

POLICY LEARNING AND SPORTING EXCELLENCE: ELITE SPORT DEVELOPMENT IN JAPAN

Mayumi Ya-ya Yamamoto, Loughborough University, United Kingdom,
m.y.yamamoto@lboro.ac.uk

Barrie Houlihan, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged that international sporting competition has intensified and, according to Green & Oakley (2001), elite sport development systems are becoming more 'homogeneous'. In recent years, there has been an increase in the volume of research which examines elite sport development system, as well as analyzing governmental rationales for investing public funding in developing elite athletes and hosting major international sport events (c.f. Green & Houlihan, 2005; UK Sport, 2006).

Despite the increased interest in elite development systems noted by Green & Oakley (2001; see also Green & Houlihan, 2005; UK Sport, 2006), there is a striking absence of empirical research from the 'non-Western' countries, despite the fact that three Asian countries (China, Japan and South Korea) were in the top 10 on the medal table in Athens Games.

After Japan's poor performance at the 1992 Barcelona Games, achieving the 5th place in Athens was recognized as a significant moment for the Japanese government and national elite sport actors. The success in Athens was greeted with a sense of relief, assuring those officials involved in elite development of further investment in the enhancement of the infrastructure for elite use (e.g. National Training Center to be launched in Dec 2007) and of a continuing structured approach to the development of elite athletes.

The aims of this paper are, first, to outline and critically review the elite athlete development system in Japan; and second, to identify the increasing salience of policy learning from other countries for our understanding of the evolution of the elite development system in Japan.

METHODS

The research is based on an extensive literature review of academic and policy documents related to sport policy and elite sport development systems. In addition, over 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior government officials, officers of national sporting organizations, prefectural officials responsible for elite sport development and academics.

RESULTS

Four results can be identified from this research:

- 1) The Japanese elite sport system is increasingly exhibiting features similar to those identified in the existing literatures as being commonly found in other countries. These features include the development of specialist support and facilities for elite athletes.
- 2) There is intense pressure to improve the support system for elite athletes by developing and adapting good practice imported from abroad.
- 3) However, the elite development system is fragmented and different values and interests of sporting organizations exist, especially at the prefectural/local level, and may result in conflict and thereby undermine the effectiveness of the system.

- 4) Nevertheless, the continuous and routine activity of the systematic gathering of information and analysis of policies and practices found in other successful countries and up-coming potential rivals can be identified as one of the distinctive features of Japanese elite sport system.

DISCUSSION

It is possible to conclude that the emerging homogenised elite sport development system identified by Green & Houlihan (2005) can be found in Japan. As noted in the UK Sport report (2006), it can be argued that the support for elite athletes delivered in Japan has been influenced by or 'directed by' what its rivals are doing. This point is supported by the distinctive example of the systematic scanning for information about rival countries with the intention to transfer or adapt good practices to Japan. It can be demonstrated from the analysis why the Japanese are engaged in the systematic scanning of information as well as from whom the practices are drawn. The awareness within Japan of its geographically and politically 'isolated' position is balanced by its commitment to establish an international elite sport network to enable to engage in the 'global sporting arms race' (Oakley & Green, 2001; UK Sport, 2006). At the same time, conflicts of interest or value can be identified between actors at different levels in Japan which could lead to a potential global-local tension (e.g. national proactive engagement in international elite sport success vs non-engagement or reluctant engagement among prefectural/ regional actors).

This paper contributes to bridging a gap in our knowledge to Japan and in relations to the broader issue of the emergence of a homogenised elite sport development system through the practice of policy transfer. It also contributes to the debate on policy transfer and policy learning (see Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; 2000) and the processes by which knowledge/practice is adapted, internalized and effectively incorporated to the national context (Rose, 2005).

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