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**Review of Junior Sport Framework
Draft Briefing Paper: The Role of
External Providers in Junior Sport**

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Junior Sports Framework Review – Draft Briefing Paper Topic: The Role of External Providers in Junior Sport

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Junior Sport Framework (JSF) Project

The Role of External Providers in Junior Sport

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1. BACKGROUND

The role of external providers has become an increasingly topical issue in discussions about the delivery of junior sport in Australia. In a society that values flexibility and choice, the boundaries of organisations and their associated programmes, as we know them, are frequently being disturbed. New providers of access to junior sport experiences, coaching and competition opportunities are challenging existing forms of service.

The question, “What is an external provider?” requires a reference point. Here, the term external provider refers to deliverers of junior sport external to National Sports Organisations (NSOs), State Sports Organisations (SSOs), and their affiliated clubs and associations. In this paper, attention is given primarily to one specific kind of external junior sport deliver, namely private (that is, commercial) providers.

2. WHAT IS KNOWN?

The provision of junior sport by organisations other than NSOs, SSOs and their affiliates is not an entirely new phenomenon. Australian schools, for example, have a long history of providing junior sport that stretches as far back as the late-nineteenth century (Kirk, 1998). Private providers, too, have been present for some time on the Australian sporting landscape. Commercial coaching programmes, for instance, have been a feature of the Australian swimming industry for much of the last century (Phillips, 2008). Nevertheless, over the past ten years, private providers of junior sport have become more numerous and more visible (Ardzejewska, 2009; Macdonald, 2011; Macdonald, Hay, & Williams, 2008; Webster, 2001; Williams, Hay, & Macdonald, 2011). Although the specific issue itself has been the focus of little research, there are a number of plausible reasons why the contemporary Australian junior sport context has been marked by an increasing prevalence of private providers. These

reasons rest on inferences that can be made from other areas of research such as in physical education (PE) and cultural studies.

Since the late-1970s and early-1980s, there has been a number of important changes to the orientations and priorities of the social and economic policies of many industrialised countries, including Australia (England & Ward, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Rose, 1999). Among these changes has been a relative shift in the roles and responsibilities of community service provision and support from the public sector and the State to individuals, families, local communities, philanthropic groups, and the private sector. Generally, government services have been reduced as governments have encouraged or facilitated commercial enterprises and community organisations to fill the breach. For example, the services which are provided by our state/territory government's sport and recreation departments will have typically been reduced over a number of years.

More specifically, features of Australian public policy and practice (Aspalter, 2003) have included shifts such as the:

- privatisation and rationalisation of services and facilities,
- introduction of competitive tendering processes,
- creation of new markets in formerly public services,
- encouragement of entrepreneurship in the community through grant and subsidy schemes, and the
- establishment of inter-agency and cross-sector partnerships.

Unsurprisingly, the spheres of sport, recreation, health and leisure have not escaped these changes and the rise of privately provided junior sport programmes is, partly, a manifestation of these shifts. In other words, these changes have created a social, cultural, economic and political context that has encouraged the establishment of alternative providers of junior sport, particularly those of a commercial orientation.

Other features of the contemporary context related to an increasing prominence of external providers of junior sport are the interests of young people, the place of physical activity in their lives, and the forms of physical activity offered by traditional junior sport providers. Sporting statistics suggest that while traditional sports continue to attract relatively high participation rates, who, how and why young people participate continues to change over time. Where young people are keen to participate in a traditional sporting club/competition experience, family resources may limit this (costs, time, competing responsibilities etc) as can access for those in regional and rural Australia.

In families that have a strong commitment to achievement and its corollary of highly engaged parenting practices, along with available resources, children may be enrolled in a range of short courses and programmes. These may be aimed at increasing children's skills and success, broadening their interests, promoting health, and expanding opportunities and friendships. This pattern of parenting, together with high levels of workforce participation of parents, further creates demand for a range of physical activity and recreational experiences that enrich, as well as safely occupy, the child or young person (e.g., Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000).

There is also evidence that many young people are attracted to "alternative", possibly less structured, sports and active recreation, are committed to part-time jobs, and highly value choice (Wright & Macdonald, 2010). These attributes of young people intersect to create markets for shorter courses/periods of engagement across a wide range of activities that can be accessed somewhat flexibly (i.e. dip in and out) and can be enjoyed at times other than when more conventional junior sport is scheduled.

Box 1 provides an example of a commercial coaching and sport development company with national and international franchises. Coerver Coaching exemplifies many of the features outlined above; an inviting "product" for children and young people, offered at a time when it may suit parents, and promises systematic skill development under the guidance of local and global experts who advertise they will produce results.

Box 1: Coerver Coaching

Coerver Coaching is a global organisation in six continents and 28 countries, with Australian licenses, offering a range of football (soccer) programmes and services. These include a Performance Academy for "grassroots player development" and a Coaching Diploma in Youth Development for soccer coaches. The company is supported with sponsorship from global brands Adidas and FourFourTwo. Boys and girls (7–17 years old) are invited to join an after school Performance Academy that uses the "world's No. 1 teaching method" at the cost of \$XXX. Coerver also can work with local soccer clubs to provide tailored clinics. Participants receive a Coerver kit (clothes, water bottle, backpack, ball etc), are tested throughout their programme, and can access support and further information via an engaging website that includes the advice, encouragement and endorsement of world leaders in soccer.

The case study presented in Box 2 also reflects market demand in junior sport that has been shaped by the abovementioned contextual factors. The second case is of a University sporting organisation that offers a range of sporting programmes that are active, safe, flexible, cost-effective, with trained leaders and offered at convenient times for busy parents.

Box 2: UQ Active Tribes

Through the University of Queensland's UQ Sport, the ActiveTribes programme offers after-school and holiday sport programmes and services as well as providing leadership and instruction for intra-school sporting experiences. Programmes are offered at UQ campuses, school and community facilities in activities such as aquatics, tennis, netball, athletics as well as multi-activity programmes for 5 to 14 year olds. Week long holiday programmes are approximately \$240/participant and weekly sessions at \$4.50/participant. The ActiveTribes programmes emphasise fun and safety with well-trained leaders, access to childcare rebates, as well as flexibility to tailor programmes to suit schools' interests and resources. In offering these programmes, university sporting organisations such as UQ Sport assist in the promotion of the university in the community, optimise the use of university facilities as a community asset, and create an income stream for the organisation.

It is important to note that in both these cases, the organisations offer types of partnerships to schools that are seen as attractive to schools. For example, they can provide access to expertise and facilities within and beyond school hours that may not otherwise be available to schools and their students. In recent Australian research many schools have reported engaging in outsourcing practices to access facilities, equipment and instructors that the schools were unwilling or unable to acquire or develop themselves (Ardziejewska, 2009; Williams, 2012; Williams et al., 2011). Furthermore, it has been shown that many external providers are motivated to deliver their programmes by the prospect of directly and indirectly contributing to the financial viability of their organisation (e.g. franchisees of Coerver Coaching, as well as their commitment to advancement of their cause or activity of concern, such as engaging a range of school students and their families with a university in which they may subsequently enrol.

Direct contributions to the financial viability of external providers' enterprises were a function of the organisations' reliance on the funds generated by the programmes delivered to schools, whereas the aforementioned indirect contributions such as with the university involved the programmes delivered to schools being used as a vehicle to promote or generate business for

the organisations in other, non-school areas of their operations , in this case, to enhance the university's profile in the community.

Overall, the findings of these investigations have pointed to consequences such as the increased employment of part-time teaching and coaching staff associated with physical activity and sport by schools (Pocock, Buchanan, & Campbell, 2004), the transfer of control of instruction to outside the school, and treatment of instruction as a commodity to be bought and sold on the market (Ball, 2007; Ball & Youdell, 2008). The authors of these studies have argued forcefully that these consequences are concerning insofar as they have the potential to compromise the ability of many young Australians to access sport and physical activity experiences in school settings as it becomes less integrated into the programmes of schools and more expensive to participate.

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3. WHAT IS NOT KNOWN?

The research literature on the outcomes of privately provided junior sport is limited. Consequently, what is known about approaches that work or do not work is restricted. However, at an even more fundamental level the absence of a defined and widely accepted understanding of what constitutes quality junior sport programmes undermines the validity of judgements that can be made regarding the outcomes of any programme and the factors contributing to those outcomes.

Defining what constitutes quality in relation to junior sport provision should involve the contributions of a range of stakeholders within the field. Discussion between stakeholders should be focused towards achieving agreement regarding the aims of junior sport programmes, a framework that communicates the dimensions of quality relating to these aims, and approaches to ascertaining the extent to which these aims are realised. Such a framework would provide a referent for discussing the nature of the contribution from “traditional” (NSOs, SSOs) and “external” providers of junior sport.

4. WHAT WORKS

Accepting that external providers are likely to proliferate and may have resources or services that could complement established sporting organisations, it is appropriate to consider how sporting organisations could establish and engage in collaborative and cooperative arrangements with external providers as appropriate. The first strategy may be the designation of boundary-spanning agents (Marchington, Vincent, & Cooke, 2005). These staff are individuals who maintain inter-organisational relationships over time through their interactions with their opposite numbers in those organisations. As such, the role of the boundary-spanner involves building sustainable relationships, and managing, through influence and negotiation, the complexities, interdependencies, roles, accountabilities and motivations inherent in the inter-organisational interaction. Under the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links strategy in the UK, new roles were created to span the provision of sport across community organisations to optimize coordination and resource use (Flintoff, 2003, 2008).

A second practice is that of forming and entering into partnerships only in an informed, considered and critical way that explicitly foregrounds mutually beneficial goals and complementary agendas. As Kirk (2002) has noted, the multiplication of aims and motives is an inherent feature of any move from intra-organisational to inter-organisational modes of delivery. Thus, it would seem prudent for sporting organisations to ensure that the agendas involved in an interaction with an external provider are unambiguous and compatible before entering any such arrangement.

Where relations between traditional and private providers of junior sport are cooperative, collaborative and actively sought, they can prove beneficial insofar as they provide organisations the opportunity to work more efficiently and effectively by focusing on, and specialising in, a more narrowly defined set of “core” operations (Domberger, 1998; Mol, 2007). In so doing, such organisations are able to work synergistically with other similarly structured organisations to the net benefit of both. This position is underpinned by the economic arguments mounted in favour of the productivity of economies of scale, compared to economies of scope.

Nevertheless, these potential benefits need to be balanced against the possible risks and deleterious effects inherent in the practices (Domberger, 1998; Mol, 2007) particularly when what constitutes quality provision is ill-defined. These risks and consequences include the fracturing and fragmentation of the organisation to the detriment of its organisational outputs and the loss of its ability to innovate, such as can occur when communication between

organisations is compromised or when, through the specialisation process, organisations lose valuable skills and knowledge possessed by employees engaged in those tasks classified as “peripheral”. As example of this could be if a sporting organisation decided to outsource the provision of mid-week coaching sessions or match referring. What may be the consequences of this loss of skill and control to the sporting organisation?

In contrast to relations characterised by cooperation and collaboration, competitive and conflicting relations between traditional and external providers of junior sport are more likely to be fractious and divisive. Relations such as these are often founded on claims of legitimacy and fought through efforts to challenge or maintain existing monopolies or “market shares” (Archer, 1979, 1995) such as claims that all provision related to that junior sport should be under the auspices of the official NSO or SSO and its local affiliates. As such, the outcomes of these interactions are frequently determined by the ability of competing stakeholders to maximise their bargaining power and negotiating strength by accessing and mobilising their resources to appeal to growing interest. Taking the example of soccer, providers would be hoping to develop and organise their alliances with Football Federation Australia to legitimize their place in the junior sport market. This takes us back to the question of quality provision and which providers are best placed to give children and young people an engaging sport experience.

In this climate of escalating outsourcing and demand for choice in sporting experiences, NSOs, SSOs and their local counterparts have some interesting challenges to consider. Can or will the “traditional” organisations adapt their services to meet changing market demands? How can these organisations differentiate themselves and convey the benefits of their approach to junior sport? Can or should these organisations form new partnerships that provide some expansion or flexibility to the services they offer? Ultimately, we ask what constitutes a quality junior sport experience and will organisations be held accountable for providing this?

5. ADVICE TO THE ASC

Given the broader social, cultural, political and economic conditions that encourage and facilitate their existence, it is likely that external providers will continue to have a presence in the Australian junior sport landscape in the short- to medium-term. With this in mind, optimising the quality of junior sport provision may be enhanced at the following levels.

Policy development level by:

- Creating a National Framework for Quality Junior Sport Development to provide a reference point for describing and promoting the quality of programmes of all providers of junior sport and for communicating expected conditions of provision to the general community. Such a framework would need to be developed and sanctioned by the ASC .
- In association with the National Framework, the ASC accredits programmes that appropriately meet the standards specified in the Framework. Such accreditation could be communicated to the community via a recognised symbol of approval such as the Heart Foundation's Tick of Approval.

Programme delivery by NSOs, SSOs and their regional and local affiliates by:

- Considering questions of cost, flexibility, and the time commitments required of participants and their families and carers in the delivery of coaching and competitions currently offered.
- Articulating the strengths of their programmes and services and convey these to prospective participants and their families and carers such as opportunities for affiliations that may not flow equally from engagement with external providers.
- Evaluating appropriate partnerships with other providers to optimise their own programmes, and the choices available to participants.
- Employing boundary-spanning personnel who can promote, market, and coordinate the activities of the traditional provider with schools and external providers
- Developing a strong and engaging web presence.

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