“Is it realistic to expect directors – non employees working part time – to make meaningful contributions to something as complex as strategy? Are most boards even capable of such a contribution? If not, do the benefits justify the effort needed to bring them up to speed?” (Kerr & Werther, 2008, p. 113). If, as the authors posit in relation to the corporate sector, there are perceived problems with engaging the board in strategy, where typically non executive directors are paid for their services, it is not surprising that this dynamic is further complicated in the non-profit sport sector where board members are typically volunteers. This issue is significant for sport where many organizations are in transition from a traditionally volunteer driven model to a hybrid between paid staff and volunteers (Shilbury, 2001). The work of the board in the non-profit sporting context has received little attention from academics, however, yet is widely recognised as a central “management” issue for sport organisations (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2005; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). In particular, the strategic role of the board, while recognised as a key function, is a fuzzy concept for many. Van der Walt and Ingley (2003) found that “ … little empirical or theoretical research has been conducted on the board’s role in strategic decisions and strategic outcomes” (p. 17). Stiles (2001) agreed, stating that, “Unpacking this concept is … rare in the empirical literature” (p. 629).

In order to learn more about this aspect of sport management, this study investigated what meaning board members of National Sport Organisations (NSOs) attach to the concept of “strategic capability”. The research also investigated what factors both constrain and enable the strategic capability of NSO boards. Three NSOs in New Zealand were chosen for this research: New Zealand Football (soccer), Squash New Zealand, and Tennis New Zealand. Using an interpretive research paradigm, and qualitative research methods, four types of data collection methods were employed for this study. They were: participant observation, document analysis, interviews (12) and focus groups (2). Data was recorded and analysed using video recorders, and journal and memo writing techniques to derive themes which were integrated with relevant literature.

Findings from the interviews and focus group phase of the research established four key elements in relation to what the board members considered to be a strategically able board. These were: mix of skills; “big picture”/long-term thinking; being focused on the work at hand; and ability to determine the strategic focus and able to facilitate the execution. In addition, factors considered to constrain and enable strategic capability drawn from interviews, focus groups, participant observation and document analysis were: the need for a clearly articulated frame of reference (or strategy); sharing of the leadership role between CEO and board in the development of this strategy; and an advancement in the quality of the relationship between national and regional entities. These findings will be presented in relation to current literature in order to advance to our understanding of the board’s strategic role.