In Investigting Institutional Complexity: Logics and Responses in Action

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National Sport Federations (NFs) are becoming increasingly complex organizations to manage as they interact and respond to a widening array and stakeholder expectations in order to maintain relevancy and solvency (Washington & Patterson, 2011; Winand, Rihoux, Robinson, & Zintz, 2012). Pressures are placed on NFs’ to achieve sometimes contradictory requirements of private, public and non-profit stakeholders, from national, state, and local levels (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Phillips & Newland, 2013; Winand et al., 2012). In many instances, this involves delivering a ‘dual mission’, namely to develop and demonstrate success in both elite and participation sport. This situation can lead to organizational decision making that creates internal and external conflict in resource allocation decision making (De Bosscher & Van Bottenburg, 2010; Hanstad & Skille, 2010; Sotiriadou, Quick, & Shilbury, 2006). As NFs are typically highly dependent on public funding, they are particularly vulnerable to the associated government’s policies, priorities and funding requirements. This has created turbulence and uncertainty and an NF’s very existence can be threatened if their results do not meet funding linked key performance indicators or if their sport is classified outside the funding framework (Green, 2005, 2007; Green & Collins, 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2008, 2010; Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013). How do NFs cope with this increasingly complex operating environment? This research explores questions of NFs’ social legitimacy and resource access, within a context of organizational survival (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Washington & Patterson, 2011). The aim of this research is to better understand the nuances of institutional complexity and the associated organizational responses, through an in-depth examination of one NF, Triathlon Australia.

Theoretical framework
This paper examines the organizational behavior of Triathlon Australia using an institutional theory lens by analyzing institutional logics and complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Institutional logics are sets of principles that stipulate “how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed” (Thornton, 2004, p. 70). There is growing interest in how organizations respond to institutional complexity, and more specifically, “incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics” (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 317). Organisations experience different degrees of complexity, therefore, they will also vary their responses to conflicting prescriptions prioritizing certain interests at the expense of others (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). To date, sport management research has focused mainly on sport clubs, deinstitutionalization and legitimacy processes and examined the presence, change dynamics and effects of dominant logics. For example, O’Brien and Slack (2003, 2004) explained the change at the individual, organizational and field levels in their research on rugby union’s move from amateurism to professionalism. Cousens and Slack (2005) noted a shift from the dominant sport logic (league perspective) to a business logic (corporate perspective) in the North America professional organizations. In a study of the Australian and Finnish sport systems, Green and Collins (2008) observed elite and participation policies as two distinct institutional pressures; and asserted that political agendas drive institutional pressures and are responsible for the establishment of a dominant agenda. Phillips and Newland’s (2013) research on Triathlon explained how event enterprises became more legitimate than NFs in terms of delivering elite and participation sport due to their commercial ethos. Furthermore, Skirstad and Chelladurai (2011) concluded that different and conflicting institutional logics – amateur, professional and commercial – can coexist within a multisport club. Building on this research, and introducing the growing body of research on institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011) this research examines how a NF responds over its lifespan to the logics arising from their particularly complex institutional field.

Methodology
A longitudinal case study (Yin, 2014) was undertaken to understand organizational pressures and responses to institutional complexity an organization’s lifespan. Triathlon Australia was selected through theoretical sampling.
leverage theory building potential (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) based on a combination of criteria including: Olympic sport; government-funded; elite and participation success; and a commercialization component. Data collection methods included: 18 interviews with executives and staff from the Australian government and Triathlon Australia; government policy documents; and Triathlon Australia annual reports, strategic plans and job descriptions; covering a period of 20 years, from 1997 to 2017. An inductive and iterated thematic data analysis was undertaken (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Whenever possible, findings were supported by multiple methods to mitigate retrospective accounts (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010).

Discussion and Implications
Four main themes emerged: (1) External Complexity, (2) Interstitial Complexity, (3) Internal Complexity and (4) Multi-Level Complexity. External Complexity was evidenced through commercial, social and governmental logics. Interstitial Complexity comprised aspects of empathizing, alignment, formalization, collaboration, centralization, specialization, and persuasion. Internal Complexity encompassed compartmentalization, integration, differentiation and diversity. Multi-Level Complexity included life enrichment, common connection, commitment, emotional monetizing, skill over-focus and entitlement. Triathlon Australia has responded to an increasing operational environment complexity over its 20-year lifespan by centralizing (Besharov & Smith, 2014) and blending logics (Ramus, Vaccaro, & Brusoni, 2017) to address stakeholder and agenda requirements. Environmental turbulence – periods of insolvency, government intervention and inclusion into the Olympic program, forced radical changes to: strategy shifting; board composition and background; federation structure and processes; and commercialization of participation sport. Vertical and horizontal integration was achieved through drawing on and exploiting the ‘passion’ that bound together and motivated state associations and individual members. This case demonstrates that appropriate responses can suppress complexity and leverage some of its aspects for organizational benefit (Toubiana, Oliver, & Bradshaw, 2017). This research makes a contribution to the literature by introducing a third logic (i.e. governmental), adding new organizational responses and including the role of agendas and internal complexity.