

POLICY TRANSFER IN ELITE SPORT DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF ELITE SWIMMING IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Research question: This article explores policy transfer in the context of (non-professional) elite sport development through a detailed examination of Chinese elite swimming organisations since the early 2000s. The analysis is structured according to the five main aspects of policy transfer: rationale, actors, sources, elements and content, and conditioning factors.

Research methods: Data were collected from 15 semi-structured interviews with officials, coaches and scholars. These interviews were complemented by a content analysis of official and semi-official documents from both relevant sports governing bodies and influential Chinese media.

Results and findings: (1) The most important factors propelling the policy transfer were poor performances at major international sports events and a desire to be successful at the home Olympic Games; (2) the key policy transfer actors included government 'insiders' and foreign experts; (3) Australia was the main source of new policy because of a combination of political, geographical, economic and sport-specific factors; (4) the policy content transferred focused mainly on ideas, methods and techniques rather than deeper-level structures and ideology; and (5) source nations sought to constrain the policy transfer process.

Implications: Although policy transfer can be effective, there can be unintended negative consequences. Policy transfer is a bilateral process which is reliant upon the support of organisations or individuals from source nations. This research can stimulate elite sport programmes to consider the merits of pursuing policy transfer, when to pursue policy transfer and how to pursue policy transfer.

This is a summary of a published paper, that should be referred as follows:

Tien-Chin Tan, Jinming Zheng & Geoff Dickson (2019): Policy transfer in elite sport development: the case of elite swimming in China. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/16184742.2019.1572768

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

- This research has both academic value and practical utility. In academic terms, the ability of the five key aspects of policy transfer to effectively analyse elite sport policy transfer between two nations is evident.
- The value of this research transcends the confirmation of existing research on policy transfer. Three elements of this research are likely to further advance relevant studies on policy transfer. **(1)** The first theoretical contribution is the further reification of the dissatisfaction rationale for policy transfer within elite sport policy. **(2)** the source-nation constraint fills a significant gap in existing research on policy transfer and highlights some distinctiveness of the policy area of elite sport. **(3)** the outcome of the policy transfer process has been positive and is reflected in the improved performances of Chinese elite swimmers in this case.
- The practical utility of this research resides in its provision of the 'thick description' and subsequent ability to guide the decision to whether or not a country should pursue a policy transfer initiative and how best to conduct such an undertaking.
- This research also contributes to the broad elite sport literature through its explanation of how nations exploit and manage policy transfer.