

The Leisure Studies Association: Past, Present and Future

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History – 40 Years of LSA

Leisure is a fundamental part of human culture, albeit one contested, constrained and constructed. Leisure is important to all of us. It is a sphere of life in which individuals find enjoyment, fulfilment, friendship and well-being. Participation in leisure contributes both to personal health and the maintenance of social life. While essentially experienced by individuals, leisure always has a social context, and consequently is subject to issues of equality, justice, politics and economics. Leisure is, however, complex, and questions related to its meanings, forms and functions abound at all levels of consideration. As local, regional and national governments become more aware of the importance of well-being, quality of life and work-life balance, leisure has come increasingly to the fore in much policy discourse. Critical studies of leisure have revealed that, rather than being a passive mechanism and merely reflecting inequality, leisure, via social agents' interactions with leisure spaces, is actively involved in producing, reproducing, sustaining and indeed, resisting, various manifestations of oppression and inequality (Dashper and Fletcher, 2013).

The social investigation of leisure finds its origins in the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. For much of the earlier nineteenth century leisure was used in an adjectival sense but in the later decades, with the emergence of the 'social question', it became necessary to think about leisure in terms of its social context rather than simply as a freely chosen individual behaviour (Snape, 2015). By the early twentieth century leisure was firmly situated within discourses of social reform, being discussed in the social contexts of university and social settlements, youth organisations, garden cities and community well-being. After the Second World War youth behaviours began to become of social concern, heightened by the rise of a perceptible teenage culture (see. Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, 1976) and this led to developments in social policy for youth in terms of the provision of facilities for leisure and the introduction of a youth service.

Towards the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of establishing a field of study known as leisure studies was actively promoted by a number of influential academic who gave the project credibility. Interest in leisure was given a further boost through the local government re-organisation of 1974 which created fewer but larger local authorities and led

to the establishment of the first leisure services departments which brought together various leisure provisions, such as libraries, museums, parks and swimming baths, under one administrative roof. This in effect created an academic sub-field of 'leisure management' and a corresponding demand for training and education. The effects of these developments were crucial to the formation of leisure studies. Sociologists, economists and psychologists were involved in the formation of UK leisure studies, but the strongest contributions in the 1970s were from geography and public administration/planning. Sociology (loosely interpreted) gradually became more prominent, then dominant. There was also strong support for leisure research from a number of public sector bodies, and key individuals within them who were interested in the potential impact of social change on our everyday activities, lifestyles and, in effect, well-being. These changes include greater affluence, earlier retirement (linked to affluence), increased alienation from work, higher unemployment, greater mobility, and the recognition of gender constraints and inequities of participation in and provision for leisure as experienced by, for example, minority ethnic groups. Leisure studies, therefore, was established via a combination of the commitment of a group of leisure academics and fundamental changes in society in the post-World War II period.

As academic and policy interest grew, so too did interest in establishing an association devoted to leisure studies. The Leisure Studies Association (LSA) was founded in 1975 in response to this wave of interest in leisure by an independent body of planners, researchers, policy-makers, administrators and practitioners who saw the need to address leisure issues for a broad range of academic disciplines and in industry, commerce and government. They observed the many ways in which leisure both reflects and influences the state of society and the effects of social change. Since 1975 the LSA has provided a multi-disciplinary and global forum for anyone interested in the research and study of leisure via a wide range of academic fields and policy discourses – including but not limited to tourism, sport, physical and mental health and well-being, education, social cohesion, urban planning, sustainability and regeneration, transport, the arts, digital culture and other types of cultural activity.

By the early-1980s the UK's leisure researchers were producing a sufficiently healthy stream of output to encourage the LSA to launch a journal, and *Leisure Studies* first appeared in 1982. This was not the world's first scholarly journal in its field. That status belongs to the *Journal of Leisure Research*, first published by the (US) National Recreation and Parks Association in 1969 (if we discount the *World Leisure Journal* which began life as a newsletter, grew into a professionally-oriented magazine and became a full-refereed scholarly journal at the end of the 1990s). In 1987 the home of LSA publications, which had been at the

Polytechnic of North London, moved to the University of Brighton at Eastbourne with Alan Tomlinson as publications officer aided by Myrene McFee, and in 1993 LSA Publications began to produce books of edited conference papers as opposed to the previous 'conference proceedings'. The income from LSA publications, and (latterly) royalties from *Leisure Studies*, contributed to the solid foundation and a stable administrative base of the association.

LSA structure and organisation

The LSA is totally dependent on volunteers to establish its strategic direction and achieve its objectives. Although LSA is in a healthy financial position it does not have the resources to have a paid person to help manage the administrative and other activities of its operations. The LSA Executive Committee, elected by its members, carries out all the administrative tasks of the Association. The current Executive Committee consists of eight defined roles plus honorary and ordinary members. The roles that currently form the Committee are: Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Newsletter, Digital Communications, Publications, Membership and Student Representative. In addition, at the annual conference hosted by Salford in 2013, LSA's Constitution was amended to include the role of LSA 'Ambassador'. These Ambassadors will take on presidential roles: firstly, they will support the aims of the Association and provide support and guidance to the Executive Committee (as guided by the Executive Committee); and secondly, they may be asked to undertake specific work for the Executive and current Officers of the Association (as required and agreed).

The LSA is not a large organisation. The current membership fluctuates around 100 members. Membership is international and includes colleagues from countries such as the USA, New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, and Spain. The vast majority of members (probably around 90%) are based in the UK. This number is probably below the overall number of academics working in leisure-related subjects in the UK. However, as we reflect below, the field of leisure studies is now quite crowded in terms of different learned societies, all of which are competing for members. For example, the Political Studies Association (which has a Sport Study Group), British Sociological Association (which has separate Sport and Leisure Study Groups), Association for Event Management Education (AEME), Association for Tourism in Higher Education (ATHE) and British Society of Sport History (BSSH) will each have members interested in leisure studies, but who perhaps prioritise membership to a single learned society.

There is a Student Representative on the LSA Executive Committee whose role is to engage with the student community through, among other things, a designated Facebook page. To encourage student membership, LSA offers reduced membership rates for research students, but the numbers of research student members remains lower than it would like.

Aims of the LSA

According to its Constitution, the object of LSA is to educate the public in all matters relating to leisure. The LSA aims to do this by: fostering research in leisure studies; promoting interest in leisure studies and advancing education in the field; encouraging debate through publications, and an international journal *Leisure Studies*; stimulating the exchange of ideas on contemporary leisure issues; and disseminating knowledge of leisure studies to create the conditions for better-informed decisions by policy makers.

In order to provide an overview of LSA activities, the following summary will focus on the objectives above, which represent a summary of those listed in the Constitution. The LSA's capacity to meet these objectives has varied in recent times so we reflect on this.

Fostering research in leisure studies

Research remains at the foundation of LSA activities. The LSA continues to pride itself on being a welcoming and inclusive environment for all scholars – whether they be professors, early careers researchers, or postgraduate researchers. In 1984 the LSA held its first international conference, hosted by the Chelsea School, University of Brighton, at the University of Sussex in Brighton which still holds the record as the largest ever LSA event (275 attended). Ever since then LSA conferences have been widely regarded as among the top events for attendance by leisure researchers from all over the world. The LSA's annual conference showcases research from around the world, presented by scholars at various stages in their research careers. In 2015 we celebrated the Association's 40th year with our conference at Bournemouth University, which revolved around the theme of 'Creating leisure'. Our 2016 conference, 'Locating leisure, blurring boundaries', will be hosted by Liverpool John Moore's University, and in 2017, Leeds Beckett University (formerly Metropolitan) will host 'Enacting leisure, recreating leisure'. The LSA has strong links and works in partnership with a number of universities in UK; both in supporting their teaching and learning practices in leisure studies, as well as supporting leisure research in other ways, for example, through sponsoring conferences. The Association has, and continues to, support a number of one-day events such as the annual 'Recording Leisure Lives' conference co-

hosted by the University of Bolton and the Bolton Museum which will host the 8th occurrence in March, 2016.

Historically, the LSA's book series provided a forum for conference papers to be written up as a publication. For many scholars, LSA books provided a space for their first publication. The 'in-house' editorial stewardship was, until 2014, provided by Myrene McFee.

The LSA continues to offer postgraduate research student bursaries to facilitate conference attendance. It also offers an annual dissertation competition at both undergraduate (Nikki Ventris Memorial Award) and postgraduate (Sue Glyptis Memorial Award) levels. The winner(s) of these are invited to present their work at the annual conference. Successful projects have ranged from the role of food tourism in sustaining regional identity and cultural heritage to the effect of gender on the enjoyment of and types of sports watched on television. In 2015 the undergraduate prize was awarded to Daniel Blunt (Liverpool John Moores University) for his project 'Green on the UK festival scene: An analysis and comparison of the green tools and techniques used by outdoor music festivals in the UK' and the postgraduate prize was awarded to Sabina Khan (Cardiff Metropolitan University) for her project 'The perception of dance among young Muslim females'.

Promoting interest in leisure studies and advancing education in the field

As we will discuss below, this objective probably represents the biggest challenge to LSA at the current time. Interest in studying leisure studies degrees in UK universities has declined substantially over the last decade. While the LSA is a strong advocate for the inclusion of leisure studies in degree courses, it has almost no influence on senior figures within universities who are responsible for managing their course portfolio. LSA remains committed to this objective and it is currently consulting on how it might engage more effectively in public comment and debate on issues related to leisure studies and higher education curricula.

Encouraging debate through publications

The most obvious achievement of this objective is the publication of the journal *Leisure Studies* and the back catalogue of 127 volumes of LSA books. While the demand for LSA books has declined in recent years, interest in the *Leisure Studies* journal continues to grow. Between 1982 and February 2016 *Leisure Studies* has published 42 Volumes and 131 Issues, contributing greatly to the development of research, not only in leisure studies, but also in

areas such as sociology, anthropology, human geography, cultural studies, sport, events, and tourism. In an attempt to deal more effectively with the number of publishable submissions, in 2014 the Editorial Board took the decision to increase circulation of the journal from 5 volumes to 6. The journal has an international reputation for publishing high quality, impactful research. This is recognised in part via the journal's impact factor (0.690 in 2014¹) and 2* rating on the Chartered Association of Business School's (ABS) journal guide. The journal's editorial team includes three Managing Editors, Book Reviews Editor, Administrator, and international Editorial Board of 17 people and international Editorial Advisory Board of 18 people.

Stimulating the exchange of ideas on contemporary leisure issues

In addition to its annual conference, journal and publication of books, the main way LSA stimulates the exchange of ideas is via its website, social media activity, newsletter and email service. The association's website (www.leisurestudies.org), was fully redesigned and relaunched in 2014. The main aim of the website was to modernise the Association and increase functionality in how its members and 'friends' communicate with one another. The website offers a number of channels for exchanging ideas, including a blog, news and social media feed. The LSA also publishes a quarterly newsletter, as well as having a member's JISCMail service.

Disseminating knowledge of leisure studies to create the conditions for better-informed decisions by policy makers

There is certainly potential for LSA to become more involved in public debate. Unfortunately, like other learned societies, LSA's capacity to establish a position on a particular issue in order to make public comment in a timely manner is limited and therefore, the LSA has remained relatively quiet on public issues. Nevertheless, individuals, who are LSA members, frequently engage in public debate and advocate for policy change.

In recent years LSA has worked in partnership with a range of institutions and organisations in the UK. In 2015 LSA contributed to the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) 'Teaching and learning in the disciplines' project and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) review of Subject Benchmarks. The aim of the Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines project was to identify key themes and issues across the social

¹ This figure is substantially reduced from 2013 where, at its peak, the impact factor was closer to 1.2. This decline has been attributed to the increased number of volumes in circulation per year.

sciences in order to understand the sector's needs from a discipline perspective. Twenty three learned societies participated in the study, which resulted in a national report on HE pedagogy, published in October, 2015 (Bulman, 2015).ⁱ The project was concerned to address the following questions:

- What issues preoccupy higher education academics, particularly in their teaching and facilitating of student learning in their disciplines?
- How are these challenges likely to evolve over time?
- What particular issues confront academic teachers in different disciplines?
- What can the HEA, professional bodies and learned societies do to help?

Representatives from the LSA conducted three focus groups in Scotland, Northern England and Southern England. A total of 19 participants were involved, all of whom were currently employed and teaching/researching within the field of leisure studies. Findings were presented in a report submitted to the HEA in July, 2015 (Fletcher et al., 2015).

The LSA has contributed to the work of the QAA since 2000, when the first Subject Benchmarks for Sport, Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality were developed. Subject Benchmarks help universities to focus on the standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. The Benchmark Statements describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject (QAA, 2015). As the learned society for leisure studies in the UK this is a rare opportunity for LSA to formally influence curriculum developments.

The LSA is a learned society within the Academy of Social Sciences. We continue to be actively involved in the AcSS's 'Campaign for Social Science' and other events, including conferences, seminars and workshops. As a learned society within the AcSS we have the capacity to work with other learned societies which might have overlapping interests in leisure pedagogy.

What is next for the LSA?

As we have already discussed above, LSA recently participated in the HEA's 'Teaching and learning in the disciplines' project. Findings from this project prompted LSA to critically reflect on itself in terms of its aims, ambitions, current and future objectives.

We remain committed to our central goals of fostering research in leisure studies; promoting interest in leisure studies and advancing education in this

field; encouraging debate through publications (mainly via the journal, *Leisure Studies*); stimulating the exchange of ideas on contemporary leisure issues; and disseminating knowledge of leisure studies to create the conditions for better-informed decisions by policy makers. However, we are perhaps more mindful than ever that these aims were established in 1975, at a time when the field of leisure studies was burgeoning, less competitive and the HE sector was less market driven. The position of leisure studies is quite different from when these aims were imagined. It would be easy for the LSA to ignore the challenges identified by participants in the study. In many cases, these are not isolated to leisure studies (see Bulman, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2015) and/or are too big for a single learned society to tackle alone (see Spracklen, 2013). However, this would be counter-productive. As a learned society we embraced this project as a basis for reviewing how we operate, serve our current and future membership and, most importantly, how we ensure the sustainability and development of our subject field. The remainder of this article will be devoted to responding to some of these challenges.

The declining availability of leisure studies degrees in UK universities

This is arguably the LSA's greatest challenge and in some ways is the one the LSA has least control and influence over. Tackling this decline is beyond the scope of the LSA. The association is not in a position to influence strategic decisions taken at senior management levels of universities. The LSA is a learned society within the Academy of Social Sciences. Our relationship with AcSS and other learned societies means we are able to draw upon a critical mass of academics and activists committed to lobbying universities and policy makers to ensure the social sciences, including leisure studies, have a future.

Leisure studies needs to be taught – especially in single leisure studies degrees – but in their absence, in sport, tourism and event-related studies, among others. The LSA needs to liaise more closely with other learned societies in the sub-fields of sport, events, tourism etc. to ensure the inclusion of leisure-related subjects in their degree programmes.

The LSA should be more visible among other learned societies and professional bodies

Given increasing pressures in Higher Education institutions for research to be 'impactful', the LSA might consider tendering for research projects and inviting collaborations between other learned societies (UK and abroad) working in the field of leisure studies. The LSA might also commit to contributing towards multi- and inter-

disciplinary research to provide originality. It already has memoranda of understanding with both the Australia and New Zealand Association for Leisure Studies (ANZALS) and the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies (CALs) and we are pursuing how best to get the most out of these relationships – e.g. sharing of resources, collaborative bidding. In recent years the LSA has worked hard to be more inclusive towards leisure industry practitioners. This has been achieved, in part through inviting speakers from outside of academia to deliver keynote addresses at the annual conference. The LSA must sustain these links and work to become more visible outside of academic communities.

The LSA could pursue policy-related research to develop rigor

By enhancing its status as a field of social science, leisure studies, could break free from being defined in terms of course provision and become a field able to contribute to contemporary social debates and be of value to policy makers, thus ensuring it remains a vital lens within the social sciences for addressing many of the global challenges of the 21st century. Our relationship with organisations such as the HEA, QAA and AcSS ensures that LSA remains at the cusp of social and cultural change in leisure studies provision.

Continue to ‘foster research in leisure studies’

The LSA remains committed to this aim. The Association has an inventory of thousands of books, which are available to purchase from our website. However, in recent years, the financial stability of the Association has been threatened. In house book production had become too expensive as a result of the increased cost of production, combined with declining publication sales. To ensure financial solvency, in 2014 the Executive Committee took the decision that the LSA would no longer produce its own books. The fact that its conferences attracted research of publishable quality has always been a source of pride for the LSA and it is regrettable that it is no longer able to publish these books. That being said some members of the Executive Committee are currently discussing the possibility of establishing a new book series with a commercial publisher. There are currently discussions taking place among the Executive Committee on how best to disseminate LSA’s vast back-catalogue of books. Current proposals include donating them to developing countries, thereby widening current engagement with the field of leisure studies.

In addition to being an outlet for disseminating research the LSA might consider providing small pools of money to its members to facilitate research. This would undoubtedly be of benefit to its membership, but more importantly ensures the LSA is directly

contributing to the development of the field. The Executive Committee are currently discussing the viability of this proposal.

The LSA and its members

Over the last 2-3 years the LSA has worked hard to enhance the way that it communicates with its members and other friends of the Association by implementing a new digital strategy. The core of this strategy has been the establishment of a new website, which has increased functionality for sharing information with and between its members. The LSA has also substantially increased its presence on social media in the hope of more effectively connecting its worldwide membership.

A review of membership details and in particular, membership benefits is currently underway. The broad field of leisure studies is now quite crowded in terms of different learned societies which are competing for members. The LSA needs to ensure that its terms of membership are competitive with other societies. In addition to asking its membership what they want from their learned society, the LSA may also undertake some market research of other learned societies and what they offer members. For example, as a professional academic body the LSA could be more active in delivering CPD courses and training for leisure practitioners on, for example, equality and diversity issues.

Conclusion

The LSA has a rich story of over 40 years supporting leisure and related areas to flourish. After years of economic difficulties, the year of 2014 has seen the LSA restructuring its focus and administrative system that has revamped the association and positioned it to move forward. The success of recent conferences hosted at the University of the West of Scotland (2014) and Bournemouth University (2015) combined with the extensive work with external partners helped the association to secure the financial stability it needed. Together with the commitment of its members, the voluntary work of its Executive Committee, and the enhancement of the quality of the *Leisure Studies* journal and conferences, the LSA sees a bright future ahead. In 2016 we will: review the current membership package, including considering the inclusion of incentives for members. Finally, we will continue to work with the hosts of the LSA conferences, the editorial board of *Leisure Studies*, members of other leisure associations and learned societies.

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ⁱ The report submitted on behalf of the LSA (Fletcher, Carnicelli, Lawrence and Snape, 2015) is available from: <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/1761/>