

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHANGING POLICY LANDSCAPE OF ELITE TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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## Aim and research question

The paper provides an analysis of changes in the policy landscape for talent identification and development in the United Kingdom (UK), where elite sport policy in general has for some time held a privileged position within broader sport policy. This research examines how the specific element of elite sport policy, talent identification and development, has become an increasingly self-contained and significant part of the policy landscape. The policy landscape is defined as the mix of public funding, political salience and organisations' partnerships and programmes.

## Theory

The research is informed by the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). The key concepts of the MSF are the three streams: the political stream, the problem stream and the policy stream; the window or opportunity and the role of policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1995). The research examines how developments across the three streams and the window of opportunity created by the successful bid to host the 2012 Olympic/Paralympic Games created conditions where talent identification and development processes could be significantly changed and become a more self-contained element in broader elite sport policy.

## Methods

The methods employed were semi-structured interviews with senior officials from national sports organisations in England/UK, including sport-specific national governing bodies (NGBs), and analysis of key policy documents issued by a range of organisations from 1995 to 2012. These two methods were used in order to identify the key information and messages that are in the public domain but also to seek a deeper insight into relationships and priorities that have shaped the landscape. Representatives from 11 national governing bodies of sport and a further three representatives from non-sport specific national organisations were interviewed.

## Results, discussion and conclusions

The political stream can be identified as the national mood and the consensus amongst politicians and the media that success at international competition is important in the UK, especially in the context of hosting the Olympic/Paralympic Games. The problem stream is two-fold: firstly, the traditional pyramid model of sport development built around the clubs structure began to be seen as inefficient. Secondly, the elite development system that has emerged in the UK since the late 1990s following the introduction of National Lottery funding has necessitated a quicker development of those at the sub-elite level not only to ensure that the UK's elite sport success, but also to demonstrate a return on the investment. The policy stream can be identified as the development of stronger contractual arrangements between the NGBs and the non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), UK Sport and Sport England that were heavily influenced by the modernisation agenda in the early 2000s. Within these partnerships, specific programmes have emerged to address the issue of talent identification and development.

Winning the bid to host the 2012 Games created a window of opportunity, which coincided with complementarity between the three streams. When budgets were set for sport in 2006, UK Sport in particular was in a position to present plans to continue its work with the World Class Performance Programme but also to increase activity in talent development. The resultant policy to support systematic talent identification and development has brought about specific programmes and, more importantly, compressed the 'normal' timescale and politics of policy change. Most significantly has been the talent transfer schemes initiated by UK Sport that apply scientific approaches to seeking out people who are already achieving a certain standard of fitness and performance in one sport and supporting them to transfer to another sport with a view to becoming an Olympian or Paralympian. This system often bypasses the club structures as athletes are trained in centralised institutions and it means that the often-supported philosophy of the requirement of 10000 hours of practice in order for an athlete to become an 'expert' is cut considerably. In addition, Sport England is addressing the issue of ensuring there is a pathway that underpins the work of UK Sport and the World Class Performance Programme by working with NGBs to strengthen youth talent development.

Although it was the hosting of the London 2012 Games that brought about change in the landscape and this element of elite sport having greater significance, political saliency, funding and programmes have not been reduced in the post-Games period, nor is there any indication within the landscape that it will decline. Therefore this can be described as a long-term change to the landscape.

## References

- Kingdon, J. W. (1995) *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* 2nd ed New York: HarperCollins College Publishers