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Board composition in national sport federations: a cross-country comparative analysis of diversity and board size

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ABSTRACT

Rationale/Purpose: The purpose of this study was to analyse the composition of national sport federation (NSF) boards in Australia, India, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Specifically, this research assessed board size, occupational diversity and gender diversity, which are theorised to influence board performance.

Design/Methods: This study employed a positivist descriptive research approach and gathered data from online secondary sources. In total, board composition data was collected on 253 NSFs across five countries, which equated to 2937 directors.

Findings: The results showed that the average board size in Indian NSFs (19.5 directors) is larger than in the sampled Western countries (on average between 7.2 and 14.2 directors). The occupational background of directors in Australia and the UK is similar, with a strong degree of business involvement (61% and 67%, respectively). Compared to Australia and the UK, India, South Africa and the USA have a larger proportion of directors from sporting backgrounds. Indian NSFs have a relatively significant number of politicians (16%) and few (7%) women on their boards compared to the Western countries.

Practical implications: This study provides empirical evidence to support sport governance policy processes.

Research contribution: This research contributes to the sport governance literature by showing the extent to which NSFs are adopting good governance standards.

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Board structure; gender diversity; good governance; secondary data; sport governance

Introduction

Academic interest in sport governance has grown substantially in recent years (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2020). Researchers argue that due to the unique characteristics of the sport industry – namely that sport organisations often do not operate according to traditional business principles and that they tend to have extremely passionate stakeholders – strong governance is especially pivotal in this context (McLeod, Shilbury, et al., 2021; Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020). Systemic problems with corruption have further highlighted the salience of governance in sport (Kihl et al., 2017). National Sport Federations (NSFs) play a central strategic and regulatory role in the sport eco-system and, thus, it is in these organisations where good governance must begin (Nagel et al., 2015).

The board of directors[1] is the principal decision-making forum in NSFs. If boards are

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[1]In some cases, the board of directors of NSFs is described as the "executive committee", "executive board" or "apex council".

to enact their governance role effectively, it is crucial that they have an appropriate composition (McLeod, 2020). Diversity and board size are two key aspects of board composition. Academic research has long asserted that sport boards should have high levels of diversity (including with respect to skills, expertise and gender) (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013; Elling et al., 2018; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012) and a board size of between 5 and 12 directors (Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009; Yeh & Taylor, 2008). Adopting these governance standards has been argued to enhance organisational efficiencies and, with regards to some elements of diversity, is ethically imperative (Geeraert et al., 2014; Geeraert, 2019; McLeod et al., 2021a).

These governance standards relating to diversity and board size are also widely promoted in the over 50 governance codes and frameworks used across world sport, including in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the European Union (EU) (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2019; McLeod & Shilbury, 2020). As such, there appears to be broad consensus in academia and practice that diversity and smaller board sizes (specifically between 5 and 12 directors) are good practice in sports governance. The conceptualisation of diversity and board size as good governance standards in this paper thus derives from what we argue is a consensus position among academics and practitioners.

While the conceptualisation of diversity and board size as good governance standards has primarily occurred in Western contexts, we propose that the arguments in favour of these practices (discussed in more depth in the literature review) are applicable across the world. It is important not to consider them merely Western inventions designed for Western organisations. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that while these proposed standards should be considered generally beneficial, idiosyncratic organisational and cultural factors may mean that they are not appropriate in certain organisations, or are less applicable in certain countries (McLeod & Shilbury, 2020). The guidance on diversity and board size is perhaps best understood as general good governance standards, with the potential for there to be exceptions.

Despite greater understanding and awareness of diversity and board size as good governance standards, the extent to which NSFs around the world are adhering to the standard remains unclear. The introduction of sport governance codes in countries such as the UK has helped to encourage their adoption (Walters & Tacon, 2018), however, these codes tend to provide NSFs with considerable flexibility and are rarely mandatory (Parent & Hoye, 2018). More research is required if we are to better understand the extent to which the composition of NSF boards around the world aligns with established good practice (Geeraert et al., 2014).

The aim of this study, therefore, is to conduct a comparative analysis of board composition in NSFs in Australia, India, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Three board composition variables are examined: board size, occupational background of directors (i.e. skills/expertise diversity) and gender diversity. To achieve the research aim, a positivist descriptive research approach is adopted, and data is gathered from online secondary sources.

The five aforementioned countries were chosen as the focus of this study for three reasons. First, while a number of sport governance studies have been contextualised in Australia and the UK (Dowling et al., 2018), researchers have so far neglected to specifically measure and analyse NSF board composition in any of these five countries. Such contributions are needed to enhance our understanding of governance in international sport and identify countries in which governance standards may be of concern. Second, as we assert when explaining our research method, these countries present a pragmatic choice as data on the composition of their NSF boards is available from online public sources. Third, there is a

mix of four Western and one Asian countries in the sample, which allows us to examine differences between diverse cultural contexts and thus form a more holistic understanding of global sport governance.

The rationale for examining board size, occupational background and gender diversity instead of other equally pertinent aspects of board composition (e.g. ethnic diversity) was that data on these variables are publicly available from online sources. The reason for conducting a cross-country analysis is that it allows us to assess patterns across different national contexts. Research suggests that country-level factors such as culture and geography can shape sport governance practices (McLeod et al., 2021a). This study can extend these insights by providing empirical evidence that highlights the extent of these differences in relation to board composition.

Literature review

Sport governance scholarship has evolved in tandem with the commercialisation and professionalisation of the sport industry (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2020). Researchers have largely focused on sport organisations in Western countries, namely Australia, Canada and England (Parent et al., 2018), although recent research has begun to explore sport governance in more diverse contexts including India (McLeod et al. 2021b). Three main types of sport organisation have been examined in the literature: governing bodies (either at the international, national and state levels), amateur sport organisations and professional sport organisations (Dowling et al., 2018).

A key focus across sport governance studies has been developing understandings of "good governance" in this context (Chappelet, 2018). To this end, researchers have attempted to define and assess principles of good governance in sport (Geeraert, 2019; Geeraert et al., 2014). There appears to be broad agreement in the literature and in practice as to what good governance looks like in sport governing bodies. As McLeod et al. (2021a) assert, "transparency, democracy, accountability, and societal responsibility are now widely considered to be important sport governance principles to uphold" (p. 144).

While the aforementioned principles illustrate the broad framework that NSFs need to adopt if they are to align themselves with established good governance standards, researchers have also examined more specific governance practices that are theorised to be effective. This has principally involved focusing on the board of directors as the unit of analysis (McLeod et al., 2020). Over the last decade, researchers have been particularly interested in developing understandings of board behaviour and processes in sport (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012). This has included studies on the strategic role and capability of boards (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015), collaborative processes in federal governance models (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2015), board performance (Hoye & Doherty, 2011), board roles (Doherty & Hoye, 2011), board culture (Schoenberg et al., 2016) and board conflict (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010). This literature has combined to offer a strong understanding of sport boardrooms from a socio-behavioural perspective.

There have been fewer studies focusing on board composition in sport (compared to board behaviour and processes) (McLeod, Jenkin, et al., 2021). Interestingly, this contrasts with the corporate governance literature, where the opposite has occurred (Pugliese et al., 2015). Of the studies that have examined issues of composition and structure on sport boards, the debate between independent vs. representative governance models has been a key focus. O'Boyle and Hassan (2016) argued that the representative board structure used in Ireland's Gaelic Football Association hindered the organisation's capacity to professionalise. Similar insights were ascertained in a study on Australian NSFs (Ingram & O'Boyle, 2018). Furthermore, Taylor and O'Sullivan (2009)

proposed that having independent directors on NSF boards in the UK enhances board effectiveness.

With regards to board size, corporate governance scholars have long theorised that the optimum size can depend on organisational-level factors such as what stage the organisation is at in its life cycle (Jackling & Johl, 2009). That said, there is broad agreement in the corporate governance literature that boards generally perform most effectively with 5–12 members (Hartarska & Nadolnyak, 2012; Sherwin, 2003). Taylor and O'Sullivan's (2009) study on UK NSFs showed consistency with the corporate literature, with interviewed directors perceiving that "board size should be in the range of five to 12 members" (p. 681). This range of 5–12 appears to be an appropriate balance between the propositions of competing governance theories (Hung, 1998). While resource dependence theory (Zahra & Pearce, 1989) advocates for a large board so the organisation can benefit from a wide range of directors' networks, stewardship theory (Turnbull, 1997) dictates that a large board may hinder the efficiency of the board-management relationship. Indeed, there is a dominant rationale among corporate scholars that boards above 12 in size will be weak because in-depth discussion becomes impractical and the emergence of factions can make it difficult to make decisions (Goodstein et al., 1994). In their review of the sport governance literature, Yeh and Taylor (2008) asserted that this rationale is equally applicable to sport organisations.

The academic position on optimum board size has been mirrored in sport governance codes, such as the UK Code for Sport Governance and Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles that advise NSFs to have boards no larger than 12 people (McLeod & Shilbury, 2020). Extant research and practical guidelines thus provide an insight into what the optimum board size is in sport (between 5 and 12). To date, however, there is little empirical evidence documenting the extent to which NSF boards are adopting this standard. Addressing this gap is important for the purposes of understanding governance standards in international sport, and for identifying contexts in which governance practices may be of concern. As such, the present study intends to measure and analyse the size of NSF boards in five sport countries.

Diversity is a key aspect of board composition. There are two main types of diversity. Task-related diversity concerns educational or occupational background. Non-task related diversity includes gender, ethnicity, religion or belief, age, disability and sexual orientation (Carter et al., 2003). A key argument in favour of board diversity, in its various forms, is that it "enhances the firm's strategic decision-making process through offering a broader range of perspectives and ideas and facilitates the acquisition of critical resources for the organization with wider social networks" (Zhang, 2012, p. 686). This argument aligns with research from the broader group dynamics literature on the theory of "collective intelligence" (Boder, 2006). The theory posits that a group, such as a board, will be more effective at completing complex and multi-dimensional tasks if it is composed of people from diverse backgrounds and who have diverse expertise. People from different social categories and cultures tend to have different viewpoints, skills and knowledge. The combined insight of these diverse perspectives is thought to be more powerful for a board compared to a group of similar individuals (Woolley et al., 2015). In addition to the "business case" for diversity, there is a social justice argument for diversity in sport governance (Elling et al., 2018). Given the unique social role that sports play in society, it is arguably an ethical necessity for sport boards to be representative of the stakeholders they govern.

Another important consideration, pointed out by Buse et al. (2016), is that diversity alone does not achieve performance or ethical

benefits on boards, there also needs be the *inclusion* of diversity. That is, other directors need to make meaningful efforts not just to accommodate minority groups on boards, but to actively integrate them into board processes. Diversity may be best considered as an important first step, which needs to be followed up with inclusive practices (Storr, 2020).

Gender diversity has received considerable attention in the corporate governance literature. Studies have provided empirical support for the value of gender diversity on outcomes such as board performance (Adams et al., 2015; Nielsen & Huse, 2010). However, it should be noted that not all corporate studies have managed to demonstrate this link (Buse et al., 2016). Gender diversity has also been the focus in a number of sport governance studies. Researchers have examined the causes and extent of board gender diversity in sport (Adriaanse, 2016; Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014), board gender quotas (Sisjord et al., 2017), the gendering of sport leadership (Hovden, 2010) and a recent study indicated that gender diversity on boards reduces organisational problems in non-profit sport clubs (Wicker et al., 2020). While existing literature has enhanced understanding of gender diversity in sport governance, there is scope for further research, especially with respect to measuring the extent of gender diversity on NSF boards in practice. Such empirical evidence would be valuable in continuing to highlight discrepancies in the representation of women in NSFs around the world, which could assist in efforts in advocacy and policy reform.

Other forms of diversity, such as ethnicity, socio-economic background and occupational background, have received less specific attention in both corporate and sport governance literature. Occupational diversity refers to the mix of skills and expertise that are present on a board. It is well-established among scholars and practitioners that sport boards require a mixture of occupational expertise (such as legal, financial and sport development) to perform effectively (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009). Research has also shown that occupational diversity can be a driver of social performance (Siciliano, 1996). This has led to the widespread use of board skill matrixes, which are frameworks that allows directors to assess skills gaps on their board (Walters & Tacon, 2018). As an area of academic inquiry, occupational diversity does not have the same social justice imperative as with ethnic, gender and other non-task-related forms of diversity. Nevertheless, given the link that occupational diversity has to board performance (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012), it remains an important issue to examine.

In sport, the occupational background of directors is a point of key contemporary debate. Recent research suggests that in Asian contexts, including the Middle East and India, there is an excessive presence and involvement of people from political backgrounds on the boards of NSFs (Dorsey, 2015; McLeod et al., 2021a). This is thought to be having a detrimental effect on national sport systems as it generates conflict of interest (e.g. regarding state funding) and disincentives corporate, and therefore commercial and professional, involvement in sport (McLeod et al., 2021b). Another key point of debate is the presence (or lack of) directors from an athletic background in NSFs. This has been highlighted as a concern in Western sport contexts that are increasingly guided by corporate logics, such as Australia and the UK. A notable exception to this is the USA, where legislation dictates that 20% of NSF boards must be athlete representatives (AthletesCAN, 2020).

Despite these ongoing debates, there has been little attempt to measure or analyse the extent of the presence of different occupational categories on NSF boards. Such contributions are needed to facilitate evidence-based discussions of occupational diversity on sport boards. As yet, the notions that there is excessive involvement of politicians on NSF boards in Asia, and

that there is a lack of athletes represented on European NSF boards, have not been tested or quantified. The value of this study is that it will provide empirical evidence and data to support these views and thus enhance the rigour of the debate.

"Play the Game", an organisation that exists to strengthen the ethical foundation of sport, has made some progress in tracking the extent to which a range of governance standards are upheld in NSFs. In its National Sport Governance Observer (NSGO) report, principally authored by Geeraert (2018), NSFs in 10 countries (Cyprus, Denmark, Belgium (Flanders), Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Brazil and Montenegro) were assessed in accordance with 46 governance principles. A small number of the individual principles related to issues of board composition, such as term limits, the use of audit committees and whether there was a board gender quota. The overall findings of the NSGO were that advanced European democracies, and particularly Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands, were better at implementing the governance standards. Nevertheless, the report indicated that there was still significant room for improvement across all the countries, and that it is important to hold NSFs to account by continuing to monitor their governance practices (Geeraert, 2018). The present research seeks to answer that call by conducting a comparative analysis of board composition in five leading sport countries that were not assessed in the 2018 NSGO. Specifically, this research attends to the following three research questions:

(1) What are the size of boards in NSFs in Australia, India, South Africa, the UK and the USA?
(2) What are the occupational backgrounds of directors of NSFs in Australia, India, South Africa, the UK and the USA?
(3) What is the extent of gender diversity on boards of NSFs in Australia, India, South Africa, the UK and the USA?

Method

This study takes a positivist epistemological stance and adopts a cross-sectional and descriptive research approach. Descriptive research "examines the situation, as it exists in its current state" (Williams, 2007, p. 66). This approach is appropriate, such as in the present study, when the aim is to describe, explain and interpret a phenomenon at a specific place and time, and to provide a benchmark for future comparative research. To address the research questions, this study accesses web-based secondary data and presents descriptive statistics that illuminate pertinent new insights into the governance of NSFs in five countries. Our methodological approach aligns with Heydenrych and Case (2018), who argued that gathering web-based secondary data offers advantages over traditional methods such as surveys. While survey-based research often suffers from low response rates, web-based secondary research usually allows for higher volumes of data to be obtained. This is particularly the case when, as in this study, there are tight time and resource constraints on the project. As such, adopting a web-based secondary data method was considered the most appropriate approach to achieve the present research aim.

Sampling

The sampling criteria were twofold. First, the researchers wanted to examine NSFs in countries that have not been previously examined (i.e. countries not covered in the Play the Game reports). Second, the researchers wanted a sample that included NSFs from both Western and non-Western countries for the purpose of drawing comparisons between different cultural contexts.

A convenience sampling approach was used to identify countries that fit the sampling criteria. Convenience sampling is a type of non-probability sampling wherein researchers

select units of analysis that are readily available. The advantage of this approach is that samples are obtained with greater ease, while the disadvantage is that results lack generalisability (Etikan, 2016). Convenience sampling is suitable for the purposes of this research given that the aim is to extend insight into the governance standards of NSFs in specific countries. While this study does seek to identify potential trends that go beyond the sample, broad generalisation is not the objective.

To find countries where information on NSF board composition was publicly available, the research team conducted web-based research. It appeared that data on NSFs was available for numerous Western countries, but not for non-Western countries. The research team noted that data on NSFs was sporadically available in the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts, but not to the extent required to make meaningful inferences. India presented the only non-Western context where information on NSF board composition was publicly available in English, and therefore India was included in the sample. In addition, the research team included Australia, South Africa the UK and the USA in the sample, which represented the chosen Westernised countries where relevant data was most readily available. Resource constraints meant that the research team only had the capacity to investigate NSFs in five countries.

To gain a list of NSFs in each country, the researchers consulted the website of the central sport authority in each country. Data was gathered on all NSFs where information was available. This equated to 70 Australian NSFs, 44 Indian NSFs, 46 South African NSFs, 46 UK NSFs and 47 USA NSFs. Thus, a vast range of NSFs were included in the sample for each country, which means that meaningful patterns and differences could reliably be inferred between countries.

Variables

For the purposes of this study, board size is a quantitative variable that is given a numeric value depending on the number of board members on a NSF's board. Occupational background is a qualitative variable that requires researchers to assign NSF board members to an occupational category. The categories used in this research were: "Business", "Politician", "Bureaucrat", "Athlete/Coach", "Lawyer", "Accountant", "Medical Professional", "Academic" and "Engineer". To define these categories, the researchers drew on O*Net, which is a dictionary of occupational categories well-established in the organisational psychology literature (Smith & Campbell, 2006), and used their existing knowledge of the sport governance context. This research acknowledges as a methodological limitation that variation may exist between individuals assigned to the "Business" category. For example, it includes people with a background in diverse areas such as administration, consultancy and entrepreneurship. The researchers accepted this as a trade-off to ensure meaningful comparisons could be made between broad occupational groups that reflect key trends in the sport industry (i.e. the presence of politicians and athletes) and to ensure the data could be visualised coherently in research outputs. This research must also acknowledge as a limitation that individuals may change occupations over time. Data collectors were given an option to select "Other" and provide a note with regards to occupational background. This option was very rarely used, and thus the pre-defined categories were considered to be appropriate in themselves to present and visualise the findings.

Gender diversity is also a qualitative variable wherein the researchers assigned NSF board members to the category of either "male" or "female". This research acknowledges the limitation of this approach, which required data collectors to make subjective judgements about the gender to which NSF board members identify based on their title, name and photo as displayed on online sources. While other aspects of board composition (e.g. ethnicity, disability,

age and tenure) would be equally as pertinent variables to examine, data on such characteristics were typically not available on NSF websites or other publicly available sources and could not be gathered reliably. Therefore, the decision was made to focus only on board size, gender diversity and occupational background, which offered a better opportunity to gather data reliably from online secondary sources.

Data collection

A two-step process of collecting secondary data was followed. First, websites of NSFs, as well as their constitutions and governance documents (when publicly available), were analysed to find information on board size and, where available, details were collected with respect to the occupational background and gender of board members. Second, where information on occupational background of each board member was not available on the NSF website, social media platforms (such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter), as well as professional websites which board members were affiliated with, were analysed to find information each board member's occupational background.

Given the sample included over 45 NSFs in five different countries (253 NSFs in total), this process was extremely time-consuming. An international team of two Academics and six Research Assistants (from two different institutions) were responsible for data collection. Data collection took place between August 2020 and September 2020.

Members of the research team were each tasked with gathering data on a specific number of NSFs in a particular country. The lead researcher created a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet template in which each member could compile the data. An instructions document explaining where to find the data, how to input data into the spreadsheet, how to code the data and what to do when relevant data did not appear to be available was provided in advance. Once data collection was finished, the separate Excel files compiled by the research team were integrated. At this point, the research team went through an extensive process of checking the accuracy of each other's work and adding any data points that appeared to have been missed. The final spreadsheet included data collected on 2937 directors who belonged to NSFs in five different countries.

It should be noted that for the 2937 sampled directors across the 253 federations, occupational background data could not be found for all of them (we expand on this limitation in the results). Another issue faced during data collection was that some directors appeared to fit two occupational categories. For example, some individuals were active sport coaches but also had their own business ventures. In these cases, the research team used their best judgement to assign the director to the occupational category to which they were more deeply involved. Consistency was ensured between coders through continuous re-checking of the data.

Another limitation is the reliability of self-reported data on each individual's social media profiles and website biographies. It is often unclear on platforms such as LinkedIn how recently an individual's biography has been updated. However, since this study is concerned only with the broad occupational background of each individual (rather than their current professional role and title), the research team used their best judgment to analyse the occupational category based on the current and previous roles held by each board member, where such information was available.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were considered an appropriate analytical procedure to achieve the research aim, which was to conduct a comparative analysis of three board composition factors (board size, occupational background and

gender diversity) in NSFs across five countries. The analysis was conducted within Microsoft Excel. For the board size variable, a formula was constructed to calculate the mean scores and standard deviation of NSF board size across the five countries. Similarly, formulas were used to calculate the percentage breakdowns of occupational background and gender diversity in NSFs in each country. To help visualise the data, box plots and bar charts were produced directly from Excel. The following section describes the results, which are presented in accordance with the three research questions.

Results

Board size

Table 1 illustrates the average number of directors on an NSF board in the five countries at the time of data collection. Table 1 also highlights the standard deviation for the board size variable for each country. The results show that the average size of NSF boards in India (19.5 directors) is generally much larger than in other countries. A range of factors may be contributing to this such as cultural norms, geography, population size and the extent to which the sport is professionalised (McLeod & Shilbury, 2020). The India Olympic Association notably has 58 members, while the Table Tennis Federation of India has 48 Executive Committee members. The average board size in Australia, South Africa and the UK all fall within the range of 7–10. The US has a larger average board size of 14.2. This may be due to the size of the country and the prevalence of athlete representation in that context (Kihl & Schull, 2020).

Figure 1 presents box plots that graphically depict the distribution of the data on board size for each country. The box plots highlight the minimum first quartile, median, third quartile and maximum values for board size. Figure 1 usefully illustrates the skewness of the data on board size. There appears to be a significant variation in the size of boards in

Table 1. Board size.

	Australia	India	USA	UK	South Africa
Board members (count)	519	858	669	462	429
Federations	70	44	47	46	46
Average board size	7.4	19.5	14.2	10.0	9.3
Standard deviation	2.00	12.14	6.44	2.65	3.98

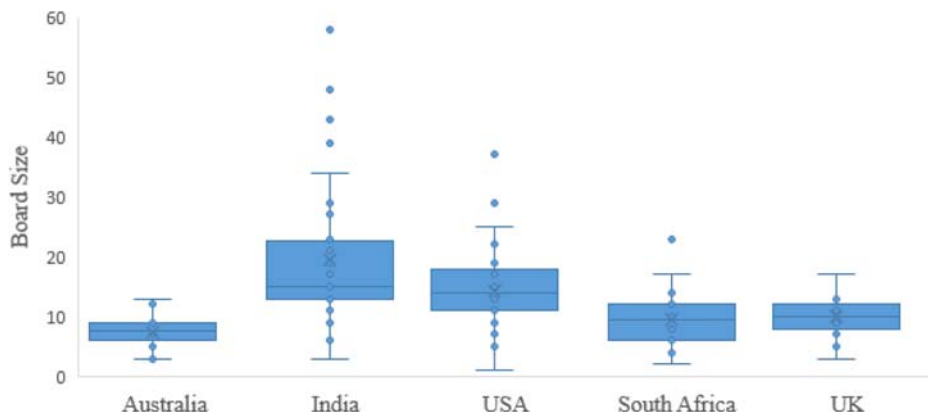

Figure 1. Box plots on board size.

India (SD = 12.4). This suggests that different NSFs in India are facing considerably different pressures in terms of how to calibrate their governance structures. The data on the USA is the second most skewed (SD = 6.44), followed by South Africa (SD = 3.98), the UK (SD = 2.65) and Australia (SD = 2.00). The small variation in board size in the UK and Australia is likely reflective of how their national sport governance codes recommend a specific board size range.

Occupational background

Table 2 illustrates the occupational background of NSF board members in each of the five countries in percentage terms and in total count. As noted above, data was not available on the occupational background of all board members in the sample as researchers could not ascertain the occupational background of all board members through online sources. Occupational background data was collected for 74.6% of Australia board members, 43.7% of India board members, 57.3% of South Africa board members, 81.4% of UK board members and 82.2% of USA board members. The results pertaining to occupational background should therefore be considered with caution, given that they are not indicative of all directors in the country. However, a sufficient volume of data has been gathered for each country to identify trends. Figure 2 presents pie charts that illustrate the breakdown of occupational background by country.

The analysis shows that the occupational background of directors in Australia and the UK is highly similar, with the vast majority of directors coming from a business background (61% and 67%, respectively). A significant proportion of directors in the USA come from elite sporting backgrounds (41%), which likely reflects the institutional prevalence of athlete representation in that country (Kihl & Schull, 2020). To a lesser extent, the same is true for South Africa (35% sporting background). South Africa has strong corporate involvement too (50%). Results show that board members in Indian NSFs often come from an elite sporting background (32%). Interestingly, there is a relatively significant amount of political involvement in Indian sport governance (16% politicians and 8% bureaucrats). Political involvement is comparatively minimal in the four Western countries. There is also a strong presence of individuals from a military background in Indian sport (12%). Again, this is unusual compared to the Western countries.

Gender diversity

Figure 3 illustrates gender representation across all NSF boards in each of the five countries. The results provide evidence of a significant lack of gender diversity on Indian NSF boards (7% women). A number of cultural and institutional factors are likely contributing to this gap. Australia performs best on gender diversity (40%), which is indicative of its high-

Table 2. Occupational background.

	Australia		India		South Africa		UK		USA		Total Count	Total %
Academic	9	2.3%	19	5.1%	5	2.0%	6	1.6%	19	3.5%	58	3.0%
Accountant	16	4.1%	2	0.5%	7	2.8%	32	8.5%	7	1.3%	64	3.3%
Bureaucrat	31	8.0%	30	8.0%	4	1.6%	30	8.0%	3	0.5%	98	5.1%
Business	237	61.2%	75	20.1%	123	50.0%	251	66.8%	230	41.8%	916	47.4%
Politician	9	2.3%	58	15.5%			1	0.3%			68	3.5%
Engineer			2	0.5%	1	0.4%			7	1.3%	10	0.5%
Lawyer	37	9.6%	10	2.7%	12	4.9%	29	7.7%	37	6.7%	125	6.5%
Medical Professional	9	2.3%	12	3.2%	7	2.8%	2	0.5%	11	2.0%	41	2.1%
Military	5	1.3%	44	11.8%			14	3.7%	13	2.4%	76	3.9%
Athlete/Coach	34	8.8%	121	32.4%	87	35.4%	11	2.9%	223	40.5%	476	24.6%
Total	387		373		246		376		550		1932	

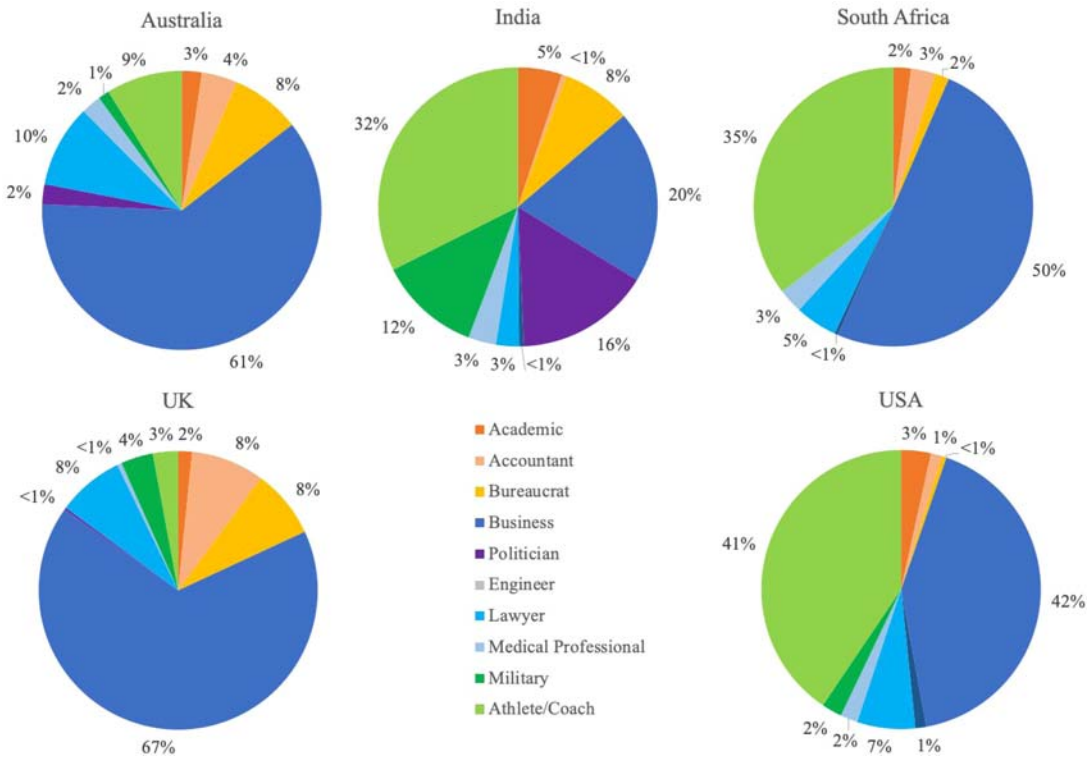

Figure 2. Occupational background pie charts.

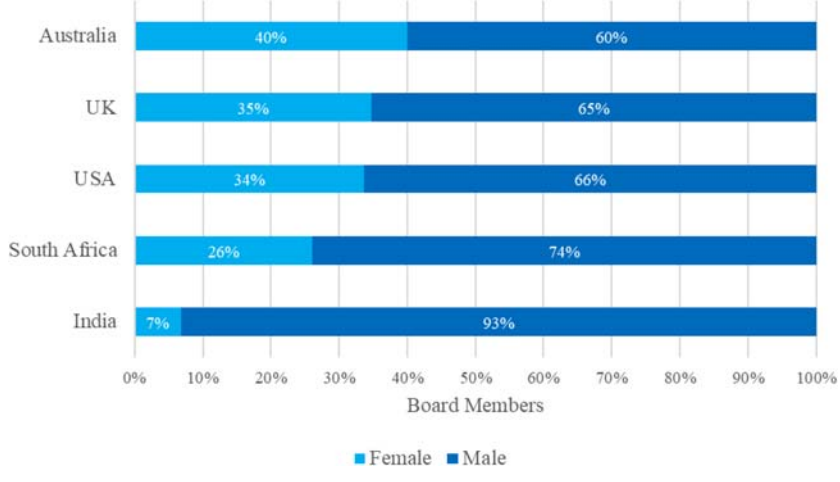

Figure 3. Gender diversity.

performing women's sport sector (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016). South Africa performs worst of the Western countries with 26% women on NSF boards.

Discussion

To date, existing research on board size in sport has been limited. A notable exception was Taylor and O'Sullivan's (2009) research into

NSFs in the UK, in which they found that directors perceived the optimal board size to be between 6 and 12. Yeh and Taylor (2008) offered support for this finding, claiming that the 5–12 range provides an appropriate balance between having a diverse set of perspectives on sport boards and having high-quality board discussions. The corporate literature provides further support for benefits of the 5–12 range (Goodstein et al., 1994; Hartarska & Nadolnyak, 2012), as do sport governance codes used in practice, such as the UK Code for Sport Governance (McLeod & Shilbury, 2020). However, while there is broad consensus on the ideal sized board in sport, until now we have limited knowledge of the extent to which this standard is being adopted by NSFs around the world. This is problematic given the anticipated impact of board size on board efficiency and, eventually, organisational performance (Yeh & Taylor, 2008). This study thus makes a valuable contribution. Specifically, it provides new insight into the average board size in NSFs in Australia (7.4), India (19.5), South Africa (9.3) the UK, (10.0) and the USA (14.2). This research builds on previous work that has theorised the ideal size of sport boards, which was drawn from the perspectives of resource-dependency and stewardship theory (Turnbull, 1997), by showing the empirical reality of board size in five sport countries.

This research shows that the average NSF board size in Australia, South Africa and the UK falls within the 5–12 range proposed in the literature. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the two most populous countries in the sample, India (approx. 1.3 billion people) and the US (approx. 330 million people), are the only countries where the average board size exceeds the range. NSFs around the world have traditionally employed "representative" governance structures (O'Boyle & Hassan, 2016). This means that the board of the NSF is composed of representatives of different stakeholder groups that exist within the NSF's network (Shilbury et al., 2016). Naturally, if an NSF exists with a highly populated country, it will need a large board to accommodate representatives of all sections of its society. This seems likely to be a factor in explaining the difference in board size between India and the USA and the other three countries. Thus, NSFs in India, and to a lesser extent the USA, may well be experiencing inefficiencies at the board level, in terms of the quality of discussion and debate, due to their representative governance model. Exploring the utility of a more independent or hybrid governance model (Ingram & O'Boyle, 2018), which is conducive to smaller boards, may be useful in such contexts.

Cultural factors may also be playing a role. Recent research suggests that in India sport governance practices are shaped by cultural norms relating to nepotism and the need to show respect to the leaders of different factions (McLeod et al., 2021a). It is conceivable that this is contributing to NSFs boards having on average 19.2 members in the country. Further empirical work exploring this idea would be valuable in helping to develop understandings of sport governance internationally.

There is growing consensus in the sport and mainstream governance literatures that having different types of diversity on boards is an important driver of board performance (Carter et al., 2003; Lee & Cunningham, 2019). To date, however, research on the demographic characteristics of sport board directors has focused narrowly on gender (Adriaanse, 2019). This study has extended the literature by providing new insights into occupational backgrounds of directors on NSF boards in five sport countries. This is the first study that has provided empirical evidence of how prevalent different occupations are on the boards of NSFs around the world.

This study shows that, overall, business occupations (i.e. those involved in administration, consultancy and entrepreneurship) are most prominent in NSFs. As shown in Table 2, 47.4% of all directors for whom occupational

background data was available came from a business background. Business occupations were most prominent in the UK (66.8%), followed by Australia (61.2%). This finding is consistent with existing sport governance studies, which have documented how sport organisations in those two countries have become increasingly professionalised and corporatised in response to the growing commercialisation of their domestic sport sectors (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Tacon & Walters, 2016).

In the UK and Australia, there appears to be a relative lack of individuals from an elite sporting background (2.9% and 8.8%, respectively). It should be noted, however, that many individuals coded as "business" for those two countries likely had some expertise in sport (i.e. they were an amateur athlete), although it was not their primary career. Without consideration of that point, the low percentages of sporting backgrounds are potentially misleading and thus should be considered cautiously. Still, there is clearly a case to be made for expanding the number of individuals on the UK and Australian NSF boards that come from an elite sporting background. This will likely provide those boards with a more diverse level of relevant expertise, which in line with collective intelligence theory, should enhance board performance (Boder, 2006; Wicker et al., 2020). Further, it is arguably an important ethical development given that athletes are the central actors in the industry and are most affected by board decisions (Thibault et al., 2010). India, the USA and South Africa generally have a much higher proportion of directors from sporting backgrounds. In the case of the USA, this is indicative of the institutionalisation of athlete representation in the country (Kihl & Schull, 2020). It is pertinent to acknowledge that board representation is not the only means by which athletes' voices can be heard. Athlete advisory committees and structured dialogue processes, for example, can be effective ways of ensuring that insights from athletes are heard. Nevertheless, there are strong performance and ethical arguments for the inclusion of athletes on NSF boards.

The results showed that the occupational diversity of NSF board members in India is considerably different from the Western countries. A key point of differentiation is the high level of political involvement in Indian sport governance (15.5% politicians and 8% bureaucrats). The number of politicians on NSF boards in the other countries is minimal. McLeod and Star (2020) recently argued that political involvement in Indian NSFs is excessive, and that this has had a detrimental impact on Indian sport. They posit that Indian politicians often wield too much influence and power on boards and that this hinders the inclusion of other directors in board processes. Moreover, they argue that they have a conflict of interest between acting as the regulators of sport and acting as the leaders of sport federations (McLeod et al., 2021b). This has led sport activists to call for politicians to be banned from Indian NSFs, claiming that it is a necessary step in the evolution of Indian sport into a more professionalised sector (Bhatia, 2019). In contrast, other Indian sport stakeholders claim politicians bring important expertise and connections to NSFs, and that they should be included as part of a sufficiently diverse board. The present study contributes to this ongoing debate in Indian sport by providing the quantified empirical evidence of political involvement in NSFs. Interestingly, there is a strong level of military involvement in Indian sport, which is likely due to the army's involvement in sport development in the country (Bhatia, 2019). In any event, this study shows that the high degree of involvement of both politicians and military in Indian NSFs is not reflected in the NSFs of Western countries.

Overall, the results from this study suggest that NSFs in Western countries have a strong degree of corporate involvement in governance, which contrasts with India where there is a greater emphasis on political and military involvement. The prevalence of individuals

from a business background in the West is likely to be necessary, given that the sport industry is increasingly shaped by commercial logics (Dowling et al., 2018). However, there still appears to be scope for greater athlete involvement in Australia and the UK. India is notably lacking in legal expertise (only 2.7% of directors) and business expertise (only 20.1% of directors). If Indian sport is to reach its growth potential (Mitra, 2010), it will arguably need a higher proportion of individuals from these backgrounds, which will better position NSFs to cope with the challenges of the contemporary sport industry (Nagel et al., 2015).

That said, it is important not to view the structure of Indian sport governance only through a Western lens. Governance can be a context-specific phenomenon and India should not necessarily be guided by Western practices (Girginov, 2019). For instance, there may be legitimate reasons why certain Indian NSFs operate better with boards that exceed the 5–12 range. This assertion has implications for how we understand the concept of "good governance". While there is a strong theoretical, logical and empirical rationale for defining general good governance in sport (such as the 5–12 range board size, being transparent and having accountability), we must be cognisant that there can be legitimate exceptions to the rule. The role that culture plays in shaping good sport governance is generally under-theorised and warrants further investigation, particularly in contexts such as India.

As previously noted, a number of studies have been conducted on gender diversity in sport governance (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014). Such studies have illuminated the barriers to the appointment of women on sport boards (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013), and have made some progress in measuring the extent of gender diversity in sport (Adriaanse, 2016). Given the strong theoretical arguments in favour of gender diversity, namely that it enhances collective intelligence (Boder, 2006), there is a need to understand in greater depth the extent to which women are represented in NSFs and their impact. This study has contributed to this area by highlighting the percentage of women on NSF boards in five sport countries (see Figure 3). There is a striking lack of women on boards in India. This is perhaps expected due to the traditional gender roles played by women in wider Indian society (McLeod et al., 2021a). For a developed and Westernised country, gender diversity on South Africa NSF boards (26%) seems relatively poor and is certainly much lower when contrasted to other Western countries in this study.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of board composition in NSFs in Australia, India, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Specifically, this research undertook a quantitative assessment of board size, occupational background and gender diversity. In doing so, this study makes a valuable contribution to the sport governance literature. The results provide new insight into the extent to which NSFs in five sport countries align with optimal standards of board size (Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009). In addition, we have known little about the occupational background of NSF directors, and the level of gender diversity on NSF boards. This study has provided new knowledge in these areas. This is useful because it shows where (and where not) good governance standards (Geeraert, 2019; Geeraert et al., 2014) are being adopted in international sport. While assumptions are often made, for example, about excessive political involvement in Indian sport (McLeod & Star, 2020), or the lack of athletes involved in British sport (McLeod & Shilbury, 2020), these assumptions have not been tested or quantified. This study has begun to address this gap. This study has important practical implications. Specifically, stakeholders involved in policy conversations can draw on the evidence provided. For instance, advocates for greater athlete and

women representation in British sport could use the findings to support their argument, as could those seeking to limit political involvement in Indian sport (Bhatia, 2019).

There are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. This study used secondary online sources (e.g. NSF websites and social media) to find data on board size, occupational background and gender diversity. While there were advantages to using publicly available secondary data (namely the ability to access larger volumes of data), the accuracy of these sources cannot always be guaranteed and there may be a margin of error in the results. Further, data could not be found on all NSFs, their directors and their characteristics, and hence the results are not based on a complete sample of NSF directors in each country. Scholars could build on this work in the future by using primary methods to generate more detailed insights into board composition, ideally in a wider range of countries.

In addition, researchers could continue to track board composition data to aid longitudinal analyses that can measure the development and convergence of sport governance structures and practices in different parts of the world. While this study compared governance practices across national contexts, a potentially useful future study would be to analyse governance practices between sports (i.e. do certain sports tend to have greater diversity and board size?). Examining how different dimensions of board composition are related to each other (i.e. how is board size related to term limits in the sport context?) could also yield interesting results, as well as assessing how this interaction influences board performance. Researchers and other stakeholders should lead and join calls for greater transparency from sport governing bodies regarding the composition of their boards (ideally reaching a situation where a depth of information on directors is available on websites). This would ensure that board composition could be rigorously examined and governing bodies can be more effectively held to account. Finally, researchers should build on existing work on diversity in sport governance by exploring the concept of inclusion on boards. Generating a deeper understanding of how minority groups can not only be accommodated on boards but meaningfully included in board processes is a necessary step in the development of the sport governance literature.

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