
ELITE SPORT POLICY TO ACHIEVE INTERNATIONAL SPORTING SUCCESS: DOES IT WORK? Results of the SPLISS study in 15 countries

Submitting author: Dr Veerle De Bosscher
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sport Policy and Management
Brussels, 1050
Belgium

All authors: Veerle De Bosscher (corresp), Simon Shibli, Hans Westerbeek, Maarten van Bottenburg

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Abstract

The emerging body of literature on elite sport policy over the past decade (e.g., Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; De Bosscher, et al., 2008; Digel, Burk, & Fahrner, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005) has contributed significantly to a better understanding of elite sport development and the factors that contribute to sporting success. These studies have largely been descriptive aiming to review the factors that shape policies, including social, political and cultural phenomena. Complementary to these studies, this research aims to examine the interaction between policy-inputs (financial resources), policy-throughputs (processes) and outputs (results during international competitions, e.g., medals, medal points, number of elite athletes qualifying, etc.) in elite sport more closely. The results are based on an international comparative study in 15 countries, where 58 researchers and 33 policy makers collaborated in a joint project, known as SPLISS 2.0 (Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success).

Methodology

Building on previous research, this study adopts the SPLISS framework (De Bosscher et al., 2006) to collect data on nine pillars (or policy dimensions) and 96 Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in each nation, using two kinds of research instruments: (1) the overall sport policy inventory, with open ended and closed questions on elite sport systems for each of the nine pillars (212 questions, 184 pages), that are completed by a local researcher in each country and (2) an 'elite sport climate survey' completed by 3140 elite athletes, 1376 elite coaches and 241 performance directors. Mixed qualitative and quantitative data were aggregated into a scoring system as a supportive and tangible way of understanding elite sport policies more broadly in relation to sporting success. While this cannot be separated from qualitative information, 'measurement' (through a scoring system) facilitates pattern recognition,

to extract meaning from qualitative data, account for all data, document analytic moves, and verify interpretations (Sandelowski, Voils, and Knafll, 2009).

Results

If nations are ranked according to their level of success, the data confirm that good performing nations have a better level of development in the different pillars. Six pillars are significantly related to the success of the sample nations: financial support (Pillar 1), governance, organisation and structure (Pillar 2), coaches' provision and development (Pillar 7), sport science, research and innovation (Pillar 9), training facilities (Pillar 6) (summer sport success only), (inter)national competition (Pillar 8) (summer sport success only). Furthermore, almost all countries do well in athletic career support (Pillar 5). No significant relationship was found with Pillar 3 (sport participation) and Pillar 4 (talent identification and development). These pillars generally show a weak level of development in most nations and scores are higher in smaller nations. Another important finding is that the nations with the best scores on pillar 1 (financial support) also have the most integrated and coordinated approach to policy development (pillar 2).

Discussion

Elite sport has evolved in such way that national policies can contribute to success if nations invest in a blend of pillars, not just in one or a few pillars. However, the study highlights that different countries may create a competitive advantages just by developing a strength in one (or a few) pillar(s) over others. For example, Australia has the strongest level of development in pillar 9 (research) but scores below the average in pillar 8 (international competition), while Japan has its strengths in Pillars 8 and 6 (training facilities) and Canada in coach development (pillar 7). All these countries are relatively successful in the international arena. While previous studies referred to the homogenization process of elite sport policies, the results reveal that – at a deeper level of policy decisions (and implementation), nations respond with different blends of strong CSFs. Nations aiming to increase short-term success may prefer not to prioritize pillars 3 (participation) and 4 (talent), pillars that delivered the lowest scores. However, it can be argued that investing in these pillars contributes to long-term elite sport development, because of the importance of continuous supply of young talents. It could even be argued that investing in these pillars can deliver to a competitive advantage for smaller nations, where detecting, tracking and developing talent may be easier to manage.

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