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The development of a model to measure the competitiveness of nations in athletics

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BACKGROUND

The struggle among nations to win medals and gain international sporting success has within a few centuries intensified and politicized, as scientific researchers and governments have shown increasing interests in elite sport policies and the factors or determinants contributing to the success in international competition (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006; De Bosscher, De Knop & van Bottenburg, 2009; Digel, 2005; Houlihan, 1997; Green & Oakley, 2001). Despite the international recognition of the importance of organisational effectiveness of national sport organisations, there exists a wide diversity of research outcomes regarding the measurement and empirical analysis of contextual, processual and specific elite sport policy structures describing elite sport systems (Houlihan, 2008). The purpose of this research project is the validation of the SPLISS-model (*Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success*) in a sport specific context (athletics), based on mixed research methods and the development of an international scoring system on the competitiveness of athletic elite sport policies.

International researchers have developed several ways to describe, measure and evaluate the organisational effectiveness of national sport organisations (cfr. Kikulis, Slack & Hinings, 1992; Madella, Bayle & Tome, 2005; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000; Shilbury & Moore, 2006). The majority of authors agree that organisational effectiveness requires measuring multiple criteria and the evaluation of different organisational dimensions using different characteristics (Shilbury & Moore, 2006, p.23). De Bosscher (2007) is one of the few studies that succeeded in testing a conceptual *model of multiple elite sport policy factors* in an international context, by measuring and empirically testing critical success factors in an international sporting context.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research project is to develop a model to measure and compare the competitiveness of nations in athletics. This will contribute to the international knowledge on policy factors in elite sport policy and the conceptualisation of competitiveness in elite sport policies. As the SPLISS-model (*sport policy factors leading to international sporting success*) tried to compare the competitive position of nations in elite sport internationally, this project will try to define the competitiveness of nations in athletics.

METHODS

As the multiple constituency approach is the most widely cited effectiveness conceptualisation based on internal and external organisations participants (Rocha & Turner, 2006, p.28), interviews and surveys with 29 international high performance directors or coaches were used to create more insight in the factors leading to international sporting success into high performance athletics. Additionally, a literature review on elite sport policies and athletic policies refined insights on key performance indicators of elite sport policies in athletics. Inductive/deductive procedures were used in the refinement of the SPLISS-model, as raw material was clustered into first order and second order themes. Some items were placed in existing dimensions of the SPLISS-model, other units were grouped in new dimensions and sub-dimensions. In this process, a new conceptual model was developed at sport specific level, describing 10 areas/pillars of elite sport policy factors. Taking into consideration the international complexity of elite sport policies, a group of international researchers and athletic experts were involved in the evaluation of the model and operationalisation into different research instruments to measure and compare the competitiveness of nations in athletics.

RESULTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Qualitative research contributed to a first step in the validation process of the SPLISS-model at sport specific level. As new sub-dimensions and critical success factors were developed and operationalised, mixed research method will be used to measure the competitive position of athletics internationally. In an international cooperation of researchers, elite sport policies in athletics will be measured based on surveys of key stakeholders (elite athletes, coaches en clubs) and a standardized elite athletic policy questionnaire.

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