CHAPTER 1

Comparative elite sport development

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Introduction

In the 4 years prior to the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, the UK government allocated around £70 million in direct financial support to UK athletes. At the Games, the Great Britain and Northern Ireland team obtained a total of 30 medals, 9 of which were gold – an approximate cost of £2.3 million per medal. In the run up to the Beijing Games in 2008, the government has allocated a sum of £75 million in direct financial support. The United Kingdom is far from being alone in providing substantial support for its elite, and especially, Olympic athletes. The poor performance by the Australian team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics prompted a government enquiry which led to sustained and substantial investment of public funds in elite training facilities such as the Australian Institute of Sport and in direct support to athletes and domestic Olympic sports federations. At around the same time, the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR; former East Germany) was reputed to be spending about 1 per cent of its gross domestic product on elite sport. As Bergsgard et al. (2007, p. 170) note, government resources ‘were very much concentrated in high performance training centres in Berlin where there was a substantial “over-employment” of support personnel’. A DSB official reported, following reunification, that ‘when we took over, in East Berlin in track and field, we took over 65 physiotherapists. Each individual athlete had his own ...’. Even in free market, non-interventionist and decentralised political systems, such as the United States, draconian government intervention in sport was not unusual if it was deemed necessary to protect elite sport success. For example, in 1978 the US Congress legislated to resolve the long-standing dispute between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) for control over elite track and field athletes (cf. Hunt, 2007). The Amateur Sports Act marginalised the AAU and gave the US Olympic Committee primary responsibility for the preparation of teams to represent the United States.

There are a variety of explanations why such a diverse range of governments should be so concerned with elite sport success which include international prestige and diplomatic recognition, ideological competition and a belief that international sporting success generates domestic political benefits ranging from the rather nebulous ‘feel good factor’ to more concrete economic impacts associated with the hosting of elite competitions. In recent years hosting major sports events has been, for a number of countries, an important element in various forms of
economic development including tourism promotion (Sydney 2000 Olympic Games) and urban regeneration (Barcelona 1992 and London 2012 Olympic Games). The economic benefits of hosting major sports events are increasingly significant in post-industrial countries where the sports-related service sector is an important engine for growth and employment (Gratton and Taylor, 2000). However, if countries are to be in a position to use sport as a resource, whether for diplomatic, economic or social objectives, they are in a much better position to exploit sport’s potential if they possess assets in the form of recognised world-class elite athletes. There are few governments who have not recognised the value of sport as a high-visibility, low-cost and extremely malleable resource which can be adapted to achieve, or at least give the impression to the public/electorate of achieving, a wide variety of domestic and international goals. Such is the flexibility of sport as a policy instrument that it is increasingly difficult for governments, providing of course that they possess the necessary financial resources, not to espouse a commitment to elite sport and competition as illustrated by Canada’s agonising over the place of elite sport in public policy following the Ben Johnson doping scandal at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. Despite many statements decrying the distortion of values resulting from a commitment to the pursuit of Olympic medals, Canada is now investing heavily in elite sport in advance of its hosting of the 2010 winter Olympics in Vancouver.

Developing elite athletes

There have been a number of attempts to identify the ingredients of successful elite athlete development such as those by Fisher and Borms (1990), Abbott et al. (2002), Digel (2002a, b), Green and Oakley (2001a, b), Oakley and Green (2001), UK Sport (2006). Although the various authors identify a different number of key elements in a successful elite development system, there is considerable overlap between the analyses (see Table 1.1). In particular, it is possible to organise the elements or characteristics into three reasonably distinct clusters: contextual, for example, the availability of funding/wealth; procedural, for example, a system for identifying talent, determining the basis on which particular sports will be offered support; and specific, for example, bespoke training facilities.

For Oakley and Green (2001; see also Green and Oakley, 2001a) the 10 characteristics listed in Table 1.1 represent ‘common approaches to the problem of enhancing elite sport rather
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Oakley and Green</th>
<th>Digel</th>
<th>UK Sport (SPLISS Consortium)</th>
<th>Green and Houlihan</th>
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<td><strong>Contextual</strong></td>
<td>An excellence culture</td>
<td>Support, especially financial, of the state</td>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>Support for ‘full-time’ athletes</td>
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<td>Appropriate funding</td>
<td>Economic success and business sponsorship</td>
<td>Participation in sport</td>
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<td>A media supported positive sports culture</td>
<td>Scientific research</td>
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<td><strong>Processual</strong></td>
<td>Clear understanding of the role of different agencies</td>
<td>Talent development through the education system</td>
<td>Talent identification and development system</td>
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<td>Simplicity of administration</td>
<td>Talent development through the armed forces</td>
<td>Athletic and post-career support</td>
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<td>Effective system for monitoring athlete progress</td>
<td>Integrated approach to policy development</td>
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<td>Talent identification and targeting of resources</td>
<td>Coaching provision and coach development</td>
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<td>Comprehensive planning system for each sport</td>
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<td>Lifestyle support</td>
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<td><strong>Specific</strong></td>
<td>Well-structured competitive programmes</td>
<td>Sports science support services</td>
<td>International competition</td>
<td>A hierarchy of competition opportunities centred on preparation for international events</td>
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<td>Well-developed specific facilities</td>
<td>Training facilities</td>
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<td>The provision of coaching, sports science and sports medicine support services</td>
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*Sources:* Digel (2002a, b); Green and Houlihan (2005); Oakley and Green (2001); and UK Sport (2006).
than responses to the social, political and economic elements in each country’ (2001, p. 91). Moreover, they suggest ‘that there is a growing trend towards a homogeneous model of elite sport development’ (2001, p. 91). Digel’s analysis (2002a, b) focuses more on the context within which an effective elite sport system can develop, but there is a clear overlap with the analysis of Oakley and Green insofar as he stresses the importance of a culture supportive of elite achievement, adequate financial support, and processes through which talent can be identified and developed.

The joint report by UK Sport, Vrije Univeriteit Brussel, WJH Mulier Institut (The Netherlands) and Sheffield Hallam University, UK (known as the SPLISS Consortium) compared elite development systems in six countries (United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Norway, The Netherlands and Belgium) in relation to the nine factors (pillars) listed in Table 1.1. The findings were ‘inconclusive’ insofar as there was no clear relationship between particular factors and elite success. However, the authors did note that the three most successful countries at the Athens Olympic Games, Italy, United Kingdom and The Netherlands, all scored well in relation to the following four factors: funding for national governing bodies (NGBs); coaching provision and coaching development; athletic and post-career support and training facilities. The report also suggested that the similar high scores for the United Kingdom and The Netherlands in relation to ‘athletic and post-career support’ and ‘international competition’ might be due to both countries benefiting ‘from the learning curve of other nations which might be described as “early adopters” such as Australia’ (UK Sport, 2006, p. 15). Finally, the report noted the paradox of increasing global competition … encouraging nations to adopt … more strategic elite sport policy in order to differentiate themselves from other nations. The net result is an increasingly homogeneous elite sport development system which is ostensibly based around a near uniform model of elite sport development with subtle local variations (2006, p. 16).

However, in an article also published in 2006, by many of the same authors of the UK Sport report they qualify their initial conclusion by stating that it is impossible to create one single model for explaining international success. A system leading to success in one nation may be doomed to fail in another. Therefore it needs to be emphasised that the combination of the nine pillars may be specific to a given nation’s context and that different systems may all be successful’.

(De Bosscher et al., 2006, p. 209)
Although there are some differences in emphasis between the foregoing analyses they have much in common, at least at the general level of specification if not in the detail. The centrality of dedicated training facilities, public sector financial support, an integration of training preparation programmes with competition opportunities and an entourage of specialist support staff was evident across nearly all analyses and received further confirmation by Green and Houlihan (2005) in their review of the Soviet and East German sports systems and their more detailed analysis of the elite sport systems in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. Green and Houlihan suggested that there were four common themes: elite facility development; support for ‘full-time’ athletes; the provision of coaching, sports science and sports medicine support services; and a hierarchy of competition opportunities centred on preparation for international events.

Elite facility development referred to the provision of, and priority access to, specialised facilities for training. While the importance of access to specialised training facilities is widely acknowledged, provision is rarely considered satisfactory. In Australia, for example, elite swimmers complained not about the number of competition size swimming pools, but about constraints on access arising from the lack of ownership and control of pools by the swimming governing body. Attempts to develop a national strategy for the location of pools, crucial in such a vast country, were undermined by the insistence of states in establishing their own priorities regarding elite sport and facility provision. Facility provision for sailing was similarly affected by the state–federal relations, although provision was improved in preparation for the Sydney Olympic Games. Elite facility provision problems were even greater in Canada where the relationship between provinces and the federal government was more fractious thus making the implementation of a national facility strategy extremely challenging. Provincial–federal rivalry was compounded by a pattern of funding which was determined by success in bidding to host major sports events. Thus funding for elite level facilities was allocated to the cities that had been successful in bidding to host events rather than to those that had the greatest need or the greatest long-term commitment to supporting elite athletes. Even in the United Kingdom, which has a much more centralised political system, problems persist with the provision of suitable training facilities although the establishment of the UK Sport Institute (UKSI) network of specialist centres has greatly improved availability and access. However, for many sports there remains an unresolved tension between the facility needs of elite athletes and those of non-elite/club athletes.
With regard to elite facilities, Green and Houlihan (2005) argued that in all three countries swimming and athletics, both heavily dependent on public resources for facility development, found it hard to resolve the tension between support for elite achievement and support for the wider membership of their clubs. With substantial state political and financial support both sports sought to overcome this value conflict by isolating elite facilities from mass access, for example, through the establishment of elite sports centres in Canada and the network of elite sport institutes (UKSI) in the United Kingdom, thus creating separate administrative and financial arrangements to ensure that no elite level funding could be siphoned off for grassroots use. Sailing was an exception largely because its well-established club structure and the financial independence of its membership left it insulated from the competition for scarce resources that featured so significantly in the other two sports. The attempts to meet the acknowledged facility needs of elite competitors were affected by two key factors: first, the resource dependency relationship between the advocates of elite sport and the state; and second, the jurisdictional complexity at both the governmental level and also within their own organisations that most national sports organisations or national governing bodies (NSOs/NGBs) had to cope with.

The standard of competition in most sports makes it extremely difficult for an athlete to compete for medals if they do not treat training as a full-time commitment. Green and Houlihan (2005) found that while the Soviet Union and the GDR funded their athletes indirectly through their armed forces or universities, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom provided direct financial support to their elite athletes. However, in none of these countries was the subsidy sufficient to enable athletes to be financially independent, even in the United Kingdom where the world-class performance programme is supported by the national lottery. As a result many athletes had to seek additional funding from part-time work or from commercial sponsorship. However, corporate sponsorship of individual athletes, especially in swimming and athletics, encouraged elite swimmers and athletes to compete abroad for prize monies often to the detriment of their long-term development and consequently to their country’s medal-winning potential at the Olympic Games. As Slack observed, these athletes ‘no longer represent their club, their country, or themselves, they represent the corporations who provide the money for their sport’ (1998, p. 3).

The provision of high-quality coaching, science and medical support services also emerged as an important element in the
elite development systems in each of the three countries. However, Green and Houlihan noted that

In [athletics, sailing and swimming] across all three countries acceptance of coaching as an important, if not essential, ingredient in elite success ... was slow in developing. Until the advent of substantial public subsidy of both swimming and athletics investment in coaching was not possible in the volume that would encourage talented amateur coaches to see the occupation as a full-time career. However, even when public funds became available ... [investment in] the supporting services of coaching, sports science and medicine [was] generally an after-thought (2005, p. 175).

Up until the mid-1990s, public sector investment in elite sport was directed towards facility development and direct financial support for athletes. Consequently, with the notable exceptions of the European communist countries, coaching was highly variable in both quantity and quality. Much the same can also be said of the availability of sports science and sports medicine services as, according to Green and Houlihan, ‘all sports have been fairly slow to explore the potential of sports science in relation to competitors’ (2005, pp. 176–177). Early engagement with sports science tended to focus on equipment rather than the athlete, primarily because the application of science to equipment and apparel design has greater potential to generate profits than research into nutrition, psychological preparation and training regimes.

The final element of the elite sport system identified by Green and Houlihan was the structuring of domestic competition schedules to meet the needs of elite athletes who were preparing for international events. Green and Houlihan concluded that ‘the establishment of a competition calendar that met the needs of elite athletes was surprisingly hard to achieve’ (2005, p. 177). Part of the explanation lay in the conflict of interests between clubs/grassroots members and elite performers with the interests of the latter providing a poor justification for altering the pattern of competition for the overwhelming majority of club members. A second factor was the frequency with which elite athletes put their own financial interests (or those of their sponsor) ahead of those of their country. In athletics and swimming in particular, it was often the case that athletes would prefer to compete on the commercial Grand Prix circuit rather than in domestic club competitions or international representative events. Third, some NSOs/NGBs have put their need to generate income, for example, through sponsored events, ahead of the needs of their elite athletes to prepare systematically for major international competitions. Fourthly, some countries, Australia
and Canada for example, had to overcome the problems associated with the size of their countries and the consequent problems of arranging national events and competitions. Australia faced the further problem of its relative isolation from the main international competition circuits in all three sports. Finally, athletes who rely on scholarships from American universities, such as those from Canada, were regularly required to put the interests of their college ahead of those of their country and their international ambitions.

Pressures for convergence

The extent of similarity and variation between the countries analysed by Green and Houlihan suggests a degree of tension between pressures towards convergence in elite sport systems and factors militating against a uniform approach to developing elite success. Among the pressures towards convergence in elite sport systems are globalisation, commercialisation and governmentalisation.

The assumption that the major determinants of public policy are confined within sovereign state boundaries has, in recent years, become progressively less persuasive as an increasing number of formerly domestic policy issues are now embedded in a series of supranational policy networks. Indeed so significant have supranational actors become that some observers, for example Andersen and Eliassen (1993), argue that the proper focus for analysis should be the global or regional policy arena. In his analysis of welfare policy, Deacon (1997) argues that globalisation has necessitated a revision of the traditional approach to welfare policy analysis. Supranational policy actors, such as the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the World Bank, who have for many years influenced the domestic policy of poorer countries, are now shaping the discourse about the future of welfare programmes in the richer countries of Western Europe. Deacon also suggests that greater account needs to be taken of the ‘globalisation of social policy instruments, policy and provision’ (1997, p. 20) which takes three distinct forms – supranational regulation, supranational redistribution and supranational provision. Supranational regulation refers to ‘those mechanisms, instruments and policies at the global level that seek to regulate the terms of trade and operation of firms in the interests of social protection and welfare objectives’ (1997, p. 2). Examples from within the area of sport would include the regulation by international sports federations and the European Union of the transfer market, the role of the World Anti-Doping Agency in shaping
national anti-doping policy and the growing importance of the Court for Arbitration for Sport in settling sports-related disputes.

Welfare-related supranational redistribution policies already operate within the European Union and at a much lower level of effectiveness through the United Nations and key agencies such as UNESCO. In sport the closest examples would be the operation of sports development aid bodies such as Olympic Solidarity and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) sports development programme where the spread of the Olympic diet of international sport is supported with some very modest redistribution of resources. Supranational provision refers, according to Deacon, ‘to the embryonic measures … whereby people gain an entitlement to a service or are empowered in the field of social citizenship rights by an agency acting at the supranational level’ (1997, p. 3). The UN High Commission for Refugees and the Council of Europe Court of Human Rights provide two examples, while in the area of sport the Court of Arbitration for Sport is beginning to fulfil a similar role for athletes. At the very least the wealth of research on globalisation requires that any comparative analysis of elite sport development systems is sensitive to the increasing significance of supranational organisations for domestic policy.

Operationalising the concept of globalisation has proved difficult once consideration moves from a simple cataloguing of effects to an analysis of forms (Houlihan, 1997; Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Scholte, 2000), causes (Wallerstein, 1974; Robertson, 1992; Boli and Thomas, 1997) and trajectories of globalisation (Robertson, 1995; Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Houlihan, 2007). Despite the eclectic nature of much of the literature on globalisation, there is broad agreement that (1) globalisation should not be conceptualised as a coherent and uni-directional process, (2) the analysis of the significance of cultural change must acknowledge the varying depth of social embeddedness and that there is a need to be wary of granting too much importance to shifts in the popularity of particular sports or events, (3) the impact of globalisation on policy within individual countries will vary due to the differential ‘reach’ of global influences and the variability in ‘response’ in different countries and (4) while the political and cultural dimensions have a degree of autonomy from economic processes, it is economic interests that have become much more prominent in sport in the last 25 years as major sports, and sports events have become increasingly a focus for private profit rather than state subsidy (see Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Held and McGrew, 2002; Houlihan, 2003; Scholte, 2000).

The second pressure making for convergence, commercialisation, has three dimensions: first, the transformation of many
sports events, clubs and athletes into valuable brands and commodities; second, the growth of sport as a source of profit for non-sports businesses through, for example, sponsorship and broadcasting; and third, the growth of sports-related businesses such as sportswear and equipment manufacture (Amis and Cornwell, 2005; Slack, 2005). Particularly important is the attitude of government to the sports sector and the extent to which it perceives sport, not for example as an element of welfare provision, but as a sector of the service economy. The change in the perception of sport from being a consumer of public subsidy to a part of the cultural industrial sector (the productive economy) has been slow especially among some neo-liberal governments. The commercial potential of sport was recognised most clearly in relation to bids to host major sports events. For Germany (World Cup hosts in 2006), Canada (winter Olympic hosts in Vancouver in 2010), and the United Kingdom (hosts of the 2002 Commonwealth Games and of the 2012 Olympic Games), the economic benefits to the national balance of payments and to the local and regional economy have featured prominently in the rationales for government support of bids.

Commercialisation has also affected the way in which athletes relate to their sport with the most obvious impact being the increasing numbers who see sport as a significant source of income. The rapid decline in elite level amateur sport in track and field, tennis and, most recently, in rugby union, and the steady increase in the number of national Olympic committees which routinely give financial rewards to their medallists are both indicative of this trend. Countries, especially in Scandinavia, and organisations, such as the European Union, in which there is a lobby to retain, what the European Union refers to as, the ‘European model of sport’ in contrast to the commercial model typified by the United States, face an uphill struggle to hold back the neo-liberal commercialisation of sport. Finally, commercialisation has affected the management values and practices in sport and, in this respect, overlaps with governmentalisation.

NSOs in a number of countries including Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom have experienced rapid change in their internal organisation, the relationship between professional management staff and volunteer officers and general management practices often as a result of encouragement or pressure from government to modernise (become more business-like). In order to access commercial sponsorship and often public funding to develop their sports, events and teams as brands and marketable commodities, NSOs have increasingly been required
to adopt business practices and expertise of the corporate sector. Thus the strong pressures of mimetic isomorphism in relation to commercial corporations are reinforced by some governments through the imposition of targets and performance indicators. Audit and inspection regimes now proliferate, and are supported by sanctions imposed on those organisations that ‘fail’ to meet these centrally imposed targets (Green and Houlihan, 2006). This form of governmentalisation clearly reinforces and legitimises the value system of commercialisation in privileging the ‘the values of self-sufficiency, competitiveness and entrepreneurial dynamism’ (Hall, 1998, p. 11).

Although it is clear that governmentalisation reinforces many of the pressures exerted through commercialisation, the most important aspect of governmentalisation is the development of a state apparatus for the delivery and management of sport. In many countries government involvement in sport, particularly elite sport, is a significant and, in some cases, a dominant feature of the sports system and infrastructure. Not only are there many examples of governments working closely with voluntary/not-for-profit sports associations to deliver sports services, but there is also evidence of the steady accumulation of functions by government and the consequent development of specialist administrative departments and agencies, and the allocation of responsibility for sport policy at ministerial level. By the early part of the twenty-first century, concern with elite sport has become so well established within the machinery of government and within the portfolio of ministerial responsibilities that many governments are able to influence significantly the elite sport system.

While the three pressures are evident in many industrialised countries, their impact differs considerably as does the domestic response. Moreover, the response to these pressures will, to varying extents, become institutionalised and form part of the fabric of constraints within which elite sport policy is made. However, it is particularly important to acknowledge the degree to which global pressures are mediated by history. For example, the pressures of globalisation, commercialisation and governmentalisation have been and continue to be mediated in the United Kingdom by a history of sport in which social class and sports participation were intimately intertwined (Mason, 1980; Holt, 1992; Birley, 1995) and a long-standing non-interventionist attitude towards sport. In many respects the initial reluctance of governments, whether Conservative or Labour, up to the 1990s to intervene in order to influence the development of sport gave commercial interests the opportunity to shape substantially the development of elite sport. However, the relatively recent
enthusiasm of the government of John Major and those of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown was stimulated less by a desire to temper the excesses of commercialisation than by a desire to harness what was increasingly recognised as a significant political resource that could be deployed to aid the achievement of a series of non-sporting policy objectives such as improved behaviour among the young, community integration, urban regeneration and strengthened national morale. An instrumental perception of sport dominates within government which sees sport as a relatively cheap, yet high-profile tool for contributing to the achievement of a broad range of social policy objectives.

Other countries have similar distinctive histories that affect the impact of global pressures. It would be surprising if the abrupt ruptures that marked German history in the twentieth century had not created a distinctive response to globalisation, commercialisation and governmentalisation. The rise and fall of the Nazi regime and the reunification of East and West Germany were dramatic breaks with the past, both of which have left strong imprints on subsequent developments. Indeed the dominant motif in the history of German sport is the depth of political involvement in sport. In Poland, the 50 years of communist control and the general level of poverty in the country have produced a legacy that cannot be brushed aside, but which will continue to mediate current elite sport policy. In a similar fashion, the geo-political location of Singapore, its colonial history and current prosperity affect how its elite sport policy has been developed just as Protestantism, oil wealth and an intense historical rivalry with Sweden and Denmark have mediated Norway’s embrace of elite sport development.

In summary, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of transnational pressures and trends such as globalisation, commercialisation and governmentalisation, but it is equally essential to recognise the significance of national history and the institutional constraints on policy development. With this caveat in mind it is important to examine the attempts to operationalise the concept of globalisation at the level of specific policy. Given that apart from the former communist countries of central and Eastern Europe, most governments have only had an elite sport policy since the early 1990s it is reasonable to assume that policy traditions and institutions have not yet been firmly established and that considerable fluidity remains in the development of policy. It is therefore valuable to explore analytical frameworks and concepts which operate at the meso-level within particular policy areas as a way of understanding the interaction between global pressures and domestic contexts.
Explaining elite sport policy development
Policy learning, lesson-drawing and policy transfer

Implicit in much of the discussion of the development of elite sport systems in the work of Oakley and Green, Digel, De Bosscher et al. and Green and Houlihan discussed above is the assumption that countries learn from each other and that a process of policy transfer is in operation. At a commonsense level, policy learning and policy transfer are attractive. For example, the United Kingdom’s main comparators in relation to elite sport success include France, Italy, Australia and Germany and it would be unrealistic and surprising not to expect policy-makers to find out what these countries do and at least ask the question whether their practices could be adapted to the UK context.

The cluster of related concepts of ‘policy learning’, ‘lesson-drawing’ and ‘policy transfer’ has featured prominently in much recent analysis of policy change. Policy learning is rooted in an Eastonian systems model of the policy process where the policy-making cycle is regularly energised by feedback on the impact of existing policy, that is policy learning. While the process of policy learning can therefore be largely domestic and insulated from experience in other countries or even other policy areas in the same country, it is increasingly accepted that policy learning can and often does involve analyses of similar policy areas and issues in other countries.

More recent conceptualisations of policy learning have emphasised the intentional aspect of the process which moves beyond feedback on existing policy and involves the systematic scanning of the environment for policy ideas thus, in part at least, answering the critics of policy learning (e.g., Blyth, 1997; Gorges, 2001) who highlight the lack of clarity regarding the process by which ideas impact upon policy. Often this systematic scanning is undertaken as a routine activity by public officials and is a technical process rather than a political one. Heclo (1972), for example, argues that policy change is often not about the exercise of power but is a more consensual process involving a variety of actors (state, interest groups and political parties) concerned with a particular issue. In contrast, Hall (1986) argues that the impact of an idea is directly related to the strength of the organisation that acts as its sponsor thus challenging the rationalist assumption that ideas are an independent variable in the policy process.

Hall (1986) provides a valuable typology of policy change identifying three levels or ‘orders’ of policy change which result, potentially at least, from policy learning. First-order changes are alterations to the intensity or scale of an existing
policy instrument, such as an increase in an existing funding stream for elite athlete development. Second-order changes are those that introduce new policy instruments designed to achieve existing policy objectives: examples of which would include the introduction of payments to athletes for gold medals where none had previously been given or the psychological and physiological assessment of young athletes as part of a talent identification process. Finally, third-order changes are those that involve a change in policy goals and would include the decision to adopt an elite development strategy where previously the public policy priority had been on mass participation or where the state had previously left elite sport development to the voluntary or commercial sector. However, it is important to bear in mind Pemberton’s (2004, p. 189) comment that it is essential to distinguish conceptually between learning and change, and to recognise that ‘learning … does not necessarily lead to change’.

The lack of a necessary connection between policy learning and policy change is a theme developed by Rose who distinguished lesson-drawing from policy learning. Rose (2005, p. 16) suggests that ‘A lesson is the outcome of learning: it specifies a programme drawing on knowledge of programmes in other countries dealing with much the same problem’. As Rose notes ‘Lesson-drawing expands the scope for choice in the national political agenda, for it adds to proposals generated by domestic experience the stimulus of examples drawn from foreign experience’ (2005, p. 23). However, lesson-drawing ‘accepts the contingency of public policy’ and that what might work in one country might not work in another. In addition, lesson-drawing has the capacity to produce innovative policies only insofar as they are new to the importing country. As Rose notes, lesson-drawing ‘presupposes that even though a programme may be new to a government considering it, something very much like it will be in effect elsewhere’ (2005, p. 24).

As a result the concept of lesson-drawing avoids, according to Rose, ‘the bias inherent in analyses of policy transfer, since the term focuses attention on programmes that can or should be imported from abroad at the expense of giving attention to the obstacles to applying lessons at home’ (2005, p. 24). However, lesson-drawing is not a technical or neutral activity as the determination of what constitutes a lesson is a political process. Moreover, it is not always the case that the outcome of policy learning and lesson-drawing is positive as policy-makers may learn the ‘wrong’ lesson as a result of, for example, lack of analytical capacity or a restrictive ideology.

Green (2007, p. 429) distinguishes policy transfer from lesson-drawing by noting that ‘policy transfer is generally conceived of
as a broader concept than lesson drawing as it takes account of ideas of diffusion and coercion rather than just the voluntaristic activity of the latter’. In particular policy transfer refers to the process by which lessons learnt are transferred: how lessons are internalised, how lessons are recorded and described and how they are incorporated into a different organisational infrastructure and value system in the receiving country or policy sector. Policy transfer is, in Rose’s (2005, p. 16) words, ‘action-oriented intentional activity’. An awareness of the extent to which the transfer mechanism facilitates or constrains transfer is crucial. For example, the important role of the armed forces in South Korea in developing elite athletes for the Olympic Games or the role of the high school and especially the university sector in the United States in talent identification and development may be lessons that are clearly understood and learnt but which are difficult to transfer to a country such as the United Kingdom which does not have the institution of conscription and where the cultural values of the higher education system preclude such a heavy emphasis on sporting success at the expense of educational attainment.

The concept of policy transfer needs to be understood as reflecting the degree of ambiguity that surrounds the concept of policy. As a number of analysts have noted policy may be defined in a variety of ways: as government aspiration (Hogwood, 1987, p. 4), government action (Jenkins, 1978, p. 15) or government inaction (Heclo, 1972, p. 85). Consequently, what may be transferred may be an aspiration to achieve elite success without any subsequent commitment of resources or development of programmes. For example, many countries are signatories to the World Anti-Doping Code but have allocated only token resources to support implementation. However, policy transfer might refer to the transfer of a commitment to act supported by the resources necessary for effective action, for example, strategy development, investment in training facilities, the establishment of coach development programmes, and rescheduling of national competitions to better suit the build-up to international competition. Finally, the policy that is transferred might be much more difficult to identify as it is a policy to do nothing, or at least, not to alter current policy perhaps because it is considered to be equivalent to those available elsewhere. As should be clear the analysis of the transfer process is as important as an understanding of the process of policy learning and lesson-drawing. Lessons may well be accurately learned but be imperfectly transferred or transferred to an unsupportive organisational infrastructure.

Despite the attractiveness of the concepts of policy learning and policy transfer, there are some problems, the most obvious of
which are the difficulty of explaining how policy-makers learn (Oliver, 1997), what constitutes learning (Bennett and Howlett, 1992) and how learning might be quantified (Pierson, 1993). In addition there are substantial concerns relating to the process by which lessons are communicated and transferred policies recreated in the receiving country (see Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000).

**Path dependency**

Underlying much of the discussion about policy learning is the assumption that policy will change as a result of past experience or new information. As Greener notes policy learning ‘considers policy legacies to be one of the most significant elements in determining present and future policy’ (2002, p. 162). As such, policy learning has much in common with the concept of path dependency which suggests that initial policy decisions can determine future policy choices: that ‘the trajectory of change up to a certain point constrains the trajectory after that point’ (Kay, 2005, p. 553). Path dependency is also connected to the broader policy analysis literature on the importance of institutions which, for Thelen and Steinmo, are seen as significant constraints and mediating factors in politics, which ‘leave their own imprint’ (1992, p. 8). Whether the emphasis is on institutions as organisations or as sets of values and beliefs (culture), there is a strong historical dimension which emphasises the ‘relative autonomy of political institutions from the society in which they exist; … and the unique patterns of historical development and the constraints they impose on future choices’ (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995, p. 27).

As was argued above the relevance of institutionalism within sport policy analysis is clear. A number of authors have identified the organisational infrastructure of UK sport as a significant variable in shaping policy (cf. Roche, 1993; Pickup, 1996; Henry, 2001; Houlihan and White, 2002; Green, 2004) while Krauss (1990) and Wilson (1994) draw similar conclusions with regard to the United States as do Macintosh (1991) and Macintosh and Whitson (1990) in relation to Canada. Allocation of functional responsibility for sport, federalism, the use of ‘arms length’ agencies, and the presence of a minister for sport are all seen as having a discernible impact on sport policy and its implementation. Similar claims for the significance of cultural institutions are also widespread. Beliefs, norms and values associated with social class (Birley, 1995), gender (Hargreaves, 1994), disability (Thomas, 2007), and ethnicity (Carrington and Macdonald, 2000) have all been demonstrated to have had, and indeed to continue to have, a marked impact on the character of UK sport policy.
Perhaps more significant is the work of Esping-Andersen and his analysis of welfare states which is based on the hypothesis that the socio-economic and cultural foundations of a country will shape policy. Esping-Andersen (1990) identified three types of welfare regime: liberal, conservative and social democratic, using the private–public mix in welfare provision, the degree of de-commodification and modes of stratification or solidarities as dependent variables. Liberal welfare regimes, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, ‘reflect a political commitment to minimise the state, to individualise risks, and to promote market solutions’ and adopt a ‘narrow conception of what risks should be considered “social”’ (Esping-Andersen, 1999, pp. 74ff). By contrast the social democratic welfare regime is ‘virtually synonymous with the Nordic countries’ and is ‘committed to comprehensive risk coverage, generous benefit levels, and egalitarianism’, the decommodification of welfare and the ‘fusion of universalism with generosity’ (Esping-Andersen, 1999, pp. 78ff). Conservative welfare regimes, such as Germany and Austria, are characterised by their blend of ‘status segmentation and familialism’. Social security systems are based on occupational schemes and corporatist status divisions. The ‘accent on compulsory social insurance’ means that ‘purely private market provision of welfare remains marginal’ with the family and non-profit, ‘voluntary’ associations, frequently affiliated with the Church playing an important role (Esping-Andersen, 1999, pp. 81ff).

Although the tripartite categorisation of welfare regimes has been criticised on a number of grounds (see, for example, Castles and Mitchell, 1990; Liebfried, 1990; Siaroff, 1994), debate has tended to be around methodology and categorisation rather than challenges to the underlying assumption that socio-economic and cultural historical factors constrain contemporary policy development. If it is accepted that socio-economic and cultural history creates policy predispositions, then it is likely that these will be reinforced and compounded by the accretion of policy decisions. Past decisions consequently need to be seen as institutions in relation to current policy choices with path dependency capturing the insight that ‘policy decisions accumulate over time; a process of accretion can occur in a policy area that restricts options for future policymakers (Kay, 2005, p. 558).

In a hard application of the concept of path dependency, one would argue that early decisions in a policy area result in a policy trajectory that is locked on to a set course although one that might, in Esping-Andersen’s terms, be particular to a certain type of policy regime. A hard application of the concept in relation to elite sport would lead one to suggest that a prior commitment
to a social democratic model of welfare and/or a commitment to mass participation in sport would make the adoption of an elite development sport policy difficult as it would require a break with established values of universalism and non-commodification. A softer application of the concept would suggest that early decisions do not lock a policy on a specific trajectory, but do constrain significantly subsequent policy options (Kay, 2005). As regards elite sport development, it might be argued that while it may be possible to adopt an elite-focused policy the range of policy instruments that could be adopted to achieve its implementation might be path dependent. For example, it might be acceptable to support elite athletes as long as elite development is seen as a by-product of a vigorous commitment to mass participation: by contrast an elite development policy that was disconnected from mass participation, relying for example on early selection of potential high-performance athletes, would be less acceptable.

**Does policy determine politics?**

In direct contrast to the discussion in the previous section, one of the most significant insights from some, often large \( n \), comparative policy studies was that nationally distinct political characteristics were only very weakly correlated with particular policies and that the dominant developmental process in advanced industrial countries was one of convergence. Freeman (1985, p. 469) summarised the challenge as follows:

The idea that distinctive and durable national policymaking styles are causally linked to the policies of states asserts that ‘politics determines policy’. The policy sector approach argues, in contrast, that the nature of the problem is fundamentally connected to the kind of politics that emerges as well as the policy outcomes that result. The policy sector approach shifts our attention away from political inputs to categories of issues and outputs of the political system; it suggests that ‘policy determines politics’.

It can be argued that some policy sectors and policy issues within them are less susceptible to domestic politics than others. For example, core welfare services that Esping-Andersen focused on might be much more deeply rooted in the culture of a political system than other services such as sport. Thus while there might be general pressures making for convergence, their impact varies across policy sectors. However, it is not just the relationship of a policy sector or problem in relation to core cultural value that
explains the differential impact of convergence pressures, it might also be the intrinsic characteristics of the problem or issue insofar as the particular properties (constraints and pressures) of the problem ‘will override whatever tendencies exist toward nationally specific policies’ (Freeman, 1985, p. 486). To quote Heinelt, ‘the thesis “policies determines politics” would imply – given that a policy sector would be seen as the only relevant variable for explaining politics – that institutions, parties, forms of interest mediation, political culture etc. do not matter, only the policy sector does’ (2005, p. 7).

One important, and possibly crucial, indicator of convergence is the extent to which a broad range of countries with different political, socio-economic and cultural profiles adopt similar policy goals. As has already been suggested the proportion of, admittedly more wealthy, countries whose governments have accepted elite sport success as a sport policy goal is high and growing. If it is accepted that there is convergence in policy goals, then the next area for investigation is in relation to the policy instruments that have been selected to achieve that goal and crucially whether the choice of policy instruments is constrained by the nature of the policy objective. In other words it can be hypothesised that there is little scope for variation in instrument selection if a country wants to win Olympic gold medals: either some policy instruments are so much more effective than others that they are selected even though they may jar with deeper cultural values or the repertoire of policy instruments is so limited that there is little scope for variation in policy selection.

**Conclusion**

The chapters that follow are a response to the conclusions drawn by Green and Houlihan in their 2005 study of elite sport development and summarised above. Each contributor was asked to review the conclusions drawn from the study of Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom and either work within Green and Houlihan’s analytical framework or to take it as their point of departure if they considered that their particular country was sufficiently distinct. Each chapter provides an insight into the history and current political and organisational context of elite development policy and will allow firmer conclusions to be drawn about the relationship of elite development to broader sport policy and the extent to which each country’s distinctive history and socio-economic and cultural profile affects the intensity with which elite success is pursued and the particular policy instruments that have been selected to
achieve policy goals. In particular the nine country studies will enable a fuller debate about the relationships between politics and policy in relation to elite sport goals.

One concern in selecting the countries for inclusion in this analysis was to move beyond the group of English speaking countries often selected for comparison. Other criteria included the concern to select countries that have a history of success in international sport in general, and the Olympic Games in particular, such as the United States and Germany, as well as countries, such as Singapore, which aspire to international sporting success. However, there was also a desire to include examples of countries which had particular characteristics such as Poland (former communist government), Singapore (small and relatively rich country), and New Zealand (small population and strong sporting culture). It is not claimed that the nine countries are representative, but it is suggested that they have been drawn from a sufficiently broad range of institutional, historical and political contexts to allow, at least tentative, conclusions to be drawn regarding trends in elite sport development systems.

References


