

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ELITE SPORT SCHOOLS. A COMPARISON OF THE CAREER TRAJECTORY OF ELITE ATHLETES IN FLANDERS, AFTER ATTENDING OR NOT ATTENDING AN ELITE SPORT SCHOOL

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Abstract

Introduction

As a rule of thumb, research has shown that elite athletes roughly need 8 to 10 years and 10,000 hours of high quality training to develop as an elite athlete and perform at high levels (Ericsson 2003). Much of this investment of time and effort coincides with a talented person's secondary and tertiary education phases. It is impossible for athletes to combine an average of 20 hours training a week with regular schooling, without losing potential development either in one or both and with high dropouts as a result (Wylleman, De Knop & Sillen, 1998). Many countries have established programmes to help athletes to combine their academic career with a sports career. In Flanders (the Northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium) for example, the so called 'elite sport schools' were established in 1998 for secondary education and aimed to facilitate the development of both the athletic and the vocational careers of their pupils. Also the European Union has shown a significant concern, to protect athletes in relation to their education and their integration into working life (European Commission, 2004; 2008). Dawn and Henry (2010) identified four different types of responses of nations to address this issue varying from centralized to decentralized systems with higher and lower state support. Flanders uses a centralized system, where the state is facilitator, and where athletes (from 12 – 18 yrs of age) are encouraged to follow the trajectory of talent development primarily via these elite sport schools, involving increased funding throughout their secondary education.

Aim

The objective of this research is to investigate the

effectiveness of the elite sport schools, from an athlete's perspective, at the level of educational as well as athletic development.

Methods

The effectiveness is approached from a multidimensional perspective, where both the processes and performances are evaluated. The SPLISS model ('Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success') was used to evaluate elite sport schools, including several 'pillars' or policy dimensions, at three levels: inputs (resources) – throughputs (processes) and outputs (results) (De Bosscher et al., 2006; 2010).

A total of 408 (64%) elite athletes who ever graduated at an elite sports school and 341 (69%) elite athletes who followed a different trajectory completed a written online survey, containing both open ended and closed questions.

Results

Looking at performances (outputs), the study revealed that since 2005, (only) 35 elite athletes reached a top 8 position in Europe. 19 of them (54%) went to an elite sport school, this is 4.6% of all 408 athletes. These figures are already slightly higher than a few years ago, which certainly indicates that elite sport schools are growing. Yet, their impact should not be overrated as elite athletes spent an average of only 2,8 years at an elite sports school, having already gone through 6 years of specialisation in their sport in clubs. These figures differ by sport.

In terms of processes, 66% of all elite athletes who went to an elite sport school, are generally satisfied about the different support services that they received; 14% are not. Mental coaching, nutrition and career coaching are the areas that most need improvement. Remarkably, 41% dropped out of school early. Interestingly, this qualitative evaluation is considerably worse for athletes who did not attend an elite school, varying from 35% of the athletes who indicated that they did not receive any service at all to for example 75% who lacked study, mental and career coaching.

Discussion

While there is a high quality of support services delivered to elite athletes in elite sport schools, after 12 years of existence it appears that there are only slight differences between the two groups in terms of both sport and study performances. In some sports (like Triathlon, Gymnastics, Badminton and table tennis) high performances were only achieved by athletes who went to an elite sport school, whereas in other sports (like athletics, swimming, judo and tennis) athletes performed well through both trajectories. In cycling athletes even performed better with their own teams and clubs, and in Handball there were no high-level performances at all. These are salutary lessons for Flemish policy makers, who invested 2.25 million euros in these schools in 2009 (11.5% of elite sports funding). Furthermore, it is noted that elite sport schools are going through a learning process. This can be seen not only in the performances at youth championships, but also in the practices of elite sport schools, as elite athletes after 2005 reported receiving more and better services than before.

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