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PROFILING ELITE/HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT ATHLETES WITH IMPAIRMENTS AT SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, universities have increasingly become hubs for high performance sports, as student-athletes enter the latter phase of the long-term athlete development process (LTAD). Within the South African context, several universities have and continue to play a significant role in the training and preparation of numerous participants for high level competition. This paper profiles the sport delivery practices for elite (high performance) AWI (Athletes with Impairments) across five South African universities. A descriptive, mixed-methods approach generated three data sets gathered through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Data was captured from high performance AWI and top management of the university sports structures featuring AWI. Elite sport for AWI featured three different delivery models identified as 'separate', 'integrated' and 'hybrid' approaches. Of the five sampled institutions, only three have elite AWI totalling 30 athletes across 10 sport codes. Some of these institutions have successfully contributed to and supported elite AWI, who have excelled at provincial, national and international levels. Findings from this study also expose how AWI are still largely under-represented in elite sport across sampled institutions as reflected in the relatively low participation numbers.

Keywords: Athletes with impairments; Universities; Elite sport; Paralympic Sport.

INTRODUCTION

The mandate to develop sport at an elite level lies predominantly within a partnership between government, international and national federations (Chalip *et al.*, 1996; Thoma & Chalip, 1996). However, the ever changing national and global sports landscape has resulted in a sport delivery system characterised by multiple stakeholders with interdependent and overlapping roles (Burnett, 2010a). The challenge of limited national resources and expertise necessitates collective effort from other stakeholders beyond the traditional role players to ensure optimal and synergised delivery (Burnett, 2010a). Amongst these stakeholders are universities, that traditionally are centres of excellence providing leadership in the various spheres of human endeavours, including sports (Joseph, 2012). The availability of sports facilities, sport science and medical services in one organisation makes universities special places to nurture talent (Campbell, 2012 as cited in Universities UK, 2012). Worldwide, universities are increasingly becoming the hubs for high performance sports.

Within the South African context, several public universities have and continue to play a significant role in the training and preparation of numerous participants for major sports events. However, much of this documented evidence in the South African sports system has been with able-bodied Olympic sport. Limited research exists with regard to the role South African public universities are playing in facilitating optimal performance of elite athletes with impairments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The availability of world class sports facilities and expert scientific services make universities potential hubs for facilitating sport excellence and act as key stakeholders in the development of elite athletes (Campbell, 2012 as cited in Universities UK, 2012). The increased visibility of successful athletes attracts universities to capitalise on the status and visibility of high profile athletes in the high-performance sport sector for marketing and branding purposes (Bourdieu, 1986; Burnett, 2010b).

In South Africa, Sports and Recreation South Africa (SRSA) has called for the establishment of strategic partnerships with tertiary institutions to effectively support elite athletes, which may develop their potential into excellence (SRSA, 2012). Burnett (2010a) reports significant partnerships between universities, the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC) and national federations, such as Cricket South Africa and the South Africa Rugby Union, among others. Universities mostly provide physical resources, scientific support and expertise, as well as managerial assistance to optimally support elite athletes and nurture their careers in high performance sport.

Federations collaborating with universities are afforded access to expert services, such as coaching, access to sport science, medical and technical services and often state of the art sports facilities. In return, universities gain access to brand building, research and opportunities for integrated learning experiences for students (Burnett, 2010a). Many South African universities are relatively well-resourced to foster sporting excellence in partnership with provincial sports academies (Burnett, 2010a; SRSA, 2012).

It is widely recognised that university involvement in the development of elite athletes has contributed to the success of individual athletes and teams at major sport competitions. Between 1992 and 2008, 61% of the Great Britain Team (Team GB's) Olympic Games medallists had been students or alumni, while 59% of Team GB for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games have been or were then current student-athletes at universities (Universities UK, 2012). Within a South African and Paralympic context, many of the participants in recent major sports events have been or are involved with universities in their training and preparation. One of the most successful universities is Stellenbosch University (SU) whose athletes won 58% of the medals at the London 2012 Paralympic Games (SU, 2012), 76% of the medals won at The International Paralympic Committee World Championships in Doha, Qatar in October 2015 (SU, 2015) and more recently, 65% of the medals at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games (SU, 2016).

Notwithstanding such success, not much has been documented regarding the role of these universities in facilitating optimal participation of elite AWI. Although PWI (People with Impairments) have participated in sport for over a century (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Brittain (2010) laments the fact that sport for PWI in general and the Paralympic Games in particular are generally under-researched. This is a concern also shared by other academics, such as Smith (2014). Brittain (2010), further notes that although there has been increased interest in documenting the history of Paralympic Sport and the Paralympic Games in the last ten to fifteen years, scientific scrutiny of the Paralympic Sport is still in its infancy and thus there is a dearth of academic material on the subject particularly from the social sciences and management perspectives.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the research was to describe the current practices pertaining to the role of South African universities in facilitating optimal performance of elite AWI. This paper profiles elite Paralympic Sport across five South African higher education institutions (HEI) as a contribution to this relatively under-researched subject area.

METHODOLOGY

Ethical clearance

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the University of Johannesburg (reference: REC-01-127-2014).

Methods

A descriptive mixed-methods approach was applied using three data sets generated from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative data was generated to show trends and provide a contextual understanding of the involvement of the sampled universities in supporting and facilitating high performance sport participation of AWI in South Africa. Qualitative data was obtained through interviewing key decision makers (n=8) from the sampled institutions, which included representatives from the top management of the university sports structure (n=5) and the sports club managers of different sport codes inclusive of elite Paralympic AWI (n=3). The interviews covered various aspects that include participation statistics of elite AWI, structuring models and funding of elite AWI at the sampled institutions.

Data collection

Quantitative data was obtained through questionnaires completed by elite AWI in the sampled universities (n=9). This questionnaire sought to capture the athletes' biographical and sport participation information. In addition, a review of a variety of documents, such as policies, reports and other written artefacts found on the websites of the universities was undertaken to verify independently and triangulate the data obtained from questionnaires and interviews. These documents included official, ongoing records of each university, such as mission

statements, annual reports, policy manuals and strategic plans. Data used for this study reflects the 2014 and 2015 structures and practices across the sampled institutions.

Sample

This study focuses on high performance sport codes (n=10) falling under the Paralympic Movement, which are offered in sample institutions . A total of nine athletes participated in this study from 10 sport codes, seven of whom were from University A, one from University B and one from University C. There were no participants from Universities D and E.

Participation was voluntary and open to all athletes participating in their sport(s) at provincial level or higher only. The ages of the participants ranged between 20 and 42 years mainly because of the open club membership. There were female (n=5) and male (n=4) respondents and all nine athletes fall under two of the three impairment categories as per the General Classification Systems of Paralympic Summer Sports (IPC, 2013) being physical impairment (n=8) and visual impairment (n=1).

Participating universities (n=5) were drawn from the public universities registered with the University Sports South Africa (USSA) and primarily focused on all institutions in Gauteng Province plus SU from Western Cape Province. To protect the identities of participating universities, specific letters will be used to denote the name of each institution, for example, University A.

RESULTS

Sport for AWI is offered at recreational and competitive levels in all five sampled universities. However, only two institutions (University B and University C) offer high performance sport for AWI. Although University A does have high performance AWI as defined for this study (athlete competing at provincial level or higher), none of the sport codes for AWI are officially recognised as high performance sports at this institution. The following discussion focuses on the participation statistics and structuring models found across the three universities with elite AWI, namely University A, B and C.

Participation statistics

Information from Table 1 shows that there are a total of 10 sport codes in which elite AWI participated across the three universities. Most of these were found at University A (n=7), followed by University B and C with each having four athletes. Swimming and athletics (track and field) are the only sport codes offered across all three universities, while the rest of the sport codes are only found at University A. In both institutions, (University A and University B), track and field athletics is the sport code with the highest number of participants at high performance level with six and nine athletes respectively. Adaptive rowing and wheelchair tennis that were only offered at University A, both codes have the second highest number of participants at high performance level with four athletes each.

The least number of athletes were found in blind judo and swimming also at University A, with one athlete each. University A has a 67% to 33% (12:8) student to non-student club

membership ratio. In comparison, University B has a 75% to 25% (12:4). The two institutions (University A and B) thus have more non-student AWI participating at the high-performance level as compared to student-athletes and management in both institutions attributed this mainly to the relatively low number of students with impairments enrolled at these institutions.

Table 1. **SPORT CODES OF ELITE AWI IN SAMPLED UNIVERSITIES**

Sport codes with high performance AWI (n=10)	**Universities**		
	A	**B**	**C**
Athletics (track and field)	X	X	X
Hand cycling		X	
Cycling		X	
Adaptive rowing	X		
Swimming	X	X	X
Wheelchair basketball	X		
Wheelchair tennis	X		
Archery			X
Wheelchair rugby			X
Triathlon	X		
Percentage total of sport codes offered per university	60% (n=6)	40% (n=4)	40% (n=4)

Structuring models

From the interviews and document analysis, three delivery models emerged, namely the 'separate club' structuring model (University B), the 'integrated' model structuring model (University C) and the 'hybrid' model structuring model (University A). The separate structuring model reflects the traditional organisation of sport for AWI internationally which is predominately governed and organised separately to that of able-bodied athletes. Different from able-bodied sports clubs which are sport code based, sport for AWI at University A is all clustered as one code, namely 'Disabled Sport' within the university's sport club. Eighty percent (n=8) of the sample sport codes in this study are structured along this model. The integrated structuring model found at University C reflects recent developments in some sports at international level, such as rowing, to integrate the governance and organisation of sport for able-bodied and AWI under the same organisations with a related discipline, for example rowing and adaptive rowing.

Amongst the 10 sample sport codes, adaptive rowing and wheelchair tennis are the only codes that are inclusively governed by the same international federations. Although there are

instances at national and local (club) levels where structures in these two sport codes are separated (able-bodied and adapted), the international and national federations for rowing and tennis encourage rowing and tennis clubs to adopt the integrated structure. This allows for the optimal sharing of management, coaches, sports facilities, as well as economic resources between able-bodied and AWI sports.

This presumably also allows for equitable recognition of elite AWI with their able-bodied counterparts in the same sports code, as is the case with rugby at University C. The rugby club at University C, is a priority sports club and represents a framework for mainstreaming at the institution. By default, all the rugby teams under this club union, women's and wheelchair rugby are accorded priority status without distinction on ability or gender. While this relatively elevated status does not translate into intra-club equity resource allocation, it comes with enhanced resource support when compared to non-priority sport codes, such as cycling.

The 'hybrid' structure which is a combination of both the 'separate' and 'integrated' club structures, was found at University A where participation opportunities exist at competitive levels across six sport codes through a separate club structure, while adaptive rowing is fully integrated into the able-bodied rowing sports club. The latter was largely influenced by the national federation, Rowing South Africa, who fund the high performance adaptive rowing team housed at University A in line with the national and international practices, where rowing for able-bodied athletes and adaptive rowing are fully integrated and governed by the same international sport federation.

The model thus allows for resource sharing and for allocation specific to an AWI sport code. All five universities have open clubs that cater for both student as well as non-student AWI to boost the low participation levels of AWI in these institutions. The open access policy of the sports clubs also ensures that the success of the athletes is harnessed for marketing purposes.

DISCUSSION

Overall, sport participation statistics show that participating numbers of AWI at elite level across the sampled institutions with elite are relatively low (n=34), except for University C who did not provide data in this regard. This is in consideration that a total of 10 sport codes were sampled across a total of five universities in this study. This echoes Burnett's (2010b) findings of a general under representation of AWI in university sport in South Africa. These low numbers also explain, in part why eight of the 10 sample sport codes are primarily individual sports as opposed to team sports.

Most of the elite AWI across the sampled institutions are non-students, a key difference with able-bodied sports in South African universities in general where most participants are student-athletes. Again, this reflects the low number of PWI in sport at the South African universities as identified earlier. PWI in South Africa have largely been excluded from mainstream society and barred from accessing basic political, social as well as economic rights (Masambo, 2013 as cited in SASAPD, 2016) and thus have had limited access to education and sport. To some

extent, the low number of PWI in sport in the sampled universities reflects a gap in the current education and sport landscape with regards to access for PWI.

Regarding structuring models, the three different structuring approaches across sampled institutions highlight the complicated national and international organisational structure in sport for AWI. While the modern day organisational structure of sport for AWI is still largely separated from able-bodied sport, with few exceptions such as adaptive rowing and wheelchair tennis, the international structure of Paralympic Sport is the made up of mixture of international bodies including federations for sport, federations for disabilities as well as sub-committees often with contradicting and interfering aims (Thomas & Smith, 2009). Attempts to integrate some sport for PWI into mainstream sport while others remain segregated have resulted in historically fragmented, complex and confusing organisational structures surrounding sport for AWI (Thomas & Smith, 2009). The complicated national and international structure is a source of confusion for member organisations and other stakeholders, such as universities that have generally followed this historically fragmented organisation and structuring. As a result, they have inherited some of the challenges and this is evident in findings from this study.

Although sample universities in this study have made significant strides in the provision of elite sport participation for AWI over the last two decades, findings from this study also reflect that PWI are still largely excluded from and marginalised in sport (DePauw, 1997; Masambo, 2013 as cited in SASAPD, 2016) and elite sport in particular, across the sample universities. This is chiefly with regard to the relatively limited opportunities for elite sport participation that currently exist, as well as the shallow depth of resource support given to existing sport codes for AWI, because of the overall failure to acknowledge elite sport for AWI as priority sport. These shortcomings can be linked to and are reflected in the lack of tangible policies or plans to address the existing disparities between able-bodied sport and sport for AWI currently as well as going forward in these institutions.

Exclusion of PWI from elite sport in sample universities

It is argued here that overall, PWI are more or less excluded from elite sport participation across sample universities. Firstly, this is relating to the existing limited meaningful opportunities for participation at the elite level and in particular, the number of sport codes available for PWI who want to pursue their academic and sport careers in these institutions. Findings from this study show that of the five sample universities, only three have elite AWI mainly because no opportunities exist at this level in the other two institutions. Within the three institutions, four sport codes are offered at elite level in a single institution (University B and University C). Although University A has the highest number of sport codes with elite AWI (n=6) based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria set for this study, these athletes are not officially recognised as elite athletes in this institution. Considering that collectively, these three institutions are the greatest contributors towards high performance sport for AWI from the HEI sector in South Africa, it is argued here that the current offerings are significantly limited. The status quo directly disadvantages AWI, who participate in other sport codes besides the ones offered and thus have no opportunity to become elite student-athletes at these institutions.

Although there are pockets of excellence and good practices within what is offered, when viewed collectively and in a wider context, there is what Goggin and Newell (2005) call, 'Social Apartheid'. This is a system of exclusion faced by PWI in accessing opportunities and resources that are available to their able-bodied counterparts (Goggin & Newell, 2005). This by no means suggests that there are blatant acts of discrimination when it comes to providing elite sport for AWI in these institutions, but rather, exclusion is taking place in "different ways and through different methods all of which seem to be acceptable" (Rains, 1999:493) and justifiable. According to Rains (1999), these methods include mainly, the use of organisational and administrative issues to justify decisions that result in PWI not acquiring adequate opportunities in elite sport participation.

However, there is a need to put the status quo in context particularly that historically, PWI have been excluded from sport and have been marginalised in sport in South Africa (DePauw, 1997) as well as across the wider community. History reveals that in many societies, PWI were not even considered as participants in sport (Thomas & Smith, 2009). When sport was introduced to PWI, for some, there was no need for sport beyond the therapeutic role (Mastro *et al*., 1998). In a South African context, PWI have also largely been excluded from mainstream society and prevented from access to fundamental political, social and economic rights (Masambo, 2013 as cited in SASAPD, 2016). Within a sport context, this is reflected in the limited opportunities for participation, inaccessibility of sport facilities, shortage of equipment and other resources (Roux, 2012), as well as the lack of sufficient competition locally, particularly in the rural areas (DISSA, 2003 as cited in SASAPD, 2016). Although South African universities have to some extent embraced social transformation, it is argued here that this has been predominantly about ethnicity and gender and little about PWI. This observation is shared by Thomas and Smith (2009) also in a related study in the United Kingdom. Regardless of these contextual insights, however, a case is made here that the existing opportunities fall short of the ideal.

Secondly, and more significantly, there is an absence of policy and concrete plans to address the existing disparities going forward. The historical context given above gives rise to the need for universities and other institutions to take proactive and extraordinary measures to fast-track the provision of meaningful opportunities for elite sport participation for PWI. While there are overarching commitments by sample universities through disability policies to ensure that previously disadvantaged groups such as PWI are catered for in terms of equal access to education, there is an aura of silence when it comes to sport. Sport for AWI in sample universities remains a largely marginal aspect of sport policy and practice with sample universities reporting having no policy or plan to increase sport participation for AWI going forward. In a country where social transformation is being pushed through in sport along ethnicity and gender lines through the quota system and other initiatives, the lack of attention on sport for AWI is a concern both at university level as well as the wider sporting context.

The importance of policy need not be overemphasised, because policy informs strategy and practice. As such, it should be the first step to be taken by universities to address the inequalities faced by PWI in relation to sport. The resultant impact of policy is evident in other areas in society where disability issues are high on the agenda, because of legislation and policies resulting from increased lobbying activities of disability activists and organisations (Thomas

& Smith, 2009). A strong and encompassing mission statement with clearly articulated and measurable goals stated publicly (Fay, 1999) is key when addressing the challenge of exclusion from and marginalisation of PWI in sport in these institutions. It is argued here that the absence of policy is the main reason for the considerable lack of adequate progress in sport for AWI in the sampled universities. For this to change, there is need for commitment to disruptive justice (changing the will) (Thomas & Smith, 2009) by top management in these institutions to redistribute finite resources. Failure to address the challenge of the marginalisation of PWI in sport at strategic level will result in little or no change to the status quo.

Marginalisation in sport

Findings from this study reflect the marginalisation of PWI in sport at the sampled universities mainly through the overall failure by management to recognise sport for AWI as priority sport. The result of this is the shallow depth of support offered to existing elite AWI. It is argued here, that the predominantly non-priority status of most of the elite sport codes for AWI at the sampled institutions is evidence that sport for AWI is largely viewed as less important at these institutions. This is because, such recognition is the first and main criteria used when determining funding priorities in relation to sport at these universities and, as such, directly impacts on the depth of support available to sport for AWI.

Universities support elite sport participation through the provision of access to training and competition, coaching, provision of expertise in the areas of sports science and medicine, among others. The high costs incurred in providing this support have been reflected in the findings of this study. The value of funding support allocated towards the specific sport code or club from the university becomes key when determining the scope of support available to elite athletes in these sport codes or clubs. The level of funding support from the university sets the foundation of what can be provided for in terms of supporting elite sport participation from the perspective of institutions from which other external stakeholders can add value. In other words, universities primarily rely on their own funding to support elite sport participation and in addition, they exploit other external sources of funding to enhance their resource capacity.

It is argued here, that overall, elite sport for AWI in these institutions receives relatively limited funding support from the universities, which by implication limits the other forms of support available to elite AWI. No figures were provided regarding the value of funding made available to the various priority sport codes by sample universities to enable comparison within and between sample universities. However, given that institutional funding priorities favour priority sport codes, the overall failure to recognise existing elite sport for AWI as priority sport results directly in less funding support allocated to this sub group. Apart from University C, where three of the four sport codes for AWI are official priority sports, none of the sport codes for AWI at University B and University A enjoy this status.

It is acknowledged that there is need for universities to invest their relatively limited resources strategically in sport codes that yield some financial return (business model) to cover some of their cost, as well focus on sport codes that align with their vision and mission. However, these funding principles inherently favour predominantly able-bodied, white, male, upper middle

class sport codes (DePauw, 1997), which by default disadvantages, and result in the marginalisation of PWI in sport at these institutions.

Supporting high performance sport is costly anyhow, and as such, management needs to transcend the barrier of limited resources (real or perceived) (Rains, 1999) and find new and better ways to fund a more inclusive and diverse elite sport offering. Management also needs to develop the potential of the existing resources through expanding their fundraising initiatives, corporate marketing strategies and exploring new market niches. Paralympic Sport has the potential to become a new niche market (Fay, 1999).

Failure to address challenges at strategic decision-making level

The challenges, regarding the exclusion from and the marginalisation of PWI in sport of PWI, in sample institutions reflect, to a greater extent, the failure by management to take measures that address the historical exclusion from and marginalisation in sport of AWI at strategic decision-making level. While there are other challenges in sport for AWI, which directly and indirectly impact on the universities' ability and potential to optimally support elite sport participation for AWI, universities, in their own spheres of authority and within their respective capacities can and should make 'the right' decisions that ensure that minority populations, such as PWI, to have adequate access to elite sport opportunities in the same way they do for able-bodied sport.

While, decision-making at any level is inherently about making choices for one or another, where decision-making lessens the chances of certain groups of people to meaningfully and adequately participate in sport (Rains, 1999), it may be construed as discrimination and marginalisation. Further, failure to take proactive and concrete measures to address the disparities that exist, can be construed as the use of strategic processes by the power elite (top management in universities) to justify and reinforce the status quo (Fay, 1999).

It is crucial, however, to note that elite sport for AWI in the sampled universities does not take place in a social vacuum. The exclusion from and marginalisation of PWI in sport across the sampled universities discussed above, reflects wider social issues related to disability in society and other global and national challenges in sport for AWI. The current relatively low levels of involvement by universities in high performance sport for AWI globally are considered in the context of wider challenges facing sport for AWI in general, such as low levels of awareness and recognition of sport for AWI in society and various tertiary institutions (Roux, 2012). Other challenges include the high cost of providing specialised equipment, adapted sports facilities and support services, lack of expertise and coach education (De Bosscher *et al*., 2008; Shuhan *et al*., 2011). These impact on the ability of universities to support the elite of AWI adequately and as a result will necessitate dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Overall, all three universities in this study have made significant strides over the last two decades to address this anomaly, particularly in as far as it relates to the provision of elite sport participation for AWI. Although the level of progress made by individual institutions varies

between modest to significant, collectively, their efforts have had some outstanding outcomes that include the provision of opportunities for sport participation across a combined ten sport codes with at least 30 elite AWI across three institutions. Individually, some of these institutions have successfully contributed to and supported elite AWI, who have had great success at provincial, national as well as international levels.

Amid these achievements, however, overall findings from this study also reflect that PWI are still largely under-represented in elite sports across the sampled institutions, as evidenced by the limited number of sport codes available to AWI and the relatively limited numbers of AWI at these institutions. Going forward, there is consensus across all five sample universities that people with impairments in South Africa are a marginalised and disadvantaged group and that universities, among other stakeholders, have a moral obligation and a social responsibility to redress the inequalities and disadvantages created by prejudice and discrimination against this minority group.

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