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Leisure's hall of fame: who's next?

Julian Leybourne remembers the inspirational figures who shaped the nascent sport, leisure and culture sector and wonders how the next generation of leaders will emerge.

Having served this sector loyally for over 40 years, I often wonder if we have progressed much since the visionary days of the 1960s when this sector was influenced by some of the keenest minds who ever worked in it.

Legends such as: Jimmy Munn, who pioneered dual-use provision in this country; Roger Quinton, a brilliant consultant and leader, who was the founder member of the Association of Recreation Managers that later became ILAM; Ted Blake, who was a chartered fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing; and of course the most brilliant George Torkildsen, who served as chair of the World Leisure board of directors 1996–2004.

I cannot name them all and apologies for the many I have left out but it would be a proper and lasting tribute if we could honour them all by organising a 'hall of fame' to honour such brilliant leaders and to use their learning and wisdom to hone the skills and knowledge of the managers of the present.

I met George Torkildsen in 1992 and he was a leader who took the leisure management profession forward with a breathtaking vision. He taught on many post-graduate leisure and recreation courses. He worked faultlessly and tirelessly improving standards and focusing on excellence of delivery. He was active and well respected throughout the United Kingdom and around the world. Both the main UK leisure management institutes honoured him with life memberships and yet he remains an unknown enigma to many leisure managers today. That we do not seem to honour a literary and academic genius who brought great credibility and respect to our sector is a shame for our sector and in my view a serious omission.

A prolific writer, lecturer and teacher, George authored Leisure and Recreation Management, Leisure Management A to Z: A Dictionary of Terms, and Torkildsen's Guides to Leisure Management. These publications have become standard coursework reading on many leisure management courses around the world. In 2005 he conceived and implemented the concept of an international innovation prize for leisure management projects, which the World Leisure Organisation first awarded in 2006. In his memory the trophy awarded to winning projects is known as "the George".

How many of the current generation of sport and leisure managers remember such inspirational leaders? I wonder where our values and vision for the future are but I am quietly optimistic that one day we will have other highly professional and inspirational leaders among us that will shine a light for others to follow. Recently I have been inspired by the passion and vision of Dr Paul Thomas and Andy McCann, who are a breath of fresh air and have much to offer this sector with their refreshing views on leadership and equality of purpose through value creation and thought leadership, which are urgently required.

This should be the exciting generation that grasps the vision of a transparent, innovative, inclusive, honest and dynamic sector that embraces change and drives standards upwards through thought-leadership.

What all these brilliant minds had in common was a United Kingdom with a sport and recreation sector that could lead the way across the globe, a sector that represented excellence in the management of sport and physical activity.

Despite the austerity agenda, we currently face our biggest challenges as well as our greatest opportunities to make a lasting difference for future generations of leaders and I wonder who will rise to this challenge to add value as well as bring values to our sector.

The government has provided a window of opportunity for our sector to work together to submit applications for the development and delivery of apprenticeship standards through the vehicle of Trailblazer standards. As the government report *The Future of Apprenticeships in England* states: "the apprenticeships programme is already successful and provides proven benefits to both employers and apprentices. For apprentices, it can equip them with the skills needed for a successful career and be a genuine alternative to going to university or even an opportunity to combine an apprenticeship with higher education. For employers it can provide a highly efficient and effective means of developing the skills of their workforce – adult apprenticeships at level 2 and level 3 deliver £26 and £28 of economic benefits respectively for each pound of Government investment. We therefore want to grow the number of apprenticeships available, with 3 million starts during the course of this Parliament."

This news should drive the sector to unite all sub-sectors to work together to create a significant number of career pathways through apprenticeships, which could trigger much more in the way of funding as well as making our sector relevant and visionary to support the government's plans for reform.

In my view we should not focus simply on leisure operations but consider the whole sector to provide a compelling case for change. A number of consortia have already been set up to submit proposed frameworks and standards and this provides an unprecedented opportunity to address the training needs of the whole sector.

Other major changes impacting on our sector started on 1 October 2015 when Ofqual launched the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) as the single framework for describing all regulated qualifications in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

The RQF is designed to help people understand qualifications, providing detail on the challenge and size of each qualification that is regulated. The framework will also show where a qualification sits in relation to others of differing level or size. At the same time as introducing the RQF, the government is withdrawing the rules of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), a move that has prompted some to predict a marked drop in quality. If this proves to be the case the sector must be aware of it and take ownership of the problem to ensure that high-quality providers are delivering high standards.

Our career pathways is in need of an overhaul and we need to make the journey much simpler for school leavers, FE students and graduates as well as practitioners, coaches and volunteers; and it is not just Trailblazer that we need to focus on.

It is deeply worrying that many degree-qualified graduates do not hold the basic entry-level qualifications or requisite skills. How can we blame leisure operators when many hundreds of different degrees exist in the marketplace and more than 70,000 graduates seek employment in the sector that they have trained to join. However, the majority of these graduates are unable to secure careers so we need a national scheme to signpost opportunities and ensure we nurture only the best talent.

Work-based training providers also do their best to service the needs of individual employers but where is the single focus to underpin and describe what our sector is truly about in order to build a competency framework against it?

We are in a different, highly mobile industry that is essentially competitive and combative, often with self-interests for survival and market share rather than the ethos of sport for all. Perhaps the principle of sport for all never really worked in practice but I suspect that we had a more embracing, altruistic society then than we do now; a society with a clearer focus of what we were about with respect to recreation as a sector as pioneered by those inspirational leaders mentioned above.

We are at a time when we need to unite to merge the critical factors for education, health and physical activity as part of a national programme to give our sector relevance and a mission for our continued existence. We need to think much bigger to engage with as many people as possible with a well-resourced and member-engaged organisation to represent the learning needs of our workforce. This does not mean a monopoly but a meeting of minds and wider interests towards a common goal.

With regard to training and development, it is a concern within our sector that the majority of managers do not hold an appropriate relevant qualification at Level 4 or above. According to our sector skills council, SkillsActive, we do have some insight into the state of play of educational qualifications for our industry but they do not look particularly good and we should be worried, very worried.

With the influx of a new generation of entry-level trainees in the sector from school and college leavers, organisations need to change their attitude towards training and start investing in their staff at all levels to create a real long-term culture for leadership through training and development.

As it stands, only one third of professionals train up to Level 4 at the moment, and a quarter of managers and directors feel that they have not received enough training for their roles. More than 50% of professionals within the industry do not train past Level 3 and for those that do 72% have to fund their own training.

When only 15% of professionals are receiving funding to progress into qualified roles, what does that say about this industry?

If we are going to advocate the sport and leisure industry as one that supports long-term career development, organisations need to step up and play their part but it is not a great picture when only 30% of the workforce are trained to Level 4 and 29% do not have a Level 2 qualification.

The Register for Exercise Professionals (REPs) was introduced in 2002 and may not be perfect but it is the best we have at the moment. REPs has provided several key benefits to the sector, including raising the agenda for professional development as well as creating a significant side-effect of data-capture on market intelligence regarding workforce competency in the fitness sector.

In terms of sector training, although there is no shortage of choice, the value of it is often measured by 'bums on seats' and not by quality of experience or measured outcomes. No one owns the intellectual copyright for excellence. It must be shared and celebrated, and our sector needs to be far more ambitious, both with respect to quality standards of training and the way in which this is achieved.

I cannot understand it when an organisation claims that cost is a good reason not to invest in high-quality leadership and competency training.

This is a short-term approach and in the long-term these organisations are likely to haemorrhage large-scale profits through ineffective leadership, lost wealth creation and high staff turnover. In addition, often the employees who remain are low performers with low aspirations both for themselves and their employers.

I believe that our strategy for success has to revolve around creating core competencies with additional technical modules for staff suited to the functional needs of the job role. For example, the generic skills for most frontline staff functions involve customer service, equality and diversity, safety, teamwork, safeguarding, skills in English and maths, and an understanding of basic physical literacy.

If you happen to work in a plant room or in outdoor coaching then you need additional technical and functional skills but we should try to keep this structure simple so that new entrants to the sector can understand their chosen career path and what they must do to progress.

As professionals gain promotion and skill needs grow, then we need to build on the core skills and increase strategic skills, such as digital marketing, financial management and leadership, so that learning really is incremental and continuous; accountability for high performance should be how employers measure success. Imagine if our higher-level managers were recruited and trained to become community facilitators rather than caretaker-managers. They would be seen as value creators for our sector and their employers.

Training cannot be fuelled by money or subjective evaluation of quality. It has to be driven by the value it delivers to people, to customers, to business performance and profitability. We have to ensure that all training is delivered in the context of the core principles of our sector, which are about active leisure and increased participation of physical activity.

We need career pathways more than ever before and these need to start with entry Level 1 progressing to executive Level 7 and beyond. They must be aspirational by nature but simple to understand. Imagine if our starting point was Level 4, progressing to Level 5 for 'duty managers' but with the title of 'operational leaders'. Above this line we remove the need for managers, assistant managers and regional managers, now obsolete, to replace them with strategic leaders.

The focus for these leaders would be on externally adding value to communities and building business networks between schools, further and higher education, business and enterprise groups, community groups and regional/local government with simple objectives: to encourage greater participation of physical activity and to promote the concept of physical literacy against business viability and return on investment regardless of what sub-sector people work in.

As a sector we seem to be seriously underdeveloped in joining the dots and I have long advocated a national mentor bank. This concept could turn the tide for creating learning cultures within our sector. A mentor bank could shape the lives, careers and aspirations for generations of future managers by creating recognised talent pools that operate vertically and horizontally across the sport and physical activity landscape.

This should be the exciting generation that grasps the vision of a transparent, innovative, inclusive, honest and dynamic sector that embraces change and drives standards upwards through thought-leadership. With integrity and passion we have the power to truly change lives so let's see more principled innovators who stand for excellence.

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Download the Trailblazer standards in pdf via www.gov.uk

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