; and the *perceived* impact on future education and employment pathways for participants upon their return to the community. The important word here however is *perceived*, as it is simply too early within this process of assessing the first cohort of separated prisoners involved in the accredited modules to assess if their involvement will help build these pathways into coaching, clubs, and the community upon return to the community. However, there is some emerging

anecdotal evidence from the unaccredited 'Stay Onside' programme, delivered to participants in the general prison population, that suggests that pathways are emerging between prison and the community that may assist some individuals in their experiences of re-entry and reintegration. The cultivation of such pathways, particularly links with IFA grassroots coaches and local clubs, should be an active consideration in the iterative, sustainable development of the Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies series. However, more longitudinal data is required in future to assess to what extent the outcomes of the modules meet the well-intentioned perceptions of participants with regards their future pathways at present.

The following are a series of recommendations which aim to support delivery of the *Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies* modules:

R.1 There is a need for more in-depth, longitudinal pre and post qualitative and quantitative data on module participants to assess the impact on actual outcomes - rather than on aspirational outcomes and what participants 'think may happen' in educational/employment terms upon their release.

R.2 Consideration should be given to scheduling future modules in the Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies series with separated prisoners during the summer months, to allow those studying for other degrees/academic qualifications greater time to dedicate to the modules.

R.3 Future evaluations of modules in the Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies series should be commissioned as a single report with differing sections for modules – rather than as separate documents. This will reduce thematic repetition between module evaluations as demographic cohorts, issues, dynamics and recommendations will be broadly similar.

R.4 Conversations should be held between the IFA, UU, and the NIPS to ascertain how future modules could be promoted to a greater extent within the prison environment.

R.5 While the presentation element of the assessment was largely welcomed, there should be further consideration amongst all relevant parties of whether assessment will take the form of group or individual work.

R.6 Where possible, and Covid-19 permitting, the modules should run weekly from inception through conclusion to maximise participant interest and uptake and avoid drop-out due to prisoner release.

R.7 It is important given the relatively small numbers of separated prisoners, and therefore smaller pool of potential participants, that the curriculum of the modules be continually reviewed to ensure that those students seeking to undertake the modules in future are being offered an evolving, thematically dynamic module (rather than repetition of previous themes/modules).

R.8 Conversations should be held between the IFA, UU, and NIPS staff to ascertain the most appropriate section within the prison to hold class-based taught-sessions that can meet security requirements while also meeting IT/technology needs.

R.9 Consideration should be given as to the best means of assigning module readings to students, given the IT restrictions. While module textbooks work well for those familiar with academic study, those with lower levels of literacy may struggle with more academic textbooks. In such instances it may be appropriate to assign academic readings in smaller or more accessible chunks. It may also be useful to increase the newspaper elements of reading - tying module themes to contemporary events/media depictions (particularly given the reasonable access to newspapers within prison – although the IFA and/or UU may want to consider subsidising these given the costs for prisoners and their families).

R.10 Consideration should be given to how to integrate more critical perspectives on social issues relating to football. For example, corruption, elite football's carbon footprint, and club ownership and sport washing.

R.11 Neither module was able to deliver the 'Women in Football' session for a variety of reasons. This session would be a strong addition to future modules in the Stay Onside: Applied Football Studies series.

R.12 The modules' had an encouraging effect on the wellbeing of the participants despite the small sample size. As sport can be a very influential 'hook' in getting people involved in health promotion activities who otherwise would not, the theme of sport could be further embedded in other rehabilitation programmes to increase initial uptake, continued engagement and improve wellbeing.

R.13 Several prisoners, and module facilitators/organisers, expressed the desire for residents of Bush and Roe to be able to play a football match against one another. In the longer-term, the practicalities and potential benefits (and challenges) of such a scenario should be detailed and discussed between all relevant parties.

R.14 Wider discussions between relevant stakeholders should take place with regards to narrowing the educational gap and courses offered for those prisoners who are on remand compared to those who have been sentenced.

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