



2020-2024

Social Science Research Strategy

Approved by Executive Committee: September 2020

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Executive Summary

Our overall goal is to invest in social science research to maintain and increase understanding of the behaviors we are seeking to reinforce or prevent. This will improve WADA's ability and the global clean sport community's capability to develop effective policies and practices, enhancing the sporting experience for all.

Social science has demonstrated its value in a number of public policy settings through its ability to improve program delivery in areas such as road safety, obesity, and tobacco. It has also demonstrated its value in clean sport through its contribution to understanding of doping behavior: shifting the simplistic narrative of athletes using prohibited substances to improve performance, to demonstrate there is no simple universal answer as to why athletes use prohibited substances. For example, a growing body of evidence now highlights that athletes who have no intention to cheat may still find themselves in a vulnerable position due to situational and environmental factors that can increase their risk of committing an Anti-Doping Rule Violation (ADRV).

WADA's support of social science research has significantly contributed to this body of evidence since 2005. The establishment of the new WADA Education department, as well as a new [WADA Strategic Plan](#), provide an opportune time to develop an aligned four-year Social Science Research (SSR) Strategy and build on the developments of the last 15 years.

This strategy sets a framework for the WADA SSR Program to move beyond a grant program and have a bigger impact on the development of social science's contribution to clean sport. This framework is defined by 6 key strategic priorities: 1) coordinating the research agenda for clean sport; 2) contributing to global insight to inform the impact of clean sport activity; 3) sharing what we know to ensure findings are disseminated and understood by our stakeholders; 4) leading by example in ensuring that our programs are evaluated and providing support for our stakeholders to do the same; 5) developing research capability globally; and 6) establishing partnerships with other funders of research and key stakeholders to help maximize investment.

By taking a strategic approach centered around athletes, considering their environments and those who influence them, we want to ensure that research continues to provide key insights and be translated into improved programs, more informed policy, and ultimately a better sporting experience for all.

Introduction: The Impact of Social Science

Social science is concerned with society and the relationships among individuals within a society. It is valued for its role in providing evidence and insights about individual, organizational and societal factors that influence people's beliefs and behaviors. Social science research frequently challenges common assumptions about the world, emphasizing the need for robust evidence collection before drawing conclusions that impact society. By framing major societal challenges into questions, social science researchers support policymakers to answer such questions. Investment in social science research informs public policy choices and anticipated societal benefits.

Social science has demonstrated how it contributes to the development and improvement of society through the understanding of human behavior and how it is influenced by a complex and dynamic interplay of factors. The more social science aids our understanding of these complex factors, the more effective we can be in our public policy initiatives; particularly where these behaviors are harmful to individuals and/or society. Understanding people, the choices they make and how they are influenced, and then using this insight to inform what organizations do, can be termed evidence-based practice or evidence-informed policy making.

1. Transforming Understanding of Real-world Challenges

In recent decades, social science research has guided public policy-making processes and enhanced contact among researchers, practitioners and policymakers. The key areas where social science research has had an impact include:

Clarifying the complexity of human behavior

Social sciences investigate factors shaping people's behavior in specific domains such as health, education and, of course, sport. The understanding of these factors in the health domain, for example, has helped policymakers design more effective interventions for addressing health conditions and promoting healthy behaviors in areas such as diabetes, obesity and safe sex, which need to be comprehensively addressed at all levels of society to have the desired impact.

Informing policy development and implementation

Social sciences provide empirical findings and models that help us understand or predict human behavior. The findings of social science research can be used by policymakers to develop and implement policies. For example, social science research (including knowledge generation and monitoring and evaluation data) has informed policy for regulating the tobacco industry around the globe, thus contributing to a significant decline in smoking prevalence in many parts of the world.

Evaluating programs and initiatives

Rigorous evaluations of public interventions provide feedback on the effectiveness of programs and initiatives, leading to improvements. For example, research and evaluation of the US drug intervention campaign 'Just Say No' provided evidence of its ineffectiveness. This provided information on how public health programs can be delivered more effectively.

Creating cultural change

Done well, social science research generates knowledge and understanding of real-world challenges and opportunities that can be implemented in policies and practices to bring about societal change. For example, road safety messages related to seat-belt usage and drunk-driving behaviors, in conjunction with regulatory changes, have led to a significant reduction in traffic-related injuries and fatalities.

The positive impact of social science research in the advancement of public policies and programs can best be achieved through buy-in from industry and other societal stakeholders. Building mutual understanding between researchers and policymakers is critical in bridging the research to policy gap.

2. Social Science Research in Clean Sport

Research related to clean sport has been growing steadily over the last 20 years. A literature review¹ in 2016 commissioned by WADA showed that peer-reviewed articles increased from an average of 7 per year in 2007 to over 26 per year in 2016. This increased research activity has led to a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of doping behavior and the multiple factors influencing athletes, moving beyond the simplistic narrative of athletes' use of prohibited substances to improve performance. A growing body of evidence now highlights that athletes who have no prior intention to cheat may still find themselves in a vulnerable position due to situational and environmental factors that can increase their susceptibility to committing an ADRV.

People's behavior, including doping behavior, is very much influenced by the immediate environment and cultural norms. Athlete Support Personnel can have a significant influence on the behavior of their athletes as can the culture of the sport or team environment and the political and socio-economic system within which athletes live. This interconnectedness again emphasizes the complexity of the behavior and the inherent challenges in tackling it. Preventing doping in sport cannot be done in isolation – it requires action across the whole sporting system.

Social science research is also beginning to explore wider contexts of recreational sport and fitness contexts, where compliance with the World Anti-Doping Code is not salient, or in non-competitive contexts, not required. Understanding these contexts and their influence on competitive sport will require a systems-based approach. This will allow programs and interventions to be designed at the athlete level with an appreciation of the broader context that influences athlete behavior. Doing so will allow programs to be better tailored and more effective. This feeds into the need to be strategic in our approach to research so we understand and can

¹ S. Backhouse, L. Whitaker, L. Patterson, K. Erickson and J. McKenna, "Social psychology of doping in sport: a mixed-studies narrative synthesis", WADA, 2016, https://www.wada-ama.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/literature_review_update_final_2016.pdf

address the complexities by increasing the scale of our research activity, coordinating this at all levels and communicating the findings to the clean sport community.

A wider development in anti-doping programs is the need for programs to be more athlete focused and athlete engaged. A key initiative of the WADA Strategic Plan is to support vulnerable athletes and those at risk of becoming vulnerable. Social science research has already provided insight into points of vulnerability during an athlete's career and can continue to provide further evidence on how to address these vulnerabilities across sports and countries. Engaging athletes in the research process will help increase its validity and relevance and ultimately improve the sporting experience for all participants. This revision of WADA's SSR Program will enable both a focused and broader approach in helping to fully realize the value and benefits of social science research applied to protecting clean sport.

3. WADA Social Science Research Program: Building on Lessons Learned

Throughout its history, WADA has been committed to improving evidence-based doping prevention strategies via social science research.

3.1 WADA Social Science Research Grant Program

The SSR Grant Program was established in 2005 as the core activity of WADA's social science research efforts. By successfully implementing the SSR Grants Program, WADA has been encouraging the global academic community to conduct robust research in the field of anti-doping and provide evidence-based findings to inform education initiatives of both WADA and the community.

The SSR Grant Program initially had two overall objectives:

1. To encourage social science research in the field of anti-doping.
2. To provide evidence-based information for the development of education programs.

The initial focus of the SSR Grant Program was to develop a clearer understanding of doping behavior. Additionally, the SSR Grant Program looked to examine the effectiveness of certain types of education interventions at an individual level. More recently, the focus has shifted to program level interventions as well as evaluating the effectiveness of education programs. It has also looked to examine certain topics, building on recommendations of previous research. Topics such as the influence of athlete support personnel, the perceived legitimacy of anti-doping rules, regulations and requirements, the impact of medicalization of sport, and whistleblowing are examples that have been prioritized in the past.

There have also been cases where research has been targeted based on identified needs, including literature reviews², a meta-analysis³ and the development of standardized questionnaires⁴.

A Social Science Research Review Panel (Review Panel) was established to provide expert analysis of grant applications. It provides recommendations to the WADA Education Committee on the selection and funding of project applications. The latter then brings these recommendations forward to the WADA Executive Committee for a final decision. The Review Panel has also provided input on social science research priorities and advised on other research-related issues.

The SSR Grants Program has spent USD3.6 million on 106 projects⁵ to date. A key success is that we now have a comprehensive insight into the determinants of doping behavior. The results of the research findings have informed WADA education programs and resources. In some instances, the findings have been communicated directly with the clean sport community to inform their doping prevention initiatives and activities. However, the question remains as to how translatable into practice these research findings have been, and how to improve the methods of dissemination overall.

² S. Backhouse, L. Whitaker, L. Patterson, K. Erickson and J. McKenna, "Social psychology of doping in sport: a mixed-studies narrative synthesis", WADA, 2016, https://www.wada-ama.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/literature_review_update_-_final_2016.pdf
S. Backhouse, J. McKenna and L. Patterson, "Prevention through Education: A Review of Current International Social Science Literature", WADA, 2008 <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/resources/social-science/prevention-through-education-a-review-of-current-international-social>
S. Backhouse, J. McKenna, S. Robinson and A. Atkin, "International Literature Review: Attitudes, Behaviours, Knowledge, and Education – Drugs in Sport: Past Present and Future <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/resources/social-science/international-literature-review-attitudes-behaviours-knowledge-and>

³ N. Ntoumanis, J. Ng, V. Barkoukis and S. Backhouse, "A statistical synthesis of the literature on personal and situational variables that predict doping in physical activity settings", WADA 2013, <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/resources/social-science/a-statistical-synthesis-of-the-literature-on-personal-and-situational-0>

⁴ R. Donovan, G Jalleh and D. Gucciardi, "Research Package for Anti-Doping Organizations", WADA 2015, <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/resources/education-and-prevention/research-package-for-anti-doping-organizations-ados>

⁵ <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/social-science-research-projects>

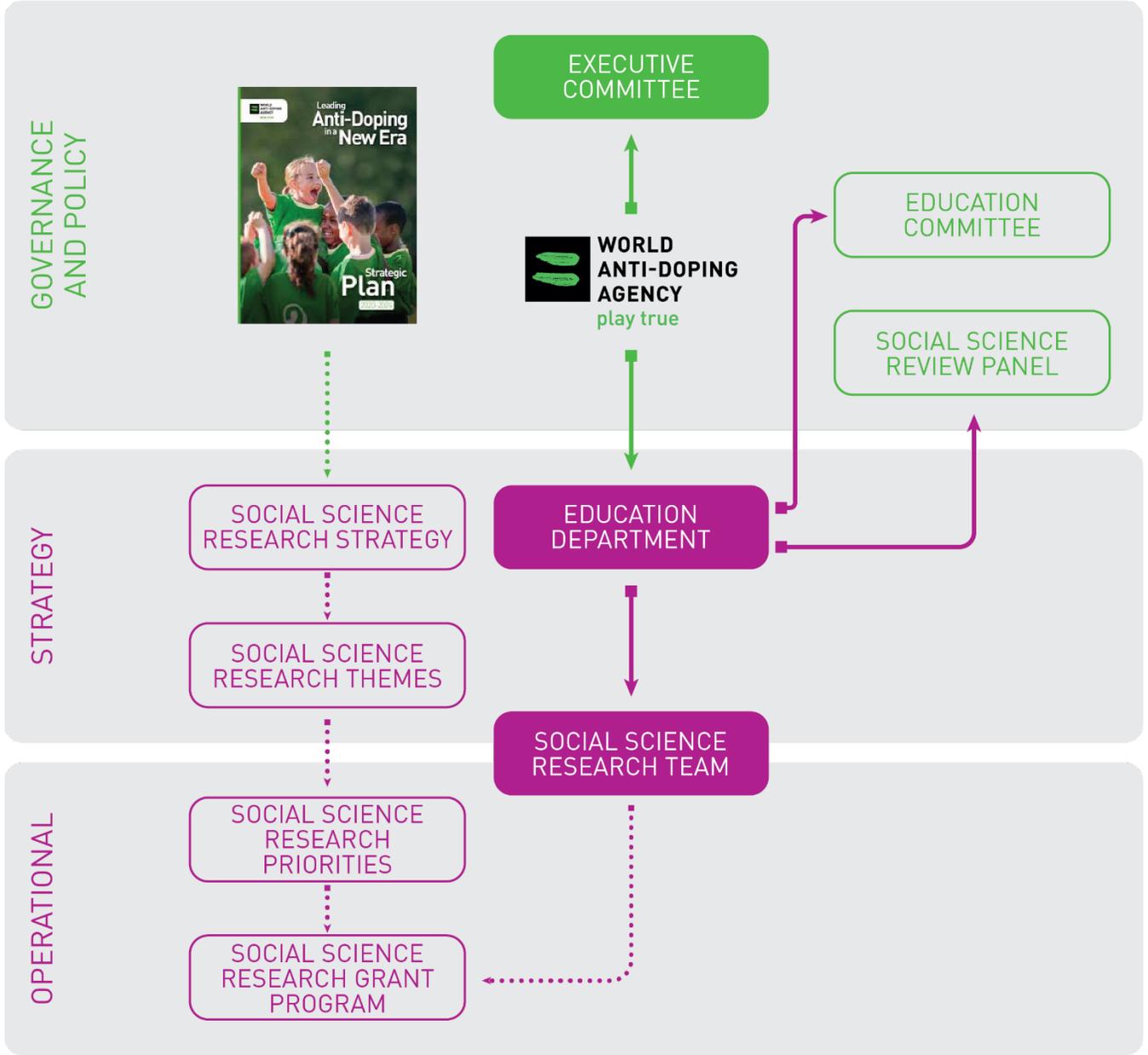


Figure 1: Governance structure related to the Social Science Research Review Panel

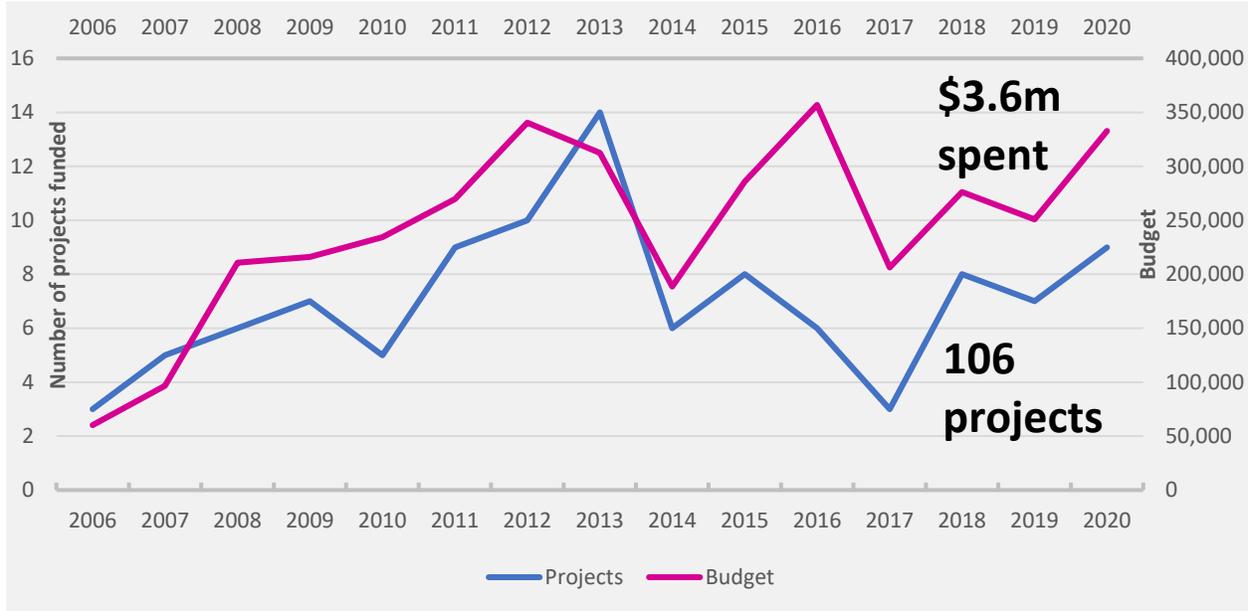


Figure 2: Overview of WADA spending on social science and number of funded projects.

3.2 Challenges of WADA Social Science Research Program

Despite the progress and the amount of knowledge generated and shared, the **clean sport community is still only partially engaged with social science research** at a program level, and even less at a policy level.

Further, our latest review of the SSR Grants Program shows a striking **imbalance between geographical regions**, both in terms of applications and funding distribution. This is possibly partially related to **language barriers** with applications only able to be accepted in English or French.

The annual budget of the SSR Program remained steady between USD200,000 and USD350,000 during the fifteen-year period of the program. Whilst a useful investment amount to fund small scale research projects and program evaluations, it has **not been sufficient to fund larger scale projects, particularly longitudinal studies**. This has limited the opportunity to determine the effectiveness of education in the prevention of doping over time, or to identify key pressure points (moments of vulnerability) in specific sports/cultures during an athlete’s career so that targeted interventions can be implemented that address these issues and their effectiveness assessed.

The SSR Program has focused on the grant program as the main mechanism for funding research. Although research priorities have been identified through this process and targeted research has been commissioned to address some gaps, the specific research areas funded are still largely determined by and limited to those who apply to the program.

By adopting a more proactive and strategic approach in the future, WADA can take a leading role in the social science research agenda to maximize its benefits to the clean sport community.

3.3 Opportunities to Seize

Recently, WADA established a **standalone Education department** and increased its administrative capacity associated with the SSR Program. The department now has the opportunity to review and improve the SSR Program which has not been done since the program's inception.

Also, social and natural science research feature under the 'Lead' strategic aim of **WADA's new strategic plan**, thus providing a further opportunity for WADA to enhance its social science research efforts:

Relevant Key Initiatives of WADA's Strategic Plan:

Strategic Aim - Lead

"Focus on impactful research based on key priorities and outcomes"

Strategic Aim – Be Athlete-Centered

"Identify vulnerable athlete groups to support and recommend appropriate interventions"

Further, the SSR Program has **received funding from partner organizations** in recent years, namely the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as part of its special fund, and Fonds de Recherche du Quebec (FRQ). External sources of research funding and leveraging investment with other funding organizations such as the newly established Chair of Anti-Doping at Sherbrooke University (Quebec, Canada) provide WADA with an ability to invest in longitudinal research studies. This will provide robust evidence to support policy adjustments and enable anti-doping organizations to develop programs with increasing effectiveness. Equally, social science research on this scale can highlight where resources could be redirected for greater impact.

4. WADA Social Science Research Strategy

4.1 Rationale and Purpose of the Strategy

Our overall goal is to invest in social science research to maintain and increase our understanding of the behaviors we are seeking to reinforce or prevent. This will improve our ability to develop effective policies and practices, enhancing the sporting experience for all.

A longer-term, more planned approach to social science research is now needed to achieve this.

So, why now?

- WADA has identified social science research as a strategic priority with increased investment; safeguarding this investment is an important initiative.
- Measuring impact and determining the return on investment of the money allocated will help to improve the program's effectiveness in the future.
- The introduction of the 2021 World Anti-Doping Code and the new International Standard for Education places emphasis on research within the World Anti-Doping Program.
- The 2021 World Anti-Doping Code describes a new paradigm for anti-doping programs, with five key strategies to prevent doping: education; deterrence; detection; enforcement; and rule of law. The uptake and impact of this more integrated interdisciplinary model will require research across all five domains.

What will have changed by 2024? We will ...

- Invest in social science research in a planned, coordinated and strategic manner.
- Attract a more diverse profile of researchers from different disciplines and all regions.
- Be more proactive in leading social science research initiatives.
- Raise the profile and value of social science research within the anti-doping and sport system.

- Generate system-led innovation by improving research capabilities worldwide and identifying emerging trends in anti-doping interventions.
- Communicate our research priorities to reduce duplication.
- Further our understanding of clean sport behaviors and individual vulnerability.
- Disseminate social science research findings in ways that increases their translation into practice.
- Know more about the impact of global anti-doping efforts and their effectiveness, particularly in the area of prevention.

4.2 Social Science Research Strategic Priorities

Coordinating the research agenda

We will set clear research priorities to focus our efforts and funding investments over the longer term, with a goal to expand our work with research experts and partners to reduce duplication in the system and maximize the impact for clean sport globally.

Contributing to global insight

We will contribute to global insight on Clean Sport by taking a data-driven approach to create a reflective and balanced view of the impact of anti-doping activity, being open about what we don't know and placing these on the social science research agenda.

Sharing what we know

We will make social science research more accessible by sharing the outcomes of WADA-funded and wider social science research and supporting their integration into the programs developed by the clean sport community.

Leading by example

We will monitor and evaluate our own programs and support the clean sport community to do the same.

Developing research capability

We will develop ways to enhance research capability globally, supporting a more diverse network of social science researchers, and encouraging connections between them and anti-doping organizations.

Establishing research partnerships

We will seek to establish research partnerships at a strategic level, working with other organizations to support global and regional social science research efforts, including sustaining the investment in social science research.

Strategic Priority 1: Coordinating the Research Agenda

We will set clear research priorities to focus our efforts and funding investments over the longer term, and work with research experts and partners to reduce duplication in the system, maximizing the impact for clean sport.

Areas of Focus

- 1.1 Coordinate the clean sport research agenda globally to help reduce duplication and increase impact.
- 1.2 Promote the value of social science research in the community and within key organizations.
- 1.3 Enhance the remit of the Social Science Review Panel to leverage their and others' expertise.
- 1.4 Align our funding investment strategies and grant program for the longer term.

Activities

In order to achieve Strategic Priority 1, we will define and publish research priorities for the duration of the strategy. These priorities will reflect the goals of the strategy and of the clean sport community and will be developed in coordination with other stakeholder organizations. To support these new research priorities and the implementation of this strategy, we will enhance the remit of the Social Science Research Review Panel and convert it to an Expert Group. We will ensure that the Expert Group is appropriately supported by WADA so that we can benefit more from the expertise and input of its members.

Outputs

- Published social science research priorities established in line with the WADA 2020-2024 Strategic Plan and needs of the community.

- The Social Science Review Panel converted to a Social Science Research Expert Group.
- A revamped WADA Social Science Research web platform including Grant Program information.
- Inclusion of social science research in key WADA events and Global Education Conference.
- Publication(s) on how social sciences in sport can contribute to clean sport efforts.

Strategic Priority 2: Contributing to Global Insight

We will contribute to global insight on Clean Sport by taking a data-driven approach to create a reflective and balanced view of the impact of anti-doping activity, being open about what we don't know and placing these onto the social science research agenda.

Areas of Focus

- 2.1 Identify the data available to assess clean sport efforts and ways to aggregate these data over time to conduct trend analyses.
- 2.2 Support the development of a more holistic view of the impact of anti-doping efforts beyond testing statistics and anti-doping rule violations.
- 2.3 Develop a methodology to assess levels of inadvertent doping globally.
- 2.4 Assess policy impact by evaluating changes in the anti-doping system resulting from new programs.

Activities

In order to achieve Strategic Priority 2, we will establish a framework for gathering and assessing data, particularly from education programs as well as wider anti-doping activities and sport data. This framework will include data and metrics from our stakeholders' programs, social science research findings, and other external sources. We will look to combine these data to provide meaningful insights that will contribute to a 'Clean Sport Index' of the anti-doping system. Adopting a longitudinal approach will provide trends on key indicators such as inadvertent doping, for example. We will also support the dissemination of the framework's data and findings to the wider community.

Outputs

- Data gathering and analysis framework and system(s) in place to analyze and report on trends.
- Clean Sport Index (health check) of the anti-doping system.
- Inadvertent doping assessment.
- Policy evaluation conducted for the ISE and ISRM as new standards (i.e., have they made a difference to practice?).
- Identification of major issues to feed into the research agenda.
- Contribution to doping prevalence research.

Strategic Priority 3: Sharing What We Know

We will make social science research outcomes more accessible and “translatable” by helping the clean sport community understand the research findings and their practical applications.

Areas of Focus

- 3.1 Determine ways to disseminate research findings through user-friendly formats shared via a variety of channels and platforms.
- 3.2 Seek opportunities to connect the clean sport community and the social sciences to improve our collective knowledge and understanding.
- 3.3 Support the establishment of a dedicated central place to access social science research relevant to clean sport.
- 3.4 Position ourselves as a resource for the media by providing examples of social science research and its impact, plus offering experts/speakers to inform the public conversation.

Activities

In order to achieve Strategic Priority 3, we will ensure that our own research findings are accessible and informative for our stakeholders. We will be proactive in ensuring that key evidence is communicated in an accessible format, focusing on the implications for policy, practice and future research. Further, we will focus on the translation of research; facilitating researchers, practitioners, athletes and policymakers coming together to co-create projects and programs.

Outputs

- A dissemination plan for social science research findings, including obligating WADA-funded researchers to share their outcomes with the wider community.
- Publication of our research findings, social science research funding opportunities and availability to the clean sport community.
- Publication of an athlete pathway, core stages of development and identification of athlete vulnerabilities along this pathway.
- Deliver social science research workshop as part of the ‘Think Tank’ day concept at Global Education Conference.
- Global Insight/Position paper series for the ADO community and a dedicated academic journal or equivalent established with partners.

Strategic priority 4: Leading by Example

We will monitor and evaluate our own programs and support the clean sport community to do the same.

Areas of focus

- 4.1 Analyzing and interpreting the outcomes of the research to inform our own policies and practices.
- 4.2 Consistently embed monitoring and evaluation measures in WADA education programs.
- 4.3 Improve the monitoring and evaluation capability of stakeholders through the provision of tools and guidance.
- 4.4 Actively seek opportunities to integrate social science research practices such as monitoring and evaluation of WADA programs beyond education (e.g. where these programs seek to directly influence specific behaviors such as Whistleblowing).

Activities

In order to achieve Strategic Priority 4, we will embed monitoring and evaluation procedures as part of WADA’s education programs, including the SSR Program itself and internal WADA programs. We will develop tools to support our stakeholders to conduct their own monitoring and evaluation procedures, including identifying measures to evaluate the impact of their programs.

The information and data generated through these activities will contribute to the Global Insight strategic priority.

Outputs

- Thorough review and re-publication of the Social Science Research Package for ADOs.
- “How to” Monitoring and Evaluation Guide developed for ADOs.
- Mobile-enabled survey instruments for Outreach programs available for ADOs.
- Shared evaluations of WADA programs/activities.
- Internal subscriptions to relevant journal databases.

Strategic Priority 5: Developing Research Capability

We will develop ways to enhance research capability globally, supporting a more diverse network of social science researchers, and encouraging partnerships between them and anti-doping organizations.

Areas of Focus

- 5.1 Combine efforts to enhance social science research capability in under-represented geographical regions.
- 5.2 Increase the geographical distribution of WADA-funded social science research grants and raise the quality of applications across under-represented regions.
- 5.3 Improve ADOs’ capability to commission, conduct, interpret and translate into practice social science research.
- 5.4 Engage a broader community of social scientists and industry experts.

Activities

In order to achieve Strategic Priority 5, we will be leveraging the expertise of the SSR Review Panel and closely collaborating with WADA Regional Offices in order to enhance research capability and capacity, particularly in under-represented geographic regions. We will deliver activities such as clinics, webinars, mentorships and presentations to research teams and universities. We will develop tools to support ADOs in building their own research capability, including the engagement of athletes and athlete support personnel in the research process. Innovation will be promoted through embedding novel methodologies used in other sectors and

drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives. We will encourage research teams from different continents to join efforts in common applications and, where relevant, include ADOs.

Outputs

- Guidance for ADOs on social science research and how to engage athletes in research, including an ADEL eLearning course.
- Introduction to Social Science Research for ADOs.
- Social science research seminars per region that engage practitioners, academics, athletes and ASP.
- Researcher mentor program and a ‘Talent Lab’ established for new- or less-experienced (linked to the Clean Sport Academies) researchers/research teams.
- Guidelines, including quality indicators, for Social Science Research Grant Applications and Compliance for researchers.
- Minimum 35% of grants allocated to non-European countries.
- Mechanism in place to ‘showcase’ system-led innovation either at the Global Education Conference or through other appropriate channels.

Strategic Priority 6: Establishing Strategic Research Partnerships

We will seek to establish research partnerships at a strategic level, working with other organizations to support global and regional social science research efforts, including sustaining the investment in social science research.

Areas of Focus

- 6.1 Establishing partnerships with other social science research funding organizations to enable larger-scale projects on aligned research priorities.
- 6.2 Formalize our engagement with the Sherbrooke University Anti-Doping Research Chair to leverage their expertise.
- 6.3 Develop partnerships with key universities at a regional level to strategically invest in programs of research.
- 6.4 Continue to influence other organizations to invest, or to maintain or increase their investment, in social science research.

Activities

In order to achieve Strategic Priority 6, we will collaborate with existing partners and establish new partnerships with organizations in and outside of the sport system. These activities will ensure sustainable investment in social science, leverage investment, and avoid duplication. In support of the Clean Sport Academy initiative, mandatory research criteria will be included in the establishment of research hubs globally, contributing to the cross-fertilization opportunities between research teams. We will be engaging athletes around clean sport and leveraging their ability to champion clean sport research.

Outputs

- Establishment of Social Science Research Funders Consortium/Network.
- Established program of work/partnership with Sherbrooke University Academic Chair.
- Social science research as a compulsory accreditation criterion for Clean Sport Academies.
- Stakeholder engagement map developed for social science research, both in and out of the clean sport community.
- Annual assessment of funding levels for social science research from all sources communicated to stakeholders.