

---

## FEDERAL VERSUS UNITARY MODELS OF SPORT GOVERNANCE

Abstract ID: EASM-2015-74 - (580)

All authors:

Ian O'Boyle (corresp), David Shilbury

Date submitted: 2015-03-19

Date accepted: 2015-04-15

Type: Scientific

Keywords: Governance; Federal Model; Unitary Model

Category: 3: Governance of Sport(s) and Sport Organisations

Synopsis:

This abstract compares the federal versus unitary models of sport governance in non-profit sporting networks.

Abstract:

FEDERAL VERSUS UNITARY MODELS OF SPORT GOVERNANCE

The federal model of sport governance has long been associated with the way in which sport is organised within and a number of countries throughout the world including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and a host of other European nations. This model sees wholly autonomous and separate legal entities comprising a sporting network made up of a national sport organisation (NSO) and various state or regional level organisations. The sharing of power and responsibility in federally based sporting networks has often resulted in tension between federated bodies that has presented itself in the form of distrust, fragmentation and occasionally even legal action due to high levels of conflict between affiliated entities in a federal network.

Furthermore, the federal model of sport governance arguably creation a situation where there is large duplication of resources across sporting networks (Shilbury, Ferkins, & Smythe, 2013).

The only viable alternative that has come to fruition is the unitary model of sport governance. This model is not as common as its federal counterpart but theoretically could address a number of the deficiencies synonymous within the federal structure. A unitary governance model requires that the board of a NSO holds the balance of power in relation to decision making, policy, allocation of resources, direction setting, and ultimately how the sport manages participation and high performance across the network. State/regional bodies are replaced with 'offices' or 'branches' of the NSO and all staff report directly to that NSO through traditional corporate managerial reporting practices. Recent scholarly works have been exploring a variety of issues within the sport governance domain, including those that relate directly to the nature of the federal sport governance model (Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald,

2009; O'Boyle & Bradbury, 2013; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2014). Research related to the utility of unitary governance models appears to be less prevalent.

## METHOD

The methodological framework adopted for this research was a single qualitative exploratory case study involving the sport of touch football in Australia. The touch football network operates under a model where some states are unified and others remain federated. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 board members and senior managers from each state within this network. The richness of the data garnered through these in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed for a detailed exploration of the benefits and challenges of adopting a unitary model in contrast to the traditional federal model in a contemporary sporting network.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic structure that emerged revolved around: the challenges that the network was facing under the previous entirely federated structure and the motivations to seek change for a unitary model; the unique benefits unified states experienced in comparison to those states that remained federated; and how trust and leadership were deemed to be integral elements key to the successful adoption and ongoing implementation of the unitary structure. A further recurring theme throughout the data was the perceived ambiguity of the role that the advisory councils (boards) had within this newly adopted unitary system.

There was a stark contrast in the reported levels of trust, conflict, and collaboration between states operating in the federal model and those in the unitary system. Furthermore, the unitary model appeared to offer a number of other unique benefits in the network involving the sharing of knowledge and resources across all unified bodies, the ability to create shared understandings by working within common strategic direction, and a more stable financial position for those states that comprise the unitary network. It was evident however, that achieving buy-in and convincing state boards to relinquish power, financial assets, and authority was a significant challenge when attempting to restructure the governance system within a sport towards a unitary model.

## CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of a unitary governance model offered a number of unique benefits to those states who opted to enter this system. However, it must be acknowledged that the states that entered this model were the 'smaller' states where touch football is not a dominant sport. Whether or not the states who remain outside of the structure would have received similar benefits in comparison to the federal model remains unknown. Furthermore, this study explored federal versus unitary models of governance in a single non-profit sporting network and results may not be transferable to other sports in Australia or abroad. However, the results of this work do provide an initial step towards better understanding the intricacies of the unitary governance model as applied within a non-profit sporting context.

References:

- Ferkins, L., Shilbury, D., & McDonald, G. (2009). Board involvement in strategy: Advancing the governance of sport organizations. *Journal of Sport Management*, 23, 245-277.
- Hoye, R., & Doherty, A. (2011). Nonprofit sport board performance: A review and directions for future research. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25, 272-285.
- O'Boyle, I., & Bradbury, T. (Eds.) (2013). *Sport governance: International case studies*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Shilbury, D., & Ferkins, L. (2014). Exploring the utility of collaborative governance in a National Sport Organization. *Journal of Sport Management*, Advance online publication DOI: 110.1123/jsm.204-0139.
- Shilbury, D., Ferkins, L., & Smythe, L. (2013). Sport governance encounters: Insights from lived experiences. *Sport Management Review*, 16, 349-363.