Assisting member organizations to achieve certification standards is becoming an activity of interest to many governing bodies who seek to develop capacity within their sport (Van Hoecke, Schoukens & De Knop, 2013). Certification programs aim to both promote and validate organizational development while standardizing programs, policies, and procedures. Sport-based certification is growing as an international phenomenon (e.g., Nichols & Taylor, 2015; Perck, Van Hoecke, Westerbeek, and Breesch, 2016; Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne & Richardson, 2010). A growing number of governing bodies across Canada are implementing certification through multi-sport or single sport certification programs, either designed and delivered through internal programs or by external agencies.

Sport organizations face increasing pressure to professionalize and standardize their program delivery and operations (Van Hoecke et al., 2013). Certification schemes represent one means of quality assurance, yet engaging in certification requires extensive investment of time, resources, and energy which may already be limited in amateur sport organizations (Cope, Haq, Garside, Pannell & Gooders, 2014). There are anecdotal claims of efficacy in implementation, but there has been minimal empirical investigation of certification within the academic literature. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to explore the factors influencing the development and adoption of club-based certification programs in Canadian soccer.

The study is framed by key tenets of institutional theory, recognizing that organizations are highly influenced by their environments and affected by institutional pressures (Washington & Patterson, 2011). In particular, Scott’s (1995) three pillars of institutions (regulative systems, normative systems, and cultural-cognitive systems) are used to understand how an organization navigates the conformance to standards and prescriptive norms, while striving for meaning within the organizational field. As such, we ask the following research questions: (1) What pressures influenced the development and adoption of the Club Licensing certification program within national, provincial, and community soccer organizations in Canada? and (2) How is certification perceived to address the contemporary pressures facing national, provincial, and community soccer organizations in Canada?

This study involves a qualitative investigation of the development and initial stages of implementation of the Canada Soccer Club Licensing Program, a nationally and provincially delivered, four-level program designed to guide community clubs toward best principles for organizational development (Canada Soccer, 2018). Phone interviews are currently underway with representatives from four provincial and territorial soccer associations (PTSOs), four community soccer organizations from each of the interviewed PTSOs, and three staff from the national soccer organization. The interviews (N=23) will be analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana’s (2014) first and second cycle qualitative coding. By examining a multi-level system in a single sport (soccer), the study offers a rich understanding of the factors influencing certification, contextualized within the particular governance and policy environment of Canadian sport delivery systems (Thibault & Harvey, 2015).

The study offers timely insight into the development and current delivery of the Club Licensing Program with implications for the role of certification programs more broadly. The presentation will include considerations for sport organizations developing their own certification programs and/or adopting existing certification schemes.