Elite Sport Policy and Higher Education: The Instrumental Use of Sport to Achieve Internal and External Stakeholder Agendas

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Current research has argued that the broader sport policy environment has fundamentally changed with a number of countries now pursuing Olympic glory in an inherent international ‘arms race’ (Green & Houlihan 2005; De Bosscher et al., 2006). As such many countries have reported broader policy paradigm shifts which now prioritise performance or elite national sporting system outcomes, namely Olympic medals. This includes changes in policy priorities and the emergence of elite sport as a significant policy concern in countries such as England (Green, 2004; 2009; Green & Houlihan, 2005) and Canada (Thibault & Babiak 2005). This study adds to this existing literature by providing a case study of sport policy change within the UK higher education sector.

Attention to the effects of these broader sport policy changes has often focused on national sporting organizations (Kikulis et Al, 1992; Macintosh & Whiston 1990) and non-departmental public bodies (Houlihan & Green 2009) and has led increased scholarly interest towards international comparative analysis (DeBosscher et al 2006; Digel, 2002; Oakley & Green 2001; Green & Houlihan 2005, 2008). Sport policy development has been researched extensively in terms of Physical Education and School Sport (Houlihan 1997; 2000; Houlihan & Green 2006), but with little consideration being made towards the effects of these broader sport policy changes further ‘upstream’ in terms of the Higher Education sector. Research that does address change within the Higher Education sector is generally produced through business organizational and institutional theory addressing HEIs visibility strategies through the medium of sport (Washington & Ventresca 2004) and strategy change within large scale sporting institutions (Washington 2004) primarily contained within the US.

This research provides a case study examination of sports strategy development within two UK Higher Education Institutions (henceforth HEIs). Kindgor’s (1984, 1995) Multiple Streams Framework was employed to make a ‘...more theoretically informed’ (Houlihan et al., 2009, p. 3) explanation of how sport strategies have changed internally within HEIs in order to further their own institutional objectives in an otherwise increasingly competitive environment. In addition the paper looks at the external drivers of change within HEIs and argues that the Higher Education sector is being used instrumentally by Government to achieve its increasingly elite-orientated mainstream sporting agenda (Green 2004; Green & Houlihan 2005).

Within the UK, the Higher Education Sector has now become an intricate stakeholder and essentially a cornerstone of the UK elite sport system. Three of the nine ‘satellite’ hubs which currently make up the United Kingdom’s Institute of Sport (UKIS), established in 1997, are contained on, and integrated with university campuses. Of the 313 athletes that comprised Team GB at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, 178 of them were university students or graduates (BUCS 2010). Thus HE mediated athletes currently represent a hugely disproportional cohort of 58% of all Team GB athletes.

A semi-structured interview method was employed with eight senior personal from two universities including senior-policy makers, academics and sport directors. A case study approach provided a thorough and “...in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring” (Denscombe, 1998, p. 32). In line with the theoretical stance adopted by Green (2004) that policy should be examined ‘as discourse’ (p. 367) interviews were supplemented by continual Discourse Analysis revision throughout the research process by examining governmental policy documentation that specifically addressed higher education sport.

The findings of the study provide useful insight into how sport is being utilized within the HE sector along with how HE sport is aligning itself with the broader policy shifts towards a continually elite and performance based policy orientation within the UK (Green 2004; Green & Houlihan 2005). An examination of HEI sport is made through four themes extracted from the data. These include: (a) Strategic Development of sport within HEIs (b) Sports Participation within HEIs (c) An analysis HEI Funding Streams, and finally (d) the importance of the upcoming 2012 Olympics. From these themes conclusions indicate that from an ‘inside-out’ perspective (Johnson et al, 2008) despite the Government’s policy rhetoric for a dualistic emphasis on both participation and elite sport (DCMS 2002), the reality is that elite sporting success and the performance policy stream has been internalized and reflected within HEIs strategic agendas and throughout HE higher level strategic thinking. Sport is being instrumentally used as an inherent USP or branding tool for HEIs in order to compete within the HE marketplace. Equally from an ‘outside-in’ perspective this research provides evidence towards the view that government is exercising its obscured regulatory authority (Green 2009) as powerful external stakeholder and is ‘cherry-picking’ the HE Sector to in achieve its sporting objectives and broader policy agendas.
The area of higher education and sport policy is notably underdeveloped with the majority of literature focusing on inter-collegiate sport in the US (Chu 1989; Edwards 2010; Fort & Fizel 2004; Washington 2004) with only a handful of European exceptions (Aquilina & Henry 2010; Callan 2008). Thus this study provides the first tentative steps towards an empirical basis of which better understand this complex and multifaceted relationship which underpins the UK elite sports system and the UK sports system more broadly. By understanding how different sports systems within different countries operate outside of North America, North American policy makers shall be better informed in making decisions in developing and improving their own sports systems domestically.