

THE PROMOTION/ENGAGEMENT OF CONTEMPORARY  
SPORTS FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN: IMPLICATIONS  
FOR NETBALL PARTICIPATION

# A REPORT FOR NETBALL SA

# SHAPE



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# EXECUTIVE REPORT

## BY PROFESSOR MURRAY DRUMMOND

Flinders University's Sport, Health, Activity, Performance and Exercise (SHAPE) Research Centre are pleased to submit the following report related to the participation of Netball in South Australia titled: The Promotion/Engagement of Contemporary Sports for Girls and Young Women: Implications for Netball Participation. This is a unique study investigating the issues that netball faces with respect to attracting and retaining participants within a social and cultural climate where a variety of contemporary sports abound. This in turn can influence the types of sports and physical activities carried out by individuals.

The Netball and Contemporary Sport Project is unique and comprises a comprehensive data set involving surveys and focus groups/interviews with participants aged 12 and over. These participants ranged from netballers as well as key stakeholders such as parents, coaches and administrators. Focus groups and interviews with smaller cohorts from the same demographic were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that emerged within the survey. The project spanned 2019-2020.

As Director of SHAPE, I would like to thank Netball SA and Flinders University for funding this important research investigation. The findings in this report

will positively impact the sport of netball and assist in supporting efforts to improve participation and retention in netball in South Australia.

I would like to acknowledge each of the chief investigators, and research assistant, for their tireless work over the last year and a half. Recruiting participants for studies such as these is always a difficult task. I would especially like to thank Ms Hayley Truskewycz for her efforts in this respect along with interviewing and analysing data.



# BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

**T**his strategic research sought to investigate the impact that wide ranging contemporary sports participation is having upon netball in South Australia, in the aim of increasing evidence-based knowledge on female participation across all sports. It is clear that the promotion and growth of opportunities available for girls and young women to participate in numerous sports, and in particular traditionally male dominated sports (i.e. AFL women's leagues), has resulted in a "shuffling" of female sports participants rather than leading to an increase in the number of new participants overall. This 'shuffling' is anecdotally having serious consequences for traditional female oriented sports, such as netball with respect to player retention, club culture, memberships, and survival. Netball SA was concerned with decreasing membership numbers across affiliated associations and clubs and there is reason to argue that a similar decline in numbers across other traditional female oriented sports is also occurring. It is important to understand the issues that confront netball in SA, and this information will enable strategies to be developed to minimise attrition, and potentially bolster female oriented sports at the 'grass roots' level.

This strategic, and timely research, involved a large-scale survey with key stakeholders involved in netball, as well as a range of stakeholders involved in other sports likely to impact upon netball in SA. Key stakeholders included female sporting participants, families and administrators. Upon completion of the large-scale survey, focus groups and qualitative interviews were conducted.

This research was designed to provide Netball SA with evidence to better understand the current landscape of female sports participation in South Australia and enable the development of strategies to ensure netball can continue to be viewed as a sport of choice for all.

## THE OUTCOMES OF THIS RESEARCH WILL:

1. Influence future design and marketing of Netball SA programs to better engage the target markets for netball;
2. Enable advice and targeted support for affiliated clubs and associations to better market netball to their local community;
3. Provide evidence to seek better collaboration across female sport providers to work together to grow female participation across all sports rather than compete for the attention of current sport participants; and
4. Identify the need to review netball formats to meet the needs of the societal changes in sport engagement.

This is the first mixed-methods study in South Australia to investigate the factors that contribute to the phenomenon we have coined 'shuffling' in female sport. The rising popularity of sports such as Australian football for women (AFLW) has placed additional pressure on netball to continue to attract and retain girls and young women into their sport. The proposed study is therefore significant because resulting recommendations and actionable advice may assist sporting codes such as netball to sustain and potentially grow participatory rates, address factors that undermine netball as a choice for girls and young women, and tackle other associated issues in the immediate sporting experience. Consequently, this research is responsive to the changing sporting landscape and as such, offers other sporting organisations experiencing the 'shuffling' phenomenon vital perspective. The implications of this research are therefore significant in informing policy, branding, recruitment and retention strategies and approaches to engaging girls and young women into sport.

# METHODOLOGY

**Phase One** used a quantitative research design with an online questionnaire to explore sport participation and commitment. **Phase Two** consisted of qualitative focus groups and interviews to explore themes that arose from Phase One. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee.

## SAMPLE:

The qualitative and quantitative participant base of the study was sourced from the netball community in South Australia utilising Netball SA to assist with recruitment. Participants included players, coaches, club members, umpires and parents. Notably, many had been involved in multiple roles throughout their netball careers; for example, members identified as players and had at some point coached or were on committees.

## RECRUITMENT:

Snowball sampling was the primary recruitment strategy employed within the study. The study was advertised on the Flinders University research website and was shared with the wider netball community via Netball SA's membership database. Netball SA distributed the study information via email and through their social network feeds (such as Facebook) to maximise recruitment potential. Face-to-face recruitment was used in conjunction with snowballing efforts, where researchers attended Priceline Stadium during key Netball events, such as the Priceline Pharmacy Country Championship Competition and the regular netball season competition Adelaide Metropolitan Netball Division (AMND) in 2019. Noteworthy, at the end of the Stage One questionnaire, participants were able to indicate their willingness to be involved in the Stage Two interview component of the study following the completion of the survey.

## METHODS:

### PHASE ONE – QUANTITATIVE:

Phase One used an observational cross-sectional research design. Informed consent was gained from all participants, and additional parental consent was sought for all participants aged under 18 years as per ethical guidelines. To be included in the study, participants had to be aged 12 years and over, female, and currently playing a sport.

A questionnaire was designed by the research team with items relating to participant characteristics, sporting involvement (up to three main sports), items pertaining to social norms in sport participation, and commitment to sport. The items relating to social norms were based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and the items relating to sport commitment were taken from the valid and reliable Sports Commitment Questionnaire (Scanlan et al, 2016). The survey was disseminated online. In addition, researchers attended

Netball SA carnivals to disseminate the survey, using iPads to collect the data.

### PHASE TWO – QUALITATIVE:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their involvement in netball. In particular, the interview questions were designed to investigate the contemporary sporting landscape for women and girls. A specific focus was placed on experiences of cross-code sport participation from not only the players but also surrounding netball stakeholders such as club members. Informed consent was gained from all participants, and additional parental consent was sought for all participants aged under-18 years. A total of 27 individuals were interviewed, 8 were living and playing in regional and country areas with the remaining 19 living and playing in the Adelaide Metropolitan area. Six of the participants identified as playing both football and netball, with the remainder being netball members involved as players, parents, coaches, managers and umpires; often in a combination of multiple roles. Most interviews were one on one, with four being conducted in pairs and one in a group of three. Interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim using a third-party transcription service.

### DATA ANALYSIS:

**Quantitative:** Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software 25.0 (SPSS, 2017) was used for all quantitative analyses. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample (i.e., means and percentages), and inferential statistics were used to establish any significant differences between groups (adolescents vs adults).

**Qualitative:** Deductive thematic analysis was used to interpret and explore the emergent themes from the data. Initial stages of the analysis involved familiarisation with the data, initial interpretations and finally grouping of themes in an iterative manner. The grouping of more well-defined themes required three iterations between two of the researchers. The key themes that were further developed throughout the process were: being a cross-coder, team size and resources, governance, and opportunities.



# PHASE ONE

# QUANTITATIVE

# RESULTS

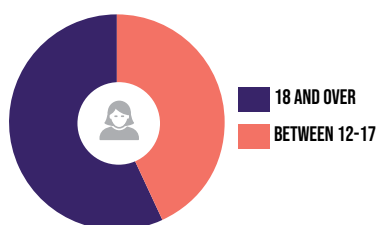
## RESPONSE RATE:

Overall, 835 people clicked on the online survey. Participants were removed from the analysis if they were aged under 18 years and did not have parental consent, were under the minimum age (12 years), or had completed less than 44 per cent of the survey. The point at which 44 per cent of the survey was completed represented completion of items relating to the main sport that was played. To be included in analyses, participants were also required to either be currently playing netball or had played in the last 12 months. The final sample in the analysis consisted of 482 participants (208 female adolescents and 273 adult women).



## PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participants (N = 482) ranged in age from 12 to 70 years (M = 25.41 years, SD = 13.42). Overall, 208 were aged between 12-17 years (M = 14.38, SD = 1.83), and 273 were aged 18 and over (M = 33.81, SD = 12.30)[one participant did not report age].



While all participants either currently played netball or had been playing in the last 12 months, only 448 (93%) of participants reported netball as their "most played" sport. The remaining 33 participants listed netball within their top three sports. When asked to indicate the highest level of netball that they played,

471 participants responded. Of these, 418 (89%) played club netball, 32 (7%) played for the state, 10 (2%) played at a recreational level, 4 (1%) played at national level, and 3 (1%) played at the school level.

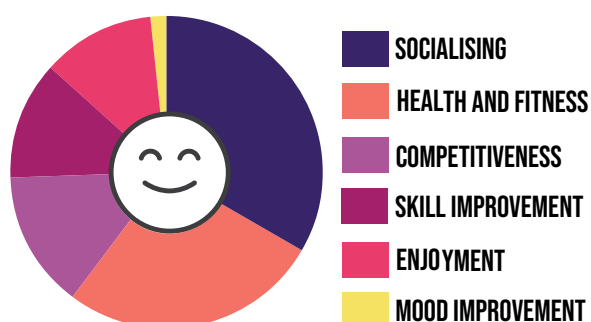
When asked how much they enjoy playing netball on a scale of 1, not at all, to 5 extremely, the average response was 4.52 (SD = 0.60) with all participants stating at least 3 (moderately enjoy playing) or more.

## REASONS FOR LIKING AND DISLIKING NETBALL

Participants were asked to indicate the top three things they liked and disliked about playing netball.

**For the likes**, 466 participants responded to this item. Six main themes emerged. The most commonly cited reason for liking netball was socialising (e.g., 'being with friends' 85%, n = 395); health and fitness (e.g., 'keeps me fit' 69%, n = 320), competitiveness (e.g., 'the competition' 36%, n = 169), skills (e.g., 'skill improvement' 31%, n = 146), enjoyment (e.g., 'I just love the game' 30%, n = 139), and mood improvement (e.g., 'makes me feel better about myself' 4%, n = 20).

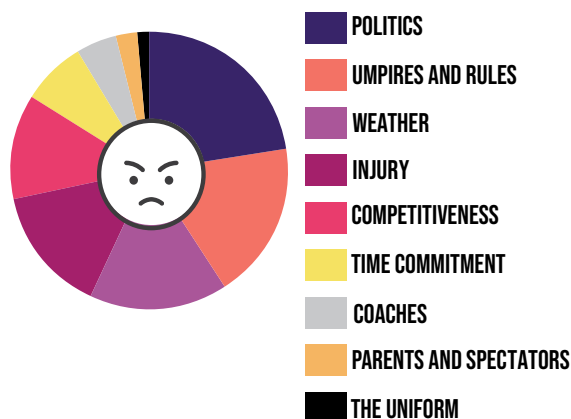
## REASONS FOR LIKING NETBALL



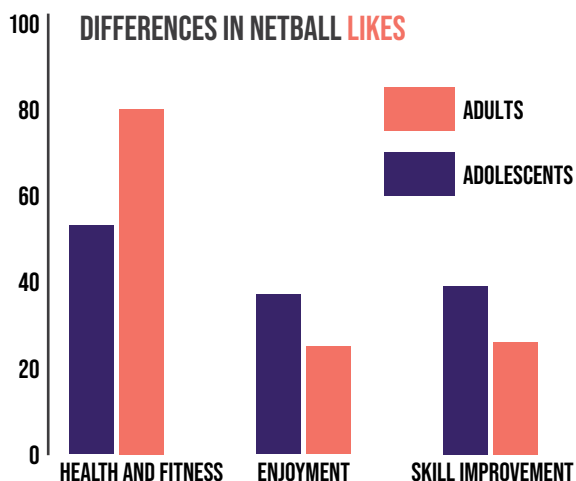
**For the dislikes**, 334 participants responded. Overall, nine different themes emerged. These included negative social interactions (e.g., 'the politics'; 37%, n = 122), umpires and rules (e.g., 'the umpires are biased sometimes' 30%, n = 99), weather (e.g., 'playing in the rain' 26%, n = 86), injury (e.g., 'getting hurt' 24%, n = 79), competitiveness (e.g., 'pressure of performing well' 20%, n = 67), time

commitment/burden (e.g., 'a lot of training' 12%,  $n = 40$ ), coaches (e.g., coach's favoritism' 8%,  $n = 28$ ), parents and spectators (e.g., 'parents that give us a hard time for losing' 4%,  $n = 13$ ), and the uniform (e.g., 'wearing dresses' 2%,  $n = 6$ ).

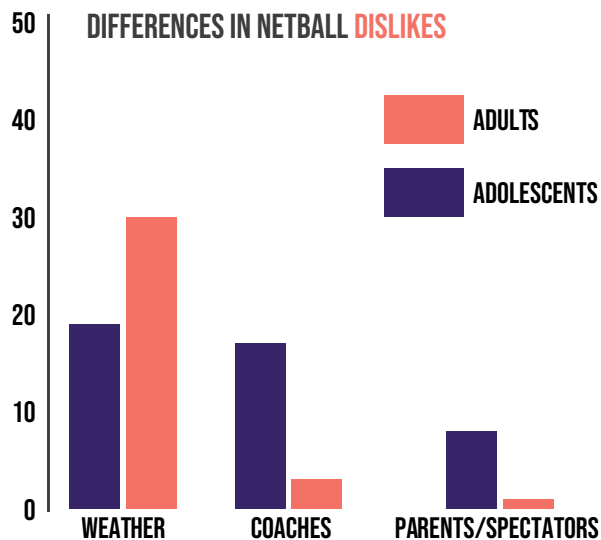
### REASONS FOR DISLIKING NETBALL



Themes were compared between adolescents and adults to see if any differences existed. Overall, significantly more adults (80%) than adolescents (53%) reported liking the health and fitness benefits of playing netball,  $p < .001$ . More adolescents (37%) versus adults (25%) reported enjoyment as a main like ( $p = .007$ ), and more adolescents (39%) versus adults (26%) reported skill improvement as a main like ( $p = .004$ ). No other significant differences on likes emerged.

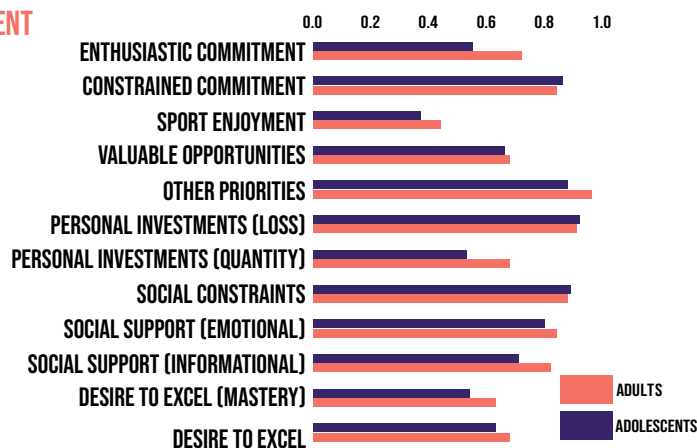


For the dislikes, adults (30%) were significantly more likely to mention the weather in comparison to adolescents (19%;  $p = .037$ ). However, adolescents (17%) were significantly more likely to mention coaches as something they dislike in comparison to adults (3%), ( $p < .001$ ). Adolescents (8%) were also more likely than adults (1%) to mention that they did not like behaviour from parents/spectators ( $p = .005$ ). No other significant differences on dislikes emerged.



### SPORT COMMITMENT

The Sport Commitment Questionnaire-2 (Scanlan, Chow, Sousa, Scanlan & Knifsend, 2016) was used to assess levels of psychological commitment to netball. Participants responded to 58 items that represented enthusiastic commitment (the desire and resolve to persist over time), constrained commitment (obligation to persist), sport enjoyment (feelings of joy), valuable opportunities that are only present in relation to the sport, other priorities that conflict with the sport, personal investment (in relation to the personal resources that have been invested into the sport and the amount of this), social constraints (perceptions of obligations to remain in the sport), social support, and the desire to excel. From Table 1 it can be seen that sport enjoyment and enthusiastic commitment were the most highly rated reasons for staying committed to playing netball, while constrained commitment was the lowest. There were also significant differences across the age groups, with adolescents rating all forms of commitment higher except for "other priorities", which was a stronger reason for adults, and "constrained commitment" where there was no difference.

**(TABLE 1) NETBALL COMMITMENT****Table 1.** Means (and standard deviations) for participants who responded to the sport commitment subscales in relation to netball by age category (n = 376)

### PLANS TO CONTINUE PLAYING NETBALL






Participants were asked to indicate their intentions to play netball “next year” and also “in the next 2-3 years”. Overall, 441 (94%) intended to play netball next year and 26 participants (6%) did not [data were missing for 15 participants]. When looking at the next 2-3 years, 408 participants (87%) were planning to continue playing netball and 62 (13%) were not [data were missing for 12 participants].

Within the next year, significantly more adults (9%) than adolescents (1%) intended not to continue playing netball,  $p < .001$ . Within the next 2-3 years, significantly more adults (19%) than adolescents (5%) intended not to continue playing netball,  $p < .001$ . Age and potential injury were cited as the major reasons why.

### SOCIAL NORMS IN SPORTING PARTICIPATION

In relation to the social norms for sporting participation, the majority of participants agreed that it is easy to play netball (64% agreed), their close friends played netball (83%) and their close friends approve of others playing netball (79%). They also indicated that they thought it is cool to play netball based on the media (80%), and that their parents approve of them playing netball (83%). In relation to these social norms, netball had the highest agreement for each of these statements, with AFL ranking second highest for close friends playing the sport (37%) and close friends being approving of playing the sport (35%). AFL was also ranked second highest in terms of perceived ‘coolness’ of playing the sport based on the media (74%). Basketball rated second for the ease of playing the sport (57%), and parental approval for the sport (27%) (Table 2).

**(TABLE 2) SOCIAL NORMS: PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREED WITH EACH STATEMENT BY SPORT.**

	 <b>NETBALL</b>	 <b>AFL</b>	 <b>SOCCER</b>	 <b>CRICKET</b>	 <b>BASKETBALL</b>
IT IS EASY TO PLAY THIS SPORT	64%	46%	45%	34%	57%
MY CLOSE FRIENDS PLAY THIS SPORT	83%	37%	15%	13%	43%
MY CLOSE FRIENDS THINK I SHOULD PLAY THIS SPORT	79%	35%	6%	6%	30%
BASED ON THE MEDIA, IT IS COOL TO PLAY THIS SPORT	80%	74%	37%	33%	49%
MY PARENTS THINK I SHOULD PLAY THIS SPORT	83%	26%	8%	9%	27%

NOTE: DATA EXPRESSED AS A PERCENTAGE OF THOSE PARTICIPANTS WHO COMPLETED THIS ITEM






**Table 2:** Social norms for netball, AFL, soccer, cricket and basketball: percentage of participants who agreed with each statement by sport (n=482)



When looking at the social norms for sporting participation by age (adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years, and adults aged 18 years and over) (Table 3), the majority of participants in both age categories agreed that netball is easy to play, close friends play and approve, it is perceived as 'cool' based on the media, and parents approve. In terms of being easy to play, basketball rated second highest for this variable for adolescents (64%) and adults (50%). Australian Rules Football achieved the second highest agreement for both adolescents and adults for close friends' approval of playing this sport (47% adolescents and 29% adults)

and the sport being 'cool' based on the media (74% adolescents and 75% adults). A higher proportion of adolescents than adults agreed that AFL was easy to play (56% adolescents, 38% adults), close friends played (48 versus 29%) or approved of the sport (47 versus 26%).

**(TABLE 3) SOCIAL NORMS: PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREED WITH EACH STATEMENT BY SPORT AND AGE.**

		 <b>NETBALL</b>	 <b>AFL</b>	 <b>SOCCER</b>	 <b>CRICKET</b>	 <b>BASKETBALL</b>
<b>IT IS EASY TO PLAY THIS SPORT</b>	<b>12-17 YEARS</b>	66%	56%	50%	38%	64%
	<b>18+ YEARS</b>	63%	38%	40%	31%	50%
<b>MY CLOSE FRIENDS PLAY THIS SPORT</b>	<b>12-17 YEARS</b>	83%	48%	22%	14%	46%
	<b>18+ YEARS</b>	83%	29%	9%	13%	40%
<b>MY CLOSE FRIENDS THINK I SHOULD PLAY THIS SPORT</b>	<b>12-17 YEARS</b>	80%	47%	10%	8%	38%
	<b>18+ YEARS</b>	77%	26%	3%	5%	24%
<b>BASED ON THE MEDIA, IT IS COOL TO PLAY THIS SPORT</b>	<b>12-17 YEARS</b>	83%	74%	34%	27%	47%
	<b>18+ YEARS</b>	77%	75%	40%	37%	50%
<b>MY PARENTS THINK I SHOULD PLAY THIS SPORT</b>	<b>12-17 YEARS</b>	95%	39%	14%	13%	36%
	<b>18+ YEARS</b>	72%	15%	4%	5%	19%

NOTE: DATA EXPRESSED AS A PERCENTAGE OF THOSE PARTICIPANTS WHO COMPLETED THIS ITEM

**Table 3.** Social norms for netball, AFL, soccer, cricket and basketball: percentage of participants who agreed with each statement by sport and age (n = 482)

Fifty-five per cent of the participants in the study agreed that it was possible for them to play both netball and AFL (61% adolescents, 51% adults). Eighty per cent of participants agreed that it was possible to play more than one sport at a time (84% adolescents, 77% adults).

# PHASE TWO

# QUALITATIVE RESULTS

**T**hrough the analysis of the qualitative data, four key themes emerged. (i) 'Being a Cross Coder' highlights experiences of players that were engaged in both Australian Rules Football and Netball. (ii) 'Size Does Matter' emphasises resources and environment associated with team and club size. (iii) 'Bored Sport' underlines netball's appeal and identifies governance and politics issues within the organised sport. Finally, (iv) '(Un)desirable Pathways', seeks to present the pathways and opportunities for netballers that may impact how they engage with the women's contemporary sporting landscape. While many of these themes are multifaceted and have the capacity to influence each other, for the sake of clarity they will be discussed separately as their own discrete themes.

## THEME 1: BEING A CROSS-CODER

Netball has been a popular sport among women for many years across Australian and certainly within South Australia. Its prominence in the contemporary landscape remains strong. However, with a range of sports becoming increasingly available, together with greater levels of accessibility for women to play, there are more choices for girls', and women's sporting engagement. One such sport that has captured the hearts of minds of contemporary females is Australian Rules Football. Participants routinely explained how they were exposed to football as children, yet they experienced limited opportunity to play the sport in a formal manner as they were growing up. In 2017 the AFLW's creation meant there was an emergent pathway, and opportunity to be involved in structured, organised football. The cross-coder participants discussed the way in which football was an exciting new opportunity for them to be involved in a sport that they always wanted to try but were not able to due to cultural and practical constraints. It was claimed:

**Participant:** So, I always wanted to play football

but just never really had the opportunity. I guess it wasn't a really big thing for girls or for women until AFLW came out and that's when I was like, "if they are doing it why can't I do it"?

**P:** I had always loved playing. I used to kick the ball with my dad when I was younger but never really had the opportunity to play it as a proper sport. And then as soon as the opportunity came, when I was in school, I wanted to have a go.

**P:** Just the fact that we've got an older brother and Dad and we've got older cousins and they've always been football based. I grew up watching footy, kicking the footy with my brother and so now I can play footy; whereas previously I played when I was under 11's and under 12's when I could play mixed with the boys. Once I got to 13 I couldn't play anymore (due to organisation rules) and so I stopped and I only played netball. Up until then I did both and then I had to stop and I only played netball.

*Additionally, parents of a cross-coder explain that football is something that their children have always watched and displayed an interest in playing.*

**P:** They now have an opportunity to play a sport they've been watching since they were little kids. So, a lot of girls will give it a go.

**P:** I mean, everyone's growing up being like, "Oh, footy's so fun." I mean, I play it at school all the time. I kick the footy. It's something everyone does and I think if that's really what you want to do and you love that sport so much then you should be able to have the opportunity to play. Definitely.

*Women's engagement in football was identified as an exciting new opportunity, heightened by their prior interest in the sport. Consistently women stated they were eager to be a part of something that was previously not available to them. One cross-coder explained the hype and excitement surrounding the ability for women to formally play football for the first time.*

**P:** It was a huge thing. Like, I loved, loved, loved it, you know? This is it for women like, this is the first time we've ever had a team. This is the first grand

final we've ever won. This is it. Yeah it was exciting, definitely exciting. It's like ... I've always wanted to give footy a shot and now it's happening.

*Furthermore, it was agreed upon among the wider sporting community that women's engagement in football was an empowering and positive movement. Two participants explain:*

**P:** (non cross-coder): I think there's more opportunities, yeah and maybe there's young girls who just want to do things that are different you know, it's like our young tradie movement where girls think, "yeah, hey that looks different and I think I can do that and that's cool" because it's being advertised.

**P:** (non cross-coder): I think it's a really empowering thing for women, to just sort of show that we can do more than what society has told us we can do. So, it's really nice to sort of, to show that women are proving that we're capable of everything that the men are capable of.

*The same participant explains that they felt that being drafted into the AFLW was a tangible and realistic goal, further encouraging their engagement and stoking their excitement.*

**P:** You could play AFL, really. Like some girls have been drafted and really, I mean they have played their whole life and stuff, but they train hard and it's your physical ability.

*A group of younger participants discussed how they perceived football as one additional opportunity that may allow them to play sport professionally. Specifically, they highlight that the male domination of some sports have previously limited their engagement.*

**P:** There's so many women who don't get the opportunity to play professionally because it's maybe classified more as a men's sport or that kind of stuff. So, it's good that now we get more of a variety of sports to do.

*The cross coders emphasised that their engagement in football heightened their awareness of their body, diet and how they manage their training loads. Some indicated that their engagement in football made them stronger and fitter for netball, ultimately benefitting their performance in netball. One cross coder explains the considerations she had to adopt in order to manage her dual sporting participation.*

**P:** Yeah with footy I'm always thinking about "what I'm going to do during the week? What am I going to eat? Like what kind of carbs do I want to have on Saturday night?" and things like that – "what do I want to have for brekky"? But yeah, with netball it was never really a thing. Like, I would go and have an "all you can eat" meal for dinner and I would still go and play netball.

*The women highlighted enjoying the physicality of football as it provided a different domain to their previous sporting experience. Many participants stated they had developed a more physical netball game and found it difficult to restrict their physicality in compliance with netball rules. In returning to play netball one of the participant's claimed:*

**P:** It was hard to not be physical because of that's what you've got to do in footy, but yeah for playing a game for so many years and then playing another game for such a short period of time it was pretty crazy how much of an impact it was making on netball.

*Additionally, the netball community, including umpires, coaches, club members and players, observed the same physicality.*

**P:** Definitely, there's been a couple of things, like a few more knees in the back when people go up, and a bit more shoving in the back, which I know isn't a part, like in football either. But like I've definitely had words with some players who I know, and I've had to tell them to pull their head in, you know, and say "this is a court and you're not allowed to do that", kind of thing.

*Building on the notion of physicality, a continual worry for both netball and football players alike was the prevalence of injuries in football. Participants identified football related injuries as more severe due to the high level of contact, as well as the strength and conditioning requirements and skills required to manage and prevent injuries. Although there is a requirement to comply with anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury prevention training, many players identified the risk of serious injury as a key factor when considering their initial engagement or continued involvement in football.*

**P:** Even though footy's such a great sport, and I love it because there's always something going on, it's just that possibility of serious injury and so my [parents], they wouldn't necessarily stop me if I absolutely loved playing it but they might suggest not playing.

**P:** So injuries are just crazy in footy and the toll on your body. I mean in footy you go so hard and you are absolutely stuffed at the end of the day and then your body is probably going to ache all day Monday. The toll it takes on your body is crazy different compared to netball.

*Moreover, the risk of concussion was recognised as a serious concern between the cross-coders. For some of the younger participants, concussion was a considerable concern of parents as one girl explains.*

**P:** My parents said that, if I want to play footy I can't play at a high level, if I was to play footy it'd definitely just be fun because they don't want me getting concussion.

*There was a perception that not enough was being done to raise awareness and address concussion in women's football.*

**P:** I think concussion is, in football, like it's not spoken about at all. You don't hear anything about the long-term effects with concussion and it's all because AFL has such a big influence on our culture that it's just all under the rug.

*Cross-coders found similarity between their experiences and discussed that football had a more serious expectation placed on players, structures and training environments, when compared to their previous netball experiences. The football team was regularly identified as a male or masculine domain that meant there was a different environment and experience to that of their netball experiences. As one young woman stated:*

**P:** I mean, I like how serious it's taken. Our coach is really into it and really passionate about it and passionate about women in footy in particular.

**P:** It would be good if – if netball coaches went out to a footy training. I think that they would probably get a bit of a shock at like how serious it's taken. It would be good for them because then they would think like "oh what can we bring into netball that is going to make it a little bit more like that".

*Some participants explained that they had played netball for a long time and grew bored of the sport. Cross-coders regularly indicated that learning football as a new sport, including skills and rules, was an enjoyable and refreshing motivator to engagement.*

**P:** Yeah like the football coach can teach me everything because I knew nothing about the sport. This is like later on you know when I'm a bit older, it's like well you know your coach will give you, not that I had attitude or anything but more like the coach would tell you what to do and you just do it and you know. But like with football you have to sit there and really take in what they're saying.

*Cross-coders vividly described the feelings and sensations of playing football. It was commonplace for the team excitement and harmony surrounding games to be described as an exhilarating experience.*

**P:** I mean there's nothing that can beat like honestly catching the ball on the run from a tap and kicking a goal. But there's no better feeling in a game that I've played yet. You know, kicking a goal from you know, a distance and like, the winning goal or something like. That is just incredible. I mean I've had games where it's like really close with netball and everything, but it's different. Everyone gets around you, everyone's hyped up [in football].

*On occasions Australian football was compared in a polarising fashion to netball, in which netball was described as repetitive, boring and far too individual in nature.*

**P:** That's right, I love footy because there is so many more people in the team, so many more voices – like it's loud, everyone is excited about the game and excited to have a good win, hopefully. Netball for me is a little bit more like, quiet. There's only about 8-9 people and it's very casual. We don't really play to win. Yeah, there's just something about footy that's just like you just want to get out there. I don't know I can't really explain it – it's...good.

*Despite this, many of the cross coders identified that football was a sport that they enjoyed while they could, suggesting they would likely return to netball.*

**P:** I will always love netball and I may go back to netball in the future, but right now footy has just literally won my heart and I just want to get better at it and see if it can go anywhere.

*One cross-coder summed up their current sporting involvement and their observations by discussing the idea that women and girls are merely jumping between sports and seasons as opposed to leaving one for another. It is possible to argue that there is currently not a real systematic approach to football and the cross coders are 'making the most' of the opportunities that exist at the present time. As one participant stated:*

**P:** What it looks like is people are just jumping in and jumping out and just sort of moving around like shuffling, as opposed to leaving one for the other.

## THEME 2: SIZE DOES MATTER

Football was discussed as having a different capacity to engage members of the team and club, consequently resulting in a different environment to that of netball. This was often the result of the function of the team size being able to engage more players and have larger squads and more opportunities for engagement in a playing, volunteering and social capability.

**P:** A: Everyone's involved, everyone loves footy, everyone. There's so many people involved because you've got the trainers, you've got the managers, you've got everyone and it's not just the players, so that was a big one, like with netball it's just the coach and it's just the players. With football you've got like 10 other people in the sideline.

### And another female concurred stating:

**P:** Yeah and that brings in like their friends and then it's just bigger. Like it has a much different energy when you go to a football game. Because you've got all these volunteers and everyone.

*However, while the size of football teams may create an exciting atmosphere, netball teams offered a unique ability to engage a more diverse spectrum of players. One parent explains that smaller teams in netball allow for stratification of ability levels and potentially offer more opportunities to engage players.*



**P:** That's kind of the advantage netball has got. That is, you can play, as I said before, at different levels. Like in every age group there's 5 or 6 different levels you can play at. Whereas, you may not have that opportunity in football. There might only be 1 or 2 grades and you're playing and you've got a 30 – 20 kids on a team, or 25 kids on a team. And you've got massive differences in ages, and abilities. So, playing amongst that group is hard. Whereas netball you can kind of cater to their abilities.

*The size of teams and clubs across both netball and football held significant influence over the environment that was created and the resources that were available. Notably, one netball club identified their poor state of facilities but also highlighted that they felt that they were limited in their ability to access funding due to their small size when compared to other sports. In some instances, key stakeholders from smaller netball clubs felt particularly unsupported by their local council and Netball SA, explaining how they were stretched to maintain their already deteriorating facilities. The following member discusses the lack of appreciation they feel, even when raising funds to repair council courts.*

**P:** So the netball club and the tennis club together contributed \$30,000 to put in the current courts that are there now, and now the Council's charging them to use their own courts. Okay, I think fair enough, if they were charging them including depreciating and utilities for lights and toilets and that sort of stuff, but they're charging them court hire, and I'm like, "they can't even maintain the bloody things", so it's just general facilities that are not nice.

*Unsurprisingly, small teams and clubs had more difficulty filling the official roles at netball games, often relying heavily on champions, volunteers and on occasion, the umpires overlooking team deficiencies. One netballer explains they are at risk of forfeiting as they struggle to fill the required team roles on game day.*

**P:** I think we rely on our umpires being pretty understanding of not having volunteers. It's a necessity, so we're just, if it's not allowed, we're honestly just relying on the umpires turning a blind eye. If an umpire came in and they were a real stickler for the rules, that they'd go "You're not allowed to do that", it'd be like "Well okay, we forfeit".

*For some small teams the lack of volunteers or capacity to fill non-playing roles mean the team was not able to play in a higher, more appropriate, division.*

**P:** We don't have a badged umpire, so we won't be able to play A grade, and we've got a weaker team, due to people leaving this season. So, I – we wanted to go to A2, just for this season, but now we have to, actually got to Bs [B grade], because we don't have a badged umpire, which would be outrageous, if we were a very strong team still.

### THEME 3: BORED SPORT / APPEAL

Common topics to emerge regarding the wavering appeal of netball were often related to players wanting to try a new sport after being involved in netball for most of their playing life. It was often explained that players found excitement in being engaged in a new sport and learning. Additionally, some participants highlighted that netball did have the capacity to be casual with respect to expectations from the team and the competition. This may also have been a function of the various entry points and grading inconsistencies that may mix-up the competition standards. One player explained that team selection and grading was not necessarily fair.

**P:** So, probably grading is actually really important, to be fair, because there's no fairness. In my club there's no – it's not fair. You know, then you've got some people in B grade, who should have the opportunity to come up, and they're not being given that opportunity, because there are no spots available, because the team is full, but not full of A grade players, just full, right.

*Many participants spoke of netball (as a collective) being complacent in its position as a 'women's sport', where it was not proactive in promotion and engagement. Often it was referred to as being passively promoted and failing to harness the excitement surrounding the contemporary women's sporting landscape.*

**P:** It's not that these sports are pulling players – girls – away from netball. It's that netball isn't riding the wave. But they need to. They're resting back saying "oh it's netball. Everybody loves netball. All of the girls play netball". No they don't. And they won't if it's not in their face.

*The complacency of netball was closely linked to it being still largely identified as a women's and girl's sport. While this was regularly seen to be a unique strength of netball to engage women and girls in sport, it simultaneously placed gendered expectations on boys. One mother discussed the sexism her son and husband received for being a player and coach, respectively.*

**P:** Yeah – I guess our association is very focused on female participation. We try to open that up more for boys as well because, you know, if girls can play footy, boys can play netball. So we kind of bribed our son into it, he's only 8 so he thinks it's a load of fun, but there's a lot of sexism towards boys, which we're trying to change for our level and that's sort of a community opinion that we have to change too. Even as far as like my husband coaching. He's obviously a male and he, he cops a lot of slack for being a netball coach and there's a lot of sexism towards that too so I think that's a really big thing that needs to be addressed.

*Regularly participants discussed the desire for netball to take greater measures to appeal to, and provide more opportunities for, boys. This is an interesting change in*



gender dynamics.

**P:** Because I think if you're going to have a women's football team, then, so like I sort of notice it's okay for women now to play men's sports, it's still not okay for men to play women's sports so to speak.

**P:** He's got no idea, he just thinks he's having fun with a group of his girl friends and then he plays boys' sports as well. So he just sees it as a sport but if he was older I think maybe it might affect him more and he probably wouldn't want to play because of it.

**P:** That's one of the reasons women are playing football now. It's because they've [Australian Football League] broadened their appeal. Football is not just a boy's sport anymore.

*The politics and governance of clubs varied and had a diverse impact on member experiences. A few common subjects emerged throughout the interview process mainly regarding concerns around support for clubs and volunteers, coaching and umpiring development and standards, clarification and reinforcement of policies and procedures.*

*Support for regional and country clubs was limited and often left clubs feeling under supported. One member explained that the proximity of their club from their Association meant that they were regularly unable to access support and development opportunities.*

**P:** Proximity is a challenge and because we're a club, we're not allowed to approach Netball SA directly, and so we have to go through the Association. So that becomes prohibitive if we want to do something and then it's a number's game. So is Netball SA going to do anything for a small country club with only X-number of people that may turn up to a skills clinic, or something like that?

*Similarly, a lack of guidance and clarity for another regional member was identified as a concern. Regional clubs frequently discussed receiving limited support and information; expressing a need for more guidance and opportunities to develop coaches, umpires and ultimately their clubs.*

**P:** The association doesn't have any support in training umpires, coaches, anything like that. So, we, off our own backs sort of thing, implemented our own.

**And continues,**

**P:** Yeah well definitely guidance. Even a list of what is expected from a club would be ideal. Any rules or regulations, like I know they've got bi-laws and constitution, which we did get after requesting it so we could go through it. But there's still nothing in there, like they've adapted other policies that's not handed on. So, I guess even like a to do list would be amazing. Maybe some more intervention [is required].

*Umpiring quality and development was raised and highlighted on numerous occasions. Some participants argued that the umpiring quality was inconsistent, which ultimately affected the experience of playing. The quality of umpires was inconsistent and highlighted as a concern.*

**P:** I know sometimes it's all about the numbers for the annual report and the levels like, how many C badges you got last year and that kind of thing. That's the focus. It's not necessarily on the quality coming through.

**P:** But it's really hard when a game gets really physical and an umpire isn't – hasn't been trained well enough, doesn't understand the warnings perhaps well enough or whatever it is to take full control of that game. I think that's an increasing issue, at least at our association where umpires aren't controlling those matches. So, players that are becoming physically injured or they're scared of becoming physically injured and there's not that discipline there is an issue. So, I think there needs to be at least at our association, a greater investment in umpires and umpire development.

*Building on this, young umpires going through their training were often subject to ridicule from spectators and teams. Umpires that were interviewed spoke about the moments they have had to defend a junior umpire, and the lack of power they have to address poor spectator behaviour. Some participants indicated a need for spectator behaviour to be more rigorously enforced and consequences carried out should they wish to better support umpires.*

**P:** It's a real issue – yeah like these are people, well certainly one of them, in a position of power that had this kid by the end of the game in tears and refusing to go and umpire again and I think we've lost her because of that because you're saying there's no way I'm umpiring again.

*Some final concerns that were regularly expressed by members were the accessibility of online resources, the content and delivery of courses and player development. The online portal for members was seen as lacking intuitive design, making it inefficient, convoluted and confusing to navigate.*

**P:** I think, the biggest issue I would have with the resources available is, actually the website itself, the Netball SA website. I find I - It's difficult to navigate. It's awful, to put it bluntly.

**It was also identified that:**

**P:** It's a terrible portal to use for anybody, so if you're just going to it, as the public page and you're not a current player, you just want some information about sports, or about what's near you, or anything like that. It's hard to use.

*Some members discussed training and online courses. While most members identified that there were adequate*

opportunities provided by Netball SA, there was a consensus in relation to the delivery and content of some of the courses. Most claimed that the provision of online courses were valuable but indicated a desire for more face-to-face practical components. This was viewed as an important step in ensuring coach education and quality, consequently affecting the standard of player development.

**P:** It's the basic skills that are lacking, a decent pass, a movement and all of that. And it's, well to me, you need the coaching courses there but by the same token, and the problem I think now is that, I think the first coaching course is done online. And that's great, but then who's doing that practical, putting that into practice and setting the tone about what's actually important?

#### THEME 4: (UN)DESIRABLE PATHWAYS

Pathways through netball were varied and often compounded by a diverse range of factors. Pathways through to the elite levels of competition were identified as limited and competitive. This was mainly a function of the limited spots available on representative teams resulting in a bottleneck selection process.

**P:** Yeah. Netball with the high levels is very hard to break – I mean you look at every age group in a state. There's 10 or 11 girls that can get into a state squad. And there's only 1 super netball team here in Adelaide. And it's very hard in that most are full of imports. So how, where do the girls go with netball as far as getting into those top teams?

*Additionally, the international reputation and competitive standard of the professional competition in Australia was a considerable factor when determining the reality of being able to pursue a professional netballing career. There is a significant presence of international players in the National league, compounding selective opportunities for young Australian players.*

**P:** There we go, that issue. I was looking at the grand final the other day going [saying], "mmm players from England, players from England, players from Jamaica, players from England, players from New Zealand. You know, I mean any spots up there for Aussie players? I think that is the big issue. I think they actually need to put a cap on how many internationals you can have per those teams.

#### It was also stated:

**P:** There's just limited opportunities at that top level, and therefore to get games. When, if you want to pursue a professional career you're not going to have that opportunity in Australia unless you're the best of the best. With so many imports in the league.

*Notably, for netballers that were aspiring to play in elite levels of competition, the prospect of achieving elite status through another sport was a tangible and often attractive*

*possibility. One young player described her ambition to play professionally and indicated she would consider swapping into another sport if the opportunity was available to her. She claimed:*

**P:** Because if I am doing another sport, and I'm better at that than netball and I do have the opportunity I reckon I'd take it. (12-years-old)

*Another member rationalised that players that have a well-rounded ability in netball may progress further in another transferrable sport and therefore may take the opportunity.*

**P:** I suppose when you look at the netball numbers and you get, it's very hard to get to that pointy end of being up the top. So, if you think you're middle of the range, well I might be able to have more success in a different, a bit more obscure sport, or something different where I can stand out a little bit more.

*Specifically, football has more places available in a team and was acknowledged to be an attractive option for some.*

**P:** Obviously having the opportunity to get into AFL and get an AFL contract with 30 girls on a team, with 10 teams. There's a lot more opportunities if you've got a natural talent to get that so, it's worth considering.

*Outside the elite and professional domains of netball, the pathways and choices presented to players were abundant and flexible. The ability to play netball all year round between metropolitan and surrounding areas meant that players were provided with flexible options for their engagement often resulting in fluctuations in player numbers at different associations throughout the year. These fluctuations were a well-accepted and routinely expected part of netball's seasonal changes. One member indicated that many players move throughout their career but they will often return to their original club in the later stages of their career.*

**P:** We have a lot of players leave and we find that extremely often they come back. So, we play summer and winter, which is an advantage for us because what that means is they'll go and play those strong competitions in winter and the main competition they'll go out to the Barossa or to town and then they'll come back and play summer with us. And quite often they'll go into town for a couple of years and then they'll say, "Nah, I mean I'm never going to play for Australia, so I think I'm just going to go back to my club", and that's the environment we try to create; is it's your club, you will always belong here, and they come back to us.

# CONCLUSION

It appears from the data that support for netball among its participants remains solid and stable. However, it is clear that netball is becoming crowded by other contemporary sports and will need to find ways in which to make itself relevant if it seeks to be the primary sport for girls and young women in the state, moving forward. It must be noted that these contemporary sports are not going to go away. Indeed they will continue to grow and traditional female-oriented sports, such as netball, will need to adapt and work in conjunction with these sports in order to continue. The theme related to cross-coders provides, arguably, the most poignant aspect of this report as it relates directly to the group of young women that are most likely to “code-hop for good”. One analogy that comes to mind is the swing voter in a state or federal election. While there are long-term party voters it is the swing voters who are the ones who have the potential to bring a government to power. This is similar to cross-coders, who at present are happily playing a variety of sports and enjoying the diversity it provides them physically, mentally and socially. The problem arises, like in most sports, when the time for specialisation occurs and the organisation, club, or other externally perceived demand places pressure on an individual to choose the sport to which they will commit all of their time and energy. While this is understandable particularly with respect to a “pathways approach” in which specific sports seek out high achieving athletes to attain the highest possible level of achievement, it does not necessarily lend itself to longevity within the sport as a consequence of burnout, injury or both. While some of the cross-coders may have enormous talent, pushing them too far to commit unconditionally will indeed push them away from sports, or to other sports, forever. The need to take a nurturing approach to sporting engagement is key in this negotiation by individual clubs and organisations. We need to be mindful that many of those in positions of administrative power, and who may have played netball in their

youth, are going to be considerably older than the young people being referred to in these instances. Times have transformed in terms of gender equity while the sports on offer for young women abound. Similarly the way in which young people perceive the world and the role that sport plays within their lives has also changed. Not only is the “sport space” crowded, but also the opportunities that now exist for young people beyond sport, and on a global scale, are far greater than previous generations. The allure of being “elite” within a sport may not be as appealing as it once was. Therefore catering for the ‘swing voters’ will be a key in terms of maintaining high participant rates in sports.

A sport such as netball, where there are obvious synergies with other dynamic ball sports, such as Australian football will need to explore ways in which it can co-exist with AFLW in order for both sports to thrive and provide young women with opportunities to play both sports. On occasions this may mean that the athlete needs to take a short break from the sport in which they are currently involved. However, the “door” should never be closed and contingencies need to be established in order to make the athlete feel welcome to leave and welcome to return. However, this is arguably not a concern for netball alone. Indeed there will be numerous sports across the South Australian landscape that will be in a similar situation. Therefore building and developing strong relationships with a variety of sports throughout South Australia will need to be established in order to mitigate the potential loss of participants from sports. Information and education sharing will be crucial in a contemporary sporting environment that is becoming increasingly challenging due to a range of social, cultural and health related concerns. This is even more relevant where girls are concerned given the significant “in-roads” that has been made to establish participatory and competitive pathways for girls and women in recent times. Losing girls and women now will affect a range of sports, including netball. Working together with other sports will be key.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**NETBALL IS AN IMPORTANT COMMUNITY SPORT WITH A RICH SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA. IT SITS NEATLY AS A MAJOR PARTICIPATORY SPORT FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN PARTICULAR.**

1

To continue nurturing the sport as a major pathway for girls and young women through traditional and non-traditional means including community organisations, schools, football and cricket affiliations, online promotions.

2

Invest in a targeted media and social awareness campaign that outline netball as a contemporary sport that will provide significant physical, mental, social, and cultural benefits to individuals and the community (Note: This is even more relevant in the post COVID-19 era).

**THERE ARE MANY CHALLENGES THAT EXIST FOR NETBALL IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA WITH RESPECT TO PARTICIPANT NUMBERS. THESE CHALLENGES RELATE TO COMPETING CONTEMPORARY SPORTS SUCH AS AFLW, WOMEN'S RUGBY UNION, WOMEN'S FOOTBALL (SOCCER) AND THE POTENTIAL FOR "CROSS-CODERS" OR "CODE-HOPPING" PARTICIPANTS.**

3

Governing netball bodies (state, regional, metro and local clubs) need to continually seek out research data and understand the changing sporting landscape for women in South Australia through continual research and analysis of participation data. (Note: Invest in strategic partnerships with tertiary sector/research industry to conduct regular 5-year research data collection by Netball SA/ORSR).

4

Invest in promoting, educating, and training clubs at all levels in being flexible and adaptable in catering for cross-coders and code-hoppers. These participants are likely to be the future of women's sport in South Australia and need to be nurtured to remain in netball regardless of their commitment.

5

Promote the successful cross-coders and code-hoppers to the broader community in order to highlight the unique skills set that netball has to offer its young female participants. Make these athletes 'visible' and emphasise the role of netball in their success.

6

Offer the successful cross-coders and code-hoppers a pathway back to the sport through mentoring, coaching, and administration, thereby emphasising netball's adaptability.

7

Establish a culture of information and resource sharing with a range of sporting codes to support the development and aspirational goals and cross-code athletes.

**THE GOVERNANCE OF NETBALL IN TERMS OF ITS PARTICIPATION RATES IS CRUCIAL FOR THE LONGEVITY OF THE SPORT. BEING “AGILE” AND ADAPTING THE CHANGING SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL LANDSCAPE WILL BE ESSENTIAL IN THE IMMEDIATE AND LONG TERM FUTURE.**

**8**

Establish a state-based committee to provide oversight of netball retention and re-engagement in the sport.

**9**

Invest in the development of an easy to understand set of guidelines for “grassroots” clubs to adopt regarding engagement, retention, and re-engagement of athletes.

**10**

Design, implement and evaluate a revised participatory framework that prioritises player retention and return. This includes using evidence-based knowledge to maximise sampling (i.e., entry level experiences) and support transition through grades and pathways.

**THE TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NETBALL IN THE COMMUNITY FOR GIRLS IS DIMINISHING WITH THE ADVENT OF INCREASED NUMBERS OF CONTEMPORARY SPORTS AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES ON OFFER. SIMILARLY THROUGH GENDER EQUITY CAMPAIGNS TRADITIONAL MASCULINISED SPORTS HAVE OPENED UP AS AN OPTION FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN, SOME WITH LEGITIMATE CAREER OR ELITE SPORTING PATHWAYS. AS SUCH, THE POSITION OF NETBALL IS NO LONGER A TAKEN FOR GRANTED PATHWAY FOR GIRLS’ SPORT.**

**11**

Invest in a sustained awareness campaign across multiple media platforms including television, print and social media to promote the physical, social, cultural, and mental health significance of netball as a recreation, competitive, elite sporting pathway with multiple end points that will cater for many peoples’ needs (including boys).

**THE AGE AT WHICH GIRLS BEGIN TO ABSTAIN FROM SPORT IN GENERAL BEGINS TO OCCUR IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE. HOWEVER, GIRLS ARE ALSO NOTED TO DROP OUT AT 17-18 YEARS, MANY OF WHOM ARE COMPLETING YEAR 12. THERE IS OFTEN A TENDENCY FOR THIS DROPOUT TO BE LEGITIMISED (BY SCHOOLS AND BROADER SOCIETY) AS A RESULT OF THE ARGUMENT BASED ON FOCUSING ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT. WHILE THE FOCUS UPON EDUCATION IS CLEARLY IMPORTANT THERE IS POTENTIAL FOR GIRLS, DURING YEAR 12, TO DROP OUT OF SPORTS SUCH AS NETBALL, AND NOT RE-ENGAGE WITH THE SPORT OR ANY SPORT AT ANY LEVEL FOR SOME TIME. THIS HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR NETBALL PARTICIPATION RATES AND A LOSS OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL WITHIN THE SPORT.**





**12**

Invest in a sustained “girls in netball” campaign across multiple media platforms including television, print, and social media to promote the physical, social, cultural, and mental health significance of netball in the lives of girls and young women throughout the school years, including year 12.

**13**

Work with clubs and coaches to recognise the need to adapt training and allow for girls to have negotiated amounts of time away from training during specific times throughout year 12 – (i.e., exams, tests, and assignments). This might involve the athletes working with coaches and fitness and conditioning staff maintaining match fitness and undertaking skills sessions at home on a periodic basis (There are now many opportunities with online portals such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams etc).

