The Professionalization and Policy Making Processes of Athletics Canada

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Canada is now spending more money on the delivery of sport than ever before. Between the periods of 2002–2009 funding to sport increased from $87 million to $171.5 million, representing a 97% increase in expenditure on sport (Sutcliffe Group, 2010). As a result of this increased investment there is a clear expectation that the focal deliverers of Canadian sport, National Sport Organizations (NSOs), should be more professional to ensure this public funding is well spent. Canada has a strong tradition in the study of Professionalization as a phenomenon both academically and as a major government policy objective. Academic research, particularly throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, supported professionalization's existence as a phenomenon within sport (Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Kikulis, Slack & Hinings 1992; Thibault, Slack & Hinings, 1991). Yet despite its identification many years ago, sport organizations are yet to be fully professionalized; evident by the fact that professionalization still remains major policy objective, and therefore concern, for the Canadian government, viz-a-viz Sport Canada.

Much is known about the multifaceted professionalization process surrounding NSOs. For example on a macro-level much is known about its effect through institutional isomorphism mechanisms (Slack & Hinings, 1992) and professionalization's ability to change organizational field logics (O'Brien and Slack, 2003; 2004). On a micro-level researchers have noted its influence organizational structure (Thibault et al., 1991) and effect on attitudes of actors (Auld & Godbey, 1998). Yet, only a handful of academics have examined the impact of professionalization on NSO policy making processes (for exceptions see Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Slack, Berrett & Mistry, 1994).

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to examine how professionalized are NSOs within this contemporary setting. More specifically, how has the professionalization process been reflected across policy making within NSOs? To achieve this, an in-depth, exploratory case study (Yin, 1994) was undertaken of one of Canada’s prominent summer NSOs, Athletics Canada (henceforth AC).

The qualitative data presented was collected conjunctively to a broader SPLISS case study examination entitled ‘Competitiveness of Nations in Elite Sport Disciplines: The Case of Athletics’ (Truyens et al., in press). Consequently, this research adopted the methodology developed and verified by the ‘SPLISS’ research consortium (De Bosscher et al., 2006; 2008; 2009; 2010). Semi-structured, in-depth, interviews were conducted with senior AC personnel with AC document analysis as supplementation. More specifically, the data presented here constitutes part of the Canadian contribution to this ongoing research with interview themes and guides extracted directly from, or in line with, the policy inventory as outlined by the SPLISS research consortium. Data went through an iterative process of coding. First, data was thematically analyzed for themes surrounding professionalization of AC policy making. Second, a process of deduction followed to the already pre-determined codes identified through Green and Houlihans’ (2005) framework and findings, whilst simultaneously allowing for any new and emerging themes from the SPLISS data around these pre-determined policy areas. Using Green and Houlihans’ (2005) framework allowed the researchers to examine the professionalization process evident within AC whilst simultaneously being able to discuss these findings in relation to those found by Green and Houlihan's (2005) AC comparative case study in 2002.

The findings of this research indicate that overall the AC has become more professionalized as a governing body, with evidence to support the notion that AC has now moved towards an executive office NSO archetype design (Kikulis, Slack & Hinings, 1992). Professionalization is evident through a number of changes across fundamental areas of ACs internal policy making, these are discussed in line with the SPLISS conceptual model. Changes are explained through key environmental shifts which have provided a greater impetus for internal professionalization in recent years. These include the overhaul of AC personnel in 2005, the creation and direction of Own the Podium and the successful bidding and hosting of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Yet despite
professionalization advances, and as a direct consequence of the internal professionalization process, AC now faces a number of new major policy concerns with broader underlying tensions now surfacing between key stakeholders, in particular surrounding the issue of centralization and control of athlete development.

This research provides an in-depth case study to explore one of the most central and continuing phenomena influencing the field of sport (Slack & Kikulis, 1989). To date we have implicitly assumed that professionalization of sport organizations is an inherently good change. However, questions remain, including what are the root causes of professionalization? What are the consequences of professionalization in this new era sport? How are new actors within the field influencing the professionalization process?

The implications of this research are as follows. Theoretically it brings to light the impact and consequences professionalization of which its story as a phenomenon within sports organizations still remains incomplete. Whilst, practically indicating the importance for NSOs to consider more holistically the impact of professionalized practices on policy making processes. In doing so, this research endeavors to shift our attention towards a continuing, endemic and enduring concern for sports managers and practitioners alike that remains critical in this contemporary sporting arena.