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Key Recommendations for Basketball England to Consider around the USA Collegiate Pathway

TASS Recommendations for Basketball England



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Introduction

Following the project that TASS conducted, exploring player and stakeholder perceptions of the US collegiate route, a series of recommendations have been made for Basketball England (BE) to consider implementing. These recommendations are based on discussions with players and stakeholders across the pathway. These recommendations have been framed as questions rather than statements, to avoid telling BE what they should do, but instead allowing BE to interpret and action them depending on what is perceived to be their priority. The questions posed include a brief introduction and quotes to support, followed by an overview of both short and long wins that BE could look to address in the area.

Short wins – areas that BE could implement relatively quickly and at minimal cost

Long wins – areas that BE could implement with either more funding or greater strategic planning and time

Do players receive enough education on pathway opportunities at the youth level?

From discussion with youth players (age groups 11-15 and 16-19) and their parents, there was a substantial lack of knowledge of the pathway options in general. Most youth players that the research team spoke to wanted to play and study in America. However, these players and their parents did not have much understanding of what the experience might be like, what the options were, how to navigate the different eligibility systems or how to begin selecting a college. These youth players were equally unclear about their options to study and play within England. For many older players who did attend college in America, they had not considered English options because they did not know what was available to them.

“I have to say, through his local team, and even through Aspire, there’s not really-- So far, there’s not been any mention of the [US] pathway, the benefits, the drawbacks, nothing like that” (Parent, 11-13 age group).

“A lot of players have dropped out of the system in the last five years. I think that’s where their major concern is, and I think alternatives of Europe or the UK are things that they [BE] want to try and make people more aware of, but they’re not making people aware of anything because of standing off the situation. I think their involvement in trying to educate people, I think is really important going forward.” (Parent, 16-19 age group)

When questioned, players and parents both provided some topics that they would like more information on from Basketball England.

What information parents want to know:

- A timeline for the American college route (e.g., when to start the process)
- The American college eligibility processes
- The potential challenges of the American experience
- The role of agents in the decision-making process
- Information for coming back to England if players were not happy in America
- University options in England and the support that they provide
- The alternative routes (to the US) to go professional
- What happens if a player wants to come back to England

*“I think one really key thing is the eligibility criteria. That’s a very confusing area.”
(Parent, 16-19 age group)*

What information players want to know:

- A checklist of actions to be completed in the recruitment process for the American college route
- The different options available to them in the US
- The options in England and the support they provide
- How they can prepare for the transition

Suggested actions

There are several actions that Basketball England could take in response to the question of education on pathway opportunities at the youth level.

Short wins

Information booklets and infographics – based on the topics requested by players and their parents, there are some key topics that Basketball England could provide information on via booklets or infographics. These key topics include:

- ✓ The US recruitment process, including a timeline of key milestones, a checklist, different options within the US and the key information players need to know about the eligibility process.
- ✓ The America collegiate experience, including real-life experiences from players.
- ✓ The role of recruitment agents.
- ✓ English university options (*TASS have developed*)
- ✓ Key information on options if they are not happy with their choice of college, including returning to England
- ✓ Alternative routes to playing professional basketball (e.g., UK, Europe or Australia)
- ✓ Guides to physical and mental preparation for transitioning to the US

The project report produced by TASS provides information that can be included in a booklet on the US recruitment process and the American collegiate experience and the role of agents. Further information would be required to develop information booklets or infographics on options if players were not happy with their college choice, and routes to playing basketball professionally.

*"I think that they should at least be given or told about the opportunities they can get from staying here."
(Player, graduated UK university)*

Long wins

Education integrated into talent programmes - in the longer-term, information on these key topics could be integrated into Basketball England's aspire and development programmes. For example, providing workshops to players on education options and routes to professional basketball as part of developing players holistically. This provides the added benefit of being able to keep information up to date and relevant to players and their parents.

Increase player lifestyle support - along with player and parent education, player support could be increased. This could be approached in multiple ways:

- Upskilling coaches and support staff within the talent pathway to support athletes in their lifestyle decisions (e.g., through TASS education '1st4Sport level 2 understanding an athlete's lifestyle' or a bespoke basketball specific education program for coaches)
- Increase the workforce of lifestyle advisors to work with youth players making decisions around their future pathways within basketball.

*"There is no USA education for coaches, players, parents, anything from the Federation."
(Academy coach)*

Is it clear to players and parents whether Basketball England endorse the US collegiate route?

Linked to the above discussion, throughout the project, it became clear that players and parents of youth players across the youth programmes did not understand whether Basketball England endorsed the US route or actively wanted to discourage players from going. It was also acknowledged that there was a lack of clarity around:

- Whether there are any specific entry routes endorsed by BE (e.g., use of specific agencies/recruitment companies) or 'official pathways'
- Whether there is an 'ideal development route'
- Confusion around whether BE endorse the route because it is not included on any Talent ID pathway documents.

Suggested actions

There are several actions that Basketball England could take in response to the question around whether it is clear whether the NGB endorse the US pathway.

Short wins

Reinforce message that it's about 'making the right decision for the player' – when the question “why are BE doing this project, is it to endorse the route or keep players away from the US pathway?” was posed to us during this project – we continually reinforced that the aim was to help players make informed decisions about their pathway and that BE wanted to optimally prepare players who were set on taking this route. Although we recognise that these are the views of BE, it is important that their message is consistent and collective. This project is certainly a brilliant first step to already achieving this short win recommendation.

“Even though they want to go, it's just trying to understand the right pathway. It's tied back to the right National Governing Body. You've got some reassurance that it's the right way.” (Parent, 11-13 age group)

“I don't really understand what's going on in all of this...whether they are encouraging children to go across at certain stages, or whether they're left to the parents and the families to make their own route. I don't fully understand what their vision is.” (Parent 11-13 age group)

Longer wins

Integrate the US and English university routes into talent development models/images - players and parents wanted more information from BE around whether taking the US route would impact on their chances of national team selection and the possibility of reintegrating into the programme if they returned early from the US or after graduation. We recommend that:

- Both the English and US higher education routes are incorporated into documents that highlight the pathway (i.e., the pathway graphic below) or new images are created. This would help illustrate to players and parents that once the player enters higher education (wherever that might be) they can continue to be part of England national programmes (promoting a holistic dual career pathway)



“Anytime they [NGB] put out documents about player pathway about talent ID... there’s never anything to do with America. That worries the life out of me because when we talk about players going through the talent pathway, you got hundreds right now that are in America playing. If you’re not on your player pathway or your talent ID, when you to come back, because most of them will play for Under-20s team, we need to know. You’re going to come play for our Great Britain team in the summer... why are they not on the player pathway?” (Agent)

Develop a list of trustworthy ‘entry routes’ – as discussed, players and parents want an overview of what they deemed to be trustworthy or approved entry routes into the USA. By tracking player experience in the US, it will be possible to develop an overview of how players were recruited and what their experience was like during the recruitment process. Although we have detailed exactly what players should consider in the recruitment process (and produced an infographic), players may still not be sure which recruitment companies and agencies to trust. We learnt through the project that other governing bodies (including Wales) have recently agreed to partner with a single recruitment agency. Whilst this seems a sensible option for a small organisation, it is

“What would be endorsed and supported because there’s so many different entry routes...what’s approved and what’s not?” (Parent, 11-13)

not manageable for England who has a large amount of talent looking to follow the US pathway.

“Basically, what they were doing is they were paying the federation money for access to that player database. If that company are not coming over and evaluating the players live, I think the federation is just giving away impartiality by making parents feel like that is the company that you must go with.” (Scout)

Do Basketball England clearly signpost players to where they can get support?

Both players and parents that were involved in the project were not clear on where to access support with regards to making decisions on the US collegiate route.

"It wasn't like Basketball England came to me and said, "Right if [your child] wants to do this, this is what we would recommend." Or "This is who you can speak to." It was all done very much off our own back or through people that [coach] knew or things I had heard and did a bit of research on really." (Parent, 14-16 age group)

Currently, players and parents are seeking support from key stakeholders such as: academy coaches, national team coaches and recruitment agents. While some of these stakeholders are well informed and offer impartial advice to players and their parents, other might not be as well informed or have a vested interest in promoting one route over another.

"Having that support and just that almost respect that I have the ability to choose where I want to go and I can make that decision for myself was really helpful because speaking to other people that have committed from different academies and stuff, you can sense that they just go in because that's where their coach wants them to go" (Player)

"As soon as I made my decision to stay, he didn't help me look at the top university programs. He didn't help me get in contact with any of the English coaches. Which I thought was really interesting because I had players the year above me or in my year who wanted to go to America. He was happy to help them out." (Player)

In particular, academies were recognised as being able to find players a scholarship in the US or the place players need to go to attend college in the US. The research suggested that:

- Players thought the only way they could get to the US was to go to an academy
- Academy coaches were keen to handle their own players recruitment
- Players felt that coaches pushed them down the US route

"Some academies will be recruiting kids and selling... come here and I can get you to the US... there's one coach that told me "I don't want my kids on your report, we handle their recruitment, we're in charge of it." (Scout)

"We do have conversations with some of them where they're like, "I don't know. Isn't this why you go to an academy?" It's like, "No. You don't need to go to an academy to go to the States, that's not why you should go to an academy." (Academy Director)

Suggested actions

There are several ways through which Basketball England could signpost players towards support.

Short wins

Promotion of advice, support, and guidelines – after the completion of this project, Basketball England will have a collection of information that guides players through the US process, including how and where to seek support. Instilling these resources into the academy frameworks will ensure that the outcomes of this project do not get lost if just sent out over email or placed on the website. The effective promoting of this material will ensure that players and parents are clearly steered towards support.

Long wins

Establish and clarify the role of academy coaches, national team coaches and recruitment agents in offering support regarding the US route – It is clear that players and parents need support with this decision-making process and that they currently seek support from these stakeholders: academy coaches, national team coaches and recruitment agents. Should coaches be expected to provide this support? How could Basketball England ensure the quality of support provided by these stakeholders?

Possible ways of insuring quality of support could include:

- Upskilling these stakeholders to support athletes in their lifestyle decisions (e.g., through TASS education - ‘1st4Sport level 2 Understanding an Athlete’s Lifestyle’) and promoting the support of stakeholders that have been through this type of education
- Bespoke training - it is worth noting that TASS could develop a bespoke basketball version of the ‘Understanding an Athlete’s Lifestyle’ Level 2 qualification having recently delivered the course to a cohort of FIBA Timeout 2.0 participants.
- USA accreditation process – academies/clubs could undergo specific training on the USA recruitment and transition process which could reassure players that they are able to provide a certain level of support (this would quality assure coaches and potentially mitigate against some of the risks of academies pushing players down the US route for their own personal gain)

Could communication between Basketball England and English players in the US collegiate system improve?

One of the most frequent comments that players made when we discussed what they would like to see happen in the future, was the desire for enhanced communication from BE. Throughout this project, it has become clear that the NGB staying in contact with players in the US collegiate system is important for a number of reasons:

1. Players may feel isolated and increased connection to home is beneficial to player wellbeing
2. Players may engage more positively with the national team if they feel that the NGB cares about their experiences
3. Staying up to date with player experience is extremely important – understanding where players have negative experiences means that BE could actively discourage players from going to certain colleges
4. Understanding where players have positive experiences could help BE guide players to certain colleges, therefore creating ‘bubbles’ of English players in the same colleges (potentially increasing the likelihood of English coaches visiting players)

“If they [NGB] have a highly regarded prospect and things aren't going very well, then the Federation is essentially telling the school that they're not happy with how they're being treated. The Federation has power, and they will make sure those schools know, or we won't be sending you any other players if you're not doing a good job with this one.” (Academy coach)

“I don't think coaches do check on the players that have gone. It's like, okay, they've gone, they're doing their thing now. And they got other players to worry about, but it's nice when you see someone that knows you...I was deep in that slump, big time...especially around the time where I wasn't sure whether I want to be there or not.” (Current US player)

Players outlined that:

- Basketball England only got in contact when they wanted them to come back for camps/play in events
- They wanted more frequent and regular check ins from national team coaches

Players considering going to the US outlined:

- They wanted to understand English player experience in the US

Suggested actions

There are several actions that Basketball England could take in response to the question around whether communication with US based players could improve.

Short wins

Check in calls - Basketball England could have host either individual or group check in group calls (on an online platform such as Zoom) with English players in the US system. Through these calls, BE could:

- Get to grips with how the player is managing the transition
- Discuss upcoming camps/events and how players may need to prepare
- Discuss the players current basketball and academic performance (to gain a holistic understanding)
- Track player experiences at specific colleges – identify challenges that arise for players at specific colleges

*“When a kid has a bad experience in the States. It’s reaching out, someone from the Federation, to gain a better understanding of what’s happened.”
(Academy coach)*

Regular calls that are planned in advance across the year could help players feel they are still connected to the English system and help them during challenging periods. Keeping on top of player experience also means that BE can provide up to date advice to players that are considering making the transition. Players who were thinking about going to America regularly spoke about wanting to understand what current English players experiences were like.

“We need to constantly adapt and adjust our support and our education around that. I think the more we engage with people that unfortunately have bad experiences the better we can educate people coming through.” (Coach)

Closed network for English Basketballers - whilst we understand that BE would perhaps not have the capacity to engage with every player on an individual level (perhaps focusing their attention in the short term on players eligible for England/GB selection), we believe that BE could be the ideal organisation to help facilitate an online network of English players in the US collegiate system. Many players outlined the desire to be able to communicate with other English players who were across the US system. What would the advantages of this network be?

- Help players feel connected and part of a wider community
- Help players talk through and overcome challenges

What might the network look like?

- A closed Facebook group (or other online platform) where English players who enter the US system are invited to talk and share their experiences
- BE members of staff monitoring and facilitating discussion

"We stay on social media and stuff. I've had some conversations with players my age. You have conversations and you're like, "Oh, my gosh, we're going through the same stuff." Then you don't feel as bad about yourself. You don't have to beat yourself up so much because everyone's struggled."
(Current US player)

Long wins

Basketball England player visits – if there are 'bubbles' of English players at specific colleges long term, BE may wish to send coaches over to these colleges to visit players to see how they are developing and to avoid long periods of time where they don't have contact with the players. BE may also wish to consider appointing an **England-US player liaison officer** in the long-term (however there was debate around where a role of this nature would best fit, i.e., in or outside the federation).

"Other Federations through the world will have people that go and visit their players at college, make sure everything's okay, speak to the coaches. The Federation has power, and they will make sure those schools know they won't be sending you any other players if you're not doing a good job with this one." (Academy coach)

How could English players be encouraged to share their recruitment and US college experiences?

The results of the report suggest that there can be an imbalance in the experiences of recruitment and US college experiences. In most cases, younger players were seeking their information about the process through social media or US college coaches who were promoting the US route. While the report provides advice to players to be aware that social media might not give them the whole picture and that people tend to only share their successes over social media, further voicing of players opinions could be beneficial.

“Sharing your story is so powerful. That is definitely what I want to see happening eventually, because if I can help, even just one person reconsider what school they are going to, the reasons why they’re going to that school, then I’m doing something right.” (Player, currently in US)

“I think we need more links to speak to these people. I feel like if people are willing, I feel like there should be somewhere where you can contact people and ask them questions about what their opinion is or get statements about what their opinion is of being out there or blogs about what their opinions are about being out there... I feel like if you don't have these people that you don't really to just reason about stuff or you're just listening to a coach in America, that's telling you about the school.” (Player, 16-19 age group)

When asked about sharing recruitment or US college experiences, older players were willing to talk about their experience but also felt that it would have been beneficial to hear them during their decision-making.

Suggested actions

There are several actions that Basketball England could take to encourage players to share their experiences of recruitment and US college with younger players.

Short wins

Open platform for current/former US based players to share experiences – Several players suggested an online resource that enabled players to share their experiences of the US collegiate route and interact with younger players. Some examples that were shared include:

- an athlete blog
- a forum to post and respond to questions
- a pre-decision network,
- an open Facebook group

One important consideration is the restrictions on current US players to talk openly about the college they are currently attending in a publicly accessible forum. Mitigations for protecting their anonymity might need to be in place. Basketball England may wish to appoint a **'player chair'** – this would be either a current or past player who has been in the collegiate system who could monitor the group, be responsible for publicising the network, finding new members, facilitate group discussion, and feedback important themes back to Basketball England.

"I think there just needs to be maybe a panel of five or six players who talk about their experiences and what was good for them and what was not so good for them so that people can see that different things can happen." (Player, graduated US)

A day in the life series – like the action above, players were interested to know what the day-to-day schedule to players in English universities and US colleges was like to help them in making a decision. This could be done to also highlight the different options available in America, (e.g., NCAA division I and II, NJCAA, NAIA). For example, you could have a day in the life of a division II mid-west college English player and then a day in the life of an east coast junior college English player, so it is clear how experience can differ. Ideally, these would be done via a collated video, but could also be achieved through a written piece.

"If there was something like, you should watch both, like the example e of the athlete in [UK university] ... Their day, like a class day, what it's like. Then how they prepare for playing and training or schedule them. Then a schedule of a student athlete in America" (Player, 16-19 age group)

Long wins

England based events – a possible strategy to educate players about their options and encourage them to make informed decisions is events or workshops for players to attend. These could be linked to national or regional competitions. The aim of these events would be to support players with information, but they could also be another opportunity for older players to share they experiences and younger players to ask questions they might have.

"I think it would be really good to have, I don't know if it would be like a roadshow or a national day organized by a governing body maybe, where kids really get to interact with other student-athletes... where they get to hear experiences, they get to ask questions. It might be that they get like a college coach come over and run a college practice, and they get to see what it's really going to be like... I think that would be really helpful for the players." (Academy Director)

Athlete mentor programme – While an online platform will support athletes to share their experiences, this could also be achieved through a more formal athlete mentor programme. Older players could be supported in developing some key mentoring skills and be supported in promoting the ethos of players making the decision that's right for them (e.g., through TASS education '1st4Sport level 2 Understanding an Athlete's Lifestyle' or a bespoke basketball specific education program for coaches). A mentor programme could also be delivered through the development of a **Basketball England Athlete Commission**.

Could Basketball England do more to enhance the opportunities available in England?

The results of this report suggest that many players make the move to the US due to a perceived lack of opportunities available in England. In many cases, coaching staff and players made reference to the need for enhanced financial incentives within the English university route, such as scholarship support, subsidised tuition fees, free accommodation etc.

“What I think a solution could be, and it just depends on how funding streams work is, if Basketball England could pick the top 20 or whatever their depth charts are that they use for Under-18s or men’s and women’s and say, “Okay, we would want you to stay here. We’d want you to be involved with either a WBBL club or a BBL... You’ve got leagues that they could stay in and that Basketball England would pay for their cost of living, like food and accommodation. Then they ask the universities to provide the scholarship of tuition fees.” (Academy Coach).

The results also outlined the challenges that come with having no junior college equivalent in England. Players who may have struggled academically during their further education studies are then left with limited options to continue their education in England. There was a lack of awareness of options that may be available such as foundation degrees and apprenticeship routes.

“It’s really hard because the type of athlete journey for players like [player] for instance, who’s not a university academic kid, we don’t have universities here that they can go to for two years if you fail your A-levels, for instance, but they do in America, junior colleges. If we don’t offer anything like that, what should he do?” (Academy Coach)

The results of the report also allude to the question of which players have access to DiSE. The opportunity to gain UCAS points through DiSE is incredibly beneficial for athletes planning to attend university in England. For those players who plan to go to the US, the outputs of DiSE have less impact due to UCAS points not being considered. The question of whether DiSE should be allocated only to those planning to attend university in the England was raised.

“I don’t know if it’s been raised with Basketball England in the past is the DiSE program. Obviously, they do it as a qualification and my understanding is it counts quite heavily to UCAS points in the UK, but it doesn’t carry any weight with the NCAA... Basketball England and academies are spending two years putting students through it to get a qualification over here, but bearing in mind a lot of the kids that will be doing the basketball program, and doing that DiSE program will potentially be looking at the US as a pathway to carry on playing basketball, that it doesn’t actually count as an A-level. To me, that just seems a bit of a waste really.” (Parent, 14-16 group)

From a basketball standpoint, the lack of basketball opportunities that sit outside the Academy system and provide players with development opportunities prior to the BBL was discussed.

“When kids finish at 18, they can go into playing senior for their local team and get paid £200 a month £400 a month part-time, whatever. They might be really, really good in three years' time and earn £1000 a month. We don't have that here. There is really nothing and there's nothing in that age group from 18 to, let's say, 23 to do anything. There's no apprenticeships... There's no second leagues. At 18, you're success or bust”. (Academy Coach)

Finally, the results of the report emphasise the impact that a well-established basketball-university system could have in England at the postgraduate level. Due to the nature of NCAA sport, with players only having four years of competitive eligibility, the English postgraduate route could be next step option. This would not only be desirable for returning English athletes, but also athletes from the US and other nations.

“Basketball England can invest loads of money and still lose kids, or what they could do is invest more money in the postgraduate route for these students that come back. Again, I don't think that'll work as much in the men's because the men's have opportunities to earn money in Europe....” I think from a women's point of view, Basketball England, they need to cater it to different offers, one of women, one for men. I think the best one would be a post-graduate is the way to go.” (UK Coach)

Suggested actions

There are several actions that Basketball England could take to enhance the opportunities available in England.

Short wins

Share the English higher education basketball scoping document – dissemination of the HE scoping document is key to making players, parents, and club staff aware of what sport scholarship opportunities are available in England. Inclusion of details around foundation degrees may be a beneficial addition. A further action for Basketball England will be to explore apprenticeship dual career opportunities for players where higher education is not a suitable option.

Strategic allocation of DiSE places – strategic allocation of DiSE places will help to ensure it is allocated to those who value both the process and output. DiSE can potentially be used as a stepping-stone for those who may struggle to get their required grades within further education.

Creating links and formal partnerships with universities – strengthening links with English universities would be a good first step in negotiating further sport scholarship support

and subsidised fees. The development of further links between universities and BBL clubs would also be beneficial to support the development of a home-grown system.

Long wins

Set funding for English university subsidies – a set pool of funding, available for players attending university in the England, would enhance the offer considerably.

Development of enhanced competition level within the English university system – a possible strategy to increase funding and consequently enhance the English university basketball league. This will help to further reinforce the English option to players as an alternative to going to the US. This will also work towards developing a pathway for players post-US, returning to England to study at the postgraduate level. In addition, this pathway could help to recruit postgraduate players from the US and other nations, further strengthening the league and the system.

Development of a BBL academy league – creation of a development league, linked to English universities would be beneficial. This would provide players with the opportunity to study for a degree, play in a competitive basketball league, and increase their visibility to professional BBL teams. This may be similar to what the FA did with the Women's Super League Academy system in 2018, where each academy is linked with a TASS delivery site to provide services, and in the process, building an education pathway between club and university.

"I think something should be linked into the BBL. Even if the BBL had a development-type league of its own, where players could play in that. ... For all the player...it could be those at university. It could be all the way from 17 upwards. It doesn't matter. France had a similar system." (Academy Coach)