

How to Professionalise in Non-Olympic National Sport Federations

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Aim

National sport federations (NSFs) have been experiencing greater organisational requirements and challenges for many years (e.g., the need for strategic planning, quality management, and service orientation), which they meet through professionalisation of strategies, structures, processes, and management staff (Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015). However, not all NSFs succeed in professionalising their organisation. Non-Olympic NSFs have more challenging preconditions to professionalise than Olympic NSFs (e.g., less funding, less sponsoring revenues, less pressure from external stakeholders). Existing literature analysing processes of professionalisation focused on Olympic NSFs (e.g., O'Brien & Slack, 2003). However, due to different preconditions, these results are not applicable to non-Olympic NSFs. Therefore, this study pursues the question of how can non-Olympic NSFs manage to professionalise adequately despite the lack of Olympic status. For this purpose, the causes of professionalisation are analysed in two Swiss non-Olympic NSFs, which have undergone a process of professionalisation in the last ten years.

The results of this current study elucidate key factors for successful professionalisation in non-Olympic NSFs and thus contribute to the concept of professionalisation, which to date does not differentiate between Olympic and non-Olympic NSFs. Furthermore, the results are relevant to the organisational development of non-Olympic NSFs as well as to umbrella federations of NSFs that aim to support their NSFs in the process of professionalisation.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The analysis of causes of professionalisation is based on the multi-level framework of Nagel et al. (2015), which differentiates between the levels of the external environment (e.g., expectations of government and sport policy), the internal environment (e.g., expectations of clubs), and the sport federation (e.g., size, financial resources, individual key actors). Olympic status is often associated with better financial conditions because these NSFs are likely to receive more government funding (Chelladurai & Haggerty, 1991), and have the ability to sell media rights. Non-Olympic NSFs have to compensate for this disadvantage, as NSFs are dependent on financial resources to professionalise (Nagel et al., 2015). This compensation may occur through sponsorship or donation. Furthermore, Nagel et al. (2015) suggest other causes that can initiate professionalisation (e.g., individual key actors, pressures from the government). However, previous research compiles evidence for different governmental support only (Chelladurai & Haggerty, 1991). Previous studies have also focused on Olympic NSFs (e.g., O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Robinson & Minikin, 2011; Shilbury & Moore, 2006). To date, it remains unclear as to how non-Olympic NSFs can manage to successfully professionalise despite their challenge of the lack of Olympic status.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The data was obtained from two qualitative case studies of Swiss non-Olympic NSFs. One of these represents smaller NSFs (Swiss Orienteering) and the other larger NSFs (Swiss Floorball Federation), which allows the study to also consider the size of the NSF. The causes

of professionalisation of the two NSFs were analysed using documents and three qualitative interviews per organisation. In addition to Nagel et al.'s framework, this study distinguishes between causes as initial triggers (i.e., causes in a narrow sense) and causes as preconditions for professionalisation (i.e., factors that promote or hinder professionalisation when they are present or absent).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary results demonstrate the relevance of internal key actors and external stakeholders (e.g., sponsors) to strategic and structural professionalisation. Furthermore, 'healthy' financial resources appear to be a prerequisite for conducting change, as financial resources can promote professionalisation if they are present or hinder when they are absent. In the analysed cases, the acquisition of a new sponsor promoted the professionalisation of non-Olympic NSFs, both in terms of financial resources and pressure towards professionalisation. Further analyses of the case studies and the role of the umbrella federation Swiss Olympic are expected to provide deeper insight into the successful professionalisation of non-Olympic NSFs.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings confirm that successful non-Olympic NSFs tend to compensate for the more challenging preconditions of smaller financial resources and less pressure from external stakeholders (e.g., media). Professionalisation is possible in non-Olympic NSFs when the required financial resources can be acquired externally. Even if financial resources are present, pressure towards professionalisation has to be generated either by individual key actors, the umbrella federation, or external stakeholders (e.g., sponsors).

References

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