

# The Role of Fitness Professionals in Public Health

## Research summary

The research investigated the occupational group of 'fitness professionals' and its role in improving public health. For the purposes of this project, the term 'fitness professional' was adopted to cover the core industry roles of 'fitness/gym instructor' and 'personal trainer', using current industry standards and guidelines as a basis for defining these roles. The project was conducted over a period of six years at the University of Birmingham and it provides the most comprehensive analysis of this topic to date.

Previous research had found that formal training and education for fitness professionals often fails to develop the knowledge and skills needed for working in 'real world' fitness and leisure environments.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this research was to identify an appropriate role for fitness professionals in delivering public health agendas, and the training required to ensure they are effective.

## Key findings

The findings show that fitness professionals are an important, complex and undervalued health-related occupational group. There is a growing expectation that fitness professionals will make an important contribution to the physical, psychological, emotional and nutritional aspects of health for members of the public, yet the structure of the fitness industry makes it difficult for them to deliver all that is expected.

The contemporary public health landscape is complex and somewhat fragmented. Within that, key issues for fitness professionals include low levels of pay, an overwhelming emphasis on sales, unclear role and expertise boundaries, insecure forms of employment, high workforce turnover and inadequate career development infrastructures. The research identified a significant mismatch between the complex health-related roles that fitness professionals are expected to perform in practice, and the formal training and education available. The combination of these factors was associated with a lack of professionalism and concerns about the credibility and safety of existing practices in the fitness industry.

The research also demonstrated that there are significant opportunities for fitness professionals to play an important role in improving public health. The widespread expansion of the fitness industry has meant that fitness professionals have, almost by default, taken responsibility for addressing an increasingly wide range of health-related needs and expectations for the publics they encounter. Fitness professionals are highly accessible in their local communities, so if they were better supported they could be more effective in addressing population health challenges, such as inactivity and overweightness/obesity. This, in turn, would enable them to make a much more significant contribution to improving public health, thereby reducing the burden on the NHS and other public services.

## Recommendations

If fitness professionals are to deliver their potential as public health assets, the following recommendations should be considered:

**Recommendation 1.** The practice and development of fitness professionals should become subject to greater regulation, with the aspiration to professionalise some aspects of fitness provision. For example, the research highlighted ways in which the health-related work

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<sup>1</sup>A.T.C.De Lyon and Cushion, C.J. (2013). The acquisition and development of fitness trainers' professional knowledge, *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, 27(5), 1407-1422.

of fitness professionals is similar to that of other related groups who are members of the Health and Care Professions Council. While it would be impossible for the entire occupational group to achieve full professional status, it could be an aspiration to professionalise segments of it.

**Recommendation 2.** Fitness professionals and facilities should be better incentivised and supported to contribute to public health targets. For example, it is clear from the research evidence that the development and practice of fitness professionals could benefit from a stronger alignment of performance measures and incentives between these practitioners, fitness and leisure facilities and key public health/medical stakeholders.

**Recommendation 3.** The training and education for fitness professionals should be better aligned with the expectations, challenges and demands of their everyday work environments. Specific suggestions for improving the quality and reliability of initial training provision include increasing the level and nature of work that is required to become a qualified personal trainer, and enhancing the quality and rigor of examination methods being employed on training courses.

**Recommendation 4.** The sector should work towards developing high quality, graduate-level job roles with conditions of employment that are congruent with the challenges and demands of those roles. For example, it is recommended that investing in the salaries and professional development of fitness professionals could help to improve relationships with the established health and medical professions. The findings also highlight the need for a strong professional body to underpin the work of fitness professionals.

**Recommendation 5.** The knowledge, training, development and practice of fitness professionals should become subject to further robust research and independent analysis. For example, future research could usefully explore how this occupational group could be supported and developed in order to become a major public health asset.

### Why is the research important?

Contemporary societies are currently experiencing a series of widespread global public health challenges. These challenges include the far-reaching and well-documented problems of overweightness/obesity, mental ill health and unhealthy lifestyle habits such as physical inactivity, sedentariness and maladaptive nutritional behaviours.<sup>234</sup> Alongside this, there is a proliferation of new media technologies (e.g., mobile devices, wearable technologies and tablets) not only conveying messages about ideal aesthetic bodies, but also encouraging people to become responsible for understanding and embodying health and fitness in new ways.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these factors is associated with the growth and development of a global fitness industry, and a plethora of workers who are responsible for providing various forms of fitness, exercise and health-related support. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, data suggest there are over 9.7 million members of fitness facilities and that 1 in 7 adults are members of a gym.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of this industry are a large number of fitness professionals, who are facing a host of new challenges arising from contemporary societal demands.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Kohl, H. W., Craig, C. L., Lambert, E. V., Inoue, S., Alkandari, J. R., Leetongin, G. and Kahlmeier, S. (2012). The pandemic of physical inactivity: global action for public health, *The Lancet*, 380(9838), 294–305.

<sup>3</sup>World Health Organization (2010). Global recommendations on physical activity for health. Geneva: World Health Organization.

<sup>4</sup>World Health Organization (2014) Global status report on non-communicable diseases. Geneva: World Health Organization.

<sup>5</sup>Millington, B. (2016) Fit for presumption: interactivity and the second fitness boom, *Media, Culture and Society*, 38(8), 1184-1200.

<sup>6</sup>Leisure Database Company (2017). 2017 State of the UK fitness industry report. London: Leisure Database Company.

<sup>7</sup>UKActive and Royal Society for Public Health (2018). Going the distance: exercise professionals in the wider public health workforce. UKActive: London.

<sup>8</sup>De Lyon, A.T.C., Neville, R.D. and Armour, K.M. (2017). The role of fitness professionals in public health: a review of the literature, *Quest*, 69(3), 313-330.

There is evidence of growing expectations about the role of fitness professionals in improving public health. As a valuable public health asset, fitness professionals could be an essential component in the delivery of policy recommendations for increasing physical activity. The problem is that relatively little research has been undertaken to explain how this diverse occupational group can deliver on contemporary public health agendas, and the types of education and training processes that would support them to be effective. This research gap has been recognised by various key stakeholders and policymakers in the health, fitness and leisure sectors.<sup>9</sup> The research presented here contributes to better understanding the gap and the actions required to bridge it.

### **Research methods:**

The project addressed significant gaps in the existing research base and was conducted over three overlapping phases:

- **Phase 1:** A comprehensive review of the research, policy and grey literature on fitness professionals and their links to public health.
- **Phase 2:** Five in-depth complex case studies of fitness professionals in practice. Together, these studies included 52 interviews, 22 periods of observation and analysis of numerous cultural artefacts (e.g., websites/social media).
- **Phase 3:** Interviews with 20 key stakeholders/policymakers in the health, fitness and leisure sectors.

Comprehensive information on the research methods, analysis and findings are provided in the author's full PhD thesis, which can be accessed via the University of Birmingham eTheses Repository (<http://etheses.bham.ac.uk>). For further information, please email [alexdelyon2@gmail.com](mailto:alexdelyon2@gmail.com)

### **About the author**

Dr Alex De Lyon has a diverse range of experience in fitness, sport and leisure. He holds a PhD in the field of Sport & Exercise Science from the University of Birmingham, a MSc in Sport & Exercise Psychology from Loughborough University and First Class (Hons) degree in Sports Coaching & Performance. The findings of Alex's research have been published in peer-reviewed journals, presented internationally and are included in major fitness and leisure sector reports. In addition, Alex has worked on projects with The English Football Association, The Lawn Tennis Association and The British Academy. In his current role, Alex works as a Personal Trainer at Third Space.

### **Other information**

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<sup>9</sup>Baart De La Faille-Deutekom, M., Middelkamp, I. and Steenbergen, J. (ed.) (2012). The state of research in the global fitness industry. Zeist: HDD Group.