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Transcript

Alisa Brown

Hi, it's Alisa, your SU President for Welfare, Equity and Inclusion. Today's episode's More Than Varsity, who gets to play at Oxford. We're looking at student support outside of varsity and how it supports mental health, why making time for it isn't equally easy for all students, and how access to facilities shapes everyday participation. who also touched on opportunities for students to get involved in volunteering and local community. Let's jump in. Please introduce yourself, Alex.

Alex Betts

Hi, Alisa. It's a real pleasure to join you. I'm Alex, Alex Betts. I'm Pro Vice Chancellor for External Engagement, Sport and Community, which is a bit of a long title. It basically means I do external engagement, global, national and local engagement. And I'm really excited that sport is thrown into my portfolio.

Alisa Brown

Right, that's great. So you've worked closely with international organisations and led community-driven research through the Refugee Economies Programme. Are there lessons from that work that you still find yourself drawing in this role you have at Oxford?

Alex Betts

Yeah, so my backgrounds as a political scientist, political economist, we're director of the Refugee Studies Centre. And my research is really around the economic lives and positive contributions that refugees and displaced people make. Under what conditions, rather than being portrayed as a burden, a cost on host societies, can they be contributors? And a lot of that's taken me to different parts of the world. Research teams support me working in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia. In a lot of that work, I've tried to make the research relevant, to have impact, to ensure that I work with international organizations, NGOs, governments, so they can take our research insights and change policy and practice and that can benefit people. So when Vice Chancellor Irene Tracy took on her role three years ago now, she was really keen to have a focus on global and local engagement to ensure the university takes seriously our social responsibility. And

the background that I had that I've drawn on is working with the media, working with international organizations, working with government, sometimes working with grassroots organizations to ensure as a university we've got partnerships, collaboration, and that we're outward focused and trying to make a difference.

Alisa Brown

So running back a little bit, when you as a student, was sport part of your student experience and do you still make time for that now? And when you're so busy, like how can you balance those things?

Alex Betts

Yeah, we'd like you, Alyssa. I went to Durham. I actually applied to do PPE in Oxford and I didn't get in. So I was one of those people who went to Durham. What drew me to Durham at the time was sport. It had that intercollegiate sport experience. And I played a bit of college football when I was there. Actually, having spent most of my teenage years really passionate about sport, doing athletics, playing tennis, playing football, I stopped playing football and I stopped doing sport at university. I got absorbed by my academic work. And I actually got into university debating. So I found that created opportunities for me to travel. I debated for the university, went to world European championships. one of my first ever big trips outside of Europe and to a developing country, which the World Debating Championships in the Philippines. So I left sport and then came back to it after I graduated from Durham. But I really valued all the extracurricular opportunities that actually as an undergraduate debating at Durham had offered me. And I came to Oxford as a graduate student, my MPhil in Development Studies, then my DPhil in International Relations. And I was the person in charge of coaching, debating at the Oxford Union, working with undergraduates to support them to be competitive. And that got me back into that mindset of training, gave me a passion for coaching that I've since brought back into running a football.

Alisa Brown

I feel like I should have come to you before this podcast to coach me on some of those things. One other question on the topic was that there is a strong association between regular movement and positive mental health. So especially in a high pressure academic environment like Oxford, do you think that the university fully recognises the role that sport plays in supporting students' mental wellbeing?

Alex Betts

The links between physical activity and wellbeing are huge. One of the things I've really tried to emphasize as Pro Vice Chancellor for Sport is that involvement in physical activity and sport are massively beneficial to our students. There's historically, I think, been a perception that being involved in sport is a distraction, that it stops students

focusing on their degrees. The data tells us the opposite. It says that actually, when students are really involved in sport, they tend to do better in their degrees. More students involved in sport tend to get first-class degrees, students who are not involved in sport. And the well-being effects can be really positive. We've got to recognize that more, we've got to make the data available across our community and raise the profile of sport physical activity. It's one of the reasons why in my role, I chair our sports strategic subcommittee, but I also chair our well-being delivery group. because I really think the links between well-being and sport are really important for us to emphasize for style and for students. We've developed programs to be inclusive about student participation in physical activity. The pilot around Moving Minds, initially with two colleges, I think Linacre and St. Cats, has had really positive feedback. There's now enormous demand for Moving Minds, but also the Active Act Oxford program that allows students to draw upon different clubs and sports societies at Iffy Road, try different sports, use those facilities without feeling that it's about achieving performance level, without having to aspire to represent the university, how can we get our students involved in sport and physical activity? And so I think there's an awful lot more we could do to recognise that link and ensure opportunities are available across the board.

Alisa Brown

Okay, on that topic of opportunities, Sport, I think, looks quite different depending on college, amongst other things that do look quite different. And also timetabling and where you live are also big factors in participation. So what do you think about fairness when provision is so uneven across this collegiate system we're in?

Alex Betts

We've got to level the playing field and make sport in Oxford more inclusive. One of the challenges as a decentralised university is we've tended to assume that we've got great sport facilities because some colleges, not all, have great sports facilities, garden foot playing fields, some of them have got really good gyms, but those opportunities are not equally available to all our students. Some colleges have no sports facilities, have to enter sharing agreements to use college sports facilities. And that's why it's really important that we've got really high quality university sports facilities. that can cater for every student in the university, regardless of what college there are. There are some facilities that can only be provided by the university, like a swimming pool. So college is going to offer a swimming pool. While most colleges are able to offer a handful of sports, the kind of sports we've been playing for over 100 years, football, rugby, cricket, hockey, netball, et cetera, there are 83 different sports offered. by the sports bed at the university level. And that's why we really need to make a case for investment in sports facilities. When the Vice Chancellor started in her role in her inaugural address, one of the lines she used is our Iffy Road sports facilities look more tired than Sir Roger

Bannister did when he crossed the... Yeah, that was great. World record. And it's really true. For A world-class university, we don't have world-class sports facilities. And yet year on year, our students overperform relative to our investment in sport. We're right down on the box list for investment in sport. And yet our teams, our students playing for the badge, playing for the history, being proud to represent Oxford, tend to overperform in box. We've got to give them facilities that are going to match them and enable that opportunity to be available for all. And we're working on that. We've got a dedicated fundraising team for sport. We've got a vision, and a plan that we're developing for the uplift of our facilities. Over the next few years, we're going to see, I think, massive progress in those facilities. At Tiffley Road, we also have aspirations to make facilities more available, closer to students. One of the things we're planning is a city centre gym and leisure facility for students. So when students don't have access to great gym facilities in their own college or they can't afford to or don't want to get a private gym membership, one of our local private gym providers, we can offer those facilities in the city centre so that people don't have to go late at night on the bike down Ify Road, but we can have that joint provision. Leisure, basic gym facilities in the city centre, alongside team sports, performance sport, ODP Road. We're making progress on that. And there's a sort of watch this space message where I hope their students will be excited to hear announcements that are upcoming about a shift in momentum and direction on that set of facilities that will hopefully go some way towards levelling their playing field. The other message I've got is that we need our colleges to be more open to sharing their facilities, particularly with students at other colleges that don't have access. I've just done a review of Oxford Sport. It'll be published in a few weeks. And one of the sets of recommendations is about how the university and colleges can work together, share those facilities and move towards thinking about our entire collegiate university sports estate and open to all our students.

Alisa Brown

Well, that's really amazing to see sort of the needs, wants, the cries even of some of the students like being taken really seriously by the university and the essential steps in place going towards, having better facilities and potentially happier and healthier students. Back to the topic of, oh, we overperform. I've heard that we've actually had more wins in sport than Cambridge in total. Do you think the claim is true or?

Alex Betts

Yeah, the data tells us. that consistently year on year, we are getting more varsity wins against Cambridge, but we're also doing really well in **** sport. I think there's a perception that runs contrary to that. It's partly driven by a historic marquee sports, rowing and rugby, where we're losing. And for a variety of reasons, we've perhaps been underperforming. in those sports, particularly rowing. And rowing has been grabbing the headlines. It's important to recognize across the 83 sports in which we have sports

teams. So many of those sports teams are doing really well. They're competitive. We can't rest on our laurels. I want us to be able to have a really good blues performance scheme. I want us to be able to have the coaching, infrastructure and support and facilities and investment. that allows all our top level sports teams to feel competitive and for us to attract and recruit students that want to be great scholar athletes. One of the things I think is really important to the DNA of Oxford is really that Sir Roger Bannister legacy. Yes. Here is the Corinthian spirit that we will never be like an American university going out and recruiting exclusively great athletes. But we want excellence across the board and we believe that excellence in one area creates excellence in other areas. And so we want this to be a place where top level athletes who are also excellent and have huge academic potential can feel they've got everything they need to thrive academically and thrive in relation to their performance level sport.

Alisa Brown

I actually think one of the conditions for Rhodes Scholarship used to be some sort of like athletic ability. So for the students listening that may feel that they're not quite good enough for varsity, may not have made the cut, sport may... quietly drop off their radar. So how do we stop participation becoming an all or nothing pipeline? Maybe this mentality like you need to be at an elite level to participate.

Alex Betts

I think the great thing about sport and physical activity in Oxford is we're looking at different levels of participation. There's really the performance level, but we've got depth to that. So an awful lot of varsity support, sport in different sports. has the blues team, but we have second teams, third teams, training squads. But then alongside that, we have recreation sport. We've got college sports teams, got college sports clubs. And then what we really need to promote is participation level, where we have programs that we invest more in, like Living Minds, like Active at Oxford, that everybody feels able to participate at a level that suits them in terms of not just ability, but time commitment. And we really need to get that message out with a campaign that says sport and physical activity can be for everyone. And in terms of provision, we will be as inclusive as possible. I think what's been amazing to see with the active at Oxford programme is sports clubs really embrace that, embrace taster sessions, offer trial sessions. allow people who are nowhere near the blue standard in particular sports to get involved. And I've had great experience over the last few years of still, at now the ripe old age of 46, going and training at the Ifly Road Track with the university athletics club and cross country clubs. My days of being able to run blue standard times are long since over, but I found those clubs inclusive, welcoming, And I think that's the ethos we'd like from our sports teams, that anyone can go along, have a go, not feel it's about selection or non-selection for a blues team, but it's about fun, it's about social

connection, it's about building memories and being involved in physical activity alongside thriving in your academic work and your enjoyment of university life.

Alisa Brown

If it's any consolation, you're able to still run laps around me. So one thing that the students, a couple of the students have told me over the course of my time in the inclusion capacity was that women students are feeling that the gyms can be quite intimidating, especially when they're new. So what kind of interventions do you see to be useful if we're serious about widening participation for everybody?

Alex Betts

It's really important that we look at what we do on sport from a gendered perspective. That we ensure that we raise the profile of women's sport. Every year, our women's sport teams attract really top level female athletes, international standard athletes. But sometimes we don't give women's sport the profile it deserves. In terms of recreational level involvement and participation, It's really important that we think about our facilities in gendered ways as we get the opportunity to develop our facilities, to invest in, if your own, to create new gym spaces. We need to ensure that facilities are going to work for all, that we keep in mind equity and diversity considerations, and that when we create those facilities and schedule training and use times, there are spaces where women feel welcome, included, and for women and those who identify as non-binary, they feel welcome than exist. to you needed sporting basis. Sport should be for all. My wife, for instance, is a member of the community, is a member of the Ifly Road gym. She uses it. She feeds back to me her experiences of being a female community member of our sports facilities. And that feedback is really welcome on the community side, all the student side. What do we want those facilities to be? How can we make the gym more inclusive? and not have it that anybody using the gym feels that they are unwelcome alongside blues level, often male sports teams, dominating use of the weights, the free weights, those sections that are often quite masculine environments. How can we reimagine what those spaces are? There's other aspects to this that are really important. Coaching provision. I think, as you know, Alyssa, because we've talked about it in the past, there's a real tendency in coaching across the board to think about women as small men, small men. Yeah, for sure. The same coaching practices, the same advice around nutrition training that we would use for male athletes. And an awful lot of the advice and the science tells us we need to adapt training methods to suit the needs of female athletes. We've tried recently to do more to engage our coaches and our sports teams in that. We have an event that St. Hilba's hosted where we invited the former head of physiology from Sport England to come and speak to our female athletes and our coaches, male and female, who coach women's teams to say, these are the things we need to be aware of in terms of reds, in terms of nutrition, in terms of physiology. where if we adopt the same approach to training that we adopt for

men's teams, we risk serious injury, we risk undermining the well-being of our female athletes. We need to adapt that culture across the board. The other thing we've tried to do, and you've been part of this, is start an early stage women's sport research network. We want to promote more research across the university, particularly in the sciences, around sport, sport relevant research. And one area where I think we've got really great emerging strengths, whether on bioengineering, whether around medical science generally, whether around endocrinology and hormones, is research that can really transform women's sport. So we're trying to do more, events, more connections that can make part of what we do on research very much linked to the experience of women in sport. So I think you raise a really important issue. How do we make sport more inclusive for everyone? But how do we particularly think about facilities, coaching and culture to be inclusive of female and those who identify as non-binary?

Alisa Brown

I'm really excited to see that progress and hope that we have something a bit more permanent in place rather than, which was amazing, like, one-off opportunity to learn more and see that become a more permanent structure and integral part of Oxford University. So as you mentioned before, we both sit on sports strategic subcommittee together. Hopefully that will have a new name change soon because it's not exactly the nicest. our most catchy title, where you chair and I represent the students. Is there anything students consistently underestimate about how decisions around sport or how decisions in general are made at the university level?

Alex Betts

I think for a long time, sport has been disconnected from the central university. We've got a group of people who are working really, really hard at the sports department and sports fed. Director of Sport, John Roycroft, has given amazing service to the university for well over 2 decades, coming up to three decades, in fact. But they've had to operate in a really resource constrained environment and not always add the support they've needed from Central University. I think there's a shift in that. Having a vice chancellor who is really committed to sport and has appointed me to be our first Pro Vice Chancellor for Sport, is strengthening those links. We've always had this sports strategic subcommittee. There's been a subcommittee, the Education Committee, because primarily sports are student facing service. We want to raise the profile of that committee. So one of the things I'll be bringing to our governance is to rename it as a start, the sports strategy committees. It doesn't sound like the sub subcommittee. Yeah, Triple SE. Give it the profile it deserves. It's a great forum. because it involves student representation, you're on it, sport counsel are on it, got representation from the Blues Committee. We want to make it more strategic, not just a reporting forum, not just information sharing, but a real advisory forum in which we can strategically shift the needle, work out what an all star of direction is in terms of facility, culture,

performance, participation, and have in some cases the difficult conversations. that can guide the sports department, sports bed and the wider university. The big step on that shift is the new review of sport that will be published over the next few weeks, where with a mandate from the Vice Chancellor, with a mandate from the Sport Strategic Subcommittee and Education Committee, I've interviewed our sports clubs, students, academics, professional services staff, could speak to other people leading other universities' sport provision and trying to think through what do we need to change? So that report, that review of Oxford Sport will really be trying to chart out a future for Oxford Sport. And we'll take that review to bodies like Conference of Colleges, Council to raise awareness, but also try to disseminate it through a communication strategy to shift the culture, raise the profile and ensure that our great colleagues historically under-resourced in the sports department, get the support they need from the wider university.

Alisa Brown

So moving away from sport as much I love it, thinking more town and gown, Oxford can feel dominated by the university during term time. It's also a city, yeah, where people live, they work all year round, the shops, the restaurants, the colleges and public services. With this long-standing town-gown dynamic in Oxford, what in the relationship works well already and where does it feel fragile to you?

Alex Betts

Local engagement is one of my favourite parts of my role. I didn't grow up here, I grew up in Bristol, but I've been here since I was a master's student, more or less continuously. And Oxford's become my home. Yes, some of them were in the university, but all my children were born in the JR hospital. We live in East Oxford. It's home and it's community. My wife's a city councillor, she's a county councillor. we're embedded and we feel very much part of that community. And I think that's the same for an awful lot of our staff. This is home. From staff at colleges to academics across the university departments, the overwhelming majority live in Oxford and Oxfordshire. But there is a historic town down divide, both in terms of perception and the material reality. I encounter through my work, children and families living in parts of Oxford who have never been to central Oxford, never been inside college, never seen what's behind those walls. And we need to break down those barriers. We need to ensure that our students recognise that they're part of the city, part of the county of Oxfordshire, and then share over Morden Bridge to Oxford once in a while, get to know the people who comprise our community and are not locked into the bubble of medieval central Oxford. So part of what I want to do is that cultural shift to have a sense of openness and inclusion so that residents feel that they can consistently access our colleges, our facilities, come to our gardens, libraries and museums, that we're open, that we're inclusive, receptive, but also to make sure that our students and staff go out to

communities, represent the university really well. show that we're relatable, that there's a human face to the university and build those connections and bridges. So what we've tried to do is build on great work that has happened in pockets with parts of the university and parts of our colleges, our gardens, libraries and museums, provide great volunteer schemes, engage with schools, Trinity College is responsible for outreach. They run an amazing twinning programme where they merge colleges with local primary schools. At the moment, I think we've got 10 colleges signed up for that. It'd be great to have an awful lot more of our colleges signed up for it because there's huge demand from primary schools to be part of that programme. It's amazing because it allows primary school children to feel a sense of belonging and identification with a particular college. It allows our students to spend time in those primary schools. even just listening to early years readers and building a sense of relationship between students and young people in the community. What we've tried to do is pilot a set of activities and coming back to sports, sports an example of a way we can build bridges. So as you know, Alyssa, we've had our young sport leaders programme over the last couple of years where year eights from six of the seven state secondary schools in Oxford have come and spent a day a week at the university in four-week blocks. In the morning, they've tried a particular sport, and I believe athletes have provided coaching, whether it's basketball, athletics, rowing, touch American football. Then they've had lunch in a college, so they get to see what happens in colleges. And then they've heard from an academic about their research for ways linked to sport. So Tom Crawford talking about mathematical modelling for football and how they can tell you where to put penalty, or Martha Newson talking about the anthropology of football crowd behaviour, or Heidi Johansson Berg and Holly Bridge talking about neuroscience, the brain, and performance. One of the really exciting things we're going to be launching in Trinity Term this summer, and we want to continue with, is our students going out to primary and secondary school across OX4, and delivering in-school enrichment clubs in those communities. And the aim will be that they take their superpowers, their skills, starting with sport, and can share them in ways that inspire young people's interest in physical activity, build a sense of connection, build awareness at the university. But there's that reciprocal benefit. Those young people benefit from sports coaching and a sense of going to university can be possible for them and a better understanding of what university is. But our students benefit from that experience of going out, working with young people, developing coaching skills. And if that works through Trinity and we'll do an impact evaluation to see that it's working and learn from it, hopefully we can expand that from sport to other areas like music, drama, debating. Our students are the biggest asset we have for local engagement. Our students have extraordinary opportunity and privilege being able to come to a great university like Oxford. And many of them from diverse backgrounds want to be able to contribute, put back, and feel a sense of connection to community. If we can harness that and get them to share their passions, their talents, their superpowers in sport, music, drama, whatever, that's a really great

asset we've got sharing and We've tried certain things along those lines. So we have a laid law scholars programme, where first year undergraduates enrol, they get additional support to fund their time here. They get an ethical leadership programme. At the end of the first year, they do a local research project where we've tried pilot after school clubs. Some of them have been doing debating, what are the United Nations like activities? developing pantomimes in five weeks, and Alice in Wonderland pantomime, but also doing research to see what works. Those types of programs have been great so far and we want to scale them. and ensure our students are part of all that local engagement activity.

Alisa Brown

That pretty much answers my last question, which was any particular opportunities that you wanted to shout out for the students that are listening in? I feel like you've covered quite a lot, but anything open now?

Alex Betts

We really would like our students to find ways to get involved in our local engagement work. And given that we're talking about sport, there's a lot of upcoming opportunities to be involved in local engagement with sport. We're partnering with the Vincent's Club to support student volunteers to get involved in the delivery of the Young Sport Leaders Programme. It will take place based here in Central Oxford out of Ippy Road through four weeks, weeks 7, 8, 9, 10 in Hillary Term and 7, 8, 9, 10 in Trinity Term. But one of the big call outs we're going to make soon is we'd like to recruit around 20 students, undergraduates, graduate students, to help be part of the first cohort delivering our enrichment sports clubs in primary and secondary schools across RX4. So we'll put that call now. We'd love students, not just blues athletes, not just performance athletes, but those with a passion for physical activity, an eagerness to work with young people, develop their own coaching skills, and do something really worthwhile to get involved. So that would be the big opportunity I'd planned. But really, we want to find a variety of ways from our SDG Impact Lab's work, it's community impact lab, local poultry lab that's getting students, graduate students involved in research, a laid law programme for undergraduates to get as involved as possible in building bridges. But even if students don't have time for that, there's an awful lot they can do. to keep in mind that in being in Oxford, in their everyday interactions with people across Oxford and Oxfordshire, they're ambassadors for the university and even being willing to strike up everyday conversations, form everyday relationships, get involved in the community in whatever ways they're excited about can represent the university and change the culture of how Town and Gown relate to one another.

Alisa Brown

Well, I think that we're doing so much to change the culture here and especially like going into the places, going into different pockets of Oxford and seeing the students first hand will make great sort of leaps into shaping a better town versus gown or more like town and gown approach. And what I probably should have said earlier was thank you for taking your time to talk to us today. It's been super helpful to talk about how sports fits into student life here and share how decisions are made at university level. And for students listening, If you've got views on sport provision, facilities or barriers to taking part, there are routes to raise concerns and shape change. We have student representation at both the college and university level. You can speak to your college rep if you have one, otherwise your JCR or MCR presidents are able to represent you in conference of common rooms and sports council members within the sports federation or reach out to the SU and its presidents directly. I'm Alisa, your President for Welfare, Equity and Inclusion, and until next time, Oxford Student Voices.