



## DISCUSSION DOCUMENT ON SOME OF THE FORCES AFFECTING SENIOR CLUB RUGBY

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### 1. Introduction

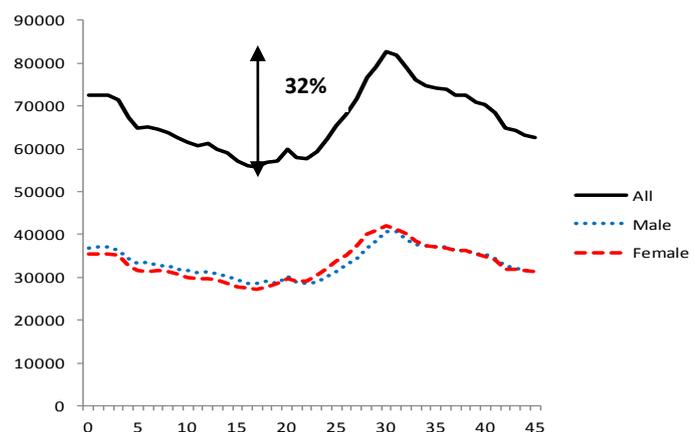
The All Ireland League was first established in early 1990s as a means of creating a higher quality game for player development. Despite the subsequent emergence of the four professional provincial teams to fulfil a similar purpose, the league has continued to operate and has striven to provide an appropriate outlet for the best club players, with the reduced involvement of professional players. Over time the number of clubs in the league has increased, mostly due to more clubs aspiring to be part of a national competition and obtain senior status: at present, as many as 23 per cent of the total number of clubs in Ireland are playing within the premier domestic club competition.<sup>1</sup>

The landscape within Ireland, and within the game of rugby, has dramatically shifted in the last six years. While the IRFU has undertaken a number of reviews and actively engaged with Branches and clubs to understand the opportunities and issues affecting the league, it is only in the last 18 months that significant insight into the competition and the clubs within it has been obtained through internal (namely, information drawn from electronic team sheets from the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons) and external data (namely, evidence-based, demographic and socio-economic information provided by the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI) with regard to participation in rugby). This paper summarises some of the findings and provides a background to further discussion to ensure that the Ulster Bank League (UBL) fulfils its role as the most senior amateur club competition, creating the opportunity for players to achieve their full potential.

### 2. Demographics

Census data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the ESRI between 2009-14 demonstrates <sup>2,3</sup>:

- Between 2009 and 2014, the number of males aged 18-30 within Ireland decreased overall by some 30 per cent. This decrease is the result of a combination of historical fertility trends and migration patterns during Ireland's boom and subsequent economic crisis. The decrease appears less pronounced in Ulster, and in the major cities which have benefited from migration, but may be exaggerated in other, primarily rural areas of Ireland



- By 2017, because of demographic trends in the younger age groups who are emerging into adulthood, that decrease is expected to rise to 34 per cent (i.e., an adjustment of 5 per cent)

<sup>1</sup> Compare the RFU in England, where 72 of 1809 clubs (approx.. 4%) play in the top four divisions; the WRU, where 14 of 314 clubs (4.5%) play in the SWALEC Championship; the SRU, where 40 of 257 clubs (15.5%) play in Premiership, National League and Championship divisions; and the FAI, where 20 of 266 clubs (7.5%) play in the Airtricity League.

<sup>2</sup> ESRI reported population trends are subject to some uncertainty due to migration. However, this effect would be small in comparison to the birth rate trends and, furthermore, its impact would be affected by the likelihood that returning migrants will take up rugby

<sup>3</sup> CSO Vital Statistics Yearly Summary - published by the CSO on 29th May 2015

- Specifically the number of males aged between 20-25 years experienced a 39 per cent decrease over the same 2009-14 period. This decrease has a direct correlation with, and impact upon, participation within the UBL where the average age of players within the competition is between 19 and 25
- Some correction will be forthcoming by 2025 in the 19-25 age group, but this will amount to just a 12 per cent rise, leaving an overall deficit in the availability of adult male rugby players over the next decade. Cumulatively, therefore, the population within this target group in 2025 will be 27 per cent less than in 2009.

### 3. Rugby data

#### a. Number of teams

The correlation between this demographic data and the health of Irish rugby can be demonstrated by the fact that, between 2007 and 2014, the 17 per cent decrease in the male population aged 18-35<sup>4</sup> was reflected by an 11 per cent decline in the number of adult rugby teams, from 620 to 554. This season the number has further declined to 521 Adult Teams. Over the same period, the number of clubs with three or more teams fell by 16 per cent. Clearly, then, as the population decrease continues to 2017, so its effects within the club game can also be expected to continue.

ESRI research confirms that this decline in the number of rugby teams is not a result of the decreasing popularity of the game. Participation in rugby as a percentage of the overall adult male population remains high with 16% in Primary School aged players, and declining during Secondary school, with eventually only 1.1 per cent of the adult population participating in a rugby activity. It is important to remember that what has decreased is the total male population to which this percentage applies – hence the overall loss of players and teams.

*The recent economic problems of the country have also led to a considerable number of young persons' either emigrating for work reasons or migrating to the larger cities, especially Dublin, for employment. This appears particularly prevalent to the West & South West of the country and has led to difficulties in clubs in these regions fielding the required minimum of 3 adult teams.*

#### b. Size of player panels

UBL data from season 2014-15, when Division 1A and B teams played a total of 18 matches, suggest that each club required on average a pool of 40 players to fulfil its fixtures; the highest number of players used was 52<sup>5</sup>; this was also the approximate figure for Division 2 clubs who had a programme of 15 matches each. Analysis of team sheets indicates that some clubs have not had sufficient depth within their playing panel to operate both a first and reserve team, resulting in "social" players being called upon during injury crises and/or the unavailability of players.

*Figures for the 2015/16 UBL season show little change. After 7 rounds of matches Division 1 clubs are averaging 34 players ranging from a maximum number of 38 to a minimum of 30; In Division 2 the average number of players used after 7 rounds is 32 with the range being 26 to 36. Should this trend continue it could be proposed that the size of the playing panels required to participate in the UBL would exceed 40 players.*

#### c. Professional players

The introduction of Provincial 'A' fixtures and the B&I Cup has meant that fewer professionally contracted players are released to play in the UBL year on year. Appearance statistics demonstrate that, in 2014-15, a total of 19 fully contracted players, 28 Development and 64 Academy players

<sup>4</sup> The 17% decline is age band compared like for like. However, player surveys over the last six years have indicated a lowering of the age profile of players in the UBL, which may mean there has been an even greater decrease in the playing population.

<sup>5</sup> Successful teams typically required fewer players, while less successful teams typically required more. This is partly due to successful teams having the resources for medical and other player welfare programmes

participated in the UBL – just 111 of over 2000 players. Of those 19 fully contracted players, only 10 made three or more appearances in Division 1.

#### 4. The way forward?

The IRFU will in the coming Months launch the strategic plan through to 2019. Reviewing the graph on page 1 of this document indicates while population base across the four provinces is at the lowest point for 20-25 year olds, there is opportunity for rugby to capitalise on the increase in population in Age Grade Rugby.

However, there is a requirement to have a transparent discussion in regards to the following questions;

- How many senior clubs will be adversely affected by the imminent decline in the rugby-playing population? This season has seen a 9% decline in the number of Adult (including U20s) teams on last season.
- Given the decline in the rugby-playing population, how many senior clubs can the available talent pool support – without suffering a loss in quality?
- Rugby Clubs are dependent on volunteer structures – the short term decrease in adult playing numbers may have a longer term impact on the volunteer capacity of clubs to capitalise on the forecasted growth of Age Grade Players (i.e. committees, coaches and supporters)?
- Given the above, should there be changes to the competition structures to ensure that we capitalise on the available talent pool?
- Are there structural or scheduling solutions which can be worked within Senior and Junior Rugby to increase the availability of players, and offset the effects of the decline in the rugby-playing population?
- What other opportunities for change are there, which may help to offset the effects of the decline in the rugby-playing population? What are the barriers to change?
- How can the professional and amateur games work together to address the issues that have been identified?