



An Insight into the Experiences of Co-ordinating the BRIT Challenge

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Executive Summary

[The Welsh Institute of Physical Activity, Health and Sport \(WIPAHS\)](#) were approached to support the evaluation of the [British Inspiration Trust \(BRIT\) Challenge](#). The BRIT Challenge is an inclusive fundraiser seeking to improve mental health and fitness.

The British Inspiration Trust (BRIT) supports mental health, fitness and wellbeing of young adults, students, and staff, in the UK through the delivery of an annual BRIT Challenge.

Background

- University and college students are at high risk of mental health difficulties (Aronin & Smith, 2016), with depression and anxiety being the most common disorders in UK students (NUS, 2015).
- Research has highlighted that one third of UK university students often or always felt lonely (The Insight Network, 2019).
- Higher levels of physical activity amongst university and college students is associated with more positive mental health (Snedden et al., 2019).
- Despite the easing of the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, university students' physical activity levels have remained low (Gallo et al., 2020).
- The BRIT Challenge was established in 2019 to support and improve young adults, students and staff mental health, fitness and wellbeing by facilitating an inclusive, feel good fundraiser within university and college settings; also assisting to destigmatise mental health.
- The BRIT Challenge has not previously been evaluated from the perspective of participants or co-ordinators. The present report synthesises the experiences of co-ordinators in implementing the challenge and provides recommendations for future BRIT Challenges.

Methods

- A qualitative design was used involving semi-structured interviews with BRIT Challenge co-ordinators following the 2023 Challenge.

Key Findings

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Experiences</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target Audiences • Competing Initiatives • Approaches to the BRIT Challenge • Preparation for the BRIT Challenge • BRIT Challenge as a Prevention Tool for Poor Mental Health and Wellbeing 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Facilitators</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website Support • Previous Involvement • Encouragement from BRIT Challenge Organiser
	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Barriers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institution Support • Capacity

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following **recommendations** are suggested:

- A BRIT Toolkit should be developed to provide co-ordinators with marketing, recruitment, and delivery ideas.
- BRIT Ambassadors should be allocated to each institution for a visit day to promote the BRIT Challenge amongst staff and students.
- Templates of evaluation strategies could be developed for co-ordinators to use and improve the evaluation of the programme.
- BRIT Challenge should be integrated with other complementary initiatives to minimise competing programmes and staff workload.
- It is vital that Universities work towards building an environment which focuses upon positive behaviour change, to which BRIT Challenge is key as a preventative strategy for poor mental health.

Report Contributions

Amie B Richards – Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis, Writing - Original Report

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Recommended Citation: Richards, AB., Sellars, P., Gray, N., Hudson, J., Mackintosh, KA., McNarry, MA. (2023) *An insight into the experiences of co-ordinating the BRIT Challenge*. The Welsh Institute of Physical Activity, Health and Sport (WIPAHS).

Introduction

[The Welsh Institute of Physical Activity, Health and Sport \(WIPAHS\)](#) were approached by [British Inspirational Trust \(BRIT\)](#) to conduct an evaluation of the 2023 BRIT Challenge.

Background



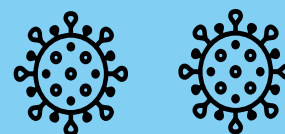
Wellbeing is a key part of overall health, with better wellbeing associated with numerous positive outcomes, including, but not limited to, improved physical health, longevity, more effective learning, prosocial behaviours, and positive relationships (Sanders, 2019). However, mental health and wellbeing levels across the UK population are low, especially amongst university-based young adults (Aronin & Smith, 2016), for whom the last few years have caused unprecedented disruptions to their learning, recreation, and social opportunities (Tasso et al., 2021). Therefore, there is an urgent need to address this dire situation and to provide university and college students and staff with support to increase their physical activity levels.

Wellbeing in University Staff and Students

Students are at particularly high risk of mental health difficulties (Aronin & Smith, 2016), with depression and anxiety being the most common disorders reported in UK students (NUS, 2015). Stress and loneliness can contribute to low wellbeing, and these are commonly felt by university students (Aronin & Smith, 2016). Indeed, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research highlighted that one-third of UK university students often or always felt lonely (The Insight Network, 2019). There are also inequalities within the mental health and wellbeing of students, with ethnic minorities (Chen et al., 2019), LGBTQ+ (Anderssen et al., 2019), or students with a disability (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016) more likely to experience mental health conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already poor levels of student and staff mental health and wellbeing

(Appleby et al., 2022; Shen & Slater, 2021).



Academic staff are also particularly prone to developing mental health problems (Guthrie et al., 2017), with burnout (Guthrie et al., 2017) and high stress levels (Kinman, 2008) contributing to low feelings of wellbeing.

<p>During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, female students reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than males (Chen et al., 2020).</p>	<p>Depression and anxiety were associated with university staff and postgraduate students belonging to an ethnic minority group, those with caregiving responsibilities, and those shielding (Carr et al., 2021).</p>
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Physical Activity in University Staff and Students

In the UK, 73% and 79% of male and female university students, respectively, were reported to not meet the World Health Organization (WHO) physical activity guidelines (Haase et al., 2004), with suggestions that students living on campus were less likely to be active (Irwin, 2004). More recent research from the USA found that higher physical activity levels amongst college students were associated with more positive mental health (Snedden et al., 2019), leading to suggestions that mental health initiatives should include, and prioritise, physical activity components.

Amongst university staff, 42% reported physical activity levels lower than the recommended guidelines, with lack of time and perceived expense commonly cited as barriers (Cooper & Barton, 2016). Similar associations between low physical activity levels and poor mental health were also reported.

<p>During the first five weeks of lockdown, physical activity in UK university students decreased significantly, whilst time spent sedentary significantly increased (Savage et al., 2020).</p>	<p>During the easing of restrictions, university students' physical activity levels remained low (Gallo et al., 2020).</p>
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BRIT Challenge

BRIT is a charity organisation supported by high-profile sporting ambassadors which aims to raise awareness of, and funds, to enhance and destigmatise mental health in young adults students, and staff through the completion of an annual, collaborative challenge. Specifically, BRIT run an annual BRIT Challenge, and in 2023 the BRIT Challenge involved wellbeing activities including moving (in any form possible and in teams or as individuals) 2,023 miles between January 23rd and March 23rd, 2023. The BRIT Challenge has been participated in by over 450 Higher and Further Education Institutes across the UK and is supported by Universities UK, a collective of 140 UK university Vice Chancellors.

The BRIT Challenge aims to support young adult mental health, reduce isolation, and promote mental fitness by:

- uniting the higher and further education sector through a UK-wide, inclusive BRIT Challenge;
- delivering inspiration through the BRIT ambassadors;
- facilitating and promoting fundraising by inviting teams to choose a second charity to raise funds for, alongside BRIT, to support local, regional, and national charities.

Research Project Overview

To better understand how the BRIT Challenge can support the mental health and wellbeing of university students and staff, WIPAHS aimed to conduct an evaluation of the 2023 BRIT Challenge. Initially, an online survey to gather the views and experiences of the BRIT Challenge participants was developed, however, due to circumstances beyond our control, this was not able to be conducted. As such, the angle of the research changed, and a new aim was developed to evaluate the implementation of the BRIT Challenge by conducting interviews with those who co-ordinated the BRIT Challenge at various Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) across Wales.

Method

Research Questions

1. What were the perceived barriers and facilitators of BRIT Challenge co-ordinators' to implementing the BRIT Challenge at institutions in Wales?
2. What were the recommendations for the implementation of future BRIT Challenges?

Data Collection

The study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews (see Box 1) with BRIT Challenge co-ordinators. Specifically, BRIT Challenge co-ordinators were responsible for liaising with the BRIT Challenge Organiser to initiate, develop and implement the BRIT Challenge at their respective institutions. A total of three co-ordinators were interviewed from three different HEIs across Wales. Interviews were subsequently analysed to identify key themes.

Box 1: Examples of questions asked during the semi-structured interview.

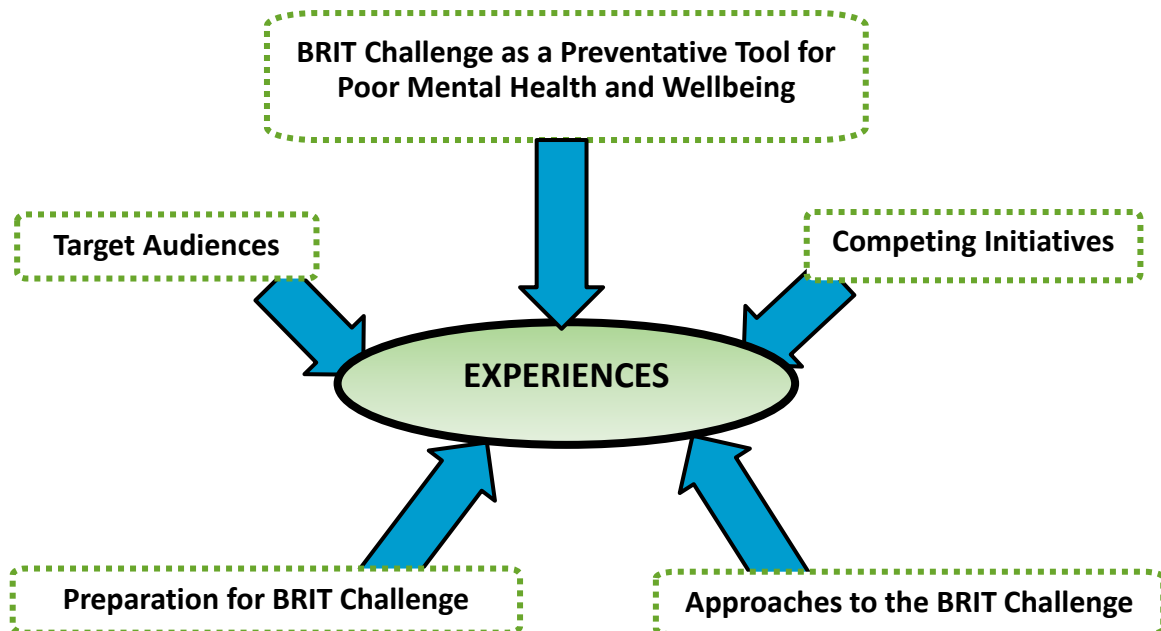
- Briefly describe how you became involved in the BRIT Challenge.
- Why did [Institution Name] sign up to take part in the BRIT Challenge?
- Regarding preparing for the challenge, how did you recruit participants to take part in the BRIT Challenge?
- In what ways did participants complete the BRIT Challenge?
- Did you receive any feedback from BRIT Challenge participants during the challenge?
- During the BRIT Challenge, can you tell me about the level of support you received from: a) your institution; and b) the BRIT organiser(s)?
- What were the biggest challenges for you throughout the co-ordination of the BRIT Challenge?
- What would you need to be able to co-ordinate the BRIT challenge to the best of your ability?

Findings

Three key elements were discussed during the interviews which influenced the BRIT Challenge co-ordinators' experiences of running the BRIT Challenge:

1. Experiences
2. Facilitators
3. Barriers

Experiences



BRIT Challenge as a Preventative Tool for Poor Mental Health and Wellbeing

Co-ordinators were largely aware of the importance of promoting good mental health and wellbeing in both students and staff. There was an awareness that physical activity can improve mental health and wellbeing and that building community and social connections is important to consider when developing preventative strategies.

“It's good to be involved in activities that foster mental health... to encourage student and staff involvement in activities that foster good mental health and build community and social connection before the need arises for counselling or mental health advisor interventions, and before people get to that stage, it's really important that we are fostering involvement in the sort of activities that will probably help to prevent some people from getting to that stage.”

“If we can improve our mental health and our physical health at the same time, then that increases our wellbeing increases our ability to engage with study or work, and it's good for us all.”

“I think that as a university they've scored highly for things like inclusion and support, especially mental health support. And it is something that I know is very important to the culture of the university as well.”

Target Audiences

When considering target audiences, inclusion was discussed in terms of international participants and disability. However, two of the co-ordinators had contradictory views on international students' inclusion during the BRIT Challenge:

“What was interesting about the walks was they attracted more international students. I think they do tend to be more interested in extracurricular community activity generally and because it hit the January intake of international students.”

“If we start talking to international students about something called BRIT... I don't know... It's very much it flies a flag of the Union Jack. So, for international students, they might turn around and go if that's got nothing to do with me, I'm not British, and I think that might be a barrier for some. You know, that's very speculative of me, and I'm sort of [making] assumptions in that respect... So yeah, I think that, in itself, might create issues.”

One of the co-ordinators spoke about living with a long-term health condition and how the challenge helped with physical activity levels.

“I live with a long-term condition... [taking part in the BRIT Challenge] helped me to focus on increasing my movement... Increasing my activity and how to think about how I could do that in a sustainable way, because it was a longer challenge, over two months. It helped me to start thinking about how I can increase my mobility and movement safely.”

Preparation for BRIT Challenge

The HEIs had different approaches to recruitment due to the differences in sizes and motives for taking part in the BRIT Challenge. Recruitment processes varied from signing up prior to the challenge, to recruiting passers-by during the challenge with an activity to take part in, such as rowing or using a static bike. It was alluded to that a better preparation may lead to an increased engagement in the BRIT Challenge.

“But we regrettably didn't do a lot to engage people prior to the launch of the BRIT Challenge.”

“So, we brought one of the rowing machines over to the Students' Union lounge. That was there for a week in March, I believe. We wanted to just kind of promote that as like a way for people to get involved. And with the aim of kind of collectively getting to 23 miles of rowing. But we didn't get a lot of engagement with that.”

“So, it seemed to just be very low engagement across the board, unfortunately.”

“I think engagement is something that kind of ebbs and flows anyway. I think that mainly it did have to do with the kind of lack of promotion. The lack of kind of consistent communication. Maybe in the lead up to the challenge. Maybe a general lack of awareness about what the challenge was and why it was so important.”

Competing Initiatives

All the co-ordinators discussed how linking the BRIT Challenge to other initiatives was a successful strategy but could also represent a potential barrier to the success of the BRIT Challenge.

“It was very much we went into it [BRIT Challenge] this year, thinking, it's an opportunity for us to promote [own physical activity initiative].”

“We also wanted to kind of wrap it in with the Student Union's wellbeing week, which is something that we do every year. And so, we were thinking of different ways that we could promote BRIT Challenge events through that event, kind of tie everything together.”

“My preference would be to not do it as much... in January. There's another campaign, Red January. [Manager] wanted me to do that... Make up of New Year's resolutions about, you know, going to lose weight and get active and the rest of it. But again, that sort of happened, and the BRIT Challenge happened, and we tried to work with both. Having two campaigns been thrown at me.”

“When you have got other campaigns out there, and like Red January is trying to hit universities as well. You know they could be fighting against each other, and sometimes there's too many campaigns out there.”

“There can be an overwhelm of information, of options. There's lots of organisations that will approach university... It can feel like when some things come in, even if they are really good, it can feel like, what's this external agency wanting now? A whole plethora of people will get in touch with you in relation to all kinds of wellbeing and therapy initiatives. I could see how it could get lost. “

“Not many of them [other initiatives] will say, do this for free, which is the huge advantage of the BRIT Challenge.”

Linked to the co-ordinator's capacity within their day-to-day roles, the priority of running the BRIT Challenge differed between HEIs. The priorities of the Senior Management Teams (SMTs) were also discussed, and it was highlighted that some SMTs advocate for taking part in the BRIT Challenge although there is then subsequent delegation and limited follow-up.

“Nobody asks us about it [BRIT Challenge]. SMT definitely don't ask us about it. So, if it's supposed to be, you know that high profile across institutions, then we don't get asked what we've achieved.”

“It is, it is too long, I think a month is better, because you kind of need to move on.”

“I think internally from our perspective, I think there's bigger fish to fry in terms of getting behaviour change, and the right level of support and commitment from SMT... We want to be spending our time concentrating on how we create a shift in behaviour, culture, attitude around physical activity... I just don't think the BRIT Challenge is going to do that for us.”

BRIT Challenge Approach

HEIs all used different approaches to providing activities throughout the BRIT Challenge, with some offering structured activities and others taking a more informal approach:

“So, we wanted to kind of come at it from an approach of like people could kind of be independent in how they got in involved with the challenge. We wanted different options, so one of the things we did was set up a Strava account. And again, like I mentioned, we had the web page on the Students' Union website about the BRIT Challenge and we kind of had a list of things.”

“We had this Nintendo Switch. Like a switch off we called it so it's kind of it was for the BRIT Challenge, but it was also focused around kind of just taking a break from daily routine that you need and being able to just kind of move around and take your mind off of exams, placements... whatever people were going through at the time... maybe it wasn't the best strategy, but there weren't a lot of people that were willing to get involved with that.”

“Another thing that we did was like 23 acts of kindness. So, we had a little, PDF that went out in a newsletter and people could print that off and kind of work through it at their own pace. [We] kind of came up with different acts. It was various things, things like, buy somebody a cup of coffee in the queue behind you, like pay it forward. Take 10 minutes to practice mindful breathing. Go for a walk, reach out to someone that you haven't spoken to for a while... There were things kind of, we tried to make it a good balance of like physical activity and just more like mental wellbeing.”

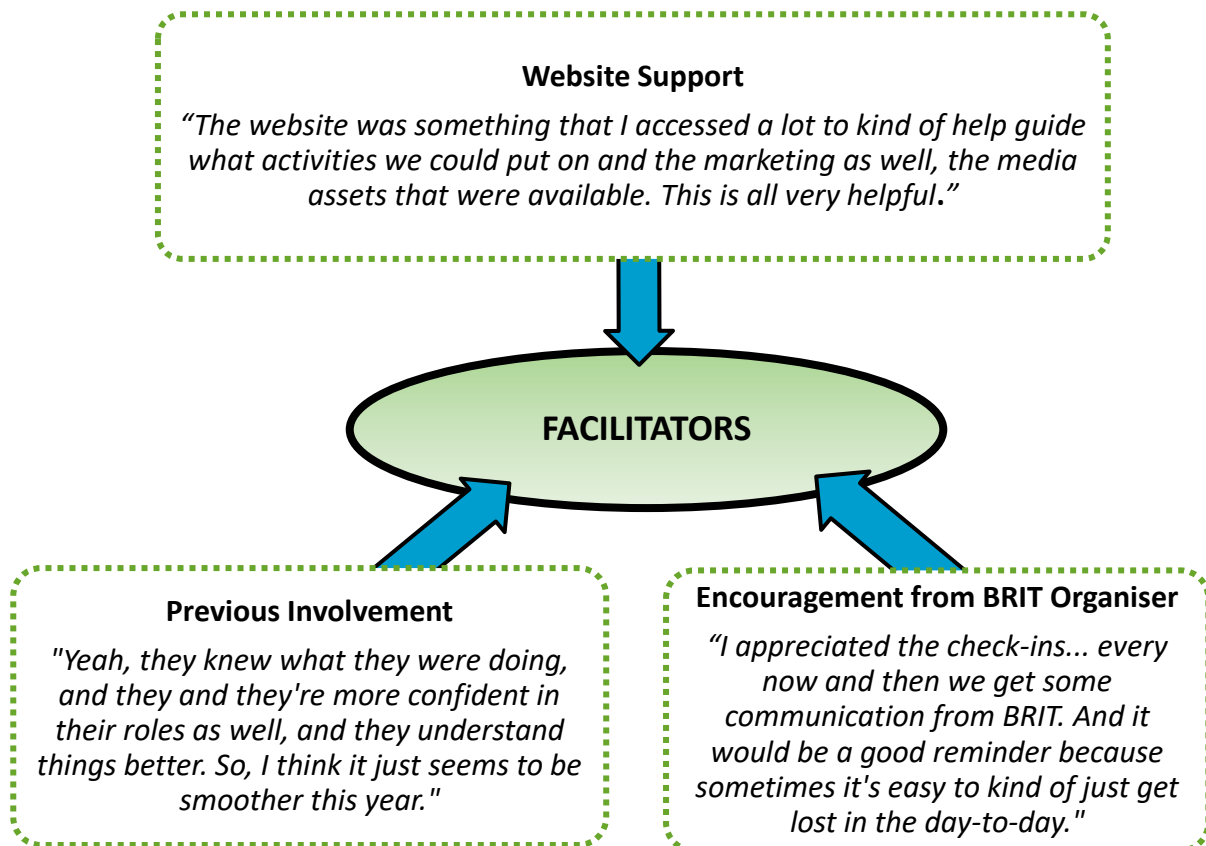
Whilst all co-ordinators thought that evaluation and feedback were important, they were unsure how to do this. Therefore, none of the co-ordinators collected any evaluation data on the BRIT Challenge at their HEI.

“I don't really have like any solid [engagement] data one way or the other.”

“I didn't get any feedback, no. Again. Something that I would be more proactive within the next round is kind of figuring out an efficient and effective way to get feedback after these events.”

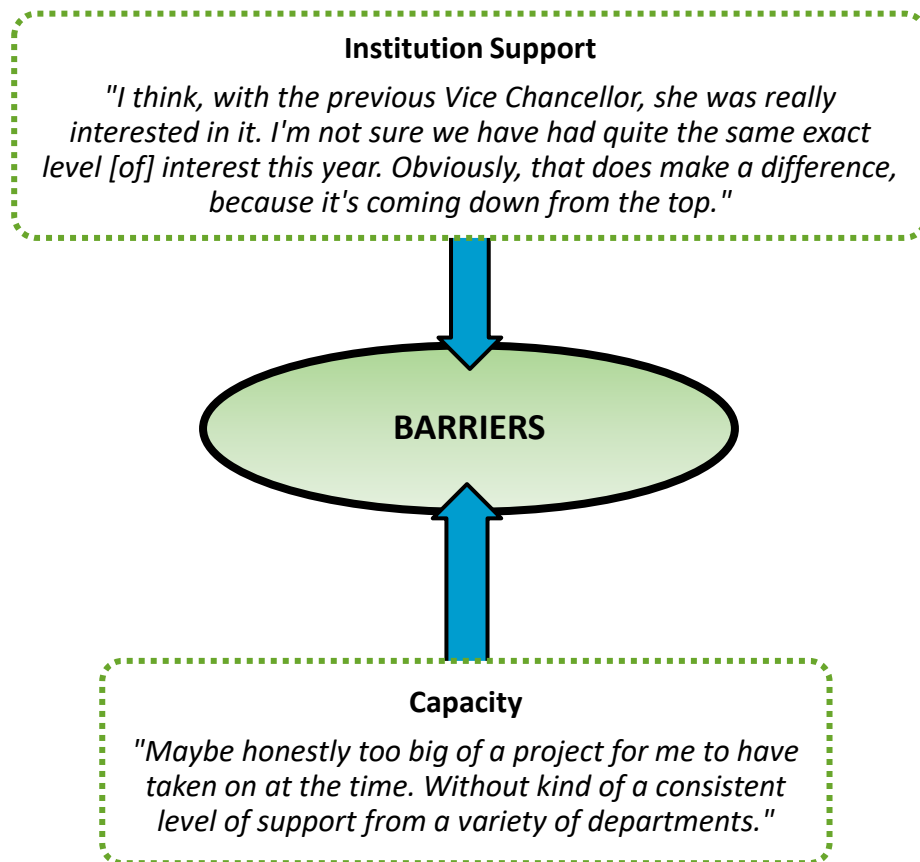
“No, I suppose because we didn't have any direct way communicating back to those who might have inputted and entered any miles... we didn't evaluate it.”

Facilitators to Co-ordinating the BRIT Challenge



The facilitators helped the co-ordinators in the running of the BRIT Challenge. Those who had previously been involved found it easier to co-ordinate knowing what had worked and not worked in past. The co-ordinators appreciated the support and check-ins from the BRIT Organiser to keep them on track, whilst others cited the website as a helpful tool.

Barriers to Co-ordinating the BRIT Challenge



Institution support and capacity were two key barriers that all co-ordinators reported. Additional quotes from the co-ordinators to support the citing of these barriers were as follows:

"I don't want to like put all of the onus of responsibility on the university, but I would expect and want more support going forward definitely."

"There were a lot of things to kind of juggle."

Areas for Improvement

Throughout the interviews, co-ordinators suggested areas for improvement that would further enable and assist the successful implementation of the BRIT Challenge.

The co-ordinators talked about utilising the BRIT Ambassadors to promote the BRIT Challenge, which may increase engagement and add an element to support the fundraising.

“We've never been offered to have an Ambassador to come down and support us... But what does it look like?... During this month you can have the opportunity to get this from this one to come down for a day each.”

“Potentially what would be useful with BRIT would be to have marketing support if they were able to offer that, and to have perhaps more direct contact with the Ambassadors... who were willing to be involved in the activities and to support the fundraising.”

Another area that was discussed as a useful tool for the delivery of the BRIT Challenge was learning from other HEI's:

“Connect with other universities to see how they are engaging and communicating with their staff and students to get more active. I think for me that is more than valuable.”

“In terms of sharing stories, you know. How did they get 500 people to do? I don't know. A big walk, but then I think this comes down to understanding what universities do within the whole physical activity space, anyway.”

“I'd be intrigued to see the report at the end to get a better understanding of that [other co-ordinators experiences].”

“Every university has its own policies and procedures, and still having a direct step-by-step guide is probably not going to work. Having ideas about what they do that's more useful.”

Co-ordinators talked about support from both BRIT organisers and internally from wider teams within their HEI's for marketing and strategy support.

“I would have more meetings with different departments in the lead up to it. I would want a strategy for who's going to be responsible for what and I'd want a more solid structure timeline of events. And I definitely would want to highlight the promotion of it earlier than the launch date.”

“I would probably have a working group, which I think is in effect, what there is, but I'd make sure we had comms, administrators, sport.”

“I'd possibly get our international talent team involved as well because they co-ordinate all sorts of activities themselves for internationals.”

The areas for improvement that were discussed all helped to create the recommendations that are proposed in the next section of the report.

Recommendations

This report provides a summary of co-ordinators' experiences of running the BRIT Challenge. Based on the findings of this evaluation, the following recommendations are suggested:

Recommendation 1:

A BRIT Toolkit should be developed to provide co-ordinators with marketing, recruitment, and delivery ideas.

The development of a BRIT Toolkit would enable co-ordinators to benefit from ideas and advice from others who have been successful in running the BRIT Challenge. The Toolkit could include marketing ideas, success stories and recruitment strategies. This would not be a step-by-step guide as all universities are different and what works for one may not work for another.

Recommendation 2:

BRIT Ambassadors should be allocated to each institution for a visit day to promote the BRIT Challenge amongst staff and students.

Co-ordinators spoke about the calibre of some of the BRIT Ambassadors. A recommendation would be to allocate a BRIT Ambassador to a HEI to visit for a day to help promote the BRIT Challenge amongst staff and students. This could be to help launch the challenge or as a mid-way point to help keep staff and students motivated.

Recommendation 3:

Templates of evaluation strategies could be developed for co-ordinators to use and improve the evaluation of the programme.

All co-ordinators spoke about their lack of evaluation of the BRIT Challenge, so a recommendation would be to create an example template of evaluation strategies that the co-ordinators could use. This would also help with the overall evaluation of the BRIT Challenge if co-ordinators sent these into the BRIT Challenge organiser to collate feedback and evaluations to help inform the next steps for the BRIT Challenge.

Recommendation 4:

BRIT Challenge should be integrated with other complementary initiatives to minimise competing programmes and staff workload.

With workload and capacity, co-ordinators spoke about their pressures of competing programmes, which could become complementary to the BRIT Challenge. A recommendation is that upon the initial BRIT Challenge discussions between the BRIT organisers and the HEI co-ordinators that a discussion is had around current initiatives and how these can complement the BRIT Challenge to minimise workload and assist other initiatives.

Recommendation 5:

It is vital that Universities work towards building an environment which focuses upon positive behaviour change, to which BRIT Challenge is key as a preventative strategy for poor mental health.

The BRIT Challenge enables staff and students to log miles of activities but doesn't have a behaviour change element. The recommendation is that the BRIT Challenge becomes the start of a behaviour change process, whereby the co-ordinators don't run the BRIT Challenge and then stop. The values and ideas behind the BRIT Challenge in using physical activity as a preventative strategy for poor mental health should be embedded within the staff and student culture.

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Welsh Institute of Physical Activity, Health and Sport

WIPAHS is a pan-Wales network of all eight Welsh Universities and Sport Wales. With members based across Wales, we can capitalise on the nation's unique culture and its remarkable range of expertise, infrastructure, and facilities. WIPAHS brings together world-leading academics, with representatives from Sport Wales and Welsh Government, who are driven to answer practice-based questions, identify fundamental research questions, and ensure that findings are reflected in Welsh policy and practice. An advantage of working with WIPAHS is the access to such breadth of knowledge and resource available across the partners.

Our research expertise includes health inequalities and the use of physical activity as medicine. We are also experts in physical literacy, and the application of technology to promote physical activity or manage health conditions. Whilst working across the lifespan, many of our researchers are leading experts in using physical activity to improve short- and long-term outcomes in children and young people. Researchers have contributed to numerous Chief Medical Officer's physical activity and health expert working groups (including children and young people guidelines), Physical Activity in the National Institute for Health Care Excellence (NICE) quality standards advisory committee for childhood obesity and are a WHO HEPA Europe Steering Committee Member.

As a practice-driven organisation, WIPAHS seeks to answer the questions posed by partners working in the field, as well as widely disseminate knowledge across a diverse range of audiences. WIPAHS uses the transformative power of physical activity and sport to improve the lives of people in Wales.

Further information on projects we have led and supported can be found in our [Annual Report 2022](#).





Sefydliad Cymru
Gweithgaredd Corfforol,
Iechyd a Chwaraeon

Welsh Institute
of Physical Activity,
Health and Sport

Contact Us

If you would be interested in discussing how the Welsh Institute of Physical Activity, Health and Sport (WIPAHS) can assist your organisation to answer important research and evaluation questions, or help provide your organisation with important insight, please do not hesitate to contact us to discuss.

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