Over the last couple of decades, governance has become increasingly recognised as a crucial process: first in the private sector, following high-profile commercial failures in the 1980s; and latterly in the public and voluntary sectors. The board of directors plays a central role in the process of good governance. The board is concerned with strategy, leadership, change, conformance, performance and a number of other functions. Academic research on governance has often been prescriptive – models of how boards should operate and advice offered to practitioners. A number of codes designed to aid stock-market listed organisations, non-listed organisations, and nonprofit organisations, charities, and community organisations have also been prescriptive in nature. However, research examining how boards actually operate has often found major gaps between the prescriptions of the governance literature and what occurs and what is considered possible ‘on the ground’. In this respect, it can be argued that an understanding of good governance is not simply about complying with certain procedures but is more about the creation of standards and behaviours that add value to an organisation.

In the sport sector, good governance has also risen rapidly up the agenda. Over the past decade within the UK, sports councils and national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) have been encouraged to professionalise their administrative structures as part of a process of modernisation. NGBs are central to the provision of sport participation opportunities and elite sport in most westernised countries. They are nonprofit organisations that often rely on a volunteer board to oversee multiple and diverse roles that include the organisation and management of competitions, coach development, increasing participation, developing talent, volunteer training, marketing and promoting the sport, and bidding for and hosting competitions. That NGBs should be governed effectively is increasingly recognised both within and outside sport. For example, the UK government has committed itself to ‘improving governance arrangements to ensure that sporting bodies better reflect the needs of the communities they serve’. In addition, the Sport and Recreation Alliance recently launched the Voluntary Code of Good Governance for the Sport and Recreation Sector, which focuses primarily on the board.

Within academia, sport governance and the board is a relatively under-researched topic. A recent comprehensive review reached the following conclusion: ‘The body of research devoted to the study of governance within any form of sport organisation is in its infancy’. This is, however, slowly changing, with a number of published books and articles addressing sport governance issues.
The role of the board in UK national governing bodies of sport

Written by Walters, G. et al

Wednesday, 21 September 2011 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 10 February 2013 11:37

Editor's comments

This report examines governance in the voluntary sports sector, focusing on NGBs in the UK. There are over 300 NGBs in the UK recognised by the four Sports Councils and they vary significantly across a range of factors, such as turnover, organisational structure, the number of staff, and the number of member clubs and individual members. This report builds on a similar report by the Birkbeck Sport Business Centre published last year that looked at a range of broader governance issues.

Reference
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