Despite success on the field, India lacks transparency in sports administration and governance off the field. To achieve long-term commercial and on-field success, focus must be on reforming the way sport is governed.

India is currently the proud host of the U-17 FIFA World Cup. The Indian cricket team is ranked first in the world in both, the Test and the One Day International formats. In a few months’ time, hundreds of Indian athletes will travel to Australia for the Commonwealth Games in their quest to bring home gold. For now, sport in India is in the news for all the right reasons — however, this is not always the case.

In order to achieve long-term commercial and on-field success in sport, India needs to focus on reforming the way sport is governed in the country. India has an opportunity to not only be a world leader on the sporting field but also in the business of sport.
Governance reform key to success on and off the field

The global sports industry is booming and sport has become increasingly commercialised all over the world. India is no exception to this general trend. Reports estimate the global sports sector to be worth approximately $600-700 billion. To this end, investments in sports infrastructure, sporting events, manufacturing and sporting tourism can have a significant impact on a country’s gross domestic product.

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Given the passion for celebrating success in sport in India, commercialisation of sport presents many opportunities in the country. However, the evolution of regulatory regimes and governance structures in sport in India have not kept pace with the increasing commercialisation of the industry. As a consequence, despite India’s drive for success on the field, there is still an apparent lack of transparency in sports administration and governance off the field.

The number of viewers tuning in to watch the Indian Premier league (IPL) matches are a staggering indication of the reach of commercial sport in India. The most recent edition of the tournament, IPL 10, recorded a record breaking 1.25 billion impressions from the 59 matches played between, according to the Broadcast Audience Research Council. What is, perhaps, even more interesting is that 45 per cent of these views were from rural parts of the country. In light of the huge viewership of the IPL in India, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that STAR India recently won the TV and digital media rights for the next five years — with a total bid of Rs 16,347.5 crore ($42.55 billion). Again, these record-breaking numbers are an indication of the commercialisation of sport in India.

While the commercialisation of cricket is the obvious case study in India, newer leagues such as the Pro-Kabaddi league also attract hundreds of millions of views during the tournament. Millions of Indians also tuned to cheer on Olympic athletes during the Rio Games. Yet, despite these opportunities, sport in India still faces considerable challenges in the way the industry is structured and governed.

Advocates of reform have been lobbying for decades for the enactment of sport-specific legislation. Legal battles are constantly being fought in the courts against national and State federations. The general public seem to acknowledge that the system is broken and needs to be fixed. Despite this acknowledgment, there is still a general inertia of many stakeholders in the sporting sector to make the necessary changes.

By way of example, doping in sports remains a significant problem in India. Indeed, India remains the third worst doping offender in the world (for three years running) after Russia and Italy. An astonishing 715-plus athletes have been handed sanctions for doping violations since the National Anti-Doping Agency was established in 2009.

A closer look at these numbers shows that athletics (26 per cent) and weightlifting (24 per cent), together constitute half of all doping offences in India. If we were to include powerlifting (10 per cent), bodybuilding (seven per cent) and wrestling (seven per cent) to this, almost 75 per cent of all doping violations come from five sports.

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As such, NADA, in conjunction with the national federations of these sports are making a concerted effort to significantly reduce the amount of doping offenses in these areas. While steps are apparently being taken in these areas, there is much scope for reform, especially with respect to educating local athletes about the consequences of doping in sport.

In addition, there is an apparent need to improve transparency and accountability in sporting federations. The need to transform transparency is a central tenet of the Lodha recommendations handed to the Supreme Court of India. ...While many acknowledge that reform is necessary for India to succeed on and off the sporting field, there is plenty of room for action.

As alluded to above, education is key to a change in paradigm. Whether we are educating athletes about the dangers of doping or illegal betting or sports administrators about the various models of improving the system. To this end, even education institutions have a role to play in changing this culture.

Recently, the Centre for India Australia Studies at OP Jindal Global University partnered with the University of Queensland to host a joint course on Sports law and Governance. This course brought together India and Australia’s next generation of lawyers and policy makers who hope to make contribution to the field of sport. These current law students were taught by Indian and Australian academics and practitioners about the legal framework in India and Australia.

The students and faculty were joined by former Australian Test cricketer and Cricket Australia board member, Michael Kasprówicz, who shared his perspectives for the duration of the course. It is hoped that such programmes may enlighten the next generation of sporting administrators in both countries so that they too may strive for reform in sport. Hopefully by this stage, India will be on its way to being a