

TRANSFORMATION OF KENYA'S UNIVERSITIES INTO RESERVOIRS OF ELITE ATHLETES

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Abstract

Due to the glory, honor, recognition and rewards that are associated with winning in major international sports competitions such as the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, soccer World Cup, World Athletics championships and many others, strategies for identifying and nurturing sports talent is continuously explored by various countries of the world. Indeed, world-class athletes can only be nurtured and developed in environments that are conducive for sports participation and competition. In this vein, universities, being the highest institutions of learning have been noted to be ideal sites for preparing, building and exposing talent in most of the countries in the developed world. Evidence is abundant on university students in the developed world who represent and win medals for their countries in international sports competitions. However, universities in African countries are yet to fully embrace this practice and identify concrete measures for producing world-class athletes. It is against this background that the current study was undertaken in Kenya. Games tutors, who are managers of sports programmes in the public and private universities in Kenya where targeted to provide information on technical and management factors that are critical to enabling universities in the country to nurture and produce athletes of national and international caliber. The results of the study highlighted various technical and management measures for transforming Kenya's universities into vibrant centres for developing elite athletes.

Key Words: Athlete, strategies talent, transformation.

INTRODUCTION

As institutions of higher learning, universities need to play a leading role, not only in the discovery and dissemination of knowledge but also in rendering community service. Universities are well placed to undertake these two broad dual roles as they are generally served by high caliber of manpower that is equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. Given the rich human resource, universities can be relied upon to tap and develop human talents in various fields, including sports. Indeed, there is abundant evidence of many university students in the developed world who represent their countries in major international sports events and win medals for them. For instance, the University of California, Los Angeles has had at least one competitor in every Olympics since 1920 with one exception (1924) and has won at least a gold medal in every Olympics since 1932 with the exception of 1980 due to the Olympics boycott. The university sent the largest contingent of athletes (56 in number) than any other university to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and won a total of 19 medals. At the same Athens Games, while 80% of the US team was composed of university students, the British one had a proportion of 52%.

In order to excel in sports, most of the developed countries rely, to a large extent, on universities as reservoirs of sports talent. As sources of this talent, universities set up sports traditions that are based on provision of conducive environments for maximal nurturing of the sports talent. The characteristic elements of such sporting environments include procedures for identifying and enhancing sports talent, establishment of sound sports programmes, including Olympic centers that focus on developing world class athletes.

To serve as reservoirs of elite athletes, such universities are empowered by being provided with the relevant resources such as modern sports facilities, sports equipment, suitably qualified technical and management personnel, incentives, as well as opportunities for competitive exposure in structured sports programmes. According to Brooking, Glanville and Stephens (2011), the universities are also responsible for availing trainers, coaches, experts and medical staff that form a central element of success in games. With these relevant human and other material resources, the universities become centres for hosting all-year training camps for athletes. Most of the universities in most of the African countries are yet to embrace the sporting practices and traditions that would enable them produce world-class athletes. In Kenya, for instance, the largest proportion of sportsmen and sportswomen who have participated and won medals in international sports events over the years tend to hail from the uniformed forces, private sports clubs, and to a lesser extent, from parastatal organizations and schools. In spite of having sports and games departments, the local universities have made minimal impact in major international competitions. It is in the light of this background that this study was undertaken to identify concrete measures that should be addressed to enable universities in Kenya to serve as reservoirs of elite athletes.

Methods

This was an explanatory survey study. A sample of twenty six (26) randomly selected games tutors, who are the managers of sports programmes in the 7 public and 14 chartered private universities in Kenya were the respondents in the study. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data on technical, management and administrative issues that adversely affect the preparation of athletes in the universities and related strategies for developing elite athletes in the institutions.

Findings and Discussion

Figure 1 below shows the gender distribution of the games tutors who participated in the study as respondents.

Insert Figure (1) about here

It is evident from figure 1 that the majority of the games tutors were male, 19 (73%), and the female were minority, 7 (27%). This gender imbalance would not be unique to this study as similar observations and findings have been noted in studies conducted by Njororai et al (2003) and Mwisukha (2004) in Kenya and Kateshumbwa (2011) in Uganda. The under-representation of women in sports participation and leadership is pervasive in many countries and still remains an issue that is continually addressed.

In order for the universities in Kenya to transform into reliable centres for developing top athletes, technical, managerial and administrative factors that pose a challenge to such endeavors need to be identified so that they can be addressed. As such, the respondents were asked to identify the challenges, and their responses on technical factors are summarized in figure 2 below.

Insert Figure (2) about here

Figure 2 reveals that the biggest challenge to the preparation of the elite athletes is unavailability of trained coaches and trainers as this was indicated by a higher proportion of the games tutors, 42%. The next proportion of 23% indicated lack of talented athletes at the university level as a challenge facing universities in terms of producing top athletes. On the other hand, none of the games tutors cited lack of local and international exposure for athletes as a hindrance to the preparation of athletes at the universities.

The implication of the finding that the most serious challenge to nurturing of the elite athletes in the universities is lack of trained coaches and trainers is that the institutions' focus has been on hiring more sports managers and administrators than those in the technical areas of sports. Alternatively, this situation can be attributable to unavailability of highly trained coaches and trainers who can be employed by the universities. In addition, the indication made by the games tutors through their responses that there are limited number of talented athletes at the universities can be supported by the argument that most of the young talented athletes who excel in sports at the school level hardly attain the required academic qualification for admission in the universities. A substantial number of such young athletes who obtain the minimum academic requirements to join universities may also lack the required funds to pay for their university education under self-sponsored university programmes. In order to ensure admission of such talented youth into the universities, special criteria for them need to be initiated and sports scholarships availed for their education.

To determine the management and administrative factors that pose as a challenge to the producing of elite athletes by Kenya's universities, the games tutors were required to give their responses on this. Their responses are presented in figure 3.

Insert Figure (3) about here

The highest proportion of responses (19%) shows that the main management and administrative challenges to the nurturing of athletic talent in the universities is lack of policy for sports development and inadequate funding. These two factors are followed by another two; inadequate time for sports training (15%) and inadequate management/administrative personnel (15%). It is however, evident that lack of adequate incentives for athletes was not considered a serious challenge as it received lowest response rate.

In order for an institution or organization to excel in any given undertaking, including sports, it must have clear official guidelines and operating procedures, as well as avail the required resources such as funding, suitably qualified personnel and adequate time for accomplishment of identified work. Policies provide focus and ensure consistency in the way activities are undertaken; lack of policy, on the other hand, can lead to confusion, disorderliness and hazardous way of conducting activities. This could be the management issue affecting sports development in universities as revealed in this study.

The respondents in the study were asked to indicate whether technical factors adversely affect their universities ability to produce elite athletes than the managerial/administrative factors. Their responses are shown in figure 4 below.

Insert Figure (4) about here

Technical factors were considered to be more responsible for the universities' inability to nurture and produce elite athletes than the managerial/administrative factors. This is supported by majority (73%) of the games tutors who attributed the current situation in the universities to technical factors, while only a proportion of 27% indicated otherwise.

As sport becomes more intensely competitive, more technical and scientific methods of enhancing athletes' potential must be continually explored. For instance, the Northern Michigan University houses the US Olympic Education Centre that provides world-class sports facilities and support services that their athletes need in order for them to become US Olympic Champions (<http://www.teamusa.org>). Other than providing free accommodation and boarding facilities for the elite US and other international athletes, the university's Olympic centre has well-developed sports outdoor and indoor facilities, including a spacious fully-equipped gymnasium, special medical clinic for the athletes, and the centre has a team of professional coaches, physical trainers, certified sports medicine physicians, sports nutritionists, sports psychologists and administrators. Since technical factors have been cited by the games tutors in Kenya's universities as having more adverse effects in the institution's ability to prepare top athletes than the managerial/administrative factors, the technical provisions and strategies used in sports-leading universities, such as the Northern Michigan University could be emulated and implemented.

Figure 5 shows the respondents' ranking of technical factors that need to be addressed so as to improve the universities' capacities to produce world class sportsmen and sportswomen.

Insert Figure (5) about here

The need for the universities to develop modern sports facilities and provide required equipment was ranked in the first place by a larger proportion of 35% of the games tutors, followed closely by another proportion of 31% who ranked this technical requirement in the second and third places. A similar proportion of 35% also ranked the need to lower university admission criteria for identified talented students, while the next proportion of 31% ranked this factor in the third place. The highest proportion of the games tutors ranked the need for participation in more structured local and international sports competitions and introduction or strengthening of sports-related academic programmes in second and fourth positions respectively. The proportions of responses in the two rankings of the two variables are 38% and 58% respectively.

In summary, the technical factors that received more frequency on first rankings were; development of modern facilities and provision of required sports equipment and the need to lower university admission criteria for talented youth.

This is followed in second place by the indication that university athletes should be exposed to more structured local and international sports competitions as a way of nurturing their talents (38%). The games tutors who participated in this study as respondents were further asked to rank various management and administrative variables that should be explored to improve universities' capability of preparing and producing world-class athletes. Their responses are reflected in figure 6.

Insert Figure (6) about here

The management and administrative factors that received more frequency of rankings in position one include formulation of universities' policy for sports development (38%), introduction or improvement of sports scholarships schemes (31%) and hiring of adequate number of management and administrative personnel (23%). The attributes that received more frequencies in rankings in second place include the need to introduce or improve sports scholarships schemes (27%), provision of adequate funding (23%) and hiring of adequate number of management and administrative personnel (23%). The factor that received highest frequency of last rankings is provision of incentives for athletes (27%).

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

- a) The main technical factors that militate against Kenyan universities' ability to nurture top athletes are inadequate number of qualified coaches and trainers, low number of talented athletes at university level and inadequate exposure of university athletes to structured local and international competitions. As such, the universities need to explore ways of identifying and enlisting the services of more qualified technical personnel and at the same time, devise strategies for attracting and admitting talented athletes to the universities.
- b) Lack of sports policy and inadequate funding are key management hinderances to the universities endeavour of producing elite athletes. Each university therefore, needs to formulate sound policy that addresses sports management in the universities, including outlining ways of raising adequate financial resources for sports programmes.
- c) Universities in Kenya should thoroughly address technical issues that are pertinent to sports excellence so as to be able produce excellent athletes, particularly due to the advancement in the application of scientific and technological knowledge in the field of sports in the modern world.

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Figure 1: Gender Distribution of the Respondents

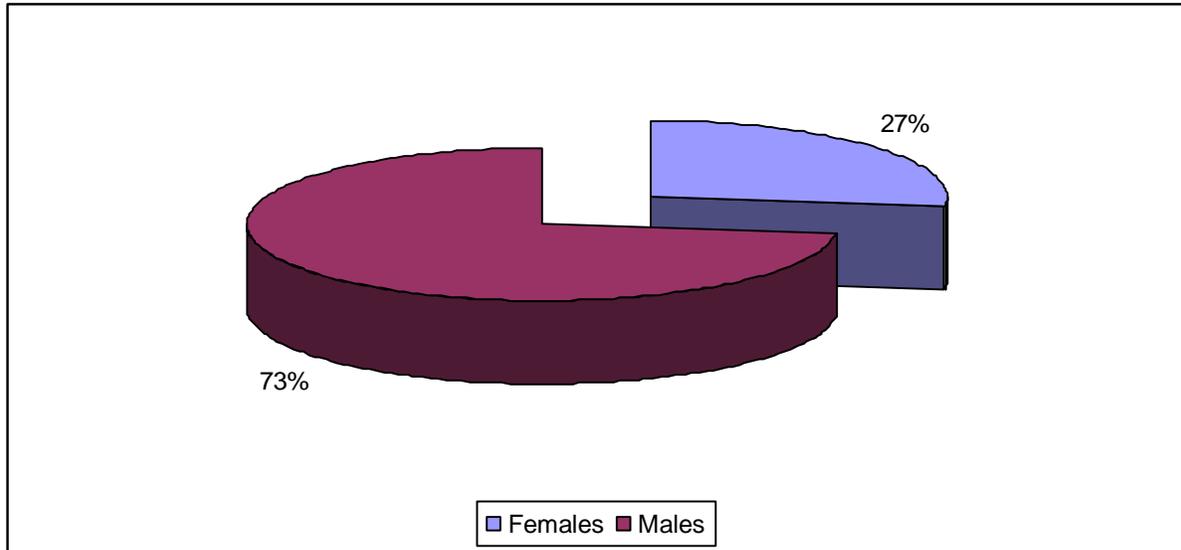


Figure 2: Technical challenges to Preparation of Elite Athletes in the Universities.

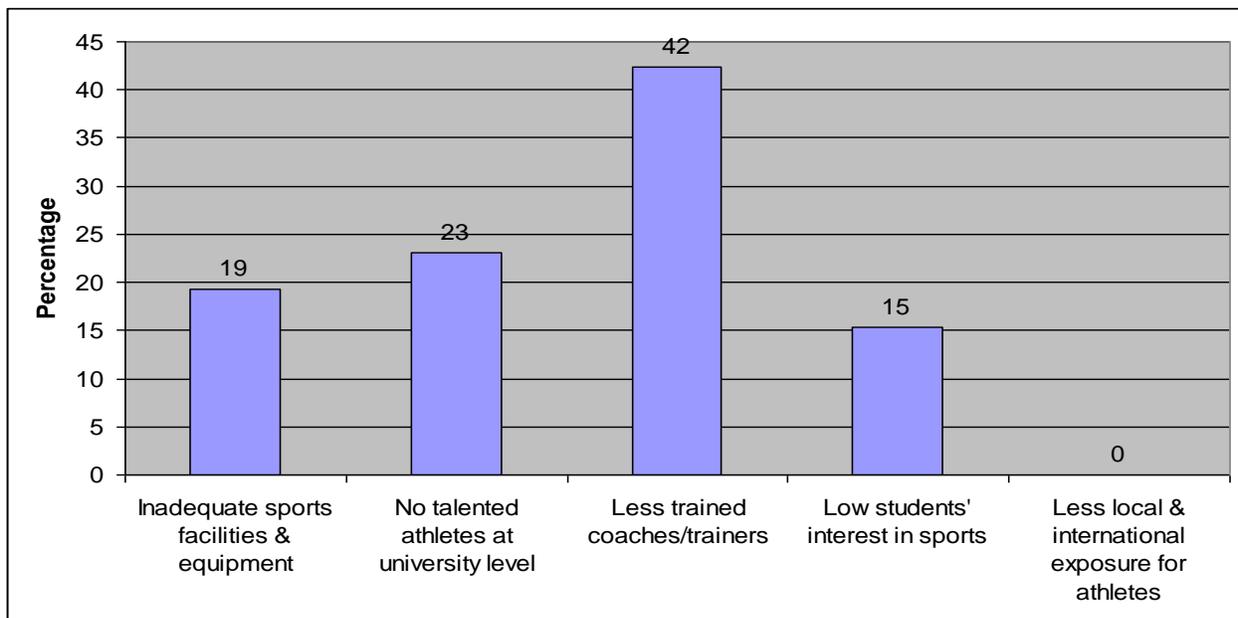


Figure 3: Management and Administrative Challenges to Preparation of Elite Athletes by Kenya's Universities

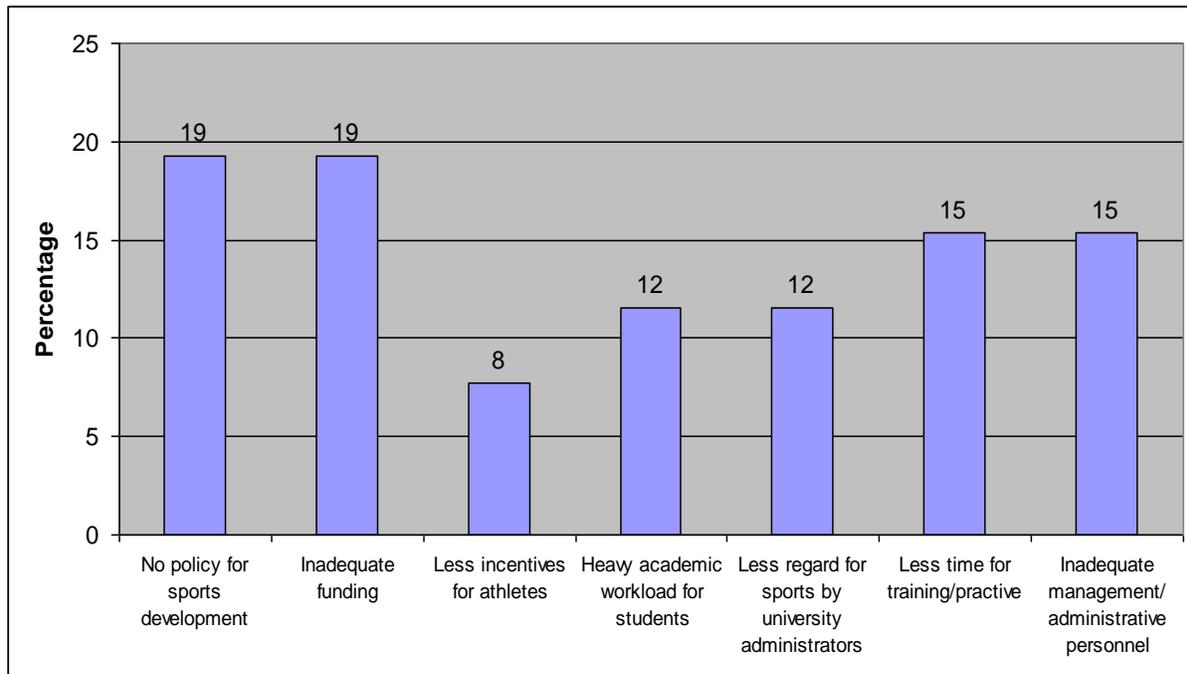


Figure 4: Effect of Technical Factors vis-à-vis Managerial Factors on Attaining Sports Excellence in the Universities in Kenya

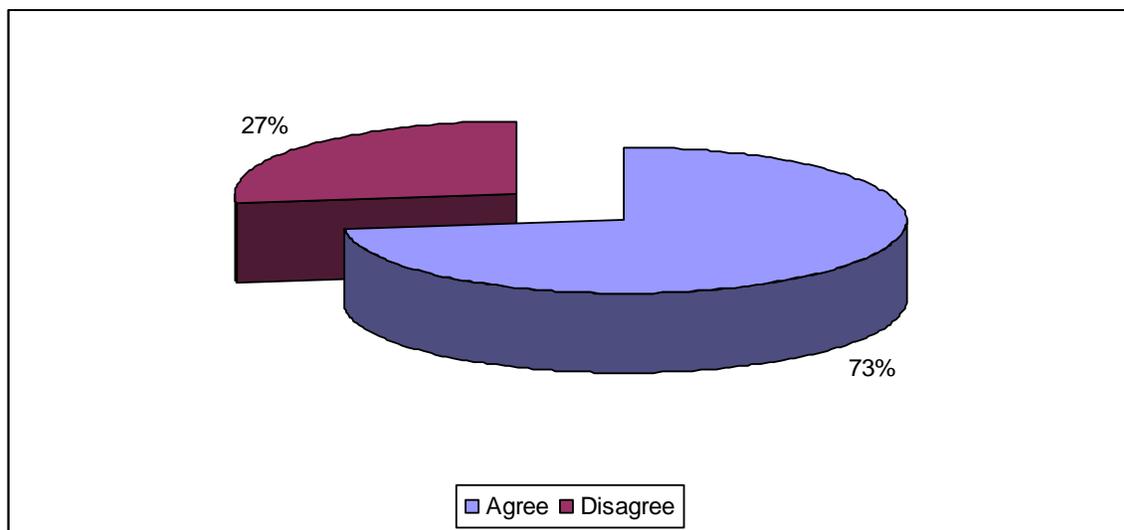


Figure 5: Rankings of Technical Factors Crucial to Producing World-Class Athletes by Universities

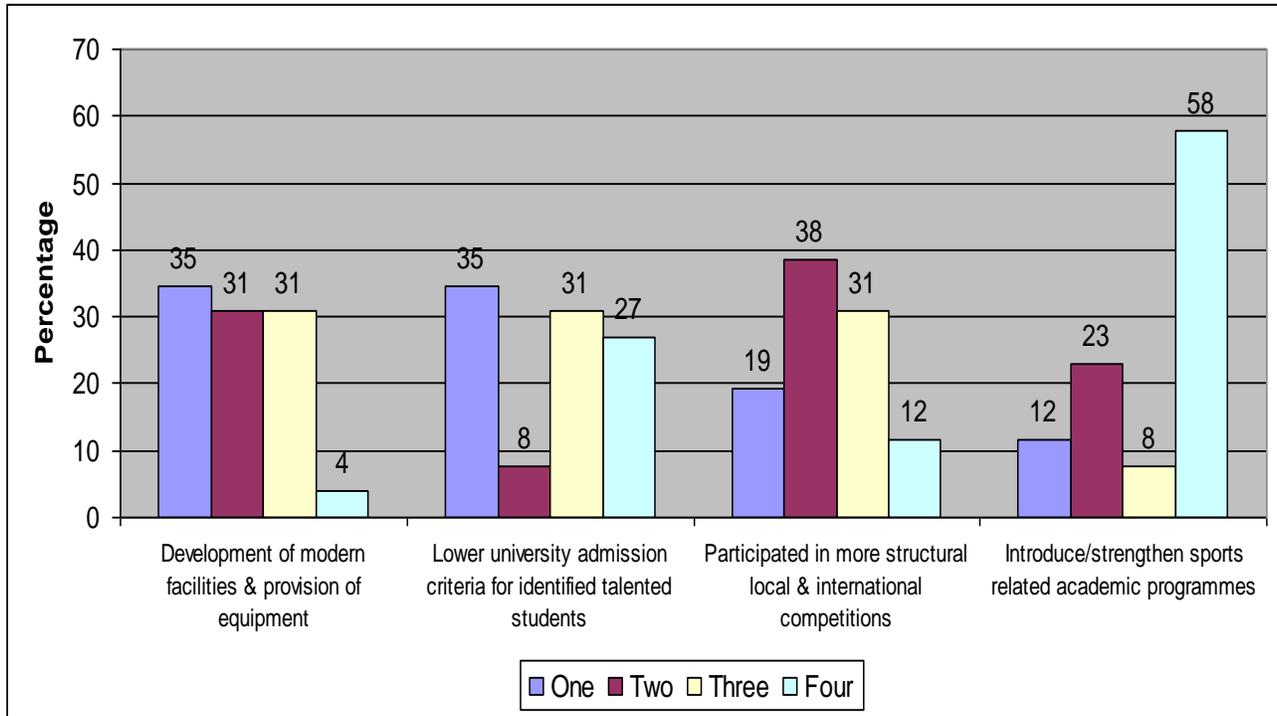


Figure 6: Rankings of Management and Administrative Factors Crucial to Producing Elite Athletes by Kenya's Universities

