# 'It's not doable!' Exploring physical education teachers' perspectives on the policy change of sport and physical education in Chinese universities

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# 'It's not doable!' Exploring physical education teachers' perspectives on the policy change of sport and physical education in Chinese universities

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## Abstract

In China, a decline in adolescents' physical fitness plus increased risks of chronic disease and obesity have led to recent policy changes in sport and physical education (PE) within the contexts of schools and universities. Although there has been increased research interest in issues related to youth sport and school sport, few studies focus on the university context. There is remarkably little bottom-up study examining how universities react to macro level policies in particular. Using case-study approaches, our research aims to explore PE teachers' perceptions regarding the roles of sport and the fitness test programme for university students along with these staff members' reactions to and perspectives on recent national policy changes. Guided by Ball et al.'s (2011) theoretical framework for education policy analysis, the empirical section of this paper uses a series of interviews conducted with a range of senior sport staff members and PE teachers from the sport departments of four case-study universities in Tianjin, China. The paper reveals that the role and value of sport has indeed been upgraded against the background of a serious policy change at the

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national level; but variations are also apparent in the implementation of the policies at university level, with these variations affected by individual interests and perspectives and by universities' contextual constraints. The paper ends with an analysis of the implications associated with micro level policy analysis for university sport development in China.

**Keywords**: university sport, PE, fitness test, policy implementation, China

## Introduction

Over the last twenty years, there has been a deterioration of physical fitness and an increased prevalence of young adults in China becoming overweight or obese (Yin, Du, Ji, Xiong, & Ji, 2012). This trend has provoked a series of policy interventions including, for example, the recent publishing of the *Standards for Sport and Physical Education in Higher Education Institutions* and the *Standards for Students' Health and Fitness* in 2014, aimed at accelerating education reform specifically associated with sports-related agendas in recent years.

Speaking at the National Work Forum for School Sport, Minister of Education, Yuan GuiRen (2014), made the point that 'in general, school sport (including universities) and physical education (PE) are the least developed areas in the whole arena of education. The current status of our students' physical health remains worrying. We need to stand firmly by the principle of "health first" and to deepen the comprehensive education reform, placing more emphasis on sport'.

The roles of schools (including higher education institutions and colleges) are traditionally and historically esteemed in Chinese society (Kennedy & Lee, 2008). The government considers that, in policymaking terms, schools and universities are perfect

conduits for addressing health and social problems (Liu, Liu, & Zhang, 2009). Universities are urged to offer more sporting opportunities to their students for the purpose of building a healthier nation. It is worth highlighting one interesting feature of the Chinese education system: universities are required to offer compulsory PE courses to Year 1 and Year 2 students with optional PE courses for Year 3 and Year 4 students. In particular, the aforementioned standards explicitly indicate that students' physical health should be used as one of the key criteria for assessing universities' quality and capacity (China Ministry of Education, 2014a), and they specifically require that 'any college or university whose students' physical health and fitness levels are on the decline for three consecutive years would be marked as Fail in their teaching assessment' (China Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 1).

It is against this background that our research unfolds. In the literature, most existing knowledge about the field of sport has a western focus. Moreover, most studies on university sport tend to draw evidence from students' perspectives, particularly focusing on their motivations for or barriers against taking part in sport and PE (Fan, 2015; Liu, Sun, & Sun, 2001; Wang, Liu, & Yu, 2002); whereas very few studies investigate sport staff's points of view. This study aims to address the current gaps in the literature: by focusing on university sport development in China, it examines sport staff's and PE teachers' perceptions of the role of sport for university students as well as these staff members' reactions to and perspectives on recent changes at the macro level of policies.

The paper begins by outlining the increasingly important role of sport during the past decade at Chinese universities. It reviews the recent policy development in university sport and introduces the general governance and management of sport and PE in Chinese

universities. Next, the methodology adopted for this study is explained. The results from our empirical data collection are presented to illustrate tensions between perceptions and practices during policy implementation in the case-study universities. Finally, conclusions are drawn. The paper adds to existing knowledge on the development of sport and PE in China's higher education system. It suggests that policymakers should take into account a full range of contextual factors for implementation.

## University sport in China

The influence of western scholars dominates research and literature on the topic of sport in general and on university sport in particular. There is little understanding of Asian contexts. Therefore, the following discussion is warranted in order to provide some useful background information on current developments in Chinese university sport.

There is a strong cultural commitment to education within China. It has been generally acknowledged that higher education provides considerable economic and social value to individuals (Wang, 2014). Such commitment yields a high proportion of young people pursuing higher education. As reported by China Ministry of Education (2016), the transfer rate from senior middle schools to higher education was 78.3% in 2015. In past decades, Chinese universities have undergone structural reforms, quality improvements, and rapid expansion of enrolment numbers (Min, 2004). The current higher education system consists of more than 2,500 universities and colleges, and it encompasses 26 million students and over 2.3 million staff members (China Ministry of Education, 2016).

### *Governance and management of PE and university sport*

PE in universities is centrally governed by the state. National policy and guidance have direct influences on the selection of targets and missions and on the development of

organisational structure at individual universities (Wu, 2007). At the national level, GAS and the Ministry of Education have joint responsibility for managing university sport and PE. Departments of education at the province, municipal, and city levels act as regional mediator agents, working closely with local universities to implement national policies and strategies and to coordinate the delivery of sports-related activities (Liu, 2010). Although there is a certain level of provincial and municipal autonomy, universities are still obliged to conform to the national education system, which is carefully controlled by the government. As early as the start of the 1990s, universities in China began to set up their own specialised sport departments catering to delivering PE modules (Wu, 2007). Universities have their own flexibility on curriculum structure, delivery, and evaluation. Student participation in campus-based sport occurs mostly in PE sessions, in extracurricular sports activities, in high-performance sports teams, and in annual university sport games. These sporting opportunities are organised and facilitated jointly by three groups: the sport department, the communist youth league committee, and the student office (Liu, 2010), to enable students to have access to a minimum one hour of sport per day (China Ministry of Education, General Administration of Sport of China, & Communist Youth League of China, 2006). Delivering PE sessions are sport departments' most important function. For universities with a population of 10,000 to 20,000 students, it means a total of 40 to 50 PE teachers catering to between 5,000 and 10,000 students a week. Other key responsibilities of sport staff and PE teachers include research, facilitating extracurricular activities, developing high-performance sports teams, organising sports competitions, and conducting fitness tests (Li, Chen, & Cheng, 2007).

Although funding for PE activities (including the construction and maintenance of sport facilities) comes mainly from the government (Li et al., 2007), individual universities can freely choose how to use their own sport departments and how much funding should be assigned to the departments. This feature has resulted in some fundamental issues with developing sport and PE in universities (to be discussed in more detail later). As identified by Wang and Guo (2000), only 10 among the total of 49 surveyed universities met the requirement of allocating to sport a minimum of 1% from the overall education funding.

***Policy development***

PE and school sport have been considered less important than elite sport and sport-for-all in China (Chen & Chen, 2016). In higher education, sport and PE spent a prolonged period at the margins of university policy and strategy (Li, 2014). Back in the 1960s and 1970s, PE was used for military training to reflect a 'citizen-soldier' ideology (Zheng, 2007). It then moved its focus to meeting the country's needs for economic and social development in the 1980s and 1990s (Bi, Zhou, & Wang, 2008). The importance of sport and school PE was finally elevated in 1995, when the National Fitness programme was introduced which was used to promote national fitness for the benefit of economic development and to improve the overall fitness and health of the nation (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 1995). Since then, there has been a clear shift of PE's focus towards enhancing young people's health and fitness. This new focus has remained at the heart of policy discourse until now.

In 2001, the publication of the *Experimental PE Guidelines and Standards* (China Ministry of Education, 2001) was a turning point for Chinese education in general and for school sport in particular. All elementary schools (for ages 7–12 years) and middle schools

(for ages 13–15 years) were required to offer at least three sessions of PE each week, and high schools (for ages 16–18 years) had to provide at least two weekly PE sessions. One year later, PE was made a compulsory module in higher education curricula for all majors, marking a watershed in the policy status of university sport in China. The fifth and sixth articles of the *Syllabus for Physical Education in Higher Education Institutions* (China Ministry of Education, 2002) explicitly state that

> [we] need to focus on students' learning interests and experiences within sport, including knowledge and skills which are necessary for cultivating lifelong sport and physical activity participation habits… PE is a compulsory module for Year 1 and Year 2 students (constituting 144 credits, with each credit translating into one 45-minute-long taught session) and is an optional module for students beyond Year 3… To achieve the required number of PE credits is one of the basic requirements for graduation as well as for receiving one's bachelor's degree.

Another striking feature of the current Chinese health and sport system is the National Fitness Test programme. Fitness testing started in 1979. In 2000, formal fitness tests were established nationally, targeting children, students, and adults aged from 3 to 69 years old. The national standards for university students include tests covering physique, physical function, and physical fitness (with five subtests encompassing speed, endurance, jumping, throwing, and strength). The fitness test programme is carried out every five years on a national scale and is randomly sampled annually (Ma, 2007). While adults' fitness tests are led by the General Administration of Sport (GAS), the tests for school students (including university students) are led by the Ministry of Education. In a secondary data analysis of the national fitness-testing results between 1985 and 2008, Yin and his colleagues (2012) revealed that university students' physiques had been gradually deteriorating; in particular, the proportion of overweight and obese female and male college

students in urban and rural areas had grown significantly. Their findings therefore reflected the ineffectiveness of the aforementioned syllabus in terms of changing students' health-related outcomes, suggesting that the status of sport and PE in universities was in fact not transformed. Li (2014) observed that universities still maintained and perpetuated a bias towards academic subjects to the detriment of PE-related activities. Such attitudes at universities, and in Chinese culture generally, have played an important role in bringing about a recent decline in physical fitness levels. The delivery of university sport, in terms of the facilities, equipment, and PE specialists, have been incapable of meeting with increasing student enrolment numbers. These issues are more significant in lower ranking universities, where the PE-teacher-to-student ratio can reach up to 1:320, representing a serious issue of financial insufficiency. When investigating reasons for the lack of physical activity among university students, a number of potential causal factors are identified by existing studies, including, for example, unhealthy lifestyles and cultural biases regarding the value of sport (Gao, 2014; Song et al., 2006; Yan, 2013; Ye, Jiao, & Su, 2009), a shortage of spare time for taking part in sport (Qing, 2009), a failure by PE teachers to actively motivate student sport participation (Song et al., 2006; Zhao, 2009); and universities, on the whole, failing to provide an exciting sport participation environment (Qing, 2009).

The immediate policy action was the issue of two standards in 2014, namely the *Standards for Sport and Physical Education in Higher Education Institutions* and the *Standards for Students' Health and Fitness*. These standards were set in a rigid and restrictive manner, reinforcing the necessity for compulsory PE sessions and explicitly indicating that students who could not pass the fitness test before their graduations would

be awarded ordinary degrees only. Significantly, any college or university which failed to comply with the standards or whose students' physical health and fitness levels declined for three consecutive years would fail their institution's teaching assessment and would lose eligibility to possess a high-performance sports team. Thus, this study focuses on examining sport staff members' reactions to this policy change and exploring the extent to which the role and status of sport in universities have changed since the publication of the standards.

## Theoretical framework

In the literature of education policy analysis, there are studies examining the role of the state in developing and implementing policy cycles at the macro level (Dale, 1992; Slee, 1995), the importance of competing national power groups and the significance of departmental traditions (Chitty, 1994, 2004; Lawton, 1984), namely ideologies, and the impact of agency and the importance of opportunism at the meso level (Houlihan & Green, 2006) versus the role of individual players at the service-specific level (Ball, 1990; Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; Fulcher, 1989). Given that the focus of the paper is on the impact of ideologies associated with localised players in specific sites, Ball's (1990) framework, in particular his notion of teachers being both *policy subjects* and *policy actors* (Ball et al., 2011) within the policy process, is adopted in this study to guide the analysis of how individual PE teachers have had to respond and react to changes in the education system and in policy.

In assigning meanings and constructing responses to policy via interpretation and translation, Ball and his colleagues (2011) specifically identified seven types of *policy actors* existing in school contexts: *narrators* (who are often headteachers or senior

leadership team members and who often play a role in explaining policy), *entrepreneurs* (who create and represent particular policies), *outsiders* (who are external, such as local authority advisers and consultants, and who play a key role in interpreting policies and in initiating or supporting translation work), *transactors* (who are often senior teachers or administrators and who are appointed to be responsible for policy monitoring and enforcement), *enthusiasts and translators* (who actively and creatively engage with different policies and are policy models for other colleagues), *critics* (who are often union representatives or active unionists and who play a role in monitoring the implications of policy or of policy translation for the work lives of teachers), and *receivers* (who are often junior teachers relying on senior members' interpretation of policy interpretations and who demonstrate high levels of policy compliance). These distinct policy roles and positions help to direct our investigation of individuals' or institutions' values and interests to understand how education policy is conceived of and discussed at the university level.

Although some authors (see Hatcher & Troyna, 1994) criticise the efficacy of Ball's theoretical eclecticism in relation to his interpretation of policy recontexualisation and disagree with his ideas about the decentralisation of power in policy making, the heuristic value of Ball's (1990) framework has been recognised and adopted by other scholars (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010; Lingard, 1993; White & Crump, 1993). Taking on the theoretical foundation of poststructuralism, Ball advocates Kogan's (1975, p. 5) view on the nature of policy that policy is a matter of the 'authoritative allocation of values', and follows Althusser's (1969) analysis of the complexity of the total social system. Facing criticisms regarding the 'hyperindividualistic' issue (Macdonald et al., 2012, p. 144)—referring to a lack of reproductive power as a result of overemphasis on identity politics,

pluralism, and choice—associated with poststructuralism, Ball (1990) argues that, because meanings are often produced in specific power relations (Foucault, 1979), it is important to pay attention to discourses, as the power–knowledge relations change in different social, political, and cultural contexts across times and locations.

## Research method

Guided by Ball et al.'s (2011) policy actors theory, this study seeks to explore PE teachers' perceptions regarding the roles of sport and of the fitness test programme for university students along with these staff members' reactions to and perspectives on recent national policy changes.

### *Sampling*

A case-study, qualitative research method is adopted, targeting universities in a China's Tianjin municipality[2]. Tianjin has nineteen universities in total, and these can be categorised according to the following three main types (The Window of Chinese Universities, 2016):

1) Comprehensive universities (n=2 in Tianjin): These cover a broad range of subjects including sciences, engineering, arts and literature, social sciences, and medicine. In this research project, case study 4 falls into this first category.

[2] Municipalities are directly under the central government in China and have the same rank as provinces.

2) Specialised universities (n=16 in Tianjin): These specialise only in certain fields such as sciences and engineering, economics and finance, humanities and social sciences, and teacher training. Case study 1, 2 and 3 belong to this second category.
3) Physical education institutions (n=1): These are specialised universities that train physical education teachers, foster talented elite athletes, and offer some sport sciences courses, for example, Tianjin University of Sport. This type of school is excluded from the study due to its focus on sport and the tendency towards pro-sport and pro-PE bias.

In total, four universities were selected, and this was done for two practical and pragmatic reasons. The first was that the selected universities represented the aforementioned primary types of university in Tianjin. Another reason was the advantage of existing contacts with senior members, hence their participation in and cooperation with the study. Significantly, this situation ensured that interviewees felt free to share their honest opinions.

***Data collection and analysis***

As *policy actors*, senior sport staff and PE teachers from the sport department of each university were selected for in-depth interviews. The sampling strategy was to recruit at least one senior member of staff (i.e. the sport department head or the associate head) from the respective sport department and a few PE teachers, ceasing once data saturation occurred in each case. This resulted in a total of twenty-one, hour-long (on average), semi-structured interviews. In terms of their job roles, the sport department heads and the associate heads (the Secretary of the Sport Department) often fulfilled leadership roles in managing department activities. When policy changed at the national level, they were responsible for setting and advancing the department's strategy, in line with the national

and regional strategic plans and directions, and for ensuring both national and university polices were implemented. PE teachers interviewed were responsible mainly for PE sessions, extracurricular activities, fitness tests, and high-performance team training (although the allocation of workloads varied for these four main activities). Interview questions encompassed interviewees' experiences of teaching sport and PE education at universities and their personal views about the current relevant policies as well as about the roles of sport, PE, and fitness tests for university students.

To supplement the interview data, document analysis was adopted, including policy documents issued by the government and by the Municipal Education Commission. These documents related to development of and requirements for higher education sport and PE and to strategic plans and annual reviews. For universities, any relevant official strategy and policy documents, either published online or accessed via internal contacts, were also analysed.

After the data collection, Strauss and Corbin's (2008) constant comparative method was adopted for coding and categorisation. In order to develop codes and to identify key concepts that emerged from the collected data, Nvivo software was used, in which free nodes were developed from the preliminary analysis before they were grouped into tree nodes.

## Results and discussion

While the previous sections provide context for the analysis of university sport at the macro level, the following discussion is structured around three issues that emerged from the case-study universities: (1) PE and university sport: changing values and perspectives; (2)

delivering sports activities in universities: what's the problem?; and (3) the challenges of the fitness test.

### *PE and university sport: changing values and perspectives*

Sport and PE had long have their position within the case-study universities' curricula. However, it was not considered significant by all four of the universities, although case study 1 (whose students' physical fitness and health are employment-related factors) valued the role and status of sport and PE more than other case-study universities did. There was a long-standing idea that 'something needed to be done about sport and PE for students…. but we did not really…. until in recent years. We have to seriously develop sport and PE, because the state pays great attention to it' (Sport department head 2, 23rd September 2016). In response to the top-down policy requirements, university sport and PE saw increasing salience and status. Amongst the senior staff members from the sport departments involved in this study, there was a clear sense that increasing state intervention in university sport and PE policy led directly to a series of actions aimed at implementing the national standards and regulations and at changing, to varying degrees, university policy and strategies. Some of these staff members reported the inclusion of sports agendas into their whole universities' strategic plans, increased resource capacity and funding for university sport development, or the establishment of specialised leading groups to oversee university sport and PE. However, for some universities where students' sport and PE requirements related less to employability, policy was recontexualised, and the universities were only minimally compliant.

> In recent years, with the rapid development of our university's general policies and of funding support for sports activities, with ever better sports facilities, we

> guarantee the implementation of teaching, training, and group activities. The key is to integrate sport into the university's overall development plan and into the university's comprehensive reform framework. What's more, we are going to strengthen the PE teachers' teams and positively carry out learning, training, communication, discussion, and other activities to improve their quality and competence. (Associate head of sport department 1, 21st September 2016)

> ... Our university has specifically set up a group for leading sports work, made up of members from the university's senior leadership team. In order to fully implement the *Scientific Outlook on Development* and to firmly establish the 'people-oriented' and 'health first' guiding ideology, our university holds the principal office meeting more than twice yearly, taking university sport as the theme. With the full implementation of *The Regulation on University Sports Activities* and of *The Ordinary University Sports Curriculum Teaching Instruction Summary*, university sports development has clearly been left with much starker choices—and graver consequences—for development plans. University management rules and regulations are being gradually introduced. Nowadays, we advocate managing the university by law. The university administrative regulations and rules are also constantly improved, and financing is gradually becoming open and transparent. (Sport department head 2, 23rd September 2016)

Furthermore, it appears that the agenda for improving health and fitness acted as a real driving force behind the recent emphasis on university sport and PE in the case-study universities. Our data reflect that, because of this 'broader and more significant agenda for using university sport and PE to address other important issues such as the deterioration of physical fitness levels, we see unprecedented levels of funding and policy guidance being provided' (Sport department head 2, 23rd September 2016). The upgrading of university sport and PE has put emphasis on health rather than on sport and PE for their own sakes. This change of emphasis is consistent with discourses in the recently issued national document titled *Opinion on Improving the Role of School Sport on Developing Students' Physical and Mental Health* (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). The document re-emphasised the political will to use school sport and PE for addressing health-related concerns, and it aimed to promote the ethos 'Exercise Every Day, Grow Healthily, Benefit for a Lifetime'. Subsequently, the primary objective of PE has shifted

away from ‘developing sport-specific skills’ to ‘enhancing students’ physiques’ (PE teacher 2, 19th September 2016). Specifically, ‘enhancing students’ physiques has become an important development goal’ (PE teacher 3, 20th September 2016). The idea of ‘health first’ has assumed top priority. Additional content relating to improving physical fitness levels and improving physique has been incorporated into teaching, as has attention to student safety. Ultimately, university sport and PE both aim at helping students to ‘master physical exercise skills, to form a set of good habits for doing physical exercise, and to lay a foundation for a sportier lifestyle in the long term’ (PE teacher 1, 19th September 2016).

Under the influence of the ‘health-first’ strategy, one case-study university which formerly focused on ‘development of high-performance sports teams and winning more medals in national competitions among universities’ subsequently ‘valued overall university students’ sport participation more highly’ (PE teacher 5, 21st September 2016). However, for some universities, the agenda for developing high-performance sports did not change much. One PE teacher explained that:

> According to both national and university policies …. we should concentrate on the development of PE and of extracurricular activities and should consider PE as THE most important sport activity. But I personally feel that, in reality, the development of high-level sports teams is still the main focus of our daily activities, as reflected in the proportions of financial investment and in the efforts of teachers. (PE teacher 1, 19th September 2016)

As further confirmed by the sport department head from the same university, ‘last year, PE cost 500,000 RMB per year; high-performance sports teams cost 1,000,000 RMB per year; other training teams cost 200,000 RMB per year; the annual university sports games cost 100,000 RMB per year’ (Sport department head 5, 21st September 2016). This

proportionality of funding for different sports activities illustrates the superior status afforded to high-performance sport.

Despite their recent rise in status, neither PE nor university sports are yet considered central to whole universities' long-term strategic plans or reputations. Compared to other core university activities, PE and sport remain peripheral to universities' agenda. There are two reasons for this: firstly, 'the university's sports opportunity and facilities are not considered to be important factors that affect students' decision-making when selecting universities' (Sport department head 4, 27th September 2016). Secondly, as there is no obvious connection between sport (PE grades in particular) and employability, it will always be a subject that receives less attention both from universities and from students. Universities' prioritisation of other outcomes was reflected in our interviews. One sport department's associate head explained:

> PE in our university is a basic public course... It is an essential part of our university's teaching system. But, to be honest, compared to other courses in our university—especially the featured ones or the 'selling' ones, if you like, PE is definitely not emphasised enough... Realistically, the university must spare no effort to support and develop the featured courses which directly determine students' employability and relate to the university's further development, its reputation, and its social influence. These things are key to the university's survival and development... and sporting activities don't serve any function relevant to them... (Associate head of sport department 1, 21st September 2016)

Our data also reveal that some PE teachers felt it was too late to change the mindsets and attitudes of many students who had, since childhood, considered PE to be an unimportant subject.

> Although the status of university sport has significantly improved now, it is still difficult to make further developments. Problems persist mainly because primary schools, junior middle schools, and even high schools don't take PE

> classes seriously. As a result, it's not easy to make changes in universities. (PE teacher 3, 20th September 2016)

This concern was shared by many of the PE teachers interviewed. They questioned the incoherence and inconsistency of PE and sport development within the education system, and they suggested that 'without cultivating student interest in sport and exercise from a young age, it is too late to try to influence them later' (PE teacher 13, 27th September 2016). Ball (2003) similarly observed that teachers may adhere to policy but may not be won over by it. As commented by the PE teachers interviewed, the theory underlining the current policies did not seem to be logical:

> Strengthening and testing students' physical fitness is a comprehensive system which must be established in primary schools, secondary schools, and universities. It is the exam-oriented primary and secondary school education that takes up time which could otherwise be spent on physical education. The phenomenon of replacing PE classes with other classes is widespread. Many of the students don't like sport, don't exercise, and can't even do a standing long jump. Their running technique is not correct either. Our PE teachers in universities have to teach students the basics of the standing long jump. Additionally, bad habits learned early on are hard for students to shake at university. This is one other important reason why results of testing students' physical fitness are not good. (PE teacher 1, 19th September 2016)

***Delivering sports activities in universities: what's the problem?***

As a result of raising the profile and funding of sport and of PE at the macro level, organisation and management of sports-related activities were better facilitated and delivered in case-study universities. In these four universities, sports activities were constructed around four areas: PE, sports clubs (including high-performance sport clubs), annual university sport games, and other extracurricular sports activities. With a total number of Year 1 and Year 2 students ranging from 5,000 to 12,000 and sport staff members numbering between 23 and 58, it was calculated that each sport staff member needed to cover 6 to 9.5 hours' worth of PE sessions per week.

*Insert table 1 about here*

Table 1 shows that, although all the case-study universities seemed able to meet all PE-related targets, extracurricular sports activities were less developed than curricular PE activities. In the current circumstances, only Year 1 and Year 2 students were likely to achieve the required one hour per day of physical activity participation (albeit without quality participation being guaranteed). Further evidence of Year 3 and Year 4 students being neglected was acknowledged by PE teachers and senior staff members, who explained that:

> In contrast with seniors, we are currently trying to make sure that Year 1 and Year 2 students meet standards…but we can't guarantee that every single student will do so…. That is just impossible…. The number would be smaller if meeting standards were not required in national and university policies. (Sport department head 4, 27th September 2016)

> [Many students] haven't met standards. Even those who do so possess little experience of quality exercise. We don't have enough teachers to manage and supervise… There are too many students. (PE teacher 10, 26th September 2016)

Regarding extracurricular activities, mixed evidence was reported. Some universities indicated that student participation in sport clubs had increased thanks to the use of social media or to the introduction of some non-traditional sports activities. Some universities raised concerns over the quality of their existing sport clubs, as these were led and organised by students, with limited support provided by the specialist sport staff. Lack of specific funding or guidance from universities to support extracurricular activities was a critical issue in some case-study universities:

> Extracurricular activities have become merely a formality and haven't attracted enough attention ... Our university [sports club] is self-funded and does not allow collection of membership fees, so it's difficult to do the club activities... Participation in extracurricular activities depends mainly on students'

> cooperation. Most of the students have bad exercise habits. Relatively speaking, in terms of time, conditions, and facilities, university is better than primary and secondary school. Still, many students prefer playing computer games and surfing the internet in their dorms to exercising outdoors. The main reason is that the university does not seriously manage students' extracurricular activities, has not attached importance to them, and focuses mainly on PE or on high-performance sports training. (PE teacher 1, 19th September 2016)

This was ironic given that, in the most recently published policy for sport and PE in higher education, one key emphasis was the active development and promotion of extracurricular sports activities (Communist Youth League of China, China ministry of Education, General Administration of Sport, & The National Federation, 2014). In order to meet the target of ensuring students take part in extracurricular sports activities three times per week (China Ministry of Education et al., 2006), morning or evening running, along with a variety of sport clubs and university sports competitions, were introduced by some universities, who linked students' participation in the running with their PE marks. The implementation of this policy was, however, problematic. This is illustrated by one PE teacher's quote:

> Some of the students just run a lap. Some even come along just to register… There is no practical significance. It is a kind of coercion and becomes a mere formality. A lot of students are forced to come along. They do not exercise at all and just come to get credits proving their attendance for extracurricular activities. Year 1 and Year 2 students in our university have PE lessons once a week. Some universities also organise morning running for them, but it doesn't include students in Year 3 or Year 4 of our university. (PE teacher 4, 20th September 2016)

In general terms, the inchoate, fragmented, and contested policy change on university sport and PE failed to win the hearts and minds of PE teachers and of senior staff members in sport departments. A majority of the interviewed PE teachers questioned the effectiveness of PE for achieving lifelong sporting habits. The teachers considered the policy to therefore have failed both in theory and in practice: on the one hand, delivery of compulsory PE sessions once a week could not change sport participation behaviour; on

the other hand, even those students who wanted to take part in more sports activities often faced practical issues in terms of limited facilities or equipment.

> Students' low interest in sport and physical activities cannot simply be attributable to one PE class per week…. There are too many influential factors. [On the one hand,] students' own ideas and perceptions are very important. On the other hand, our university should also provide as many sports opportunities and extracurricular activities as possible in order to meet students' diverse demands. (Associate head of sport department 3, 28th September 2016)

A few issues and constraints were reported by PE teachers and senior staff members. For example, lack of indoor facilities was a major obstacle to the development of university sport, as reported by one associate head of sport department:

> Indoor facilities are far from adequate. We are located in the north. The winter is so cold that we should improve the indoor sports facilities, including the basic ones. Individual sports activities can't be done outdoors in winter, and this seriously influences teaching and students' interest in physical exercise. What's worse, the foggy weather in the Tianjin region has worsened in recent years, making it more difficult to teach outdoor sports like volleyball, basketball, and so on. In the winter, the students are unwilling to do sports, especially during the first and second periods in the morning (which start at 8:00 and 9:30) and during the seventh and eighth periods in the afternoon (from 15:35 to 17:05). Because of the bad weather, the teaching results are unsatisfactory... (Associate head of sport department 1, 21st September 2016)

These situational constraints (Sparkes, 1991) were not unique to just one case-study university. Rather, other case-study universities have had their own practical issues, such as shortages of PE staff and lack of outdoor space, which impacted on the quality of teaching and on staff members' responses to policy change in PE contexts (Li, 2014; Wang & Guo, 2000). Increased safety concerns faced by PE teachers imposed further limitations, as described by these comments:

> Today's students are not tough enough. The media often report injuries which happen in PE classes and which result in parental disputes with universities. That influences the teachers a lot. Although our country and school have introduced *The Sports Risk Prevention and Control Measures*, teachers still

> have concerns about teaching and are not willing to teach sports associated with more difficulties or risks. (PE teacher 9, 26th September 2016)

Confronted with such problems, while it is still required that PE teachers fulfil their teaching roles, the teachers prioritise daily activities according to personal interest. For example, one common feature emerged from the four case-study universities is that PE teachers with a strong personal investment in those aspects of their work potentially facilitating promotion tended to focus on research activities rather than on other priorities, such as teaching and delivering extracurricular activities, that their department had highlighted.

> We have quite a number of teachers spending most of their time and effort on research…. because scientific research achievements can get them promoted and elevate their titles. Thus, teaching and facilitating extracurricular activities become less meaningful to them… (PE teacher 8, 23rd September 2016)

Some teachers (i.e. *policy enthusiasts*) felt strongly that they lacked power or resources to implement the necessary guidelines and the policy.

> We aim to strictly implement all the instructions and guidance issued by the Ministry of Education…but there is some individual content that cannot be applied because of practical difficulties concerning things like facilities, teachers, and funding resources. (Sport department head 2, 23rd September 2016)

This concern is reinforced by another head who pointed out that, while the funding for university sport came from the overall education funding pool, it was allocated by individual universities, which was highly autonomous and influenced by the nature of the university. Universities had varied ideas about how much should be spent on university sport and PE.

> Funding is distributed by the university as a whole. The overall funding for education is sufficient, but a low proportion of the total funding amount is

> allocated to sports. This small amount cannot enable meeting the national requirements. The nature of university education demands that funding be used mainly for professional courses. (Associate head of sport department 1, 21st September 2016)

### *The challenges of the National Fitness Test programme*

In essence, the National Fitness Test programme has provided a Chinese national educational blueprint for assessing the quality of universities and for improving students' health and physical fitness. Although the fitness tests have been welcomed at university level, their operation has remained problematic. Specifically, the implementation of the test programme has affected the delivery of PE sessions through increasing teachers' workloads and occupying curriculum time, as the programme has not been systematically incorporated within the PE curricula of all the case-study universities.

> Although the fitness testing is necessary…it has added to our workload. It has affected classroom teaching to a certain extent, because our university does testing mainly in the classes. Each semester, testing takes up two to three sessions (four to six hours), leading to a lack of teaching hours for PE. (PE teacher 2, 19th September 2016)

One case-study university reported that the existence of the fitness test threatened the value of PE, as 'scholarship assessments are linked with the results of the fitness test rather than with PE marks; as a result, students pay more attention to the test' (PE teacher 10, 26th September 2016). PE teachers and sport staff with whom we spoke also criticised the fitness test's criteria: some standards appeared to have been set too high for boys, which therefore dragged down the overall scores for the universities dominated by male students.

> The intentions of our country are good, and these documents are good also; but standards are a little high for the individual indicators of healthy student physique, especially for pull-ups, which requirements far exceed the current abilities of university students. The pass standard for boys is ten, and few can

> pass. In the test case, girls therefore scored significantly higher, on average, than boys did, making our teaching and management work very difficult. If we strictly enforced the provisions, awards and scholarships would certainly be given to girls, just because the pull-ups lead to most of the boys gaining no scholarships. That cannot work in our science universities [which are dominated by male students]. (Associate head of sport department head 1, 21st September 2016)

PE teachers also expressed concern over whether fitness tests would lead to better sport participation and physical condition.

> I feel that we do badly at facilitating regular physical activities for students… Then, suddenly, we give them a test. Neither individual students nor teachers can stand it! It is scary, because individual students react so badly to the run … falling over, vomiting, and sometimes even fainting. We should think about how to make the students exercise regularly rather than just testing them. Linking PE to university degrees is a good thing for us. But, for the students, it is a bit cruel. (PE teacher 16, 30th September 2016)

Furthermore, when PE teachers and senior staff were asked about the policy whereby 'students who cannot pass the fitness test before their graduation will only be awarded ordinary degrees' (China Ministry of Education, 2014b, p. 2), the view of the following PE teacher was shared by many of our interviewees:

> The fitness test programme in a way urges students to do more sport and to exercise more, but it's hard to implement… To be honest, we have never heard of any students being unable to graduate because of failing the tests. In fact, each year we have to monitor the results, particularly for the final year students, to avoid them being unable to graduate because of the tests. The current number of students who get jobs after graduating for higher education is going down, so we are reluctant to not let students graduate because of the tests. (PE teacher 1, 19th September 2016)

As suggested by Forte (2010), the degree of accountability has a direct impact on strengthening implementation efforts. Our study reveals that the implementation of the fitness-testing programme, with respect to monitoring and enforcement, was rather loosely structured and not very transparent. Amongst the senior staff members involved in this study, there was a clear sense of significant intervention in the results of fitness testing

happening at different levels, including the sport departments, the universities, and even the Municipal Ministry of Education.

> When the individual students cannot reach the 50% passing mark before graduating, [the sport department] intervenes [to change the results]…because the registration card for the National Healthy Physique Standard for Students needs to be put in the students' files. Therefore, the intervention is necessary, avoiding affecting students for a lifetime… Our annual data reported to the Ministry of Education are accurate. The Municipal Ministry of Education has never penalised any universities or given any notice… (Associate head of sport department 1, 21st September 2016)

> [The policy] is not carried out in practice. If it were, there would have to be a large number of students unable to complete the credits due to the students being in particularly poor physical condition. The university has not dared…to execute the rules. If you did execute them, the university leaders, the sport department, teachers, students, and parents would all be dissatisfied. (Sport department head 2, 23rd September 2016)

> It is not doable…mainly because the Ministry of Education has no real mechanism for monitoring and enforcement… The aim is just to show that [the Ministry of Education] is trying to raise students' physical health levels and to strengthen students' physiques. If we followed the rules, there might be many students unable to finish their courses. Nobody is willing to see that happen. The regulations feature many areas needing perfection. (Associate head of sport department 3, 28th September 2016)

Furthermore, it was clear that senior staff members in all the four case-study universities played key roles in deciding what could be done and what could not be done. The quote below resonates with Ball et al.'s (2011) observation that there is a fine balance between making policy palatable and making it happen (p. 626).

> The key lies with the university. It is hard to implement from the university level. If there had to be a student not graduating and thus affecting the employment rate, the principal would not agree to that; so the university's attitude is the key to whether or not we can do anything. (Sport department head 4, 27th September 2016)

Only some policy messages filtered down to PE teachers at the case-study universities. A few of the PE teachers responded that they were not even aware of the

respective regulations. As *policy receivers*, policy is distanced from some PE teachers (who tend to be junior and newly qualified teachers). Yet, as *policy narrators*, senior members of staff were clearly aware of the policy, which was part of their 'leadership remit' (PE teacher 6, 22nd September 2016). Power relations between *narrators* and *receivers* also existed, where policy was translated by the former to the latter on the one hand; *receivers* were 'expected' and 'pressurised' to take on bigger workloads and to be 'measured' by policy on the other hand (PE teacher 1, 19th September 2016).

In summary, whilst the importance and necessity of the fitness tests were appreciated at the university level, the effectiveness of such policy was questionable. Our analysis conveys that PE teachers and senior staff members thought future policy should emphasise both establishing a systematic approach to cultivating sporting interests and motivating participation by offering a range of good quality sports opportunities in order to enhance health and physical fitness.

> First of all, some standards set by the index are too high, such as pull-ups. Those need to be readjusted. Secondly, in order to strengthen students' physiques, the university must offer a structured, well-resourced sporting system guaranteeing funding, human resources, and good facilities. It should be a comprehensive system and must be brought to the attention of teaching staff at all levels. Furthermore, physical health levels should be set as a *real* evaluation criterion for the quality of universities. (Sport department head 4, 27th September 2016)

## Conclusion

Drawing from a series of qualitative data rigorously developed, we have demonstrated how sport staff and PE teachers reacted to the recent changes in China's national sport policies. A particular variety of concerns, issues, roles, and interests in the processes of policy implementation at the micro level have been discussed. While we recognise that policy implementation differs according to local conditions, resources, and personnel

commitments, there seems to have been strong consensus among this study's interviewees regarding several points: firstly, although the profile of developing university sport had been raised in all the case-study universities, the role of sport was still relatively downplayed, in contrast with other core university activities, and sport received relatively little funding, resources, and strategic attention. Secondly, although the central government controlled the content of the PE curriculum, there was evidence that universities operated under their own initiative at the local level and were not necessarily penalised (yet) for failing to follow government standards with respect to PE and university sport. Thirdly, the recently launched national policies on university sport development were not 'translated' clearly to PE teachers, with many of them reporting that they were either unaware of the detailed national policy changes and/or unwilling to change; only a small proportion of PE teachers confirmed that they adapted teaching materials to fit their local contexts of implementation. Fourthly, a general lack of accountability for delivering extracurricular sports activities or for meeting fitness status objectives in sport departments affected the implementation of policies.

Despite some evidence of similarity and conformity in a very broad sense, individuals in universities had varying perceptions of the policy messages: some welcomed a focus on students' health first as a core principle for PE, some considered fitness-testing policy as a distraction which should be separated from existing university sport departments' activities, and some perceived a failure by the current national standards to address fundamental problems. This range of responses from the sport staff and PE teachers interviewed reminds us about the complexity of the reproduction of policy messages. Policy implementation is also multi layered, involving many players (Ball et al., 2011;

Ozge, 1987; Penney & Evans, 1999). National government policies on university sport are recontextualised within universities. Different universities have different priorities, politics, and ways of distributing financial and human resources. The analysis of four different case studies is significant as it reflects the heterogeneity, as opposed to homogeneity, of commitment, of practice, and of purpose at the different levels for adopting and implementing university sport standards and guidance. The four universities demonstrated varying degrees of compliance to the national policy. Some institutions were able to cover all policy priority areas, whereas others had to give up on certain areas. For example, the imperatives of fitness tests were relayed in case study 1's strategy and policy as well as in the content of PE curricula. However, the recontextualisation of university sport and fitness tests is shown to have collided with agendas and with other interests and practices pre-existing within some case-study universities. This dynamic impacted on teachers' engagement with and implementation of official national policy.

Policy implementation is value laden and affected by cognitive and affective intent (Evans, Davies, Rich, & DePian, 2013). Our data reveal the impact of PE teachers' and sport staff's personal interests and interpretations of policy on how universities' sports-related principles were constructed and how activities were delivered. The data clearly illustrate that policies inevitably have different outcomes depending on how universities and sport staff understand, engage with, and operationalise in specific contexts. This point resonates with the observation of Braun et al. (2010) that how teachers interpret and implement policy mediates ways in which policy knowledge is experienced, valued, and enacted.

Furthermore, there was a contrast between rigid policymaking and flexible implementation in university sport revealed by this study. Some policy roles and positions outlined above suggested, to a certain degree, that policy process can be modified by the existing values and interests of individuals and by the contexts of departments. Policy failure lies in a lack of coherent definition or detailed guidance on funding and resource allocation (Ball, 1990) as well as in a lack of systematic monitoring and enforcement. As Ball highlighted, this hiatus, although it gave individual schools some room for manoeuvre, also gave much 'larger numbers of conservatives or doubtfuls the room to carry on more or less as they had before' (p. 30).

Previous research has supported the idea that one way to strengthen policy implementation efforts would be increased accountability (Bull, Bellew, Schoeppe, & Bauman, 2004; Forte, 2010). In light of this study, we argue that resolving accountability requires sport staff members' insights into how fully teachers may participate in university sport reform; and their voices can help to understand the perennial problem of seeing policy changes through from conception to implementation. The article thus contributes to policy studies research in this sense. Through identifying issues and challenges faced by the case-study universities on the ground, regarding their sport staff's struggles with interpreting and accommodating national policy changes, this study provides a practical implication for effective management of the institutions' sports activities. Although the use of Ball et al.'s (2011) framework on policy actors offers an opportunity to reveal 'the problem of meaning in policy analysis' (p. 625), it is only capable of offering a metaphor for identifying individuals' roles in the process of policy implementation, and provides less guidance on further exploring potential power plays in different actors' relationships (except for the

interplay between *policy receivers* and *policy narrators*). Therefore, future studies should pay particular attention to the power relations between different actors within a unit of case study. Further research is also recommended to explore the effectiveness of and issues associated with policy monitoring and enforcement.

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