Australia has had a good start to the Rio Olympics, appearing well placed for a more successful campaign than the London Games. But does that mean the strategy created in response to Australia's poor Olympic performance in 2012 is working?

Under its new policy – known as Australia’s Winning Edge – the Australian Sports Commission set high targets for the national Olympic team. The strategy projects a top-five finish on the medal tables for the 2016 and 2020 Games.

While, on the one hand, the government has been praised for setting such high standards, it has also been criticised for implementing a funding model that clearly favours traditional sports with a proven record. Former Australian Institute of Sport director and world champion marathon runner Robert de Castella has criticised the policy for just "going for easy medals".

Winning ways

Australia's Winning Edge was implemented in late 2012, following the disappointing performance of the Australian team at the London Olympic Games.

The ten-year strategy marks a strong shift for Australian sport, and supporters and critics alike will be watching the results at Rio to evaluate its success. But athletes competing in Rio are there as a result of the previous sports strategy.

Before 2012, government funding embraced a " whole-of-sport " approach that rewarded disciplines with a large participation base and clear pathways for athletes. But the high-performance investment allocation model supporting the new strategy categorises sports according to their contribution to its targets.

Those with a record of achieving multiple medals or having consistent team success will receive support. So will sports most likely to achieve a top-eight finish at the Games or garner gold medals at the Commonwealth Games. But those that fail to meet these criteria receive less funding.

One sport that has already felt the impact of the new funding model is artistic gymnastics. The Western Australian Institute of Sport (WAIS) cut its women's artistic gymnastics program after the Australian team didn't qualify for the Rio Games earlier this year.

Only the top 12 nations in the world qualify to send a team to compete in the Olympic Games and this was the first time Australia hasn't qualified for 28 years.

Although other state-based institutes have retained their women's artistic gymnastics programs, WAIS had produced Olympic and Commonwealth champions for many years, as well as training athletes who transitioned successfully into other Olympic sports such as aerial skiing, snowboarding, and diving.

WAIS claimed its decision to redirect funds was made in order to prioritise Western Australia's contribution to " Australia’s international sporting success ".

Rio and beyond

The concern among many involved in less popular sports is that the government's sport investment focus is now only supporting successful sports and successful athletes. But how do athletes become successful without support structures and systems around them? And how can sports develop and nurture talented athletes with no funding?

Prior to the implementation of this new strategy, the Australian Institute of Sport housed and developed Olympic champions. It no longer operates a daily training hub for pre-elite or developing athletes.

And there are no residential full-time athlete programs based at the Institute. What was once considered a "gold medal factory" is now described as a " tumbleweed town ".

The Winning Edge strategy is focused on supporting traditional sports that have historically been successful at the Olympic Games, such as swimming, rowing, sailing and cycling.

But Australia's first medal at Rio was in archery, a sport not identified to contribute to the Winning Edge performance targets. In 2015-2016, it was allocated A$600,000, compared to sports such as basketball ($4.7m), cycling ($7.8m) and swimming ($8.4m).

Public criticism of the strategy by the Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates suggests we can say goodbye to these lesser-known sports and athletes winning surprising medals.

At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the Winning Edge strategy will have been in place for eight years. We will then be able to identify how the program has contributed to the development of the next generation of Australian athletes across all Olympic sports.

The results in four years' time will truly reflect the impact the strategy has had on sport development, sport participation and sport pathways in Australia. That is, of course, if the strategy remains in place after the Rio Games.

Lisa Gowthorp does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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