

## students demand good fitness facilities

Attracting students to a specific university or college is a serious business and the competition among academic institutions is now red-hot. The modern teenager has been brought up using a gym, and one of the facilities that is, therefore, becoming increasingly important in terms of which institution they choose is a well-equipped fitness centre. Tim Webster talks to Kathryn Cooke at the University of Warwick, Paul Cook at the University of Southampton and Simon Tunley at the University of Sussex.

In the old days the three things that mattered most to would-be students were the location of the university, the course and the social life – not necessarily in that order. Today's youngsters still have a good time, but they are much more likely to balance the excesses of student life with regular exercise and even some fruit and veg in their diet. In much the same way that hotels have had to offer a fitness centre in order to attract the health-conscious businessman, academic institutions are being pressed to add a modern gym to their must-have list. The difference is that while some hotels get away with turning a broom cupboard into a fitness centre, universities increasingly have to go the whole hog, with exercise facilities that rival the commercial centres in the locality.

Having just built a state-of-the-art 4,500 square foot air conditioned fitness centre equipped with an extensive range of Precor kit, Warwick University is one of a growing number of academic institutions that are taking the health and fitness opportunity very seriously. "Good health and fitness facilities are



becoming an increasingly important draw for students and until recently our facilities simply couldn't compete with other universities. That's no longer the case," says fitness development officer Kathryn Cooke. "Although most of our members will come from the university community, we will also have a limited number of places for local residents, so it is very important that we have a facility that can compete with the commercial sector."

Here is a grab from the Warwick website, the development of which was aided by Precor: If you're feeling energetic, you'll need to know that both staff and students have access to the sports centre on campus. It is ideal for all kinds of sport, no matter what your ability or level of fitness, whether you want to play to win or just to meet new friends. Try the Bear Rock Climbing Centre if you're feeling adventurous, or choose from a swim in the 25m pool, a game of squash, weight-training, a

pop-mobility class, a workout in the gym, or even a relaxing sauna (and don't forget to scoff in the snack bar afterwards)". Does that sound like the college or university gym you remember?

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Kathryn anticipates that the new facilities will help Warwick to attract some elite

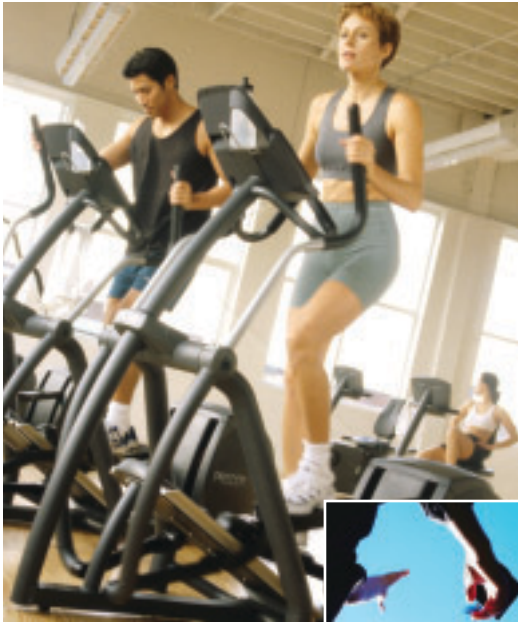
athletes to the university, but much of her time will be focused on increasing activity levels in the general student population. At £80 a year for students and £115 for staff, money certainly shouldn't be a barrier. "We have a marketing budget and part of my job will be to use it to get students off the couch and into the gym. Facilities like these are a massive help and we intend to programme them with a variety of classes that will appeal to both ends of the exercise spectrum and everything in between," says Kathryn.

You may think that universities have a captive audience and therefore service isn't as important as it is in the commercial market. You would be wrong. "In general our users are young and confident students but that



doesn't mean that we just leave them to it. One of our key aims is to deliver optimal service and if we want to get more people involved in exercise we have to do much more than just build nice facilities. Everyone will have a group induction and a one-on-one programming session free of charge and fitness testing will be available on demand for a small fee," says Kathryn.

So why chose Precor as their equipment partner? "Precor is a market leader in terms of the quality of its equipment, but it was the company's flexibility and responsiveness that attracted us to



them. Business is all about relationships and Precor have worked very hard at creating and maintaining their relationship with us, there's no doubt that they have contributed our success thus far," says Kathryn.

Paul Cook, the facilities manager at the University of Southampton, is another who is gearing up for the new term. "With 28,000 students and 4000 staff, we have a lot of people to cater for. The cost of our fitness centre is only £45 per year, but with 16,000 students signing up each year (that's 57% market penetration) the finances more than stack up," says Paul.



Freshers week is the key recruitment time for Paul and his peers in universities and colleges around the country and the gym is one of the facilities that always come under the spotlight. "We have a wide variety of people wanting to use the fitness centre and we have to cater for them all," says Paul. That means that our equipment and facilities need to be able to handle a thorough work out from top (sometimes Olympic) athletes, a pounding from the rugby teams and massive casual usage from students who are just interested in keeping their weight under control."

Time was when the gym was pretty much the preserve of the college jocks but things have changed, and now it also has to appeal to the social athlete; that means a new design rationale and very different equipment selection. Precor's ability to provide a wide range of resilient but good looking, easy-to-use equipment ensures that it is the first choice with educational establishments.

Universities like Southampton are also investing in new management techniques: "We have developed a student smart card so that we can track students movements, usage patterns and activities. We have

their mobile telephone numbers and text messages can be automatically sent out detailing last minute changes to activities. Students always look at their text messages," says Paul.

Simon Tunley, the deputy head of sport at the University of Sussex is another university-based operator who handles an enormous throughput from



students during term time and is keenly aware of that managing university sports facilities is a lot more demanding than it once was. "The quality of the facility is really important now as are staff training and efficient operating procedures. We have to have

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equipment suppliers like Precor who are able to work with us in all of these areas," says Simon.

When the Sussex students return home at the end of term Simon and his team turn their attention to specialist courses for the community. For example, there is a course for local fire fighters. "We train an individual from each fire station on how to use the Precor equipment and maximise its benefits so that they can inform the rest of the firefighters from that station. Precor has supported the courses and they have developed a specialist firefighters exercise programme," says Simon.

The fitness boom of the nineties has spawned a generation of students who see the gym as part of their life and who demand top-notch exercise facilities alongside interesting and rewarding academic courses. It seems that this dynamic is set to drive an explosion in high quality fitness centres at universities and colleges throughout Britain.

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