Opening the “Black Box”: Exploring Board Decision-Making Processes in Non-Profit Sport Organizations

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Introduction and Literature Review

Boards are recognized as an important group for the effective governance of non-profit sport organizations (NPSOs; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). A central facet among Boards is their ability to make decisions, which are important for the effectiveness of NPSOs and achievement of strategic outcomes (e.g., good governance; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007).

Despite this importance, sport governance research has not uncovered the processes undertaken by Boards to make decisions. Previous research has examined a variety of topics among Board such as roles and responsibilities (e.g., Yeh et al., 2011), commitment (e.g., Cuskelly et al., 2002), leadership (e.g., O’Boyle et al., 2019), conflict (e.g., Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015), strategic capability (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012), and effectiveness (e.g., Hoye & Doherty, 2011). However, fewer studies have gained access to the boardroom to examine Board processes in action (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010, 2012; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011) compared to post-hoc examinations using questionnaires (e.g., Fahrner & Harris, 2020; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). This gap in sport governance research has left academics and practitioners without appropriate knowledge on the decision-making processes undertaken by Boards.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore Board decision-making processes in NPSOs. The following two research questions were proposed: 1) How do Boards make decisions in NPSOs?; and 2) How do internal and external factors impact Board decision-making processes in NPSOs? Decision-making processes are examined using the strategic decision-making theory (cf. Hickson et al., 2018).

Methods

The study is currently underway and will be completed by April 2021. A multiple case study design (Yin, 2018) is being used featuring six NPSOs; two national-level NPSOs and four provincial-level NPSOs. Data are being collected through non-participant observations during six Board meetings per case, three semi-structured interviews per case (i.e., Board Chair, one individual Board member, and executive director), and documents (e.g., Board meeting agendas, Board meeting minutes, strategic plans). A total of 36 observations and 18 interviews will be conducted by the end of the study. Data is being thematically analyzed (Braun et al., 2016).

Anticipated Results and Conclusions

Based on the initial interpretation of the data, results indicate Boards make strategic decisions through discussions and negotiations involving multiple members. A wide variety of internal (i.e., documents, personal expertise and skills) and external (i.e., external stakeholders, consultants) sources of information are used. Delays in decision-making processes are attributed to technology and/or waiting for information to become available. Internal factors impacting the decision-making processes include the leadership style and passion of the Chair, engagement of members, relationship between the Chair and executive director, and Board size, while COVID-19 and relationships with external stakeholders represent external factors. Findings will be discussed according to previous Board research in sport management (e.g., Hoye, 2006; O'Boyle et al., 2019; Schoenberg et al., 2020; Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020) and the broader management field (e.g., Bradshaw & Toubiana, 2014; Brown, 2014). This study contributes to Board research by directly observing decision-making processes and their factors in action (cf. Cornforth, 2014).