

# OLYMPISM 365 INNOVATION HUB



International  
Olympic  
Committee

In collaboration with

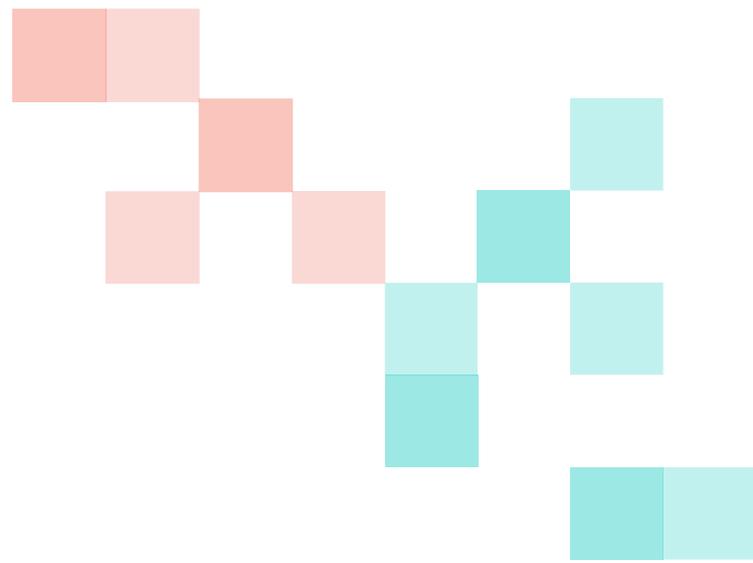


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## LOUGHBOROUGH LONDON COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Summary report of the  
research projects and learnings

December 2025



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary
2. Context
3. Research Insights
  - 3.1. Innovative Finance
  - 3.2. Grassroots Innovation
  - 3.3. Emerging Technology
4. Conclusion

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The O365 Innovation Hub's Knowledge Exchange team has worked with three master's students from the Loughborough London Sports Business Institute to conduct research to help the Hub understand what and how innovation takes place within the Hub and identify opportunities to support innovation further.

The students' research identified key needs for the Hub to address:

- There is a need for new funding mechanisms
- New funding models need to be explored and tested to identify risks and benefits
- Grantees need M&E support to help them fulfil funders' M&E requirements
- Innovation can take the form of using existing, low-cost tools
- Innovators need support to make use of low-cost tools for more ease and efficiency
- Building internal digital literacy to reduce perceived cost and ethical concerns

These findings highlight that there is further support the Hub can offer to grantees, building on skills for M&E, building digital literacy, and investigating innovative funding mechanisms further.

## 2. CONTEXT

The O365 Innovation Hub's Knowledge Exchange team has been working in collaboration with three Loughborough London Sports Business Institute Masters students carrying out dissertations supporting learning and insights for the Hub. Over the last few months, we have been working closely with the students and their supervisors to help them research the following topics:

- **Innovative Finance:** What are the recommended innovative financial solutions to fund Sport for Sustainable Development organisations?
- **Grassroots Innovation:** How do emerging technologies facilitate innovation in Grassroots Sport for Sustainable Development organisations operating under resource constraints?
- **Emerging Technology:** How can emerging technology support innovation and improved outcomes in sport for development?

Each research project varied in terms of methodology and depth of insights, with students remaining in control of the output and their IP. In this document, we summarised the most relevant findings of each project and the learnings and implications for the O365 Innovation Hub, its grantees, and the wider sector.

## 3. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

### 3.1 Innovative Finance

With previous experience in sustainable finance, Loughborough Master Student Natsuko Yoshiki explored current funding approaches and new funding mechanisms.

A survey was distributed to O365 Innovation Hub grantees, with 22 completing the survey (33.8% response rate), to gather data on business models, financial status and challenges, risk appetite and social impact measurement practices. Further interviews with 15 sector experts (incl. international sport organisations, philanthropic foundations, consultancies, and social enterprises) explored impact measurement standards, criteria for allocating grants, perceptions of new financial mechanisms, and sector-specific challenges.

## Findings and Learnings:

### 1. There is a need for new funding mechanisms

64% of the survey respondents (grantees funded by the IOC O365 Innovation Hub) rely mainly on external funding to sustain themselves. Short funding cycles, financial uncertainty, and funding gaps mean that they face additional barriers to innovate and create sustainable social impact, with 45% of the organisations reporting that they struggle to cover their operating costs.

**Recommendation for the Hub:** New funding mechanisms should be considered to support innovators. The research found that repayable finance schemes are not widely used, highlighting an opportunity for the Hub to innovate and trial this approach with willing consortia members and grantees. Investigating the barriers to repayable finance from the grantee perspective and why repayable finance schemes seem inaccessible, may help the Hub identify opportunities to support grantees further.

### 2. New funding models need to be explored and tested

A literature review and interviews with industry experts highlight that relevant alternative funding models include convertible impact bonds, loan guarantees and interest subsidies, and a private-public-partnership model which can offer alternative ways to help both parties. However, 91% of respondents reported never having accessed repayable finance options, highlighting the opportunity to support grantees with accessing alternative funding mechanisms.

**Recommendation for the Hub:** This finding supports the work and analysis being conducted by consortia members into innovative funding mechanisms. There is an opportunity for the Hub to support grantees in gaining knowledge and access to alternative funding mechanisms. Alternative funding mechanisms could offer new solutions to funding cycles, financial uncertainty, and funding gaps. However, the lack of examples in the sport for development and extremely low experience rates amongst innovators requires significant caution if this is to be used.

### 3. Grantees need M&E support

Rigorous M&E processes assure funders that their investment is achieving the outcomes that they have invested in and are particularly rigorous in innovative finance practices. However, 72% of the respondents reported the need for funding to conduct

impact measurement and evaluation, and training to support them with M&E requirements (27%).

**Recommendation for the Hub:** The Hub's Knowledge Exchange is offering some support for innovators through training modules, resources and peer learning opportunities. However, the need for M&E support balanced with the stringent requirements in innovative financing projects, demonstrates that many of the organisations in the hub are not yet equipped for impact investing. There is an opportunity to support grantees further through the Hub but even with continued support, the resources required to deliver on innovative financing M&E may make this financing model unattainable for some organisations.

## 3.2 Grassroots Innovation

Loughborough Master Student Sanidhya Mittal explored how grassroots organisations supported by the O365 Innovation Hub have approached innovation, what enablers and barriers they have faced, and the role of emerging technologies.

A survey was distributed to O365 Innovation Hub grantees, with 27 completing the survey (41.5% response rate), to gather data on enablers and barriers to innovation, and the role of emerging technologies. Follow-up interviews with 10 selected grantees explored process, drivers, and challenges in more depth.

### Findings and Learnings:

#### 1. Supporting innovation using existing tools

Grassroots organisations are being innovative by necessity, driven by the lack of funding and internal capacity. Tech innovations take the form of repurposing resources, with simple tech tools, such as WhatsApp (67%) and Microsoft Office (56%), being used to make processes more efficient and cost-effective.

**Recommendation for the Hub:** The O365 Innovation Hub should consider supporting innovators in developing their use of existing tools rather than building literacy in newer tools e.g. AI and blockchain. Networks and partnerships can support the capacity building of innovators, by linking them to organisations that can either support the process of innovation, or provide the funding and resources needed for grassroots organisations to innovate.

## 2. Offering capacity building alongside financial support

**The research found that grassroots organisations face systemic challenges** inhibiting them from embracing innovation and emerging technologies. Whilst lack of funding, resources, and capacity can be a driver of innovation, organisations still struggle to implement new technologies and new processes, with 81% of respondents citing lack of funding and resources as a key barrier to innovation.

The innovation that does take place is limited to using existing technologies, e.g. WhatsApp and MS Teams for efficiency and ease. Emerging technologies, such as AI and blockchain technology, is rarely used or adopted due to lack of digital literacy and limited capacity to learn and test new systems and processes.

**Recommendation for the Hub:** There is an opportunity for the O365 Innovation Hub to provide further support to grantees, specifically focused on improving the use and understanding of existing, low-cost tools in new ways. This approach may unlock innovation by grassroots organisations without putting too much strain on the capacity of internal teams.

## 3.3 Emerging Technology

Assessing the use of emerging technology within the O365 Innovation Hub, Loughborough Master Student Arjan Singh interviewed 13 individuals including grantees and members of the consortia to find out more about how emerging technologies create value and scale responsibly in sport for development.

### Findings and Learnings:

#### 1. Building internal digital literacy for efficiency

Whilst the consortium is starting to use AI and blockchain technology in their work, this remains surface-level, mainly trialling tools that enhance efficiency on everyday tasks (e.g., translation, and data analysis). Members of the consortium are starting to explore blockchain technologies and emerging media to enhance transparency and creative storytelling, but digital literacy gaps and concerns around ethical use and cost remain.

Illustrative quotes on the benefits tech tools offer and the challenges organisations are facing:

- *“AI and digital tools allow us to process data faster and make insights more accessible.”*
- *“The biggest challenge is skills. Our staff aren’t trained to use these technologies properly.”*
- *“The tech only worked once we had clear policies in place to guide its use.”*
- *“Training was critical. Without building staff capacity, the innovation would have failed.”*

**Recommendation for the Hub:** To enable innovation using emerging technologies, the O365 Innovation Hub may consider building digital literacy for those ready and able to adopt new technologies. Enabling the hub to drive innovation within processes and procedures could have positive effects on efficiency and ethical practices when using these tools.

## 4. CONCLUSION

These findings highlight opportunities for the Hub to strengthen its support to grantees. While current training builds foundational M&E and technology skills, further modules could equip grantees to access funding and more effectively utilise current resources.

Emerging technology adoption remains perceived as risky by consortia members and grantees, with ethical concerns and limited digital literacy presenting key barriers. However, the Hub could better support grantees in maximizing low-cost, accessible tools and innovating their use to improve efficiency whilst reducing resource demands.

Innovative financing mechanisms represent a significant opportunity for the Hub to establish itself as a thought leader. The current research did not explore barriers to repayable finance schemes for grassroots innovators in detail, a gap the Hub could address by building understanding of enablers and barriers and supporting grantees to pilot new funding mechanisms.