

Gold medal policy – the impact of national policy on Australia’s international sporting success

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Introduction

In 2011 Australia joined Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS). This followed from De Bosscher and colleagues 2008 study investigating the importance of nine policy pillars for international sporting success, that carried out comparative analysis of elite sport systems and policies of six nations. Trend analysis showed a significant increase in funding for elite sport over a 10-year period with successful countries also offering high quality support for athlete and coach development as well as access to quality training facilities. Furthermore, talent identification and development policies were found to be inferior in the two wealthiest and most populated nations (Italy and UK).

The second iteration of the SPLISS study aims to build on the knowledge gained from the first study and address some of its methodological shortcomings such as underdeveloped pillars in sample nations.

While international benchmarking is underway, the data collected using SPLISS methodology has provided a basis for identifying and evaluating policy factors specific to Australia’s sporting success. An overview of the key findings across the nine policy pillars for Australia will be presented.

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). Elite athletes (n=205), coaches (n=153) and performance directors (n=9) completed an elite sport climate survey. Survey data was analysed with SPSS.

Results and discussion

Over 50 interviews were conducted with sport policy makers who provided qualitative and quantitative data to populate pillar inventories. This data was reviewed in context with stakeholder responses from the elite sport climate surveys. In the lead up to the Sydney Olympics the government funded and delivered many national elite sport programs via the Olympic Athlete Program (1994-2000). Then in 2001, funding was scaled back from the national and state institutes and channelled directly to sports. Responsibility and accountability for elite sport now resided with national sporting organisations (NSOs). Some sports thrived, some

sports floundered with the pressure to develop and manage their own high performance (HP) programs.

Whilst one-line appropriated funding was introduced in 2001, it has taken over a decade for all Australian governments (Commonwealth, States, Territories) to form an official alliance focused on developing a national strategy for HP sport. It is evident from this study that the absence of such a national strategy has impacted on the government (via the Australian Sports Commission (ASC)) being able to provide effective leadership and support for NSO pathway development. Without clear roles for HP stakeholders (i.e. national/state institutes), sports had to seek and negotiate with each individual stakeholder. This resulted in HP pathways that often lacked systematic progression, as they were influenced by deals and opportunities that stakeholders could provide.

With Australia’s geographical limitations, sport participation and talent identification/development (TID) are two critical pillars for sustainable international sporting success. A reduction in club sport participation, outdated membership and delivery models, inadequate physical education (PE) in schools, and rising obesity levels are all attributed to a decline in sport participation. The ASC is currently leading development of the National Sport and Education Strategy to prioritise sport and PE in schools, developing a National Volunteers in Sport Strategy, as well as a national research agenda concerning participation trends and influences.

For 25 years Australia ran nationally coordinated TID sports programs. Under the government’s current sports policy, *Pathway to Success (2010)*, the ASC has adopted a new approach towards TID. Rather than direct delivery of initiatives, the ASC moved to a capability-building role providing NSOs with resources and advice so they can implement their own TID initiatives.

Other key pillars impacted by lack of national coordination include training facilities, (inter)national competition, and coach development. Progress is being made on a new National Coaching Strategy, but training facilities and hosting international events continue to be the responsibility of state government and individual sports. There is a clear need for national mapping and audits of the supply-and-demand of elite sport facilities in addition to national guidelines regarding the bidding/staging of international events.

As elite sport in Australia has matured, the role of government has come full circle. After 25 years of institutional management, it is clear that ‘sport runs sport’. Government is embracing its leadership and partnering roles with sports that will only be strengthened by a National HP Strategy.

References

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