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**SPORT IRELAND INSTITUTE
A REVIEW OF THE PURSUIT
OF EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME
2014-2016**



Report Author



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1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Commissioned by the Sport Ireland Institute, this independent review evaluated the Pursuit of Excellence Programme and its impact over the 2014-2016 period with the aim of identifying a set of recommendations designed to evolve the programme leading into the 2020 cycle.
- 1.2 The review found that Pursuit of Excellence Programme is a highly successful programme delivering significant impact. A total of 43 Pursuit of Excellence participants across 21 sports coached athletes that won 78 Olympic, Paralympic, World and European medals across 14 sports during the review period (2014-2016), and the medal haul and number of sports winning medals increased year-on-year. A total of 54% (68 out of 125) of athletes in Rio representing Ireland were coached by 18 Pursuit of Excellence participants across 16 sports. Out of the 13 medals won in Rio, 10 were coached by Pursuit of Excellence participants across 4 sports. Appendix 1 lists the medals won from 2014-2016 by athletes that were supported by Pursuit of Excellence Programme participants.
- 1.3 The Pursuit of Excellence Programme compares exceptionally well with other coach development programmes globally, with some areas arguably world leading. Strengths of the programme include robust recruitment processes, the provision of a safe learning environment where coaches feel challenged, motivated, supported and satisfied, well-planned programmes, partnership working and very high standards of support delivery. Support and development is part of the culture of the Sport Ireland Institute, and they are firmly committed to supporting the development of high performance coaches.
- 1.4 The review ultimately concludes that the Pursuit of Excellence Programme has been effective and efficient, well-managed and overall cost is very good value for money invested over the 2014-2016 period. The review findings demonstrate a strong case for increased investment in the Pursuit of Excellence Programme through the 2020 Tokyo cycle.
- 1.5 The following set of recommendations is designed to evolve the Pursuit of Excellence Programme leading into the 2020 cycle:

Recommendation 1:

This report recommends that Sport Ireland carefully consider the investment required in order to sustain high impact professional development support within a high performance sport context.

Specific investment recommendations include:

- 1(a). High Performance Coaches: It is essential moving forward that the number of participants on the programme be considered relative to the resources available. Capping the number of participants would reduce the risk of over-stretching resources, as well as safeguarding the status of the programme that has been developed to support world class and developing coaches delivering impact on a world stage. If the same level of resources were available in the Tokyo cycle, this report recommends an advisory ceiling of 12 participants on the Podium Programme and 12 participants on the Horizon Programme.
- 1(b). High Performance Directors: It is recommended that Sport Ireland consider providing extra investment in order to design and implement a distinct PEP programme for PDs.

Recommendation 2:

This review has recognised a significant strength in partnership working by all involved in the programme. Moving forward, it is recommended that the Pursuit of Excellence Programme continues to use this strength to encourage the sharing of key ideas, best practice and resources.

Specific partnership recommendations include:

- 2(a). The PEP programme leadership team should consult with CEOs/Performance Directors annually prior to submitting each annual support offer to coaches on the programme in order to ensure that the support plan is aligned with line management needs. CEOs/Performance Director should also consider integrating feedback from the Pursuit of Excellence Programme into their overall performance management process for coaches on the Programme employed in their sport.
- 2(b). Existing training partnerships with the Irish Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána should be expanded to offer more high value training opportunities using highly rated problem based learning approaches.
- 2(c). Sports should also be strongly encouraged to develop communities of practice in their own right as the community of practice methodology is a viable one for the purpose of coach development.

Recommendation 3:

The Pursuit of Excellence Programme has an overall coach support vision and a number of internal objectives for the Podium and Horizon Programmes. In order to help shape and direct operations, it is recommended that a new set of key objectives be established for the Pursuit of Excellence Programme. In setting these objectives it would be important to consider whether the mission of the Pursuit of Excellence Programme is to build a community of practice or achieve podium impact. Because the programme runs to specific timelines, it risks negatively impacting the community cohesion when the programme ceases.

Recommendation 4:

This report recommends that all learning materials be made available on a central portal to facilitate coach learning and further enhance the connectivity of the community of practice.

Recommendation 5:

The timings of the programme were found to be well-planned overall. On-going adjustments were made to accommodate competing interests up until and including Rio in 2016. It is recommended that the entire programme be periodised and then tailored individually in 2020.

2 Background

2.1 Following recommendations going back to the Review of Ireland's preparation for and Performances in the Athens 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games (2005), the Pursuit of Excellence Programme was launched in 2009 as part of the Irish Institute of Sport (now Sport Ireland Institute) to help develop high performance coaches. In 2012-2013, a number of performance supports were offered and delivered to 34 coaches across 15 sports. In 2012, the programme restructured into two separate coach development communities, each with its own lead reporting into the Director of Performance Services:

- 1) Podium, supporting Ireland's World Class High Performance Coaches;
- 2) Horizon, developing Ireland's High Performance Coaches.

The Pursuit of Excellence Programme has the following Coach Support Vision: "To challenge, inspire and develop high performance coaches to deliver winning performances for Ireland on the global stage".

2.2 The Podium programme ran from January 2012–January 2013, with the following deliverables:

- 12 coaches from 8 sports joined the inaugural Podium community;
- Podium coaches were involved with 28 athletes who competed at the London 2012 Games.
- 12/21 medals achieved at London 2012 originated from within the Podium group;
- Podium coaches were given targeted grant aid totalling €30,000 in order to enhance their performance capacity around the London 2012 games;
- A pre Games performance simulation event was run in partnership with An Garda Síochána 8 weeks before the London 2012 games;
- Each podium coach was provided with a 1-2-1 post game support package designed to assist coaches as they transitioned from the London 2012 experience.

The Horizon programme ran from November 2012–December 2013, with the following deliverables:

- 22 coaches from 13 sports joined the inaugural Horizon community;
- Horizon coaches attended four 2-day performance seminars involving key applied case studies provided by coaches in the Podium community;
- Six athletes joined the Horizon community and formed Ireland's first athlete coach transition group with the view to becoming a high performance coach after their athlete career;
- Horizon coaches accessed on going performance mentorship and completed a series of key project tasks over a 13-month period.

2.3 Following the success of the Pursuit of Excellence Programme, the Podium and Horizon Programmes were extended from 2014. The Podium Programme offered supports to Ireland's high performance coaches over a three year period, encompassing the 2016 Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Programme was open to a maximum of 16 coaches and it offered each coach a personalized performance support package designed to enable podium performances for each coach and the athletes they work with. The Horizon Programme offered supports to Ireland's emerging high performance coaches working with junior and developmental over a 15-month period. The programme was open to a maximum of 16 coaches and it offered each coach a professional development experience designed to evolve their coaching practice.

2.4 The entry criteria for the Podium Programme included:

- Coach Performance Track Record: the number of athletes that an applicant has coached who have won individual or team medals at Olympic/Paralympic, World or European events; and the number of events at which a coach has represented Ireland at major level events including Olympic/Paralympic, World or European events);
- Coach Potential – Rio 2016: coaches must be officially appointed in a coaching role working with senior carded athletes in a national sports body; coaches will be tracking to coach athletes likely to qualify and/or medal at Rio 2016; coaches will have evidence of continuous professional development and an openness to further challenge and growth; coaches will be willing to share their experience with other podium coaches and provide support to aspiring Horizon coaches; and each application must be approved by the performance director or CEO in each sport).

2.5 The Podium Programme included the following planned deliverables during the delivery period:

- On Board Need Analysis: each coach to be provided with an on-boarding needs analysis service designed to identify annual critical performance factors and thus initiate a programme of individualized performance supports throughout the year;
- Performance Simulation Events: in preparation for high-level competition, coaches to be given the opportunity to attend performance simulation events prior to the 2016 games where practical scenarios would be used to examine and develop targeted performance capacities. These events would offer unique peer-to-peer feedback exchange whereby coaches can reflect on the quality of their coaching, management or leadership practice;
- Performance Mentorship: individual and group level mentorship sessions to be offered across a range of themes including coaching, management and leadership;
- Financial Support to Build Performance Capacity: coaches to be given the opportunity to self-direct their performance support by applying for some individual grant aid. These supports may involve mentorship, equipment or a short course in a specific discipline.

2.6 The entry criteria for the Horizon Programme included:

- Coach Performance Track Record: the number of athletes that an applicant has coached who have won individual or team medals at Junior/Development level Olympic/Paralympic, World or European Events; and the number of events at which a coach has represented Ireland at Junior/Development level Olympic/Paralympic, World or European events;
- Coach Potential: coaches must be officially appointed in a coaching role working with high potential athletes identified by the sport in their performance plan; and each coach will have demonstrated commitment to their development by engaging in ongoing professional development; coaches will be willing to share and learn from their peers);
- Athlete Coach Transition Category: athletes in the latter stages of their career/athletes who have recently retired who are interested in making the transition into a coaching role in the high performance programme of their national sports body and who are supported by the Performance Director/Lead.

2.7 The Horizon Programme included the following planned deliverables during the delivery period:

- On Board Need Analysis: each coach to be provided with an on board needs analysis service designed to identify annual critical performance factors and thus initiate a programme of individualised performance supports throughout the year;
- Knowledge Development Events: Horizon coaches to be provided with key knowledge development events designed to build their knowledge and capability across the combined themes of coaching, management and leadership;
- Performance Simulation Events: in preparation for high-level competition, coaches to be given the opportunity to attend performance simulation events prior to the 2016 Rio games whereby key practical scenarios will be used to examine targeted performance capacities;
- Innovative Project Tasks: Horizon coaches to be tasked in groups to complete knowledge building projects around key performance topics. Coaches to be tasked to observe and peer review each other's practice and share the outcome of this with other coaches in their community;
- Mentorship: individual and group level mentorship sessions to be offered across a range of themes in coaching, management and leadership.

2.8 The application process for the Pursuit of Excellence Programme (2014-2016) involved the following:

- Each applicant was invited to complete an application stating their ability to meet the programme entry criteria. This application was available to download at www.instituteofsport.ie/pursuitofexcellence and had to be approved by the designated high performance lead in each applicant's national sports body. The closing date for applications was 24 February 2014;
- Staff from the Sport Ireland Institute engaged with the designated high performance lead in applicants' sports to shortlist applicants in accordance with the entry criteria;
- A final decision on successful applicants was then made by the Pursuit of Excellence Programme management team; unsuccessful applicants were contacted to explain why their application was unsuccessful.

Successful Podium and Horizon applicants were then invited in March 2014 to the Institute of Sport with their designated high performance lead in their sport to complete a professional needs analysis and agree an individualized 2014 coach performance support plan. The Programme launch was 24 April 2014 and the Programme start date was 25 April 2014.



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James Laverty, Head Coach, Irish Paralympic Swim Team

3 Brief and Methodology

- 3.1** The brief was to complete a review of the Pursuit of Excellence Programme (2014 -2016) and identify a set of recommendations designed to evolve the programme leading into the 2020 cycle. A mixed method approach was required, comprising a review of programme documentation and four focus groups. Telephone interviews with programme leads from the Horizon and Podium Programmes were also conducted.
- 3.2** An extensive range of internal programmes documents were reviewed and informed various aspects of this report, including the focus groups design as outlined in Section 3.3. This document list is available in appendix 2.
- 3.3** Focus groups were conducted with:
- 1) 6 Horizon participants;
 - 2) 12 Podium participants;
 - 3) 6 CEO/Performance Directors;
 - 4) 6 athletes coached by Pursuit of Excellence Programme participants

In order to address the review brief, all focus groups included questions related to:

- 1) Impact of the programme;
- 2) Support effectiveness;
- 3) Support type, timing and volume;
- 4) Programme delivery;
- 5) Stakeholder management;
- 6) Programme improvements.

- 3.4** In order to further inform this review, a number of internal and external sources were reviewed. These included, but were not exclusive to:
- Sport Ireland website
 - Sport Ireland Institute website
 - Coaching Ireland website
 - National Governing Bodies of Sport websites
 - Association of Sport Performance Centres websites
 - Review of Ireland's preparation for and Performances in the Athens 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games (prepared for the Irish Sports Council by Wharton Consulting, March 2005)
 - An Overview of Seven National High Performance Coach Education Programs (Callary et al., 2014)

Review of Pursuit of Excellence Programme (2014-2016)

(A) Recruitment

4.1 The Pursuit of Excellence Programme aimed to target and recruit high performance coaches supporting podium potential athletes at the 2016 Rio Games. A total of 53 coaches (19 for the Podium Programme and 34 for the Horizon Programme) from 21 sports applied to the programme following a launch event in January 2014. 17 coaches were accepted onto the Horizon Programme (from 12 sports). 16 coaches were initially accepted onto the Podium Programme, and an additional 10 coaches were later accepted in August 2015 (the 26 coaches represented 20 sports).

(B) Programme Activities

4.2 The Programme has offered the following supports:

- Themed Master Classes (eight, two-day master class events were delivered covering key topics including leadership development, self-management, stress management, relationship management, performance planning, transition management, big data management and debriefing);
- Performance Impact Project Funding (7 coaches accessed highly specialized performance supports across a range of specialist areas including biomechanical analysis, metrology, sideline communication systems development, media training, training monitoring systems development);
- Medical Screening (16 coaches have completed a full cardiac screen, blood profiling and a lifestyle audit as part of the screening process. In total, 53 health behaviour modifications were recommended arising from the screening process);
- Vantage Point Observation & Feedback Support (10 observation and feedback interventions have been completed across 8 sports);
- Peer Connect Events (11 peer connect events have been provided in order to enable coaches to connect and share similar challenges and solutions arising in the field);
- Problem Based Learning Support (coaches attended a 2-day event focusing on the theme of high stress decision-making in collaboration with the Irish Defence Forces);
- 1-2-1 Performance Mentorship (coaches regularly accessed 1-2-1 performance mentorship across a range of themes including lifestyle management, relationship management and strategy development);
- Hawkeye (peer to peer observation feedback support);
- Peer Reviewed Knowledge Development Projects (Themed knowledge development projects across key themes including the athlete coach relationship, talent identification and development, athlete lifestyle management)
- Access to two high level High Performance Conferences led by Sport Ireland Institute (HPX 2014: April 24th – 25th 2014; HPX 2015: April 29th – 30th 2015).

The total cost across all of these Programmes activities was €232,289. This cost is broken down as follows:

Cost Category	2014	2015	2016	Total
Master Class Events	€11,703	€7,729	€7,974	€27,406
Problem Based Learning Events	€720	€2,237	-	€2,957
Expert Consultancy	€950	-	€8,800	€9,750
Performance Impact Project Grants	€14,860	€7,616	-	€22,476
Coach Medical Screening	-	€13,280	-	€13,280
Programme Management & Delivery	€53,658	€38,951	€63,811	€156,420
Total Cost	€81,891	€69,813	€80,585	€232,289

(C) Participant Satisfaction

- 4.3** End-of-year surveys were distributed in 2015 and 2016 to programme participants, asking them overall whether or not the programme experience met their expectations.
- 4.4** The overall percentage of whether the programme experience across the years 2014-2016 met participant expectations was 95.1%.
- 4.5** Participants were also invited to rate their satisfaction with the supports offered on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) and could provide any open-ended comments on each support event. Vantage Point Observation and Feedback surveys were completed after, and subsequently not captured in, the end-of-year survey. Participants rated the impact of this on a 5-point scale (with higher scores indicating greater impact). Mean scores for each support event ranged from 5.00 to 3.75, with an overall mean of 4.49. Open-ended comments supported overall scores and a selection of these from the 2016 end-of-year survey are provided below.

Event	Overall Satisfaction
Performance Transition Master Class	4.29
Leadership development Master Class	4.65
Performance Technology Big data Master Class	3.78
Performance Planning and Debriefing Master Class #1	4.73
Performance Planning and Debriefing Master Class #2	4.63
Personal Performance Management Master Class	4.18
Performance Impact Project	4.85
Medical Screening	4.78
Peer Connect Events	3.75
Problem-Based Learning Event	5.00
1-2-1 Performance Mentoring	4.43
Knowledge Playback Sessions	4.36
Hawkeye	4.55

Sample Coach Feedback

"The program was tailored appropriately on lead into Rio. Volume was reduced due to increasing time demands on coaches, but quality was kept at high levels."

"Once the Games came around I felt prepared and PEP made a significant contribution to that state of readiness."

"It has been the single most valuable thing I have done with my time since joining the programme. It has challenged and changed the way I look and think about coaching and how I approach coaching as a profession."

"The PEP experience has offered me an opportunity to push on my own coaching with valuable experience and support given from both the leaders and peers in the community. I have been able to look at not only coaching practice but all the different drivers outside of the raw coaching that impact the overall success of the sport. I was able to look into self-management and improvement of my own practice to ensure that what I filter into our high performance environment will have a positive impact on the players, coaching staff and overall system. I am now pursuing excellence across all areas of my sport rather than settling for what has been done in the past. The course has helped me look to push the boundaries on what we provide and to explore other avenues to make our system take closer steps to becoming World Class."

"I feel that I have changed a lot as a person. I started the journey burnt out, I started the journey with so many doubts in my mind. I didnt really know where I was going, I felt like a coach, I knew I needed to become a leader. I had no idea what type of leader I should be ! I needed to look inside myself and decide what qualities I had and how I could maximise them. I also needed to decide on what was lacking and how to develop them. I need to reflect, I needed direction, I feel that I could have easily walked away from sport. PEP gave me direction, PEP gave me tools, PEP gave me an outlet to step outside my environment and learn from peers. I can safely say that it changed me as a coach leader. PEP has not just changed me, it has changed my staff, my coaches and indeed all our athletes."

"PEP has provided support and connection in a complex and sometimes fragmented environment. That sense of community and expert critical analysis and experience stimulated positive change in my coaching practice and contributed in a very practical and impactful manner on my performance as a coach in Rio."

"I would like more 1-2-1 events with an open agenda and the freedom to discuss anything relating to high performance, bounce ideas and get feedback. Would like some of the leadership events to be with the people I would be working with in the Olympic village and games, rather than solely with coaches from other sports. This would also apply to conflict resolution"

(D) Medals

4.6 In 2014-2016, Pursuit of Excellence participants coached athletes (across senior, U21, youth and junior levels) that won 78 Olympic, Paralympic, World and European medals across 14 sports (see appendix 1). The medal haul and the number of sports winning medals increased year-on-year:

Year	No. of Medals	No. of Sports
2014	20	8
2015	28	10
2016	30	10
Total	78	14

(E) Focus Groups

(i) Coaches

- 4.7 As the end user of the Pursuit of Excellence Programme and the individuals whose success is the implied outcome of the investment in the programme, it was important to conduct focus groups with a representative number of both Horizon and Podium coaches across a variety of sports. Separate focus groups were also conducted with a representative number of athletes coached by Pursuit of Excellence Programme participants and CEO/Performance Directors.
- 4.8 The Horizon and Podium coaches were asked to describe the impact of the programmes on their professional practice and what changes in practice they noticed as a result of participation in the Programme. All coaches across programmes stated that it helped them be more ready to perform as coaches in training and competition settings. This was achieved across the Pursuit of Excellence Programme by sharing best practice and, as noted by Horizon coaches, having access to a broader base of knowledge outside of their sport. They stated that the programme supported them and, in doing so, helped them grow in confidence. The coaches felt challenged, motivated and were enjoying coaching more as a result of the Programme. One coach on the Horizon Programme has set up a community of practice in their sport.
- 4.9 When asked which supports had the greatest impact on them, the coaches felt each contributed in different ways to their professional development and performance as a coach. For the Horizon coaches expressed how they could identify on-going, sometimes subtle, development throughout the programme and how and their development based on the different supports (i.e., master classes, peer connect events, problem based learning events, Hawkeye, mentoring, Performance Project: Dragon Den) contributed to enhanced athlete performance in training and competitions. The problem based learning events were highlighted by the Horizon coaches as having significant impact because everyone completed the same scenarios and it was beneficial to see how others approached the same problem. Mentoring was also seen as an innovative aspect of the programme; the Horizon coaches expressed that having others involved who were “a couple of chapters ahead” had a major impact on their learning. Post-review reflections after each support event were also beneficial, but that support opportunities were not as effective when everyone was not engaged. The Podium coaches universally said that Vantage point and debriefing was impactful.

The problem-based learning camp was a very significant support event and the timing was good in relation to the overall Programme. The coaches felt the peer events were the least impactful when ranked against other supports as they often repeated the same information, while the Performance Impact Project was effective in providing higher certainty when working with key athletes. It also was important for performance outcomes, but also for their own coach development and for sharing the learning with other athletes. Knowing what technology would be impactful was difficult to assess by coaches. They were asked at on-boarding their needs, and little information was provided. It was often by chance that they stumbled upon the right technology for PIP. Overall, all the coaches said that the type, timing and volume of learning activities across the Pursuit of Excellence Programme met their needs with regard to their key responsibilities.

- 4.10** With regard to the overall experience of programme delivery, the coaches were asked to discuss how well programme activities were implemented. Overall, the coaches stated that the programme leaders were effective at delivering an impactful programme experience for them. The Horizon coaches expressed how the “commonality by design” was important reason why they felt it was so successful. The programme recruited like-minded coaches in pursuit of excellence for Irish athletes, and this allowed for learning in safe environments. All coaches felt they were able to share and contribute to Programme as it evolved, thus not losing opportunities to learn. The Podium coaches felt the periodising of the programme was effective. Year 1, on reflection, was “loaded and crammed” but good adjustments were made in Year 2. Some coaches asked if the residential could be held in Year 2. Year 3 was difficult with time management, although the programme leader made every effort to accommodate and bring all coaches together when and where possible. The coaches universally thought it was important that everyone shared their Year 3 journeys together and that tailoring to individual coach development was beneficial. Overall, all the Pursuit of Excellence Programme coaches felt the programme was delivered well given the diverse needs and knowledge of participants.
- 4.11** The coaches felt the type, timing and volume of learning experiences was highly appropriate and met their needs. Meeting every 4-5 weeks was considered effective, and shorter, mid-week sessions were viewed as more efficient by the majority of Horizon coaches compared to 2-day weekend events. The standard of delivery was high and the type of learning was highly relevant across the Programme.
- 4.12** From the focus groups, it was evident that coaches regularly informed their athletes that they were on the Pursuit of Excellence Programme. The coaches generally felt supported by their sport with regard to their development as a professional and, in some cases, were encouraged to create wider communities of practice networks in their sport. However, there were mixed responses with regard to whether they regularly informed their line manager about their participation on the Programme. This stakeholder management was expressed as being important for them.
- 4.13** Finally, when asked how they thought the Programme could be improved moving forward, the coaches felt it could be important to formalise the progression onto the programme and also between Horizon and Podium. There is potential for coaches to go straight to Podium as a result of who they are coaching instead of their development as a coach. In order to demonstrate the value to other coaches and NGBs, the Horizon coaches felt it is important to “define, package and badge” it. Although they appreciated and understood that it was never intended to be part of the programme, the Horizon coaches expressed a desire to have something to show for it at the end the programme. There was general consensus that more opportunities for interactions across Horizon and Podium participants to share ideas would be welcome. The Podium coaches felt it was important to capture the context after each event to share knowledge by factoring in time for this in advance.

(ii) Athletes

- 4.14 The athletes were asked to describe the impact of the Pursuit of Excellence programme on the development of their coach. There was a general consensus that the programme had a significant impact on their coaches. The athletes said that the programme changed the behaviour of coaches in a positive way, compared to coaches not on the programme. They noted how they are more confident and motivated as coaches, and have a better mindset both in training and competition. The athletes recognised how high performance coaches require both experience and knowledge, and how the programme was providing opportunities for both.
- 4.15 When asked whether they noticed any changes in practice as result of their coach's participation in the programme, the athletes described how they could see changes in technical aspects of practice. They stated how technical aspects were being changed faster as a result of coach development, and some stated how this was advantageous. Other athletes, however, said they sometimes struggled with the changes being made too quickly but the coaches became more "steady" overtime and were able to balance the approach in their coaching style. When this happened, the athletes said they were able to look at things more logically and that this really helped. The athletes also noted an improvement of "soft skills" amongst their coaches.
- 4.16 In terms of support effectiveness, the athletes were asked which supports were the most and least effective on their coach's professional development and performance. The athletes stated how the problem-based learning camp helped them to handle pressure better, and how Vantage, debriefing and the health screening had beneficial effects. Some athletes said that their coaches expressed how WhatsApp was both effective and ineffective depending on engagement but that learning from coaches from other sports was valued.
- 4.17 There were a number of questions related to programme delivery that the athletes were unable to elaborate upon (i.e., Did the type, timing and volume of learning activities meet your coach's needs? How effective was the programme leader at designing, communicating and executing the PEP programme?). However, the athletes were very aware of the programme and stated how the coaches had regularly informed them about their participation on the Pursuit of Excellence Programme.
- 4.18 When asked how they thought the Programme could be improved, the athletes noted the importance of helping with annual plans and "technological/scientific advancements". The athletes concluded by unanimously emphasising how important coach development is to success on a world stage.

(iii) CEOs/Performance Directors

- 4.19 When asked about the impact of the programme on their coaches, the focus group members expressed the importance of having a community of practice and network of peers. They felt it as important to recognise coaching as a profession, and also that there was a need to accelerate coach development above and beyond Level 2. The majority said they would want the Programme to continue.



- 4.20 An important theme quickly emerged in discussion related to the integration of the programme. The focus groups members unanimously felt a significant challenge involved coaches on the programme being employees of, and accountable to, another organisation. They are content that coach development is occurring, as upskilling is very important, but it is effectively outsourced from their organisations. This has, at times, led to challenges related to coaches being away for periods of time and communication not always being as effective as possible. The group members recognised that these consequences related to reporting had perhaps not been thought-through enough at the outset when they were signing off involvement in the programme.
- 4.21 The focus group members felt the type, timing and volume of learning activities met their coach's needs. The programme leaders were effective at managing the Pursuit of Excellence Programme, including the provision of CEO/Performance Director briefings that occurred in May-August 2015 (Swim Ireland, Cycling Ireland, Irish Amateur Boxing Association, Triathlon Ireland, Irish Rugby Football Union, Horse Sport Ireland, Badminton Ireland, Hockey Ireland and Paralympics Ireland). This enabled essential information to be shared concerning the provision of individual supports to coaches in the lead in to the 2016 games. The focus groups members felt communication could be improved as the "CEOs need to know". The group members noted their desire to be involved at the briefing stage to a greater extent, and then kept-up-to-speed more often throughout.
- 4.22 In terms of programmes improvements, the focus groups members felt it was very important for line managers to be more involved during the recruitment stage. They recommended CEOs being informed about engagement as part of the on-boarding process and subsequently updated by their coaches or programme leader following each support event. They also recommended having separate programmes for Performance Directors and Coaches and, although beyond the scope of this review, more CPD opportunities for CEOs.

(F) Conclusions

4.23 Strengths of the programmes include:

- Robust recruitment processes;
- Participants are challenged, motivated and supported in a safe learning environment;
- Programmes are well-planned and adapted based on participant feedback;
- Very high standard of support delivery, with significant impact;
- The management and administration of the programme is effective and efficient; and the programme leaders are passionate, motivated and well-respected.
- Partnership working has been both instrumental to, and demonstrative of the success of the programme. This has led to the development of significant social capital in the form of shared support values and understandings that have facilitated co-operation, exchange and innovation among like-minded people in pursuit of excellence for Irish sport.

Compared to international high performance coach education programmes, the Pursuit of Excellence Programme compares very well overall with some areas arguably world leading.



Brian Nugent, Technical Director, Irish Cycling

- 4.24 The reach of the programme grew significantly beyond the allocated places, and the resources to support and administer may not have changed greatly. This appears to have spread the programme too thinly. It is clear that the programme fills an important void in coach development in Ireland, but the Pursuit of Excellence Programme has minimal branding internally and externally.
- 4.25 There are opportunities to build upon the social capital developed across the high performance coaching community. The cohort that have completed the programme creates an opportunity for promotion of the programme, perhaps through the development of an ambassadorial role to inspire the next generation of high performance coaches. A mentorship panel could also allow for specialist support. There are also opportunities for more interaction between the Podium and Horizon Programmes, and to further develop Ireland's first athlete-to-coach transition group. Finally, a Pursuit of Excellence Programme graduation event could be established where coaches completing the programme are invited to present their learning impact to their peers.
- 4.26 This review ultimately concludes that the Pursuit of Excellence Programme has been effective and efficient, well-managed and very good value for money investment over the 2014-2016 period.

5 Recommendations

The review brief included identifying a set of recommendations designed to evolve the Pursuit of Excellence Programme leading into the 2020 cycle.

- 5.1** This report recommends that Sport Ireland carefully consider the investment required in order to sustain high impact professional development support within a high performance sport context. Specific investment recommendations include:
 - 5.1.1** High Performance Coaches: It is essential moving forward that the number of participants on the programme be considered relative to the resources available. Capping the number of participants would reduce the risk of over-stretching resources, as well as safeguarding the status of the programme that been developed to support world class and developing coaches delivering impact on a world stage. If the same level of resources were available in the Toyko cycle, this report recommends an advisory ceiling of 12 participants on the Podium Programme and 12 participants on the Horizon Programme.
 - 5.1.2** High Performance Directors: It is recommended that Sport Ireland consider providing extra investment in order to design and implement a distinct PEP programme for PDs.
- 5.2** This review has recognised a significant strength in partnership working by all involved in the programme. Moving forward, it is recommended that the Pursuit of Excellence Programme continues to use this strength to encourage the sharing of key ideas, best practice and resources. Specific partnership recommendations include:
 - 5.2.1** The PEP programme leadership team should consult with CEOs/Performance Directors annually prior to submitting each annual support offer to coaches on the programme in order to ensure that the support plan is aligned with line management needs. CEOs/Performance Director should also consider integrating feedback from the Pursuit of Excellence Programme into their overall performance management process for coaches on the Programme employed in their sport.
 - 5.2.2** Existing training partnerships with the Irish Defence Forces and An Garda Siochana should be expanded to offer more high value training opportunities using highly rated problem based learning approaches.
 - 5.2.3** Sports should also be strongly encouraged to develop communities of practice in their own right as the community of practice methodology is a viable one for the purpose of coach development.
- 5.3** The Pursuit of Excellence Programme has an overall coach support vision and a number of internal objectives for the Podium and Horizon Programmes. In order to help shape and direct operations, it is recommended that a new set of key objectives be established for the Pursuit of Excellence Programme. In setting these objectives it would be important to consider whether the mission of the Pursuit of Excellence Programme is to build a community of practice or achieve podium impact. As the programme runs to specific timelines, it risks negatively impacting the community cohesion when the programme ceases.
- 5.4** This report recommendeds that all learning materials be made available on a central portal to facilitate coach learning and further enhance the connectivity of the community of practice.
- 5.5** The timings of the programme were found to be well-planned overall. On-going adjustments were made to accommodate competing interests up until and including Rio in 2016. It is recommended that the entire programme be periodised and then tailored individually in 2020.



Garry Cahill, Performance Director, Tennis Ireland &
Rory Fitzpatrick, High Performance Coach, Irish Sailing Association



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Appendix 1: Medals Table Associated with PEP Coaches 2014 – 2016

Year	Athlete	Sport	Medal Colour	Age Level	European	World	Olympic/ Paralympic
2014	Martyn Irvine	Cycling	Silver	Senior		•	
	Sanita Puspure	Rowing	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Colin Lynch	Para Cycling	Silver	Senior	•		
	Katie Taylor	Boxing	Gold	Senior		•	
	Claire Grace	Boxing	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Josie Knight	Cycling	Silver	U23	•		
	Eoin Mullen	Cycling	Bronze	U23	•		
	Mark Downey	Cycling	Silver	U23	•		
	James Scully	Para Swimming	Bronze	Senior	•		
	James Scully	Para Swimming	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Orla Barry	Para Athletics	Silver	Senior	•		
	Robert Hendrick	Canoeing	Silver	Youth		•	•
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Gold	Senior		•	
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Gold	Senior		•	
	Katie George-Dunlevy & Eve McCrystal	Para Cycling	Silver	Senior		•	
	Mark Rohan	Para Cycling	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Ryan Mullen	Cycling	Silver	Junior		•	
	Team Ireland	Eventing	Gold	U21	•		
	Elizabeth Hayden	Eventing	Bronze	U21	•		
	Katie Taylor	Boxing	Gold	Senior		•	

2014: 20 Medals (8 Sports)

Year	Athlete	Sport	Medal Colour	Age Level	European	World	Olympic/ Paralympic
2015	Lisa Kearney	Judo	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Gold	Senior		•	
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Katie-George Dunlevy/Eve McCrystal	Para Cycling	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Katie Taylor	Boxing	Gold	Senior	•		
	Michael O'Reilly	Boxing	Gold	Senior	•		
	Brendan Irvine	Boxing	Silver	Senior	•		
	Sean McComb	Boxing	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Chloe McGee & Sam McGee	Badminton	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Josh McGee & Sam McGee	Badminton	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Ellen Keane	Para Swimming	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Darragh McDonald	Para Swimming	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Gold	Senior		•	
	Dean Walsh	Boxing	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Michael Conlon	Boxing	Gold	Senior	•		
	Joe Ward	Boxing	Gold	Senior	•		
	Bertram Allen	Show Jumping	Bronze	Senior			•
	Team Ireland	Eventing	Bronze	U21	•		
	Arthur Lanigan-O'Keefe & Natalya Coyle	Modern Pentathlon	Silver	Senior			•
	Arthur Lanigan O'Keefe	Modern Pentathlon	Gold	Senior	•		
	Team Ireland (Men)	Hockey	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Michael Conlon	Boxing	Gold	Senior			•
	Michael O'Reilly	Boxing	Silver	Senior			•
	Joe Ward	Boxing	Bronze	Senior			•
	Orla Barry	Para Athletics	Silver	Senior			•
	Deirdre Mongan	Para Athletics	Bronze	Senior			•
	Niamh McCarthy	Para Athletics	Bronze	Senior			•
	Noelle Lenihan	Para Athletics	Silver	Senior			•

2015: 28 Medals (10 Sports)

Year	Athlete	Sport	Medal Colour	Age Level	European	World	Olympic/ Paralympic
2016	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Colin Lynch	Para Cycling	Silver	Senior		•	
	Nhat Nguyen	Badminton	Gold	Youth	•		
	Nhat Nguyen & Paul Reynolds	Badminton	Bronze	Youth	•		
	Nicole Turner	Para Swimming	Silver	Senior	•		
	Nicole Turner	Para Swimming	Silver	Senior	•		
	Nicole Turner	Para Swimming	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Sanita Puspure	Rowing	Silver	Senior	•		
	Katie Taylor	Boxing	Bronze	Senior		•	
	Kellie Harrington	Boxing	Silver	Senior		•	
	Deirdre Mongan	Para Athletics	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Noelle Lenihan	Para Athletics	Gold	Senior	•		
	Orla Barry	Para Athletics	Gold	Senior	•		
	Niamh McCarthy	Para Athletics	Silver	Senior	•		
	Mark Downey	Cycling	Silver	U23	•		
	Natalya Coyle & Arthur Lanigan O'Keefe	Modern Pentathlon	Gold	Senior			•
	Olivia Mehaffey	Golf (Ladies)	Bronze	Senior	•		
	Annalise Murphy	Sailing	Silver	Senior			•
	Orla Barry	Para Athletics	Silver	Senior			•
	Niamh McCarthy	Para Athletics	Silver	Senior			•
	Noelle Lenihan	Para Athletics	Bronze	Senior			•
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Bronze	Senior			•
	Eoghan Clifford	Para Cycling	Gold	Senior			•
	Katie-George Dunlevy & Eve McCrystal	Para Cycling	Gold	Senior			•
	Colin Lynch	Para Cycling	Silver	Senior			•
	Katie-George Dunlevy & Eve McCrystal	Para Cycling	Silver	Senior			•
	Ellen Keane	Para Swimming	Bronze	Senior			•
	Team Ireland	Golf (Ladies)	Bronze	Senior			•
	Team Ireland	Golf (Mens)	Bronze	Senior			•
	Christina Desmond	Boxing	Bronze	Senior	•		

2016: 30 Medals (10 Sports)

2 Appendix 2: Internal PEP Documents

- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Podium Delivery Schedule 2014
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Podium Delivery Schedule 2015
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Podium Delivery Schedule 2016
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Horizon Support Calendar 2014-15
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme On-Boarding Survey 2014
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme On-Boarding Survey Data 2014*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme End of Year Review Survey 2014
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme End of Year Review Survey Data 2014*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme End of Year Review Surveys 2015
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme End of Year Review Survey Data 2015*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme End of Year Review Surveys 2016
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme End of Year Review Survey Data 2016*
- Performance Observation & Feedback Support Discussion Paper (June 2015)
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Vantage Support Brief (August 2015)
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Vantage Pilot paper (October 2015)
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Vantage Point Observation Plan examples*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Vantage Point Feedback Report examples*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Debrief Report examples*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Post-Games support profile*
- CEO/Performance Director Feedback Report examples May-August 2015*
- Pursuit of Excellence Podium Programme Grants Paper*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Performance Impact Project Application Pack*
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme Masterclass video examples
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme activity costs
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme post-event feedback surveys
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme medal impact results 2014-2016: European Championships
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme medal impact results 2014-2016: World Championships
- Pursuit of Excellent Programme medal impact results 2016: Olympics and Paralympic Games

* The information provided was anonymised and all private/confidential notes and documents were concealed.





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