Using A Configurational Research Approach to Assess the Structure of National Governing Bodies of Sport

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The evolution of sport national governing bodies (NGBs) “from traditional to professional structures is a recurrent feature of the evolution of national sport systems” (Madella, Bayle, & Tome, 2005, p. 207). With NGBs globally progressing towards more business like operations and structures (Madella et al., 2005; Stewart, 2007), the modern NGB is represented by diverse functional units operating within complex environments, networks and systems. Bayle and Robinson (2007) presented the organizational structure of modern NGBs as functional with varied differentiation across predominantly three areas: administration, sporting and finally, communication and development which includes promotion and marketing.

It is the complexity presented by these differentiated functions which has generated a need to identify and understand structural frameworks of NGBs and how they are configured to best achieve performance. Structural and operational differences between individual NBG sub units require integration across the NGB to ensure it operates as a functional organization. The relationship between differentiation and integration is often central to organizational tension and crisis (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), which can develop into strategic issues that impact organizational performance. As such, adequate integration has considerable positive implications for sport organizations, their functioning and the achievement of outcomes. Alternatively, tensions or conflicts arising from a lack of integration can potentially hinder organizational performance. Understanding how separate and potentially conflicting functions act and interact to produce performance (Bayle & Robinson, 2007), as well as where issues or tensions may emerge in the interplay of sub units, therefore represent important and underdeveloped research outcomes for sport organizations.

Applying a configurational research approach permits a theoretical framework under which complex organizations such as NGBs and their functioning can be addressed. Using this approach, the organization is viewed as a system of parts, with components and interrelations between components considered. The approach corresponds with a “specific epistemological and methodological approach which seeks to articulate the relationships between internal variables of the organization and those within the environment” (Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1178). When investigating structure using a configurational approach, structural variables are defined as differentiation and integration (Dow, 1988; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). As such, the design of the organization is dependent on two attributes of structural design: the division of tasks into subgroups (differentiation) and the integration of the subgroups towards a functional organizational unit. While forms of integration and differentiation have been recognised in the body of work on sport organizational structure (Gomez, Opato, & Marti, 2008) the concepts of differentiation and integration have been little examined within sporting organizations, and therefore create areas of investigation by which the strategic nature, structure and functioning of sport organizations can be assessed.

This study investigated three such areas of NGB structure and functioning. Firstly, the research defined the characteristics of differentiation present across NGB functions or sub units. Secondly, it assessed the requisite need for integration and the mechanisms NGBs use to achieve integration. Finally, an agenda of strategic issues based on imbalances between differentiation and integration was developed. The identification and treatment of these strategic issues provides insight into future strategic and structural decisions of NGBs, and sport organizations more widely.

Research using the configurational approach is generally undertaken through case studies given the level of intra-organizational analysis involved. In the case of national sport systems, each NGB is considered a configuration of resources (Snow, Miles & Miles, 2005), which is designed and evolves to best cope with its individual environment. Data collection methods included the use of documentation, ranking tools adapted from previous studies, and in-depth interviews with CEOs, general managers, operational staff and board members. Within this approach, the variables of differentiation and integration were assessed using an adaptation of past approaches (Lawrence &
Results obtained from a pilot study of one Australian NGB provide initial insight into NGB structure and functioning. Findings discovered sources of differentiation in the levels of formal structure, goal orientations and operating environments of sub units, with the need for integration varying between sub units based on task dependence and operational requirements. Strategic issues based on the interplay of differentiation and integration were identified in prior and current operations of the NGB. These are summarised as issues with conflicting goal orientations, control and distribution of hierarchical power, interpersonal differences, lack of role clarity and cross functional job knowledge, difficulty aligning with expanded operating networks of the sport, and geographic dispositions of sub units. The organization showed examples of the use of mutual adjustment, strategic planning, standardisation of processes, information and communications technology, and efforts to better develop organizational culture as integration mechanisms to achieve functionality within the organization. When implemented, these mechanisms demonstrated positive effects on the functioning of the organization. Overall, these results suggest differentiation and integration are both present within NGBs and effective as a source for identifying and responding to strategic issues.

While representing an initial phase of discovery, the pilot showed achieved integration within NGBs had a positive impact on organizational functioning or institutional efficiency, which is one dimension of performance for all organizations. Results are presented and refinements made to the research approach will guide the next phase of case studies. This will enable the initial findings, which confirm and characterise the structural concepts of differentiation and integration, to be supported. The pilot research, coupled with future research cases, seek to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of balancing differentiation and integration to attain functional and high performing NGBs.


Lorsch, 1967). This included in-depth interviews to gain detailed qualitative insight into the research issues in order to complement prior, more positivist approaches to assessing sport organizations structures (Kikulis, Slack, Hinings & Zimmermann, 1989; Slack & Hinings, 1987: Theodoraki & Henry, 1994).


