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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Challenges and opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes: an analysis of a Swiss national sport federation

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, some governments (e.g. Canada, the UK, Australia) have imposed far-reaching professionalisation processes on national sport federations (NSFs), while others (e.g. Switzerland) have made only minor impositions and relied more on NSFs to self-regulate. As governments must decide on the extent to which sport policy imposes professionalisation processes on NSFs, understanding the challenges and opportunities arising from both policy-imposed and self-regulated professionalisation processes is relevant. However, extant literature has focused mostly on professionalisation processes imposed by sport policy. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the context, action, content and outcome of self-regulated professionalisation processes to identify the challenges and opportunities arising from these processes. A framework of professionalisation and a corresponding processual approach build the conceptual background of this study. A single-case study is applied to enable a holistic and long-term analysis of the proceedings of a Swiss NSF's professionalisation processes. The results reveal the mechanisms of self-regulated professionalisation processes (i.e. how contexts and actions shape outcome), thus leading to a conceptualisation of these mechanisms and conclusions about challenges and opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes, which are useful for sport managers and policymakers.

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Introduction

National sport federations (NSFs) and their associated sport clubs play a central role in the provision of organised sports, particularly in Europe, and thus help attain the strategic objectives of the national sport policy (e.g. health promotion, social cohesion, talent development; Hoekman *et al.* 2015, Bayle 2017). NSFs promote sports in society, organise competitions and grassroots events, manage marketing and sponsorship activities at the national level and support the sport clubs with appropriate services (Ferkins and Shilbury 2010, Hoye and Doherty 2011, Nagel *et al.* 2015). For all these duties, many NSFs are facing growing expectations from both member organisations and external stakeholders (e.g. government, umbrella federation, sponsors, media). For example, member organisations expect their NSF to ensure coach development (Ferkins and Shilbury 2010), while

sponsors expect media exposure and modern forms of communication (Ruoranen *et al.* 2018). However, NSFs' mainly volunteer-based organisational structures are experiencing increasing difficulties in satisfying these diverse expectations, and thus many NSFs are working to professionalise their structures, processes and staff (e.g. employment of paid staff, development of a strategy, adaptation of organisational structure; Shilbury and Ferkins 2011, Dowling *et al.* 2014, Ruoranen *et al.* 2016).

In the past few decades, certain governments, such as Canada, the UK and Australia, have met the growing expectations for NSFs by imposing far-reaching professionalisation processes as a condition of the government funds the NSFs receive (Amis *et al.* 2004a, Green and Houlihan 2006, Grix 2009). Canadian NSFs, for example, were required to develop a wide range of written policies and procedures, employ paid and specialised staff and shift the decision-making authority from volunteers to professional staff (Amis *et al.* 2004a). Other governments, such as Switzerland, have made only minor impositions in terms of professionalisation, such as the existence of a strategy (Lang *et al.* 2018), and relied more on NSFs to self-regulate. These examples indicate that governments are concerned with the question of the extent to which sport policy imposes professionalisation processes on NSFs by setting, for example, standards and requirements as a condition of government funds. The empirical assessment of both the imposed and non-imposed professionalisation processes, and the challenges and opportunities associated with these processes, may generate knowledge to assist sport policy-makers to gauge the extent to which sport policy imposes professionalisation processes on NSFs. According to Fahlén *et al.* (2015), non-imposed processes are called 'self-regulated' processes because, from a sport political perspective, these processes are self-regulated at the NSF level. Self-regulated processes are defined by the autonomy of an NSF in deciding whether or not it implements the respective process, regardless of internal (e.g. from members or staff) and/or external (e.g. from sponsors) pressure, which in most cases exists (see Fahlén *et al.* 2015). In turn, imposed processes mean that the NSF does not have any other option but to follow the demands of external stakeholders (e.g. government, international federation, sponsor) because the measures are either part of legislation (e.g. O'Brien and Slack 2004) or a condition of receiving financial subsidies, which the NSF cannot reject (e.g. Amis *et al.* 2004a).

The few existing studies analysing NSFs' professionalisation processes holistically over the years (e.g. O'Brien and Slack 2004, Amis *et al.* 2004a), have focused on processes imposed by sport policy (e.g. the 'Best Ever Programme' in Canada, the 'Paris Declaration' in rugby; see also Strittmatter *et al.* 2018). These studies reveal a significant increase in the professionalisation of many affected NSFs. However, other NSFs have struggled with the impositions, either because they lacked financial and human resources for the implementation or because they found that the imposed measures were not appropriate for their organisation. Sport Canada's (i.e. the government's agent) impositions, for example, only had the goal of improving performance at the Olympic Games, which was not appropriate for all organisations (Amis *et al.* 2004a). As existing studies have not analysed the proceedings of self-regulated professionalisation processes, the challenges and opportunities arising from these processes remain unclear. Therefore, this study focuses on analysing self-regulated professionalisation processes.

The Swiss national sport policy builds on the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy, which means that it makes only minor impositions on the professionalisation of NSFs (e.g. existence of a strategy) and grants considerable latitude in how the NSFs can invest the government funds they receive. Therefore, most professionalisation processes conducted by Swiss NSFs are self-regulated at the NSF level, which makes this setting appropriate for the aim of this study. Building on Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) framework of causes, forms and consequences of professionalisation and Pettigrew's (1997) processual approach, this study reconstructs the context, action, content and outcome of self-regulated professionalisation processes in a Swiss NSF to understand and conceptualise the mechanisms of these processes (i.e. how contexts and actions shape the outcome of the processes) and, thus, to unpack the challenges and opportunities arising from these processes. We applied a single-case analysis to enable a holistic and long-term analysis of professionalisation processes.

Contextual background: Swiss sport policy

Switzerland's sport legislation was first introduced in 1972 and established the basis for the government's following sport promotion activities. In 1999, the Federal Office for Sport (FOSPO) was set up to develop Switzerland's sport policy. The resulting concept followed five strategic aims: health, education, performance, economy and sustainability. As part of the performance aim, the FOSPO mandated Swiss Olympic, the umbrella federation of the 86 NSFs and national Olympic committee, to distribute government funds to the NSFs. Using the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy, the FOSPO formulates goals linked to the government funds, but Swiss Olympic can make autonomous decisions on how to distribute the funds and which achievements to demand from NSFs as a condition of the funds (Swiss Federal Council 2000, Chappelet 2010, Bayle 2017).

Nowadays, Swiss Olympic imposes the existence of statutes, a mission statement, financial planning and member statistics on NSFs to become a member of Swiss Olympic. To receive the basic government funds, the amount of which is determined by the number of members, Swiss Olympic requires NSFs to provide (1) a strategy, including the NSF's position towards grassroots and high-performance sport and measures for promotion of volunteers; (2) ethics planning, including a multi-annual planning of measures; and (3) an annual report, including the budget and financial statement. Since 2011, Switzerland's sport legislation has included extra funding for competitive sport. To receive this extra funding, Swiss Olympic imposes the definition of a high-performance sport promotion concept, including a strategy, objectives, a responsible person for high-performance sport and a detailed budget for high-performance sport, on NSFs. The amount of extra funding an NSF receives for competitive sport is based on a five-tier classification. The classification builds on the NSF's success in high-performance sport (i.e. success of elite athletes in international competitions, their potential success in the next Olympic cycle, success of young athletes in international competitions and quality of high-performance sport promotion concept implementation) and the relevance of the sport (i.e. international reputation, economic relevance and national popularity for active participants and spectators). Additional funds are provided for qualifying for the Olympic Games and organising mega events (Swiss Olympic 2018). With this funding system, Swiss Olympic exerts only minor influence on the NSFs' professionalisation compared with other sport systems (e.g. Canada, Australia) by demanding a few concrete measures as a condition of the funds. However, except for these conditions, the NSFs can autonomously decide how to invest the funds (Bayle 2017).

Theoretical background and literature review

Framework of causes, forms and consequences of professionalisation

Building on the conceptualisations of Bayle and Robinson (2007) and Legay (2001) and summarising extant sport management and sociological literature, Nagel *et al.* (2015) developed a conceptual framework for the analysis of NSFs' professionalisation (Figure 1). The framework suggests that a professionalisation process originates from specific causes, which can arise at the federation, the external environment and the internal environment levels. Such causes can lead to a change in professionalisation forms, from which specific consequences at the federation, the internal environment and the external environment levels can arise.

Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) literature review showed that much is known about potential causes (e.g. Ruoranen *et al.* 2018), forms (e.g. Amis *et al.* 2004b) and consequences of professionalisation (e.g. Bayle and Robinson 2007). However, to identify the challenges and opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes, examination of the proceedings of such professionalisation processes is required. As Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) framework does not account for the process perspective, we added Pettigrew's (1997) processual approach to include a focus on actions during the processes (i.e. how processes were conducted). The combination of Nagel *et al.*'s and Pettigrew's frameworks provides the frame to guide the empirical analysis of professionalisation processes in

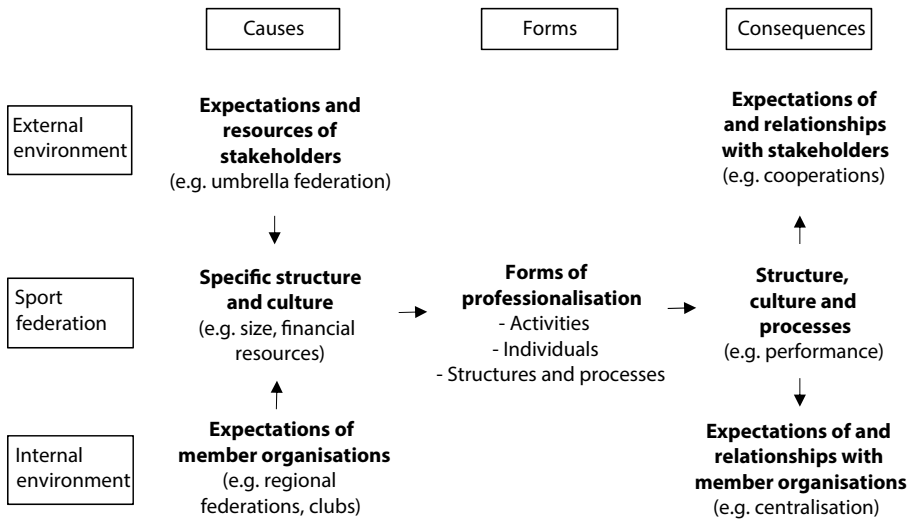


Figure 1. Multi-level framework for analysing professionalisation in sport federations (condensed form of Nagel *et al.* 2015, p. 412).

this study. The empirical analysis contributes by specifying and conceptualising the mechanisms of professionalisation processes and unpacking the challenges and opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes.

Processual approach

Pettigrew's (1987, 1997, 2012) processual approach suggests a multi-level, holistic analysis of change over a period of at least 12 years to avoid a focus on narrow changes. The four levels of Pettigrew's approach are context, process, content and outcome. Context considers factors that cause the change process at the federation (i.e. inner context) and environment (i.e. outer context) levels, similar to causes in Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) framework. Process refers to actions of the concerned actors during the process (e.g. decisions, behaviour, measures) that contribute to develop the content of the process. Content conforms with professionalisation forms in Nagel *et al.*'s framework. While Nagel *et al.* do not consider actions in their framework, Pettigrew (2012) postulates that a long-term interplay between context and action shapes content and outcome. Thus, outcome is the intermediate and final effect of context and action (i.e. consequences in Nagel *et al.*'s framework). In the following, we label the process level as 'action', because the word 'process' often defines the whole process, including context and outcome. According to Pettigrew (1987), the 'why' of change stems from the context, the 'how' from the actions and the 'what' from the content. For example, an NSF's board might realise that the NSF's organisational structure is no longer appropriate (i.e. context) and decides to discuss options to adapt the structure, engages an external consultant to support the discussion and promotes the process by setting deadlines and persistently controlling how the work proceeds (i.e. action). Finally, the NSF might adapt its organisational structure (i.e. content), resulting in board satisfaction (i.e. outcome).

Studies on professionalisation processes

After Kikulis *et al.* (1992) identified the well-known organisational design archetypes, follow-up studies examined changes in Canadian NSFs' organisational designs, which were imposed by sport policy (e.g. Slack and Hinings 1992, 1994, Kikulis *et al.* 1995, Amis *et al.* 2004b). The so-called Best Ever Programme pressured Canadian NSFs to become 'a professional bureaucracy controlled by

professional staff, with volunteers reduced to a supporting role' (Amis *et al.* 2004b, p. 20). These studies identified a shift to more bureaucratic and professionalised organisations. Parent *et al.* (2018) recently analysed the same NSFs and revealed a convergence in governance structures and the need to revisit Kikulis *et al.*'s (1992) design archetypes. However, these studies focused on what changed and, to a certain extent, why the changes occurred (e.g. Slack and Hinings 1992, 1994), but not how the changes were undertaken (i.e. actions during the processes).

Only a few studies have analysed the professionalisation process of NSFs holistically over multiple years, examining processes driven by sport political changes and impositions. Amis *et al.* (2004a) examined change processes in Canadian NSFs during the Best Ever Programme and found that not all the processes were successfully completed. The successful ones were characterised by leaders who created a vision and persuaded other members, as well as voluntary board members who were willing to share power with paid staff. The unsuccessful ones were characterised by ineffective transformational leadership, volunteer board members with centralised power, subunits (e.g. volunteers) with deviating interests and a lack of financial and human resources. NSFs also complained that the financial support provided by Sport Canada was not adequate for the imposed changes, and that Sport Canada viewed success at the Olympic Games as the only criterion of achievement, a criterion that was not relevant for many sports. Skinner *et al.* (1999) and O'Brien and Slack (2003, 2004) found that the Paris Declaration, which allowed the financial remuneration of rugby players, led to the professionalisation of Queensland and English Rugby Union. With this adapted regulation, new business-oriented actors entered the field and brought professionally oriented values with them, took measures to advocate their interests and created a collective vision; however, these professionalisation processes were hindered by a lack of financial resources and leadership. Girginov and Sandanski (2008) analysed the change in Bulgarian NSFs over multiple decades, when the country was undergoing fundamental political, economic and social transformations. These transformations led to a restructuring of the sport sector, including a redistribution of capital, which caused change processes in the NSFs. All these studies found relevant contexts and actions for imposed professionalisation processes but neither differentiated between context and action nor analysed inter-relationships and reconstructed the mechanisms of these processes.

A few action research studies have analysed self-regulated professionalisation processes. However, these processes were guided by the researchers of the studies. These studies focused on the analysis of specific professionalisation forms, which involved either the professionalisation of strategic capability (Ferkins *et al.* 2009, 2010) or governance capability (Shilbury and Ferkins 2015). Evaluating an intervention period of 18 months, these studies revealed the importance of shared leadership, board involvement in strategy and collective board leadership in governance decision-making. Fahrner (2009) analysed self-regulated changes in organisational structures of a single NSF with a focus on decision-making processes and found that the different opinions of members, key individuals with particular influence on decisions, intransparent preparation of decisions from top down and a lack of communication before and after decisions were problematic for decision-making processes. While these studies provide first results about specific self-regulated professionalisation processes, they do not explain the inter-relationships among multiple concurrent or consecutive professionalisation processes (i.e. longitudinal course of the processes). For this aim, a more holistic and long-term process analysis is required.

According to this review, many previous studies have analysed why professionalisation processes were undertaken (i.e. context), but only a few studies have also considered how the processes were conducted (i.e. actions taken during the process). Furthermore, the studies focused mainly on professionalisation processes imposed by sport policy. Although imposed professionalisation processes may be accompanied by self-regulated processes, previous research has not distinguished between imposed and self-regulated professionalisation processes. Furthermore, previous research has not differentiated among context, action, content and outcome of professionalisation processes or analysed inter-relationships. Thus, it remains unclear which contexts and actions are relevant to conduct self-regulated professionalisation processes and how they shape outcome (i.e. mechanisms of the processes).

To address this research gap, we formulated two research questions: Which contexts and actions are relevant to the NSF's professionalisation processes? (RQ1) and How do contexts and actions shape the outcome of the professionalisation processes (i.e. inter-relationships; RQ2)? The analysis of contexts reveals whether the processes are imposed or self-regulated. Additional analysis of the relevant contexts and actions, and how these contexts and actions shape outcome, unpacks the mechanisms of self-regulated professionalisation processes and enables identifying the challenges and opportunities arising from these processes.

Method

Design

Drawing on the conceptual background of Nagel *et al.* (2015) and Pettigrew (1987, 1997, 2012), this study analyses the four levels of context, action, content and outcome of professionalisation processes and their inter-relationships. Pettigrew (2012, p. 1316) emphasised that a process analysis considering inter-relationships among context, action, content and outcome is 'one of the greatest inductive challenges' for process researchers. To meet the required standards and manage such an in-depth analysis, focusing on one case is appropriate (Yin 2014). A qualitative single-case study design enables conducting an in-depth analysis of the NSF's long-term professionalisation processes, capturing the complexity of this process and gaining a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Skille 2013). The main criterion for the selection of a suitable NSF for this case study was that the NSF underwent a fundamental professionalisation process from a volunteer-administered to a professionally-led NSF (e.g. employment of first paid staff, formalisation of documents) during the last 20 years. Processes older than 20 years are difficult to reconstruct because of missing documents and faulty memories (Yin 2014). This criterion was selective because the larger, highly professionalised NSFs began these crucial professionalisation processes earlier, and many smaller NSFs are still volunteer-administered. Combined with a more pragmatic criterion of accessibility of data (e.g. board meeting minutes, interviews), which was relevant to reconstruct the process, we selected the Swiss Orienteering Federation (SOF) as our research subject.

SOF is a member of the International Orienteering Federation and promotes orienteering sports (foot-orienteering, ski-orienteering, bike-orienteering) in Switzerland. Orienteering is a well-known sport in Switzerland; however, the NSF, with its 11 regional federations, 90 clubs and 8539 members, is small. Despite its non-Olympic status, SOF has reached the second-highest grant classification, mainly because of the constant international success of elite and young Swiss athletes. In the early 2000s, SOF was completely managed by volunteers. Nowadays, SOF has nearly eight paid full-time staff equivalents (i.e. permanent staff and part-time paid mandates). Although the NSF has grown only marginally in size (i.e. associated clubs and members), it has professionalised instruments and documents, organisational structure and staff. In their study on professionalisation designs among Swiss NSFs, Lang *et al.* (2018) examined professionalisation types among Swiss NSFs and classified the SOF in a group with primarily Olympic NSFs, whose professionalisation design is characterised by a particular focus on the professionalisation of the sport sector (i.e. paid trainers and support staff).

Data collection

We collected organisational documents (e.g. strategic concepts, organigrams) and archival minutes from board meetings and general assemblies from 2002 to 2018, because an initial screening of documents showed that the first context factors leading to the initiation of the first crucial professionalisation processes within the SOF came up in 2002. Thus, we followed Pettigrew's (1997) suggestion to analyse a period of at least 12 years. We held in-depth interviews with key individuals of SOF (for an overview of collected data, see Table 1) to triangulate the data and supplement the information from documents. The interviewees and period of analysis were defined on the basis of

an initial screening of organisational documents and archival minutes and in agreement with the current CEO. The criteria for the choice of interviewees were that they were (1) active in the NSF during overlapping spans of the analysed period (2002–2018), (2) key actors in the crucial professionalisation processes and (3) accessible for interviews. Because of the size of SOF and the few changes in key positions, the number of key actors was small. Three interviews were conducted in 2015 and captured the period from 2002 to 2015 retrospectively. The data on SOF's professionalisation processes reached saturation after these three interviews. At the beginning of 2019, we conducted another interview to discuss developments in the last 3 years and to answer any questions that came up during the preliminary analysis of documents and interviews from 2002 to 2015. The interviews lasted between 69 and 99 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data analysis began with a screening of organisational documents and archival minutes to gain an overview of the data and identify the potential interview partners and period of analysis. In a first step, the minutes of board meetings and general assemblies from 2002 to 2018 (including appendices) were reduced to information relevant to SOF's professionalisation, to compile a chronological sequence (see Yin 2014) of context, action, content and outcome. This was the most fundamental and extensive part of the analysis. Organisational documents (e.g. organigrams, organisation regulations, strategic concepts) assisted in this step. While the documents provided only first insights into how processes were conducted (i.e. actions), the interviews mainly served to explore actions as a second step. When feasible, we cross-checked the information gleaned in the interviews against the document sources, and vice versa, to triangulate the data (see Yin 2014).

For content analysis, a 'start list' of codes was deduced from Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) framework of professionalisation, which provided the deductive frame of the analysis. However, we created additional codes using inductive descriptive and causation coding. We applied descriptive coding to identify the content of SOF's professionalisation processes and then assigned contexts, actions and outcome to the identified contents using causation coding (see Miles *et al.* 2014) (for an example see Table 2). We subsequently re-analysed contexts, actions and contents independent of the chronology using descriptive and pattern coding (see Miles *et al.* 2014) to reduce them to a smaller number of themes (for an example see Table 3). We re-read the documents and transcripts to compare codes and, when necessary, merged, re-named or removed them. This procedure

Table 1. Collected data.

Source	Date	Details
Archival minutes		
Board meeting minutes	2002–2018	104 documents
Relevant appendices	2002–2018	116 documents
General assembly minutes	2002–2018	10 documents
Organisational documents		
Mission statement	2018	1 document
Organigrams	2010; 2018	2 documents
Organisation regulations	2010; 2018	2 documents
Statutes	2017	1 document
Strategies incl. appendix	2005–2010; 2011–2016; 2017–2022	3 documents
Marketing strategy	2014	1 document
Annual reports	2002–2018	14 documents
Interviews		
Group interview: President and head of executive office	1 April 2015	President since 2014; head of executive office 2014–2016, then CEO
Former president	8 June 2015	President 2007–2014
Former vice president	8 July 2015	Vice president 2004–2007, member of the board since 1993
CEO	9 January 2019	CEO since 2017, former head of executive office

Table 2. Example for causation coding.

No.	Context	Action	Content	Outcome
1	World orienteering championships 2003, increasing workload	Decision of the board to pay the secretary	Payment of secretary	Better conditions for secretary but still not ideal
2	Process to establish an executive office	Appointment of working group	Strategy 2005–2010	Supporting document for the establishment of an executive office
3	New president 2004	Initiative to formalise roles and competencies of board members	Document of roles and competencies of board members	Clarification of roles and competencies
4	Pressure from the sponsor to improve communication activities	Initiative of head of commission communication	Paid mandate for commission communication (20%)	First communication concept; new webpage; double mandate
...

Note. The information is ordered by the date of completion of the process

assisted in maintaining the trustworthiness of the data analysis and limiting the extent of researcher subjectivity (Miles *et al.* 2014). The lead author developed the codes, while a co-author, who closely accompanied the research process (e.g. attended interviews), checked the identified codes. Pattern coding was applied to determine the relevant contexts and actions of professionalisation processes (RQ1). The first-order themes of pattern coding described the identified contexts, actions and contents in more detail. The combination of causation and pattern coding served to illuminate how contexts and actions shape the outcome of the professionalisation processes (i.e. inter-relationships; RQ2). The content analysis was computer-assisted with Atlas.ti, which helped manage the large number of documents. The selected quotations for the 'Results' section were translated from German into English.

Results

Identification of the relevant contexts and actions (RQ1)

We summarise the contents of professionalisation in the period analysed to foster understanding of the case and the identified contexts and actions. We classified the identified contents into (1) *creation and formalisation of instruments and documents* (i.e. strategy, communication concept, marketing concept, allocation of roles and competencies, working contracts, sponsoring contracts and organisation regulations), (2) *employment of paid staff* (i.e. paid secretary, paid trainers, paid mandates and paid employees in the executive office) and (3) *changes in organisational structure* (i.e. mandates, establishment of an executive office and reorganisation of organisational structure, including reduction of board members, new structure of commissions and departments and appointment of a CEO).

We classified the contexts of the SOF's professionalisation processes into (1) *impositions by external stakeholders* (i.e. impositions as a condition of government funds and sponsor money), (2) *expectations of external stakeholders* (i.e. expectations of sponsors, event organisers, Swiss Olympic and the FOSPO), (3) *expectations of staff* (e.g. coaches), (4) *change in positions* (e.g. new president), (5) *increasing financial resources* (e.g. from sponsors or Swiss Olympic), (6) *decreasing financial resources* (e.g. from sponsors or Swiss Olympic), (7) *problematic organisational structure* (e.g. too much operative work among board members) and (8) *priorities* (e.g. higher prioritisation of an event other than professionalisation processes).

We identified the following actions during SOF's professionalisation processes: (1) *appointed working groups*, (2) *participative preparation of decisions*, (3) *creation and usage of supporting documents*, (4) *usage of sustainable finances*, (5) *insufficient preparation of processes*, (6) *realistic time management*, (7) *promoting individuals* and (8) *resisting individuals*. For working groups, a balanced selection of experienced group members (i.e. representatives for the different affected parties) was

Table 3. Example for descriptive and pattern coding.

Codes	First-order themes	Second-order themes
Three options for executive office	Multiple options to chose	Participative preparation of decisions
Four options for reorganisation (first attempt)		
Three options for reorganisation (second attempt)	Voting for options	
Delegates vote for desired option		
Board discusses options	Transparent advance information	
Board agrees for one option		
Board confirms constitution of working group	Participative advance information	
Options were presented four times		
Delegates voted two times for proceeding of the process	Common sense	
Transparent communication of results		
Visits in regional federations to explain intentions of new strategy		
Information for club through regional federations		
Common sense among decision makers		
Unanimous voting		
Only few counter votes		

important, and an external consultant was deemed helpful. Promoting individuals were usually board members, particularly the president, or paid employees who helped foster the process in its preparation and implementation phase. They were persistent and convincing and were appointed for this 'job' if they did not take the initiative themselves. Resisting individuals were mainly board members and club presidents who did not agree with the professionalisation plans or decisions (e.g. critique, counter votes). Such resistance led to deceleration or stagnation of the professionalisation processes and to dissatisfaction of the resisting people if the plans were implemented despite the resistance. Participative preparation of decisions included transparent and long-term advance information and voting, with multiple options to choose for all affected parties. Documents (e.g. strategy) supported lobbying and, thus, the progress or even success of a process; if these did not exist, they were created. Professionalisation processes required time because of the limited availability of voluntary workers, the need for democratic decisions and the need to wait for other upcoming priorities (e.g. mega events). The implementation phase also required time, for example, to accommodate new situations and correct problematic outcome. Processes were insufficiently prepared if not enough lead time was calculated (e.g. communication, preparatory processes), necessary documents were not prepared or decisions were made without the participation of the affected parties. Usage of sustainable finances means the decision to use long-term available financial resources for professionalisation (e.g. for the employment of permanent paid staff).

Identification of inter-relationships among context, action and outcome (RQ2)

The analysis of how contexts and actions shape outcome (i.e. inter-relationships; RQ2) showed that shorter-term professionalisation processes, which were most prevalent, usually had relatively simpler systematics than longer-term processes. Shorter-term professionalisation processes (e.g. formulation of a communication concept) were dependent on single context factors (e.g. a sponsor demanded a communication concept), which led to a single action (e.g. creation of a communication concept by a working group) and a specific outcome (e.g. satisfaction of the sponsor). However, the two key professionalisation processes in the case of SOF – namely, the establishment of an executive office and the reorganisation of organisational structure – were longer-term processes and showed complex inter-relationships among context, action and outcome (i.e. multiple inter-related context factors from different organisational levels, a long-term action phase and both positive and negative outcome). To understand the mechanisms of such complex processes, we analysed these two key processes in detail with regard to RQ2. We reconstruct these two processes in the following paragraphs with separate sub-sections for context, action and outcome, to track the inter-relationships among contexts, actions and outcome. The contexts and actions identified under RQ1 appear in italics in the text. We address the question of how these contexts and actions shape the outcome of the processes (RQ2) in the discussion section.

Establishment of an executive office: context

One of the main catalysts for the professionalisation of SOF was the combination of the world orienteering championship (WOC) 2003 in Switzerland and the sCOOL project, which is a long-term event series in Swiss schools intended to connect young generations with the orienteering sport. A Swiss bank began sponsoring the sCOOL project after an extraordinary sCOOL event in connection with the WOC 2003 (*increasing financial resources*). At the same time, the WOC brought a high workload to the secretary, who at the time was a volunteer (*problematic organisational structure*). During the preparation for the WOC 2003, SOF began paying the secretary a salary, who became the first paid staff for the SOF. However, '[the secretary] had an extreme amount of work and was still not well paid for this work. She was a paid volunteer' (*problematic organisational structure*; former vice president, 8 July 2015). SOF realised that it was becoming more difficult to find volunteers for administrative work. Another problem was that the voluntary secretary was not reachable during office hours, which stakeholders (e.g. sponsors, Swiss Olympic, event organisers) increasingly

expected (*expectations of external stakeholders*). Furthermore, the commission presidents, who were also members of the board, had too much administrative work (*problematic organisational structure*). Therefore, the SOF considered establishing an executive office to be responsible for the main administrative tasks. The president of the organising committee of the WOC 2003 pushed this process (*expectations of staff*).

In 2004, the sCOOL sponsor also decided to support the national team and a new international elite event and thus became SOF's main sponsor (*increasing financial resources*). SOF's young talent, which won WOC titles in 2001, 2003 and 2004 and was the overall World Cup winner in 2002 and 2004, might have been one reason sponsoring the national team was attractive to the sponsor. In the course of this extended engagement, the *expectations of the sponsor* were growing:

The sponsor counted the number of articles and pictures in journals per year and showed us the statistics. In the end, the sponsor wanted us to sell ourselves better. He said we need to have a communication position, higher quality of the magazine, more professionalised website, photo archive of the top athletes ... Those were relatively clear expectations of the sponsor, which pushed this process [of the establishment of an executive office]. On the other hand, our athletes benefited from the sponsoring. (Former president, 8 June 2015)

Establishment of an executive office: action

After the WOC 2003, a *working group* was appointed to analyse the sustainable functioning and financing of SOF because paid work appeared unavoidable in the future. The working group concluded that a combination of voluntary work on the board and paid administration was the only long-term solution to secure the sustainable development of SOF. The working group also charged the board with developing a strategic concept as a *supporting document* to promote the objective of establishing an executive office. The new president (elected in 2004) and the vice president led and promoted this strategic process (*promoting individuals*). They appointed another *working group* to develop SOF's strategy 2005–2010, thereby focusing on including all relevant parties within the SOF, such as representatives of regional federations, clubs, young members and women (*participative preparation of decisions*).

The strategy 2005–2010 included the aim to establish an executive office. In 2006, a *working group* focusing on financial resources developed three options for the structure of the executive office. Two options included raising membership and race entry fees; the third, more extensive option included charging additional sponsoring fees. The working group emphasised the relevance of the *usage of sustainable finances* (i.e. long-term available financial resources). The working group also created a *supporting document* for lobbying, which stated the reasons for an executive office, its tasks and the benefit for clubs and members. In total, the results of the working group were presented four times in annual and extraordinary general assemblies. Two times the delegates had to confirm the proceedings of the preparation process (*participative preparation of decisions*). 'The preparation process needed 2 years' time' (*realistic time management*; former vice president, 8 July 2015).

There was also scepticism. The clubs were not our friends that time. Young club presidents supported the attempt but the idea was suspect to older club presidents. There was also critique among the board members (*resisting individuals*). It is clear, nowadays, more people support the decision but in the beginning it was not as unanimous. (Former vice president, 8 July 2015)

The executive office began the operative work in 2008.

Establishment of an executive office: outcome

The commission presidents were required to delegate administrative work to the executive office. While this worked well for certain commissions, other commission presidents resisted doing so (*resisting individuals*). 'They said that they did this work for 30 years voluntarily. They will still do this, why do we need an executive office for these tasks?' (former president, 8 June 2015).

The first two or three years, I talked repeatedly to the commission presidents to convince them to transfer their administrative work to the executive office. I wrote this concept and I wanted to implement it. I treated, punched, enslaved, and maybe also convinced them until I succeeded (*promoting individuals*). However, there were a few critical minds from the beginning and they were the same who resisted in the realisation phase as long as they were part of the board (*resisting individuals*). After two, three years they quit. The resistance declined continuously (*realistic time management*). (Former president, 8 June 2015)

The executive office had mainly positive consequences at the federation and external environment levels. The secretary was no longer overloaded, and commission presidents were relieved of too much administrative work. Furthermore, the executive office contributed to meet the expectations of stakeholders. On the internal environment level, individual members were usually not involved in the executive office's work.

First attempt at the reorganisation of organisational structure: context

The new president elected in 2007 (*change in positions*) decided to re-analyse and update the strategic goals in a working group, though the strategic cycle 2005–2010 was not yet finished. In addition to making minor adaptations to the strategic concept, the respective working group concluded that the board was too large (i.e. 14 members) and that many board members completed too many executive-level tasks (*problematic organisational structure*). Therefore, the group recommended that the organisational structure be 'reorganised' in connection with the establishment of the executive office. Thus, the statutes were updated in the context of the establishment of the executive office and mandated a separation of strategic and operative tasks.

First attempt at the reorganisation of organisational structure: action

Until the operative start of the executive office in 2008, the board was not concerned with the reorganisation, though the working group in the context of the update of strategic goals emphasised its necessity (*insufficient preparation of processes*). However, because the new statutes mandated a separation of strategic and operative tasks (*supporting document*), the board discussed the reorganisation of organisational structure in the first board meeting after the operative start of the executive office. One board meeting later, the president proposed four options for a new board structure in the board meeting (lacking *participative preparation of decisions*). However, some board members resisted this attempt for reorganisation (*resisting individuals*) because they did not agree with the president's propositions. 'I made an attempt that time, we discussed about the options to decrease the number of board members. ... I did not succeed. Each commission president who would have been eliminated feared that his or her department would drown' (former president, 8 June 2015). Furthermore, 'they did not want to lose the financial autonomy' (CEO, 9 January 2019).

First attempt at the reorganisation of organisational structure: outcome

The discussion was adjourned, and subsequently, the president was appointed the role of the CEO.

I had the chance, I had the time, I took the time, I could arrange it with my private life. However, I knew that in the mid-term (*realistic time management*), the executive office had to overtake more operative work than they did at this time. This thought faded into the background, simply because of the WOC 2012 (*priorities*) and after the WOC my term was over. (Former president, 8 June 2015)

Second attempt at the reorganisation of organisational structure: context

In 2014, a new president was elected (*change in positions*). 'In my first year as a president, I heard comments of board members several times that the board is sluggish because there are too many board members and too many operative discussions' (president, 1 April 2015). In particular, the president was overloaded (*problematic organisational structure*). 'There were such dynamics in these discussions among board members that I realised we have to take action' (president, 1 April 2015). In

addition, Swiss Olympic, FOSPO and sponsors preferred a single contact person with decision-making authority (*expectations of external stakeholders*). Up to that time, the head of the executive office handled mainly administrative tasks and had no power to make decisions (*problematic organisational structure*). Therefore, the board discussed changing the position of the head of the executive office to the CEO as part of the reorganisation. The board decided to conduct a workshop to determine the organisational structure.

Second attempt at the reorganisation of organisational structure: action

At the beginning of 2015, a *working group* of five people prepared two workshops led by an external consultant and accompanied by the president of another Swiss NSF, who was experienced with reorganisation processes. To prepare for the workshop, the group evaluated the objectives defined in the strategy 2011–2016 (*supporting document*) and defined three options for a new organisational structure. The workshops were subsequently held with the whole board (*participative preparation of decisions*).

It happened very fast and it was surprising to me that the commissions could be subordinated to the executive office in these two workshops. We followed the model of a private company . . . There was a common sense, the vision and the goals were clear but I do not know why. The president was fully committed to this process and the proposed changes, this might be a reason (*promoting individuals*). Furthermore, we trusted the external consultant and he did not avoid uncomfortable discussions. (CEO, 9 January 2019)

The results of the workshop were sent to the club presidents to be discussed at the presidents' conference at the end of 2015. The results were also discussed with the regional federations (*participative preparation of decisions*). 'We invested a lot of time to communicate the results transparently (*realistic time management*). This might be the reason that the general assembly accepted changes in statutes and organisation regulations with very few abstentions and counter votes' (CEO, 9 January 2019). The board was reduced from fourteen to seven members, the head of the executive office became the CEO of SOF and the commissions were restructured.

Second attempt at the reorganisation of organisational structure: outcome

The positive outcome included the reduction of the number of board members and the discharge of the president of operative work. The consequences of the external environment were also positive:

Swiss Olympic praised us very much for this initiative and also the FOSPO is glad to have one single point of contact. It is good that the person who is in the meetings is the same who signs the contract. This person is also the one contacted when something does not work. (CEO, 9 January 2019)

As a negative outcome, the roles of the new executive office and the board remain somewhat unclear (e.g. who decides what in which case; *insufficient preparation of processes*) and the board still does not think strategically enough. 'This is an important part of the whole process, which is yet to come' (CEO, 9 January 2019).

Discussion

Mechanisms of professionalisation processes

The analysis of contexts (RQ1) served to differentiate between imposed and self-regulated professionalisation processes within the SOF. While most of the analysed processes were self-regulated by the SOF, we also identified processes that were externally imposed by Swiss Olympic (e.g. the creation of a promotion concept for young and high-performance athletes) or the sponsor (e.g. paid mandates for the sCOOL project and a part-time communication position), which provided financial resources in return for these professionalisation processes. In consideration of the research gap identified in the literature review, the subsequent analyses focused on the self-regulated professionalisation processes.

The question of how the contexts and actions identified under RQ1 shape outcome (i.e. inter-relationships; RQ2) contributed to specify the mechanisms of professionalisation processes on the basis of Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) and Pettigrew's (1997) frameworks. The results show that the identified contexts have either a promoting (e.g. increase in financial resources) or a hindering (e.g. other priorities) influence on whether actors take action to initiate a professionalisation process (see also Ruoranen *et al.* 2018). If the promoting contexts outweigh the hindering ones, the process is initiated. For example, the pressure from staff and stakeholders on the SOF to establish an executive office was stronger than the financial barriers. The subsequent action phase can be differentiated into preparation (i.e. preparation for the voting in the board or general assembly about the realisation of the process), decision-making (i.e. decision about whether or not the process is being realised) and realisation (i.e. realisation of the process after the decision). Just as contexts do, actions have either a promoting or a hindering influence on the next process step, and promoting actions need to outweigh hindering actions for the process to continue. In addition, the action phase is co-determined by contexts (see also Pettigrew 1997). SOF's president, for example, promoted the initiation of the preparation of the first attempt at reorganisation of the organisational structure; however, the hindering actions of resisting board members and the higher priority of the upcoming WOC 2012 (i.e. context) outweighed this action so the board decided not to realise the reorganisation at that time.

If promoting contexts and actions outweigh hindering contexts and actions in each process step (i.e. before initiation, during preparation and during realisation), the content of professionalisation can be realised, which leads to the satisfaction of those who promoted the process, such as stakeholders, staff or board members (i.e. intended outcome). However, hindering contexts and actions, which are outweighed by promoting contexts and actions, can produce an unintended outcome of the professionalisation process (e.g. dissatisfaction of commission presidents, which resisted the establishment of an executive office).

The results further show that the professionalisation processes do not necessarily end after having produced an outcome. Instead, the outcome can lead to a new professionalisation process (e.g. the process of establishing an executive office led to a follow-up process of the reorganisation of organisational structure). In addition, side-actions and side-contents (e.g. formulation of a strategy to support the process) can be initiated during or after a professionalisation process.

Previous studies on professionalisation have shown similar contexts (e.g. expectations of external stakeholders; Nagel *et al.* 2015, Ruoranen *et al.* 2018) and actions (e.g. promoting individuals, resisting individuals, insufficient preparation of processes; Skinner *et al.* 1999, O'Brien and Slack 2003, 2004, Amis *et al.* 2004a) to those of the current study. However, we also uncovered additional contexts (i.e. problematic organisational structure, priorities) and actions (i.e. realistic time calculation, appointed working groups, creation and usage of supporting documents, participative preparation of decisions and sustainable financing) that are relevant for self-regulated professionalisation processes. Furthermore, we reconstructed the mechanisms of professionalisation processes by analysing inter-relationships among context, action, content and outcome, which has not been done in previous research and contributes to a holistic understanding of professionalisation processes.

Conceptualisation of the mechanisms of professionalisation processes

We used the results obtained by analysing self-regulated professionalisation processes based on Nagel *et al.*'s (2015) framework of professionalisation and Pettigrew's (1997) processual approach to propose a conceptualisation of the mechanisms of professionalisation processes (see Figure 2). Such a conceptualisation does not exist to date. The results include four main conclusions. First, we identified not only promoting but also hindering contexts for professionalisation processes. This result complements Nagel *et al.*'s framework of professionalisation (see Figure 1), which considers only promoting contexts (i.e. causes). Second, the results show that the actions of concerned actors are relevant to the continuation and the outcome of the process. Actions can be differentiated into preparation, decision-

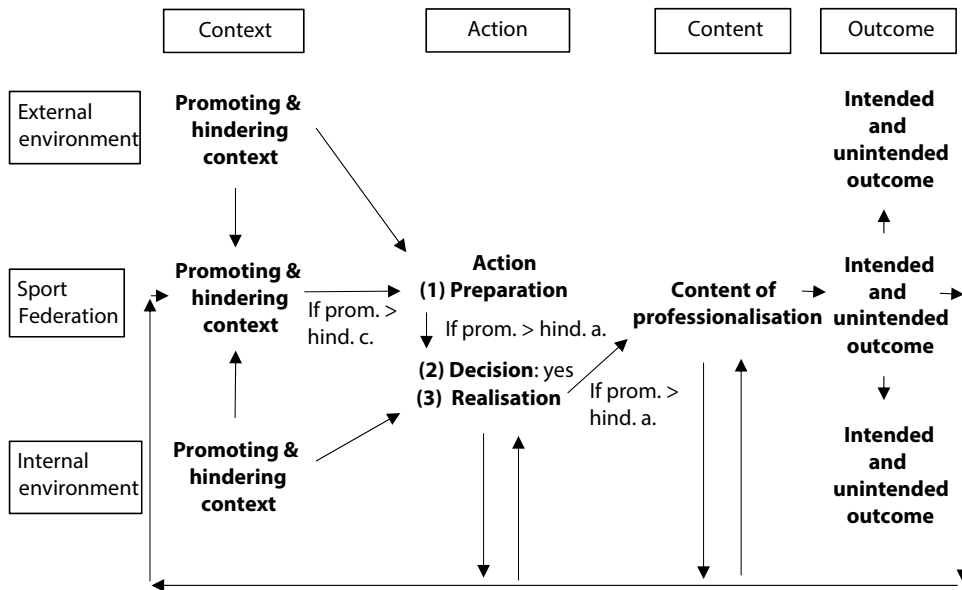


Figure 2. Conceptualisation of the mechanisms of professionalisation processes.

making and realisation. Third, the outcome of professionalisation processes can be intended and unintended. Fourth, professionalisation processes can initiate subsequent processes or side-action and side-content (see arrows indicating potential additional loops in Figure 2).

Challenges and opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes

The aim of investigating the mechanisms of self-regulated professionalisation processes was to unpack the challenges and opportunities arising from these processes. The analysis of inter-relationships among context, action and outcome (RQ2) showed that the timing of self-regulated professionalisation processes (i.e. when to initiate the process with respective actions) can be adapted to organisation-specific contexts (e.g. priorities, changes in position, availability of sustainable financial resources), which is an opportunity for self-regulated processes. Furthermore, the non-existent time constraints during the action phase enable a realistic time calculation, appointment of working groups, creation and usage of supporting documents, participative preparation of decisions and reduction of insufficiently prepared processes. These actions contribute to a successful preparation and realisation of professionalisation processes. In addition, the results show that self-regulated professionalisation processes create the opportunity to adapt the content of the professionalisation processes to the NSF's and its stakeholders' expectations (see also Fahlén *et al.* 2015), whereas the content of imposed professionalisation processes is specified by sport policy.

The analysis of contexts and actions showed that the successful initiation of the preparation phase of a professionalisation process is a major challenge of self-regulated professionalisation processes, given other options for investing financial and human resources (i.e. priorities). Therefore, internal and external expectations, which put pressure on the NSF, are necessary to convince employees and members of a self-regulated professionalisation process. After a self-regulated process is initiated, the non-existent time constraints can be challenging and may result in slow or stagnating processes during both the preparation and realisation phases of a process. In particular, the preparation phase is intensive and time-consuming and could be shortened by political impositions, including implementation instructions (e.g. Amis *et al.* 2004a). However,

political impositions do not necessarily lead to the successful completion of a professionalisation process (Amis *et al.* 2004a, Green and Houlihan 2006, Fahlén *et al.* 2015).

Regarding the identified challenges and opportunities, a predominantly self-regulated sport policy system enables greater organisation specificity of the professionalisation processes (i.e. timing, content) but entails risks of less control over and effectiveness of NSFs' professionalisation processes and an 'illusory freedom' for NSFs. Similar results can be found in sport policy implementation literature regarding imposed and self-regulated policy implementation processes (e.g. Green and Houlihan 2006, Fahlén *et al.* 2015). However, these studies do not analyse professionalisation processes specifically. Literature on professionalisation, in turn, has not differentiated between imposed and self-regulated professionalisation processes to date. Therefore, the results complement the existing literature on professionalisation. In light of the results, we recommend the imposition of basic professionalisation processes on all NSFs (e.g. existence of a strategy) because the challenges of self-regulated processes outweigh the opportunities in this case. However, for far-reaching professionalisation processes (e.g. shift of decision-making authority from volunteer to paid staff), the opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes might outweigh the challenges, at least when the same impositions are defined for all NSFs. In the end, sport policymakers need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of self-regulated professionalisation processes to determine the extent to which sport policy imposes professionalisation processes on NSFs.

Limitations and future research

This single-case study served to improve the understanding and conceptualisation of the mechanisms of professionalisation processes. However, an analysis of other cases that involve relevant contexts, actions and possible intended and unintended outcome of professionalisation is necessary to complement Figure 2. In particular, previous research on professionalisation processes has widely neglected relevant actions during professionalisation processes. While this study focused on self-regulated professionalisation processes, an analysis of both the sport policy imposed and self-regulated professionalisation processes would yield more comprehensive and comparable results in terms of the challenges and opportunities arising from imposed and self-regulated professionalisation processes (e.g. is there a difference in the sustainability of the processes' outcome?). Such results would further contribute to the question of the extent to which sport policy imposes professionalisation processes on NSFs. Future studies should also analyse NSFs in different countries to distinguish between impositions for all NSFs (e.g. Amis *et al.* 2004a) and organisation- or type-specific impositions (e.g. Thieme 2017) as well as between top-down and bottom-up implementation (see O'Gorman 2011) of professionalisation processes.

We chose the interviewees for this study within the NSF because our focus was on the proceedings of professionalisation processes. However, to ideally meet the requirements of a holistic analysis, additional primary data from the internal and external environment level would be useful (e.g. interviews with club presidents, regional federation presidents, stakeholder representatives). Furthermore, social desirability must be critically questioned because professionalisation is usually deemed a desirable process, and the interviewees might not be willing to reveal any undesired actions in which they were involved. However, the interviewees seemed to openly reflect on both positive and negative actions. Furthermore, two interviewees were no longer active in the NSF by the time of data collection. Another challenge was that the analysed period of 17 years was long, so it was sometimes difficult for the interviewees to recollect situations that had occurred in the past. The triangulation of interview data, archival minutes and documents helped reduce these difficulties, as did the information from the different sources.

The results regarding the challenges and opportunities arising from self-regulated professionalisation processes should also prove useful for other countries with sport systems containing NSFs that govern voluntary sport clubs (e.g. diverse European countries, Australia, Canada), because each of these governments is confronted with the question of the extent to which sport policy imposes

professionalisation processes on NSFs. The results of the relevant contexts and actions can be useful for sport managers in diverse sport systems, because NSFs in sport systems with more restrictive impositions in terms of professionalisation are also allowed to conduct self-regulated professionalisation processes, as long as they do not contravene the regulations. Furthermore, imposed professionalisation processes may also benefit from promoting contexts and actions.

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