The World Anti-Doping Agency’s (Re)-Commitment to Anti-Doping Education: A Major Development or Just Another Exercise in Compliance?

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This past November 2019, at the World Conference on Doping in Sport, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) will have submitted for approval the latest edition of the World Anti-Doping Code (hereafter – the Code). The Code is a document that harmonized anti-doping rules globally and aligns efforts to prevent doping in sport. Article 18 of the 2021 Code (2019), similar to previous editions, will focus on education and will mandate that International Sport Federations and National Anti-Doping Agencies deliver anti-doping education to athletes and athlete support personnel. In addition, WADA will introduce, for the first time, an International Standard for Education. WADA publishes several International Standards and these are technical documents that Code signatories are required to adhere to for Code compliance. These documents provide specific information on topics such as details of substances and methods on the prohibited list, and the process to grant a therapeutic exemption for the use of medications that otherwise would be prohibited. These developments also come on the heels of the official launch in January 2018 of “ADeL”, WADA’s online platform that consolidates all of its e-learning resources into one place and in August 2019, the creation of a Director of Education position, to lead WADA’s education strategy. These efforts are summarized in WADA’s (2018, p. 56) most recent annual report that “No longer is education a worthy but optional extra. Increasingly, it is an essential and central pillar of the global anti-doping program.”

These actions represent a renewed emphasis on the role of education in doping prevention. However, WADA and educational efforts generally have been heavily criticized in the past for the limited resources devoted to educational initiatives (Backhouse, 2015) and because educational efforts have been described as simplistic, lacking substance and mere exercises in compliance (Hoberman, 2013; Houlihan, 2008). Online platforms and the one-off nature of educational initiatives have also been challenged for their effectiveness (Hauw, 2017). Furthermore, while it may be intuitively appealing to promote education to prevent doping, the effectiveness of educational efforts has been questionable at best (Backhouse, McKenna, Robinson, & Atkins, 2007). Even well-known educational initiatives, such as Goldberg and colleagues’ (1996a, 1996b, 2000) Adolescents Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids (ATLAS) program, provide depressingly poor educational outcomes when viewed from a critical lens. All of this is made worse when one realizes that scholars have been advocating for improvements in anti-doping education for nearly 50 years (e.g., Cooper, 1972; Thomas, Knotts, & Erickson, 1973).

Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is to discuss WADA’s education policy. Moreover, WADA’s approach will be examined from an educational perspective. While it may be commonsensical to assume that educational programs are designed using relevant theories, the reality is that this is often not the case. Instead, methods have been proposed that are not empirically supported to improve educational outcomes (Houlihan, 2008). Recommendations will be provided on the ways in which WADA and other anti-doping organizations could improve their education policy and design educational programs more likely to produce the desired educational outcomes.