



European Bridge League
Administering the Mind Sport BRIDGE in Europe



Bridge: A MindSport For All
Connects People, Challenges Minds

**Report for the European Bridge League
Seminar run by Dr Miriam Snellgrove
*Saturday 1st February 2020 – Prague***

Please cite this paper as follows:

Snellgrove, M. L. & Punch, S. (2020) *Challenges, Issues and Solutions facing National Bridge Organisations in Europe*, BAMS Report for the European Bridge League, Stirling: University of Stirling.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Seminars

Feedback & Conclusions

Appendix

Acknowledgements

Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA) would like to thank the European Bridge League (EBL) for their generous support in including BAMSA researcher Miriam Snellgrove in their bi-annual seminar and giving her the space to run this preliminary seminar. In particular Kari-Anne Opsal and Jan Kamras deserve particular thanks for their ongoing interest and engagement with the aims of BAMSA and its researchers. BAMSA also thanks Tihana Brkljacic who provided much needed support and help throughout the seminars and Stephen Peterkin for typing up the flipchart and A3 notes from the seminar sessions.

Introduction

In February 2019 Professor Samantha Punch launched the global *Bridge: A MindSport For All* (BAMSA) campaign to publicise the benefits of bridge beyond the bridge world. Today, fewer people are playing bridge and the bridge community needs to come together and develop new approaches to recruit a fresh generation of players.

The Sociology of Bridge is a research project and an emerging academic field exploring interactions within the mind-sport, wellbeing, transferable life skills, mental health and social connection. Playing bridge encourages clear thinking, boosts self-esteem, facilitates partnerships, trust, cooperation and social interaction as well as contributing to intergenerational community building. However, there is a lack of published academic research which demonstrates the benefits or skills gained from playing bridge.

Alongside developing a research field into mind-sports, another aim of BAMSA is for the research to be directly useful for the bridge community. Understanding the particular challenges and issues facing the bridge community, from small local clubs to the broader national and regional (not to mention global) organisations is a key focus. To that end, BAMSA (represented by Dr Miriam Snellgrove), was invited to run a seminar session at the European Bridge League's (EBL) bi-annual NBO Seminar in Prague (February 2020). The focus of the seminar was to gather qualitative comments from all member countries present on:

1. the key issues and challenges facing their national bridge organisation (NBO)
2. suggestions for future solutions regarding these issues
3. how and in what way academic research findings might be able to aid regional NBOs and by extension the EBL.

The qualitative comments and feedback presented here will be used by BAMSA to develop a questionnaire to be administered to all relevant NBOs after the workshop. The aims are to provide a baseline assessment of the current state of play regarding bridge (numbers of players/attrition rate/ageing bridge populations and so on). The results from the questionnaire will be written into a report that will be distributed to all participating NBOs, the EBL and the global BAMSA network.

Further, we hope that this report (and the future survey findings) alongside BAMSA's forthcoming academic papers actively indicate to the bridge community the possible benefits of academic research in terms of issues around recruitment, gender bias and ageing bridge

population to name a few and can be used by the EBL and the various NBOs to further promote and enhance the importance of bridge as a mind-sport. The report will also guide future research as it is based on the needs of the bridge community and what is most important and useful for them in terms of interventions and academic impact.

This report provides a descriptive summary of the format of the seminars, the qualitative comments from the questions and an overall analysis of the most frequently highlighted issues and challenges. It also highlights ways in which regional NBOs thought the issues could be tackled and how research could be useful to them.

The Seminars

The seminar sessions included three tables with between six and eight people at each, totalling nine groups over the three sessions. Participants were representatives of National Bridge Organisations in Europe, usually the President of the NBO and another key committee member. In total 62 participants from 29 European countries took part. Three A3 sheets of paper were placed on each table outlining the three key questions. Participants were introduced to the BAMSA project and its aims and asked to discuss the three questions and write their group feedback for each question on the specific sheet. After thirty minutes of discussion, a chosen speaker from each table would provide feedback of their table's answers to the group as a whole and the researcher (Miriam Snellgrove) wrote down the collated ideas from each table on a flipchart.

For ease of reading, the following responses from across the three seminar sessions are presented according to each question asked (see Appendix for more detailed group responses). In this way, the similar issues and concerns raised across the specific groups as well as the general feedback can be seen and understood.

Question 1: What are the key issues and challenges facing your NBO? And why?

Across the three seminar sessions the following points were agreed to be the most pressing in terms of issues facing their specific NBO.

- Recruitment and Ageing: bridge populations are ageing and it is increasingly difficult to recruit younger and newer members.

- Clubs: most bridge clubs are surviving rather than expanding and many have reached a critical mass of numbers when it comes to running weekly bridge events. There has been steady membership decline in clubs. Club environments are often experienced as hostile for new players and an unpleasant encounter can discourage them from playing club bridge. There is also a shortage of volunteers to help maintain the bridge clubs.
- Money: money is a key problem for NBOs. There is a constant need to chase sponsors (often through knowing and having connections to people/organisations that might contribute to an NBO). Petitioning government and MPs to support bridge has had little to no success.
- Recognition: if bridge had a more prominent and less problematic profile/image this would help in attracting funding, but also more players to the game. NBOs and their clubs are still struggling to explain why people should learn to play such a complicated game. Bridge should be seen as a mind-sport and not a game but it is not clear how to get that message across?

Other issues raised by specific groups but not mentioned by all were concerns around gender and the lack of women playing at elite level. High drop-out rates of young promising female players was seen as a major issue, possibly linking the loss of potential good players to everyday sexism in the game. There was also some concern about the teaching of bridge and the fact that there was not one standardised teaching programme across different NBOs and even within the EBL. Further, some people would claim to be able to teach bridge and then would be inept causing the NBO problems which could be addressed with more streamlined teaching accreditation.

Finally, there was recognition that between clubs, NBOs and the EBL there was often a gap in what the different arms of the organisation did and why it was useful to members. The value of the NBO (and by extension the EBL) was often unclear, resulting in members leaving to start their own clubs rather than pay membership fees that were rarely used to tackle their club specific issues. Tensions regarding the different agendas and responsibilities of clubs versus national organisations appear common issues, which tend to be exacerbated by a lack of clarity regarding more fruitful links and possible collaborations.

Question 2: What kind of solutions/resources would help address the issues your NBO faces?

There was much less consensus across the three seminar sessions as to the solutions required to tackle the issues they had previously mentioned. However, the following points broadly summarise the points made.

- Money: Clubs and NBOs need more money to promote bridge locally and nationally.
- Schools: Getting bridge into schools and getting younger people playing is a key way to keep bridge alive and also to tackle the ageing bridge population and lack of younger players.
- Youth Groups: Target youth groups/centres and make bridge just one part of what young people do when they get together. Bridge should be part of the fun but not the main focus.
- Developing the Digital: Digital marketing should be used to try and improve the image of bridge (e.g. Cyprus and their Facebook campaign). Social media should be used in a much more targeted manner to popularise bridge. A bridge app should be developed to encourage new and younger players to the game similar to apps that exist for other mind-sports like chess and board games (Risk). There was also a suggestion to replace cards with iPads to overcome the image problem with cards.
- Disseminating Information: The EBL/WBF needs to be much more proactive in disseminating research that shows the benefits of bridge. In addition, they should also post good teaching resources and share those with all the NBOs so that the teaching wheel is not continually being reinvented.

Age was an issue that was raised in relation to teaching by some groups. In particular, some thought younger players should be taught by younger teachers thereby showing that bridge is a game for young people. Whilst others disagreed with this and suggested that grandmothers (in particular) were a key resource for the teaching and learning of bridge and should be used in a much more targeted manner. There was also recognition that the gender and sexism issues facing women in bridge were a reflection of wider society and that if bridge could engage in specific forms of empowerment through playing/learning bridge this would empower women to be equipped to challenge other forms of sexism in their everyday lives. It was not clear how and in what way bridge empowerment would be implemented or indeed work. Finally, there was a suggestion that bridge be a little less insular in trying to solve their bridge specific issues and start cooperating and engaging with other sports, chess/golf /e-sports to learn from them and see how they have/are recruiting more players etc.

Question 3: How and in what ways might academic research be of use to your NBO?

This question generated the most consensus across all nine groups and three seminar sessions with some general pessimism regarding the effectiveness of research but also cautious optimism if research could give the NBOs what they wanted. Research was therefore the potential panacea for many of the ills currently facing the bridge community.

- Proof: Research is useful to the bridge community if it could prove that bridge offered benefits to young and old, whether that was in improved sociability, maths skills, good for mental health and wellbeing (ie generally happier with less lonely and isolated populations) than so much the better. This evidence could then be used to lobby governments and sponsors for more money to help maintain/expand clubs, pay teachers a proper salary (rather than having to rely on volunteers) and would also show the respectability of bridge thereby overturning its negative associations with gambling.

Feedback and Conclusions

The main points raised across the nine groups in three sessions will now be presented in a highly condensed form.

- 1) Issues: Ageing and recruitment were flagged up as ongoing issues, as were problems around money and getting sponsors. Even large NBOs with money were always looking for more money/sponsorship. Older teachers were seen as an issue and the diversity of teaching practice across the many different NBOs an ongoing problem (ie. replicated efforts in terms of designing materials and inconsistent quality). Gendered issues were raised about the lack of women playing at elite level. Another issue was the need to make the federations more useful to clubs and members.

Furthermore, why should people learn to play bridge? The fact that it is a complex game often puts people off and this perception is not helped by some negative behaviours in clubs that put off newer members, whether younger or older. EBL/WBF need to do more to inform NBOs of existing teaching and research practice that could be of direct use to NBOs.

- 2) Solutions: Engage in a digital marketing campaign to attract other kinds of players. Develop an app (like with chess) so that younger players can learn through their phones. Empower women in bridge as a way to overcome the sexism in the mind-sport. EBL/WBF to actively disseminate teaching materials that have proved successful from

other clubs. A standardised teaching curriculum with appropriate resources would be welcome. Target youth groups and create a social environment that bridge is part of but not the main aim. Replace cards with iPads to help tackle the image issue.

- 3) Research: Robust and reliable research evidence would be useful if it can show the benefits of the mind-sport, whether that is through healthy ageing or social connections – either way the research needs to have sufficient proof so that NBOs can use it to lobby their local governments/sponsors for money, but also to attract new members.

Overall it is clear that there are a multitude of issues but also some suggestions from within the seminars for improvement and development. Whilst most of these findings will be unsurprising to the bridge community, research that is valid and credible needs to be based on empirical data and not on assumptions. These responses are the start for designing a global survey and ultimately developing the kind of research the bridge community is asking for: robust, credible and useful for clubs, organisations and future bridge generations.

Postscript: Bridge in the Time of Covid-19

Since the Prague seminar in February, much has changed in the world due to the global Coronavirus pandemic. Writing this report in the time of Covid-19 only further raises the challenges that bridge clubs and NBOs are facing over the coming months. With social distancing rules now in force across most of the bridge playing world, will the existing issues around recruitment and ageing, gender, teaching and financial viability of clubs become ever more stark and problematic? Will the need for digital tools/apps to teach bridge to increasingly housebound populations now have its necessary moment? What is clear is that the role research can play in finding answers to these solutions, but also in challenging existing narratives around everyday sexism in the sport, is more crucial now than ever.

As a result, BAMSA has begun a new research project titled ‘Bridge in the Time of Covid-19.’ We anticipate that such a project will provide insights not only into how the bridge community is responding to the crisis, but how some of the solutions may be integrated into the longer term regarding how bridge clubs and online opportunities for both play and teaching bridge are managed, as well as the shift to online and digital play. A descriptive report on the findings of this project will be available from December 2020. For those who are interested or willing to participate please see <https://keepbridgealive.bridgecloud.com/about/bridge-in-the-time-of-covid-19> or email bamsa@stir.ac.uk.

Appendix:

Collated notes from the seminar sessions

1. What are the key issues and challenges facing your NBO? And why?

Group 1: A3

Lack of viability

Poland – Performance based Ministry of Sport

- Bridge4Success – 100's of schools
- Aging populations

Czech - 115 from membership list from state sponsorship

- Good juniors

Romania – % juniors

- Pupils based

Sweden –key issues

Professional marketing cost

Aging. Age of teachers

Italy - members social not taking part

Olympic Committee – small contribution 200,000 euros

Fiscal benefits

Group 2: A3

Critical Mass – lack of funds

Wrong Mind Set – not thinking how to develop bridge but just to survive

How to advertise bridge more – to create awareness

How should I learn bridge?

Group 3: A3

Lack of recognition

Declining membership

Failing at entry level

Addressing loneliness – children, older people, even middle-aged mental health

Group 4: A3

Membership declining and ageing (significantly)

Not enough women at top level

No or not enough gov funding

Demonstrate value of federation to members

Lack of sponsorship

Group 5: A3

Recruiting young players

Lack of sponsors

Lack of TD's

Teaching – Greece/France/US – methods different

Image problem

Nature of game, complexity

Group 6: A3

Attractive(sic) new players

WE want to be like France (we are also happy with 3,000,000)

Teachers and teaching programme

Authority to give licence/certification to teachers

Central educational/teaching method

Group 7: A3

Decreasing membership

Age of our player base – hard to get young members

- To get young members you need coaches
- Teach in schools so that new players are friends already

Hard to teach people – hard to persuade people to remain and try to play competitively

Hard to make people stay and learn all that we want them to know

They become overwhelmed and don't return to bridge.

Behaviour in clubs is one more reason to discourage newcomers

Bad image of playing cards – prejudice of gambling.

Group 8: A3

Aging demographic – gap on age and experience level

Maintaining participation and membership

Money

What do clubs get?

What do members get?

What do members want?

Federation – club – members relationship

Croatia give equipment to clubs

Recognition as sport

Group 9: A3

Recognition from state/authorities
Explain bridge is a sport/ not a card game
Getting to public/media
Clubs on the limit of existing/too small
Recruiting new members/youth
Sponsors/only by personal contacts
Not enough volunteers

Flipchart Group 1

Aging – recruitment younger members
Maintaining participation/decreasing
Money – sport – recognition, sport not a card game
Sponsors – problem
What do NBO's/clubs/members want/get
Media/news - Image problem
Clubs dying
Volunteer shortage
Overwhelmed by learning bridge

Flipchart Group 2

Recruitment
Sponsors/money/no government funding
Lack of TD's
Aging + decline
Gender (lack of women)
Value of NBO to members
New members
Teachers – competent/licensing/EBL help
Establish teaching programme

Flipchart Group 3

Critical Mass – money
Surviving rather than expanding
Awareness/lack of recognition
How/why learn bridge
Lack of visibility – Different countries; Sport; Performance/medals/funding
Failure at entry level
Marketing
Membership decline
Ageing

2. What kind of solutions/resources would help address the issues your NBO faces?

Group 1: A3

Poland – drop in members
Bridge 10 success
Non-affiliated clubs
Promotion
Czech - minibridge – out of school
Sweden – minibridge – trick-taking
Italy - minibrIDGE
Schools minibridge
Clubs only play united conventions.
academia

Group 2: A3

Create common content for advertising (ACBL example)
Own platforms/payed
Communication strategy (target/how/to whom/what)
Mini-bridge (or similar)
Kol (let them talk about bridge)

Group 3: A3

Something that demonstrates that in some way good for you – including learning abilities for children, development, problem solving tools
EBL and WBF support for research and collating what's already going on outside KBA (eg Netherlands) and having web-based information centre [pro active]

Group 4: A3

An avenue to government funding – eg health, education
Develop concept of empowerment for girls and young women – not limited to bridge
School bridge projects
Keep 'card playing' alive
Apps for children: simple online game – e-sport
Videos and content for young people
Imager and marketing – multi focus on different needs/benefits (newly retired, young people)
Bridge for all generations

Group 5: A3

Marketing
App to learn bridge

Group 6: A3

Centralised method by EBL – teaching, certification of teachers
Digital marketing

Group 7: A3

Market the benefits of bridge outside the bridge community
Popularise mind-sports – people need to realise and accept bridge is a sport
Mobile app which would allow not only bridge but you could learn how to play, you could play mini-bridge (no bidding)
Do not push too much information onto new players – let them ‘discover something new’
Use social media in ways that might popularise bridge for younger people
For older people – create communities, groups of friends
Recognise that for (new players/juniors/schools) it's not just about bridge, it's about everything else that comes with it – competitions against other schools, comradery vs rivalry.

Group 8: A3

Money
Bridge centre
Recognition as sport
Youth/schools involvement
Official agreement to teach in schools
Don't forget middle-age groups, families, grandmothers

Group 9: A3

MONEY
Continuous work
Money to clubs to spread the idea
Main frames of a project
Co-operation with other sports – chess, golf, e-sports
How to get people playing at home to the club?

Flipchart Group 1

Money- clubs, recognition
Bridge centre

Youth in schools – agreement for school
Age – attract families + middle-aged grandmothers as resource
Continual work
Co-operate with chess/golf/e-sports
Reach home players
Popularise – social media
Develop bridge app

Flipchart Group 2

Digital marketing – image
App – teaching bridge
Avenue to government – health/education
Gender – empowerment- beyond bridge
School bridge project
EBL support NBO
Certificate teachers
Keep card playing alive
Content for young people

Flipchart Group 3

Results – proof that bridge is good for you
EBL/WBF - share info
Awareness of research to NBO's and members
Website that combines info
Communications – strategy
Mini-bridge/sim/promotion
Bridge + success – non-affiliated players
Younger bridge teachers

3. How and in what ways might academic research be of use to your NBO?

Group 1: A3

To provide evidence – show correlation
Poland – prevent social isolation

Group 2: A3

It will help to gain credibility in face of stakeholders
Recognition
Evidence of bridge benefits

Group 3: A3

Research can be presented to government (or other potential sponsors) for fundraising and support
Perhaps might help with recognition

Group 4: A3

Proof of the benefits for different ages
Useful for schools and educational settings
Government funding
Potential members

Group 5: A3

Benefits of bridge

Group 6: A3

Research provides proof to attract new customers/funds/sponsors

Group 7: A3

Highlight the benefits of bridge and put a tool into our hands to persuade people to start playing
You may receive a credit at University for playing bridge
Possibility to choose bridge as an extra-curricular activity at University
Popularise bridge as a sport

Group 8: A3

Zero purpose to research
Recognition – raise profile
Challenge preconceptions
Mind sport
Well-being
Help getting into school

Not just activity for old
Supports publicity efforts

Group 9: A3

Show the result to authorities
Research should be understandable
Consequences - good for health
- Gives you partnership/show positive aspects
Helps convince people/authorities that this is good for public health
Sport/health/schools
Integration

Flipchart Group 1

Zero –raising profile –schools
Health benefits – also fun
Funds
Authorities/government benefits
Integration (prison bridge)
Respectability of bridge

Flipchart Group 2

Proof of benefits for different ages – better than maths
Schools
Government – fun and laughs
Sponsors
Convincing message to members

Flipchart Group 3

Proof
Recognition + credibility
Funding – value government