

THE NEW ERA IN AUSTRALIAN HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT – INSIGHTS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY ON ELITE SPORT CLIMATE AND POLICIES

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION

With increasing competition to win medals at major events such as the Olympics and World Championships, many nations are focused on finding a competitive advantage. Interestingly, international high performance sport systems are becoming more similar than dissimilar as nations are employing common strategies in their quest for international sporting success (Green & Houlihan, 2005).

In 2008, De Bosscher and colleagues examined the elite sport systems and policies of six nations (Belgium, Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom). This landmark study was based on a theoretical model outlining nine pillars important for international sporting success (De Bosscher et al., 2006):

Four of the six nations showed a substantial increase in funding over the last decade, suggesting a corresponding increase in the price of success (De Bosscher et al., 2008). In addition to financial support (P1) the most successful summer sporting nations (Italy, UK and the Netherlands) also scored highest in athletic and post career support (P5), training facilities (P6), and coaching provision and coach development (P7). However, the two wealthiest and most populated nations (Italy and UK) scored poorly on talent identification and development system (P4). Greater competitive advantage may exist for these countries if/when they invest in systematic identification and development of talented athletes. Whilst an elegant study, it was concluded that a number of pillars were underdeveloped in the sample nations; namely, talent identification and development (P4), coaches provisions (P7) and scientific research/ sport science support (P9).

In 2011 Australia joined the research network investigating Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting

Success (SPLISS). The collective purpose of this study is to measure the competitiveness of elite sport systems and policies. Specifically for Australia, this was an opportunity to identify and evaluate factors critical to the nation's sporting success, and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the national elite sport system.

METHODS

Based on the theoretical model developed by De Bosscher et al. (2006), data was collected using centrally developed sport policy questionnaires containing over 200 open and closed questions. This dataset was completed by researchers resulting in an inventory of qualitative and quantitative data across the nine pillars (including over 100 critical success factors (CSFs)). A secondary source of data will also be collected as part of this study (elite sport climate survey) and analysed with SPSS, but in regard to this paper this will be work in progress.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over 30 interviews were conducted with Australia's key sport policy makers (including senior executives, managers and senior researchers), who provided qualitative and quantitative data to populate a robust data inventory. Although comparative analysis across the contributing nations is yet to occur, the process of objectively documenting Australia's elite sport system and its evolution has been very insightful.

Australia's sports system is the envy of many, but it is essentially a 30-year-old system. In 2009 an independent review of Australian sport highlighted major concerns and challenges for Australia to sustain international sporting success. In response, the government released a new sport policy outlining their vision for a system overhaul. Since that time, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) have been working closely with State partners and National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) to develop and deliver a truly national elite sport framework.

Much of the new system is still embryonic, but this study has confirmed significant progress has been made to establish a more cohesive national elite sport system. In particular, evidence for a national sports policy framework with a clear vision for achieving international sporting success; a universal cooperative agreement between key government providers, including improved clarity of roles and responsibilities; as well as development of a national elite sport strategic plan and nationally agreed priorities for sport funding can be reported. Along with great advances, this study has also revealed that elements of the elite system still require successful integration into the new framework such as Australia's talent identification and development (TID) program. Considered to be a world-leading program, Australian sport policy makers have shifted funding and accountabilities for pre-elite development from the TID program to the national sporting organisations (NSOs). This significant change in working paradigm presents a unique challenge for the TID program as they move from managing and directing TID initiatives, to more of an educational, case management role for NSOs.

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