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Board composition in federated structures: a case study of the Gaelic Athletic Association

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the issue of board composition within non-profit sport organizations operating in a federated governance structure. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is used as a case study to illustrate the challenges and complexities of comprising a board that has the requisite skill set to carry out its function in a rapidly changing operating environment. Interviews (n = 10) supported by document analysis were conducted with senior ranking officials within the Association in order to analyse the integral factors related to board composition within the GAA. Findings show that the Association heavily relies on the delegate system of board composition, potentially limiting its ability to appoint a board that has a commercially orientated focus reflecting the professionalization and commercialization of the contemporary sport industry. Practical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed along with suggestions for future research.

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Introduction
Federated governance and the GAA

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is Ireland’s largest sporting, cultural and community organization. The Association was founded in 1884 and has grown to have over one million members representing 1650 clubs. Since its foundation, the Association has grown to become a major influence in Irish sporting and cultural life with considerable reach into communities throughout Ireland and among the Irish diaspora. The organization operates almost on an entirely voluntary and amateur basis, and while the GAA has a small number of professional staff, its members and players participate in the Association’s activities without financial reward. All federated bodies within the organization (counties, provinces) operate on a wholly non-profit basis despite the GAA itself generating significant amounts of revenue on an annual basis (Hassan, 2010). As of 2015, the organization had revenues in excess of €55 million, and was involved in a number of commercial activities including the sale of broadcasting and media rights, along with ticketing, merchandise and other business activities.
This federated or network model of governance is common within non-profit sport and is seen in other nations such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK and a host of other European states. Hence, an examination of issues relating to federated governance structures within the GAA is not only relevant for the organization itself but also retains significance for other organizations operating within federated structures of governance throughout Europe. The emergence of a more professional and commercial environment within the sport industry as noted by O’Boyle (2015) and Taylor and O’Sullivan (2009) also makes the GAA an ideal case study organization as these issues are at the core of the need for board restructuring that reflects the current context of the wider sporting environment faced by this organization and many others within the industry.

Shilbury, Ferkins, and Smythe (2013) describe this form of governance as “a network of organisations which seek to allocate resources, and exercise control and co-ordination” (p. 2). The GAA for example not only governs within a network of provincial unions, but also at county and club level within the sport in Ireland. Each entity within this model discharges its duty under its own authority; however, as Rosenau (1995) and Shilbury et al. (2013) explain, within federated structures there exists interplay between each entity in relation to the allocation and control of valuable resources.

Entrenched within this type of federated governance model is the delegate representative system of board composition. This is perhaps evident more so within the GAA than any other national sport organization in Irish, and indeed international sport. At the lowest form of governance within the sport, clubs elect a delegate to represent their interests at the county (or district) level. In turn, each county sends a delegate to provincial union meetings and each provincial union is then represented by a number of delegates at the national level of the sport. This bottom-up approach is traditionally the manner in which many non-profit sport organizations operating within federated structures have been governed and may remain a suitable model in less commercial and professionalized sporting environments. However, many non-profit sport organizations, such as the GAA, have failed to update their governance practices, most notably in regard to board composition, to reflect the changes that have taken place in the external environment concerning the professionalization and commercialization of sport. This is concerning as the role of the board has significant influence on the governance, direction and performance outcomes of a sport organization (Sherry & Shilbury, 2009). Furthermore, board skill sets have been highlighted as imperative to ensure organizations are performing at the required level and this has been the focus of a number of reports from industry based bodies (Australian Sports Commission, 2005, 2012, 2013; SPARC, 2006; UK Sport, 2004). The current board composition of the GAA may not lend itself to ensure that the necessary skill sets are present within the board to meet the demands of this commercially driven and professional context that the organization now finds itself in.

Although the body of research relating to governance and boards in general within non-profit sport organizations is growing (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2005; Hoye, 2006; Hoye & Auld, 2001; Hoye & Cuskelley, 2007; Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Mason, Thibault, & Misener, 2006; O’Boyle & Bradbury, 2013; Papadimitriou, 2007; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000), few studies have directly examined the impact of this federated model of governance in relation to board composition, which has been accepted as directly influencing the overall performance of an organization.
The purpose of the current paper is to explore board composition within a federal-based system based on delegate representation and how this networked approach to governance impacts upon board composition and, ultimately, organizational performance. To explore the issues at hand, the GAA was chosen as a case study organization, which was deemed highly appropriate given the extent to which the delegate system is entrenched within the federated model of sport governance in this entity.

The following sections explore extant literature related to federal and delegate models of governance, focusing on work related to the board within non-profit sport organizations. Methods and results are also explained and directions for future research based on the findings of this study conclude the paper.

**Literature review**

The growing number of scholars affording attention to the issue of sport governance is slowly increasing our understanding of the complexities involved within various dimensions of the sport governance domain. Within this body of research, scholars have focused predominantly on issues related to the role of the board including the board’s strategic capability (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Ferkins et al., 2005; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009; Inglis, 1997; Shilbury, 2001; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Yeh, Taylor, & Hoye, 2009). However, other research has explored alternative factors such as internal board dynamics (Doherty & Carron, 2003), the composition and performance of boards (Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009), and shared leadership between boards and CEOs (Ferkins et al., 2009; Hoye, 2004, 2006; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003; Inglis, 1997). Reflecting the geographical locations of federal governance systems, the majority of these studies have been empirically derived from countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK.

**The board’s function**

Academics and some government sport agencies have attempted to develop governance guidelines in order to assist non-profit sport organizations adopt high performing boards with relevant skill sets. These agencies include the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), Sport NZ (formally Sport and Recreation New Zealand known as SPARC) and UK Sport who have realized, in the first instance, the need to define the role of the board within non-profit sport organizations before deciding on how best to comprise a potentially high performing board. The ASC (2005, 2012, 2013) describes the role of the board in terms of having a legal, strategic, financial and moral function. In addition to this, the ASC suggests the board has the responsibility of recruiting the CEO, conducting analysis of organizational and financial risks and being accountable to stakeholders through periodic reporting. In New Zealand, SPARC (2006) provides a more vague definition of the role of the board, advocating that it involves advancing and protecting “the long term interests of the organisation as a whole, which it holds in trust” (p. 19). Further extant literature within academia has generally reflected the various roles of the board in line with those that are contained within the industry reports noted above (Ferkins et al., 2009; Hoye, 2004, 2006; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003; Inglis, 1997). Reflecting the geographical locations of federal governance systems, the majority of these studies have been empirically derived from countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK.
2005; Hoye, 2006; Sherry & Shilbury, 2009; Shilbury, 2001; Yeh, Hoye, & Taylor, 2011; Yeh et al., 2009). Some studies such as Doherty and Hoye (2011) have identified the need to clearly define the role of the board and board members. This study showed that role ambiguity was the major factor impacting on board members’ perceived performance. Wright and Millelsen (2008) also added lack of communication as a determining factor. They believed that role ambiguity could be decreased through training and feedback. However, training can be challenging when board members are often volunteers and there are time/cost pressures.

Shilbury (2001) in his study of Australian state sporting organizations found that executive directors preferred board members to have a focus on strategy and long-term planning. In addition, Bradshaw, Murray, and Wolpin (1992) in their study of Canadian non-profit board structures, processes and effectiveness found that the role of the board was focused on strategic planning, and having a shared vision for the organization. They also noted that in relation to financial matters, boards were quite reactive and did not appear to take risks. Following on from Bradshaw et al. (1992), a study by Inglis (1997) of provincial Canadian sporting organizations identified four factors that were important roles of the board being “mission; planning; executive director; and community relations” (p. 174). Inglis (1997) continued this work and developed a framework for the roles and responsibilities of non-profit boards, which showed strong support for the strategic activities undertaken by boards.

A significant point worth noting in relation to Inglis (1997) research is that the perceived performance of the board varies greatly between members and employees within the sample organizations, and major discrepancies in board roles and performance are also evident between male and female members. Inglis (1997) concludes that “understanding additional explanations for varying perceptions of the roles by gender should be a focus for further research” (p. 174), yet this area would still appear to be under-developed within the current body of knowledge in this area. More recent work within the non-academic space has also afforded attention to this area highlighting the concerns and importance to address these issues (Europa, 2011).

Given the diverse governance skill sets that are required within a board composition in contemporary non-profit sport organizations, it appears that a major challenge in the board process is to ensure that its calibre is of the highest level (Sherry & Shilbury, 2009).

The board’s skill set

Non-profit sport organizations such as the GAA are central to the development of participation in sport and in fostering the sport generally within their jurisdiction. These entities not only foster increases in participation, but are also responsible for coaching development, staging events and competitions, volunteer training and other important aspects of sport management and development. Government agencies, both sporting and non-sporting, are beginning to appreciate the importance of having high performing boards in place within these entities (Hoye & Doherty, 2011). Furthermore, the negative impacts that poorly comprised boards, devoid of the relevant skill sets, can have on these organizations has been well documented by a number of agencies around the
world (e.g., Australian Sports Commission, 2005, 2012, 2013; SPARC, 2006; UK Sport, 2004). Hoye and Cuskelly (2007) have suggested that the board is a central feature of the governance system and structure that operates within these organizations. A recent review of the relationship between non-profit board and organization performance by Herman and Renz (2008, p. 403) highlighted that board effectiveness is related to organizational effectiveness. In addition, the ASC (2005) suggested that to ensure organizational success a non-profit sport organization’s board must incorporate an appropriate blend of experience, skill set and strategic vision.

The calibre of board members, in terms of their knowledge of both sport and importantly traditional business acumen, which can help to effectively govern such an organization, is clearly an important factor in facilitating board effectiveness and therefore overall organizational success (Papadimitriou, 2007; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000). This has been further highlighted by Bayle and Robinson (2007) who state “the system of governance, most notably the permanence and position of the main executives, are one of the keys to a NGB’s [National Sport Organisation] success” (p. 258). Supporting Bayle and Robinson’s (2007) assertion, Herman and Renz (2008) further noted that research has demonstrated that board performance is directly related to organizational performance.

Although it is widely claimed throughout various studies in the published literature (e.g., Bayle & Robinson, 2007; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000) that board calibre and performance is related to organizational performance, it is acknowledged that there are only a limited number of empirical studies that have been conducted to confirm this hypothesis. Hoye and Auld’s (2001) research applied a specific board performance scale, the Self-Assessment for Non-Profit Boards Scale (SANGBS), which had previously been developed by Slesinger (1991). In their research, by applying the SANGBS scale, they were able to empirically measure board performance and thereby distinguish between ineffective and effective boards. This scale has also been used in later studies by Hoye and Cuskelly (2003, 2004) and Hoye (2004, 2006).

Other studies have also analysed issues that are directly associated with the performance of the board in non-profit sport organizations. These studies largely focus on the internal workings of the board in relation to the extent of authority between the board and the CEO (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003), the relationship between staff members and chairpersons of the board (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003), the relationship between board chairpersons, board members and staff (Hoye, 2004, 2006) and issues of board cohesion (Doherty & Carron, 2003). In exploring the composition (calibre) of the board and the recruitment of board members, Hoye and Cuskelly (2004) state:

Board members who do not possess appropriate skills, who are unsure of their role due to the absence of individual role descriptions, or have not been adequately orientated to an organisation, may find it difficult to contribute optimally to the board and thereby impact negatively on board [and organisational] performance. (p. 95)

As noted above, there is some evidence to suggest that board performance is directly related to organizational performance and in addition to this, Hoye and Doherty (2011) argue that “expectations of board performance are tied to how well a board undertakes its role” (p. 274). The challenge remains, however, how exactly can a non-profit sport organization ensure that the board has the appropriate skill set to carry out their roles effectively?
Board election and appointment

The election/appointment process of board members has become an increasingly important issue within contemporary sport governance. There are essentially three models that have been employed by these organizations in the past and that continue to have relevance today. The traditional delegate model, as discussed at the outset of this paper, sees representatives from particular regions/clubs/stakeholder groups being elected to the board; the hybrid model sees the adoption of a limited number of appointed independent board members to sit alongside elected members from the delegate model; and the independent board (which few organizations have been able to implement) generally consists of a board that is wholly appointed based on the possession of a particular skill set, which is in line with organizational requirements (Shilbury et al., 2013; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009).

The traditional delegate model has been heavily criticized in the past due to cases of perceived favouritism and a board not acting in the best interest of the sport body as a whole (Shilbury et al., 2013). A further criticism has been that the skill set of an elected board within the delegate model can vary from year to year depending on who has been chosen to lead the sport organization at the board level, potentially jeopardizing the overall performance of the entity. There is no guarantee within this system that individuals with the appropriate skill set will be elected and therefore the delegate system may put an organization at risk of having a board that does not possess the necessary competencies to fulfil its various governance functions. In addition, these individuals commonly serve terms of up to three years or longer within the entity and have the possibility of being re-elected for consecutive terms (O’Boyle & Bradbury, 2013).

The independent model consists of a board that does not contain representatives who have current direct involvement in other federated bodies (regional, club, etc.) within the sport, and thus do not represent a specific alliance, such as those from affiliated regional associations. The logic behind an independent board is that it will represent the best interests of the sport itself and not the concerns of an affiliated association, removing the issues of parochialism that have been a criticism of some boards in the past.

A major challenge to the implementation of the independent board is that some organizations can be wary of a backlash from current board members when an independent board structure is suggested over the delegate system. Ferkins and Shilbury (2012) suggest that a hybrid model of sport governance be initially introduced followed, over time, by the adoption of a completely independent board structure. The hybrid model is essentially a mix of the delegate system and the independent board structure whereby up to half the members are appointed external independents and half are elected from the regional affiliates (delegates). Ferkins and Shilbury (2012) suggest “board composition of this nature is considered to be ‘hybrid’ which allows for the democratic ideals of an election process to remain, supplemented by individuals chosen for their professional expertise, as well as ‘outsider’ perspectives” (p. 72). The central concept behind the hybrid model is that member affiliated representatives and non-member directors sit on the board with the intention of achieving more independent and “best interest” sport decisions.

As suggested, parochialism has been identified as a major issue that impacts the performance of many non-profit sport boards. The selection of independent board members may help to overcome this challenge within sport governance. Dalton, Daily,
Johnson, and Ellstrand (1999) suggest that if the board is composed of individuals who are current employees, or even individuals who have a vested interest within the organization, then the CEO/management’s performance is less likely to be monitored on a continual basis while an independent board is far more likely to scrutinize CEO/management performance at an adequate level. Another potential benefit from selecting board members from the external environment is that they may bring an understanding and “voice” to stakeholders of the organization who may not have been previously heard (Yeh & Taylor, 2008). Furthermore, the major benefit of the adoption of an independent board is that it can be ensured that appropriate knowledge and expertise is present within the board in order to deliver on strategic imperatives, a situation that cannot always be guaranteed with the delegate and to a lesser extent the hybrid model.

There appears to be a clear consensus that board independence is positively correlated to board effectiveness and organizational performance (Dalton et al., 1999). According to Jensen (1993) a completely independent board may be an unrealistic ideal, as the CEO and senior managers are routinely required to sit on the board due to their intimate knowledge of the organization, and their inclusion can aid the board in the decision-making process. Aside from this sometimes necessary exception, the emerging trend appears to be that non-profit sport organizations are attempting to implement an independent professional board of suitable external directors (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009). Although there has been little research conducted analysing the relationship between board independence and organizational performance in the sport sector, within the traditional business environment, it has been proven to be effective in some areas of organizational performance. For instance, Dalton et al. (1999) and Zahra and Pearce (1989) found there to be a positive relationship between board independence and financial performance in particular.

Method

It was clear that in order to obtain the necessary data relating to board composition within a federated model that a case study methodology would be the most appropriate manner of exploring themes pertinent to the key issues underpinning this work. Edwards and Skinner (2009) claim the case study method lends itself well to qualitative research in sport management and argue for greater adoption of this method within the domain. The use of quantitative methods was considered inappropriate in order to conduct an in depth analysis of an organization and ascertain the richness of information considered necessary. This research required an insightful and detailed description of characteristics associated with board composition within the GAA and research outcomes that were largely inductively determined. It is for this reason that a qualitative methodology was chosen for this research study, which typically involved consideration of subject matter which is by no means easy to quantify.

Data collection

The methods used to collect data consisted of document review and analysis supported by interviews with key stakeholders of the Association. The Director General of the GAA (CEO) was asked to provide relevant documentation to support analysis of the overarching themes being examined at interview in relation to board composition and the federated
governance model. Such documentation included, but was not limited to, strategic plans, annual reports, mission statements, vision statements, values statements, bylaws, organizational structure description, organizational budgets, personnel policies and procedures, information on fundraising and sponsorship initiatives, and organizational history description. This documentation was then scrutinized by the researchers and triangulated with the results of the interview stage to ensure that the findings of the data gathering process were considered valid.

Purposive sampling (n = 10) was used to select relevant interview participants who could provide detailed commentary on the governance structures within the GAA. In-depth interviews were then conducted with the selected participants with each interview lasting between 1 h to 1.5 h in duration. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with a selection of participants following initial transcription and analysis in order to clarify certain information or to return to particular emergent themes for additional information. All participants gave their consent to take part in the study and to have their anonymous views published as part of this paper. Interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate data gathering method due to the nature of the information being sought and the ability of the interviewer to provide a relaxed setting (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The Director General and President of the GAA were interviewed in the first instance followed by a number of other senior management figures and other employees/volunteers involved with the Association. It became apparent that a sufficient number of interviews had been conducted when data saturation was reached during each phase of the data collection process. All interviews were conducted over a period of six months (January 2011 to June 2011) allowing time for each interview to be transcribed and analysed. The time between interviews also allowed for the researchers to examine emergent themes and prepare a line of questioning for subsequent interviews.

Triangulation of data to ensure validity

The challenge for the researchers working on this study was to ensure accuracy both in fact and meaning from the work undertaken. To achieve this goal the researchers deployed a qualitative approach method in a rigorously and sustained manner, which relays results that are both accurate and illuminating. Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) point out that “only when both criteria are met does research attain the rigor and insight that it aspires to attain” (p. 56). Also, in order to further ensure the validity of the results, the researchers sent all participants the thematic structure that emerged from data collection and analysis and asked each participant to confirm that it accurately represented their opinions, which they were happy to do so.

By combining document review data with data collected during interview, the validity of the findings was further strengthened, and any inconsistencies in responses which required additional inquiry were revealed. Attempts were made by the researchers to gain an understanding of issues relating to governance practices present in documentation such as the mission statement, vision statement, strategic plans, annual reports and other relevant written documentation published by the GAA and alluded to previously. In addition, the methods and internal formal norms of operations geared towards governing practices were examined. Written materials or budget entries, which suggested the development of specific areas of governance or policy shifts towards a change in practice, were
also sought out during this phase. Interviews were used to clarify and investigate various issues raised in document review along with other issues related to governing practices within the Association. All written notes, whilst anonymized and securely stored, have been retained on file.

Findings

Delegate representation

The GAA is unique in that the board of the organization (often referred to as the management committee) acts alongside a National Congress and Central Council that make up a complicated governance structure rarely seen in other non-profit sport organizations. Epitomizing delegate representation and the federated nature of the organization, the GAA’s Central Council is a body composed of 40 elected delegates from each county unit (in Ireland and overseas) and meet approximately six times per year. “Between Annual Congresses, responsibility for the on-going operation and development of the GAA is vested in the Central Council” (Quinn, 2002, p. 243). The composition of such a large group constitutes an outdated approach to corporate governance in sport where inefficiency, communication issues and accountability in the decision-making process can be major problems facing decision-making bodies made up of such a large membership (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009). Furthermore, board calibre – as described previously – must be questioned within this body as although they are responsible for major strategic and at times commercial decisions relating to on-going development within the Association, this federated structure based on delegate representation results in no guarantee that individuals within the Central Council have the appropriate knowledge or expertise to govern the Association effectively (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009).

One participant suggests that “one of the major problems with the current governance structure within the GAA is that often decision-making cannot be done easily as it must be filtered through various committees and levels within the Association”. In addition, another participant claimed poor communication due to an overly complex federated structure and board composition leads to:

a lack of a joined up message within the Association because of its size where decisions and strategic direction set out at various levels of governance are occasionally inadequately relayed and misunderstood by elements and sections of the Association.

Below the Central Council is the GAA’s management committee (board), currently consisting of 15 people who have a mandate from Central Council to manage the day-to-day operations of the GAA. In the GAA, the management committee essentially holds the same responsibilities as “the board” within other non-profit sport organizations and is made up of 13 delegate representatives from GAA membership with just two independent committee members. In terms of best practice in modern sport governance, it is becoming widely accepted that boards in sport organizations such as the GAA should consist of largely independent members (Crawford & Carter, 2011; Hood, 1995) who have the business acumen necessary to develop the entity to its full potential, and do not represent any specific facet of the organization. Fama and Jensen (1983) and Hoye and Doherty (2011) also claim that the incorporation of independent board members within oversight
committees is widely considered to be an appropriate governance mechanism designed to improve the overall capabilities of the board. When asked about board composition within the management committee, one participant suggested that the appointment of “two external [independent] members brings a level of expertise that we wouldn’t have ourselves”. They go onto claim that “all external members of the committee have brought something very valuable to the Association in the past and that the Association could avail of a greater balance of GAA and external membership within the committee”. There was a general consensus of this theme within all of the interviews conducted yet although this consensus exits; it appears that little change in the composition of the board was due to take place.

Another participant in the study highlighted the resistance to move away from the traditional delegate model suggesting that “as a result of the GAA’s ‘reach’ within Irish society, the Association can seek external advice without adding further external membership to the management committee”. This scenario would ultimately cause confusion and possible resentment amongst existing committee members who have been elected to carry out these very roles. Supporting Papadimitriou (2007) and Papadimitriou and Taylor’s (2000) research, a further participant suggests that groups such as the management committee “should have more representation of people from a traditional business background … people with business acumen must be on committees to support better policy making”.

The majority of the GAA’s management committee is made up of delegate representation from the provincial bodies within Ireland (Leinster, Munster, Connaught and Ulster), chairman of the British unit and members of Central Council. One participant suggests that “the GAA is at the whim of democracy and committees within the Association can have a range of backgrounds”. A different participant supports this synopsis claiming that:

> the traditional business background and expertise of the management committee can vary depending upon composition … some years it may be stronger than others as committee members change with different elections, it is never guaranteed that members will have the appropriate knowledge and experience required.

**Changing to a commercially orientated board**

It is clear that the federated model based on delegate representation operating within the GAA revolves around member representation as opposed to a commercially orientated board. A change of focus to a more commercially orientated board within non-profit sport organizations has been advocated by numerous industry reports (ASC, 2012, 2013) and many organizations have moved away from the traditional delegate model as a more professional and commercial environment begins to take hold within the industry. The majority of participants in this study acknowledged that the Association now faces increased pressures in relation to commercial activity and required specific skill sets within the board to be able to manage such issues. In fact, of the 10 participants, 8 believed that the GAA should be moving away from the traditional delegate model of governance to a more commercially orientated board. However, there was significant differences in emphasis to what degree member representation should be completely removed from the board structure as some participants were conscious that a wholly independent
board with a solely commercial focus may alienate the masses of GAA membership who take part at grassroots levels within the sport:

I think we need to move away from representatives of counties and provincial unions dominating the management committee structure. These people know the sport well but it is never guaranteed that they will have the skills needed to negotiate broadcasting rights or deal with other commercial activities faced by the management committee in the modern GAA.

Although the majority of participants favoured a change in board composition to reflect a more commercially oriented board, they also suggested that change was unlikely to take place in the immediate future due to the GAA’s “bottom-up” approach to governance and how the organization has developed over the years. This theme has also been reflected in the work of Taylor and O’Sullivan (2009) who found that respondents from a study in the UK also suggested that removing member representation from boards at national level is a major challenge due to the uniqueness of national sport organizations and their evolution. Taylor and O’Sullivan’s (2009) study goes on to conclude that although national governing bodies of sport are different to commercial organizations, “all organisations should structure their board to fit their function, and there is no difference in any sporting body” (p. 687). Further, in support of the participants’ views within this study, Taylor and O’Sullivan’s (2009) work argues for “the notion that boards … should rebalance their structure to incorporate a greater element of business expertise in order to help them operate successfully in the increased commercial environment in which they now operate” (p. 687).

The hybrid model – incorporating external expertise

Of the three models that exist in corporate governance (delegate, hybrid, independent), the GAA largely operates under the delegate system with some external expertise sought yet “this is not a requirement within the constitution of the Association”. In order to move to a more commercially orientated board as described in the section above, it is necessary for organizations such as the GAA to incorporate the expertise of external members through adopting a hybrid model of board composition which still allows for some member representation within this structure. All participants in the study were in favour of increasing the number of “independent” board members within the management committee of the GAA as:

they not only bring with them an aspect of business acumen that may be missing from the committee, they also are removed from acting in the interests of the county or province that they are involved with from a GAA perspective.

Although the entire sample agreed that there was a need for an increase in the level of independent members within the GAA’s governing structure, a concern was raised by a number of participants to ensure that the Association could attract the right expertise and calibre of independent board member that was required. One participant stated “if we move to a mixed model, we need to ensure that the external candidate is of an extremely high standing and it can be hard to ensure that is the case all of the time”. The issue of providing remuneration to independent board members was raised during interviews with a general consensus that independent board members should not receive remuneration as
the elected delegate representatives do not receive remuneration and it would essentially go against the foundation of volunteerism on which the GAA has operated since its inception.

Industry reports within the sector generally argue for a 50/50 balance of independent board members or for at least a significant amount of independent membership to carry weight in boardroom decisions (ASC, 2012, 2103; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009). The participants views in this study in relation to the amount of independent board members to sit on the management committee of the GAA was mixed with some participants arguing for ultimate power to be vested with the delegate representatives and others being supportive of the 50/50 ratio as advocated by such industry reports. Interestingly, a number of participants were of the opinion that independent members should serve a lesser term (one year) as opposed to the delegate members and that this would allow for the board to address the skill deficiencies in any given year. One participant stated: “Each year the Association faces different challenges, if we can appoint a person with a certain skill set in the area we need them for that particular year that would be best”.

Overall, the issue of including greater numbers of independent board members within the GAA management committee was advocated by all participants, yet how exactly these individuals would be recruited and rewarded, along with what length of terms they should serve were areas where there was not universal agreement amongst the interview sample.

Conclusions

National sport organizations such as the GAA are fundamental to the organization and delivery of sport and its associated social and health outcomes for participants. These organizations receive large amounts of funding from government entities that is often supplemented by additional funds raised through commercial activities such as the sale of broadcasting rights or other commercial endeavours. This raises two concerns in relation to corporate governance: (1) Do these organizations have appropriate structures and systems in place related to effective corporate governance practices seeing as a large public financial investment is allocated to these organisations? (2) Are the boards of these organizations structured in such a way that high calibre individuals are constantly present within their composition and can act on behalf of the sport as a whole without pressures to advocate for the interests of particular sections of the organization that they may have ties to?

Using the case study example of the GAA as set out above and assuming that the GAA acts as a logical representative of an organization entrenched in a federated structure based on delegate representation, it appears that governance structures and systems remain largely outdated and not suitably responsive to the demands these organizations now face. Calls for increased transparency, professionalism and the growth of complexities around financial management within the industry further support this synopsis. Within the GAA specifically, a tiered system of decision-making bodies (Congress, Central Council, Management Committee), consisting of delegate representatives who may or may not have the skill set required to effectively govern such an entity, is arguably limiting the GAA’s performance and indeed is causing concern even with members within its own ranks (Hassan, 2010). A move to include more independent board membership through the adoption of a hybrid model or a completely independent board of professional
directors would allow for a more streamlined organization, remove potential issues of self-interest within current board compositions, provide the Association with the opportunity to create a more commercially orientated board and would remove the need to constantly seek external advice, as identified by participants previously. In order for the GAA to remain relevant to its membership within Irish society when there are now more opportunities to participate in other sports and entertainment than ever before, the organization must adopt a system of governance that is appropriate to its current needs and a board of directors who hold the right mix of expertise and knowledge of the pressures facing the Association and how these might best be addressed.

As a new addition to the growing field of sport governance research within federated structures, this study provides insight into the challenges and complexities of creating a board composition within such an environment that is appropriate and relevant to the major pressures facing non-profit sport organizations such as the GAA. Further research is clearly warranted to uncover how exactly non-profit sport organizations operating in federated structures can combine delegate representatives and independent board membership within their board composition, ensuring that the interests of all members and stakeholders are protected. Furthermore, it is important that future studies address other issues related to the incorporation of independent board members in hybrid or wholly independent compositions such as appointment processes, remuneration for independent board members, term length of independent members, and ultimately the roles and responsibilities of these members in comparison to delegate representatives of the board. Finally, and importantly, it is necessary to explore how the adoption of a hybrid or wholly independent board model impacts upon overall organizational effectiveness and performance. To date there have been no such studies within the sport governance domain that address these issues and although there have been calls from many practitioners and researchers to incorporate more independent members within boards, from an academic perspective research is required to confirm that this situation would in fact create efficacy gains for these organizations. In addition, as boards may see a reduction in delegate representatives, it is important to explore how new board compositions may impact upon the federated structure and critical collaborative governance arrangements with federated bodies as outlined by Shilbury et al. (2013).

It is suggested that given the somewhat unique aspects of these entities, further case study designs or action research would be the most appropriate methodologies employed to investigate such issues. The location of such studies could take place within a variety of settings; however, given that federated structures of sport governance are most commonly found in Australasian and European locations, it is suggested that researchers focus attention to investigate the issues raised above within these environments.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on contributors**

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