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[Valentina Stefanica](#)\*, [Marko Joksimović](#), [Halil İbrahim Ceylan](#), [Raul- Ioan Muntean](#)

Posted Date: 7 May 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202405.0325.v1

Keywords: affirmative action; recruitment strategies; decision making; board selection; organizational culture



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*Article*

# Navigating the Path to Management: Insights into Sport Manager Selection and Diversity Strategies in Romania

Valentina Stefanica <sup>1,\*</sup>, Marko Joksimović <sup>2</sup>, Halil İbrahim Ceylan <sup>3</sup> and Raul-Ioan Muntean <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Physical Education and Sport, Faculty of Sciences, Physical Education and Informatics, National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest, Pitesti University Center, Pitesti, Romania, valentina.stefanica@upb.ro

<sup>2</sup> Faculty for Sport and Physical Education, University of Montenegro, Cetinjski put 2, 81000 Podgorica, Montenegro; marko.j@ucg.ac.me

<sup>3</sup> Department of Physical Education of Sports Teaching, Faculty of Kazim Karabekir Education, Atatürk University, Erzurum, Turkey; halil.ibrahimceylan60@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup> Department of Physical Education and Sport, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, University "1 Decembrie 1918" of Alba Iulia, Alba Iulia, Romania, muntean.raul@uab.ro

\* Correspondence: valentina.stefanica@upb.ro

**Abstract:** This study explores the complexities of sport manager selection, investigating the impact of affirmative action, recruitment strategies, organizational culture, diversity initiatives in board selection, and career advancement insights from coaches' perspectives. To conduct this investigation, a purposive sampling technique was employed, selecting 65 prominent sports managers and coaches from Romania. Participants, aged between 35 to 58 years old, boasted an average of 10 to 20 years of sports experience and were chosen based on specific criteria, including academic qualifications. Data collection occurred over an extended period, spanning from fall 2022 to spring 2024, through semi-structured interviews with sport managers and coaches. The findings unveiled persistent challenges in effectively implementing affirmative action measures, as sport managers grapple with balancing the promotion of deserving candidates while maintaining continuity in board culture. Achieving meaningful diversity necessitates nuanced approaches that consider both candidate quality and cultural compatibility. Moreover, the study sheds light on coaches' perspectives when considering executive council positions, highlighting various pathways to career advancement. Recruitment practices prioritized informal methods, emphasizing board cohesion. Despite the recognized importance of diversity, challenges persist in selecting candidates solely based on demographic representation. The study provides valuable insights into promoting diversity and inclusivity within sports organizations' executive councils. Future research directions may include exploring longitudinal trends and delving into the qualitative experiences of underrepresented groups, with the aim of advancing understanding and promoting equity within sports organizations.

**Keywords:** affirmative action; recruitment strategies; organizational culture; board selection; career advancement insights

## Introduction

The call for Affirmative Action Policy resonates now more than ever. Our society is grappling with an unprecedented wealth gap, disproportionately affecting women, people of color, and other marginalized communities, exacerbating economic and societal disparities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage that affect entire generations and communities (Brown & Langer, 2015; Libertella et al., 2007; Cooper et al., 2020).

To chart a path towards a more just future, sport managers must recognize the pressing need for their active engagement in effecting change. This study highlights the importance of understanding the board's role as the highest authority in organizations, responsible for supervision and decision-

making. Consequently, it emphasizes how selection processes determine who has the right to govern (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Hovden et al., 2018). While sports managers establish the overarching framework for organizational policies and operations, the significance of their roles extends beyond mere administration (Edwards, 2015). Membership on sport organizations boards, particularly at the national level within the sports industry, carries considerable prestige and power. These bodies wield significant influence over the delivery of services crucial to the organization's primary activities.

Moreover, the landscape of sports organizations, is evolving towards a more professionalized model akin to corporate boards (Love et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2019). This shift reflects a response to the growing complexity of demands faced by these organizations. However, unlike traditional corporate boards, sport organizations boards often exhibit greater social diversity owing to their diverse constituencies (Forde et al., 2015). Nevertheless, managers within the sports industry find themselves in a unique position amidst this evolving landscape. The responsibility of sports managers transcends conventional managerial duties. They are entrusted with shaping not only the operational aspects of their organizations but also contributing to broader societal conversations around equity and inclusion. As such, they must navigate the nuances of professional management practices while remaining attuned to the diverse needs of their constituents. By embracing inclusivity and leveraging their influence, sports managers can play a pivotal role in driving meaningful change, both within their organizations and society at large (Schulenkorf et al., 2019; Hovden et al., 2021).

Even though it's a topic that's talked about a lot, especially when people are asking for better management in sports organizations nationally and internationally, researchers point out something interesting. They say there aren't many studies about how boards choose their members, despite the importance of the issue (Takos et al., 2018; Mikkonen et al., 2021; Enjolras & Waldahl, 2010; Parent & Hoye, 2018).

Social dynamics within organizations are intricate, characterized by a continuous interplay of inclusion and exclusion. Exclusion, though not absolute, is inherent in the complex web of interactions among organizational members. These interactions serve as channels through which individuals glean information regarding their perceived place within the organizational hierarchy, as well as the values and norms embedded within its structures. Concurrently, individuals engage in identity work, deciphering their affiliations and the corresponding expected behaviors ((Rich & Misener, 2017).

Studies, such as those conducted by Patterson & Parent (2018) and Wood & Danylchuk (2015), illuminate this process of identity negotiation within organizational contexts. Through these interactions, power dynamics come to the fore, delineating social groups along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, age, and other markers of identity. Typically, these dynamics establish a dichotomy between power elite and less empowered sectors, with the former wielding greater influence and privilege within the organizational framework.

Despite formal inclusion within organizational structures, individuals from minority or less empowered sectors often find themselves marginalized. This marginalization is perpetuated through established interaction patterns and the construction of shared meanings or 'common sense' within the organization (Cunningham, 2019). These dynamics can manifest in various ways, from subtle biases in decision-making processes to overt acts of discrimination.

For example, while the organization may boast policies promoting diversity and inclusion, the day-to-day interactions among employees reveal underlying power dynamics. Women and ethnic minorities may find themselves excluded from informal networks or overlooked for advancement opportunities despite possessing equal qualifications. These dynamics not only hinder individual progress but also perpetuate systemic inequities within the organization (Knoppers et al., 2021; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007).

Organizational inclusion is not solely determined by formal structures but is intricately woven into the fabric of daily interactions and shared perceptions. Addressing these dynamics necessitates a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and confronts entrenched power imbalances, fostering environments where all individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute meaningfully (Trussell & Kerwin, 2024).

The dynamics of organizational management can perpetuate exclusionary practices, even when not explicitly intended. Members of social groups holding positions of power may inadvertently or strategically engage in behaviors that reinforce hierarchies of dominance and marginalization within the organization. This phenomenon, documented by researchers like Evans & Knepper (2023) and Dwight (2021) highlights how those in positions of influence often act as gatekeepers, regulating access to top-tier positions.

This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "boundary policing," where individuals in positions of authority consciously or unconsciously control access to coveted roles and opportunities within the organization. These actions can manifest in various forms, including biased decision-making processes, favoritism towards individuals from similar backgrounds, or the perpetuation of traditional power structures (Whitmer, 2021).

For example, let's consider a large sport organization where the executive management team is predominantly comprised of white males. Despite the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion, the established leadership may unconsciously perpetuate exclusionary practices. In meetings and decision-making processes, subtle biases may manifest, such as dismissing ideas from women or minorities or assigning lower-value tasks to individuals perceived as outside the dominant social group (Vianden & Gregg, 2017).

Consequently, individuals from marginalized social groups may find themselves facing barriers to advancement and feeling undervalued within the organization. This not only undermines their professional growth but also perpetuates a cycle of inequality within the organizational culture.

The behaviors of managers within an organization play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of different social groups. Addressing issues of exclusion and marginalization requires proactive efforts to dismantle existing power structures and promote inclusivity at all levels of management. Only through conscious and deliberate actions can organizations truly create environments where every member feels valued and empowered to contribute fully (Stenling et al., 2020).

The primary objective of this research was to delve into the selection process of board members within sport organizations in Romania. Romania was selected as the focal point due to its unique characteristics and historical context (Cipu & Dragnea, 2007; Iordache et al., 2010). As an emerging economy, Romania has demonstrated notable achievements in high-performance sports, particularly in disciplines such as gymnastics, football, athletics, among others, during the communist regime. However, in the 35 years since transitioning to democracy, Romania has gradually lost its prominent positions on the global and European stages in sports. In Romania, high-performance sports are predominantly organized through a public framework consisting of national federations, local clubs, and associations. These sports organizations serve as critical entities in facilitating competitive opportunities and nurturing athletic talent nationwide. Consequently, gaining insights into the selection processes of board members within these organizations is imperative for comprehending the intricate dynamics of sports management in Romania.

By focusing on Romania, researchers can delve into the nuanced factors influencing sports governance and management within an evolving socio-political landscape. This examination provides valuable insights not only into the challenges facing Romanian sports but also sheds light on broader issues pertinent to sports management in emerging economies. Thus, Romania serves as an apt and compelling case study for exploring the complexities of sports governance and management in transitional contexts.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Subjects

In this study, the selection of participants was guided by a purposive sampling technique. A group of 65 prominent sports managers and coaches from Romania, consisting of 30 sport managers (26 men and 4 women) and 35 coaches (23 men and 12 women) living in ten different cities across Romania was intentionally selected. The selection criteria included individuals between the ages of 35 and 58, who had an average of 10 to 20 years of sport experience. In addition, the selection criteria



for sport managers and coaches emphasized the attainment of academic qualifications, with a notable preference for candidates holding Bachelor's and Master's degrees, particularly in Physical Education and Sports. This approach aims to ensure that appointed managers possess the requisite scientific knowledge and expertise crucial for effective management within the dynamic realm of sports. In terms of academic qualifications and training, it is evident that the selection process for sport managers primarily prioritized individuals with a solid educational background. Among the selected candidates, a significant majority held a Bachelor's degree, accounting for 95.4% of the total (n=62). Following closely behind, 49.3% (n=32) possessed a Master's degree, showcasing a commitment to advanced academic attainment.

The academic disciplines of these degrees were diverse but predominantly fell within the domains of Physical Education and Sports. Specifically, 43.0% (n=28) of the selected managers and coaches specialized in Physical Education, while 52.3% (n=34) focused on Sports Performance. This distribution underscores the importance placed on expertise in these areas, essential for effective management within the sports industry.

### **Procedure**

The data collection process spanned an extensive period from fall 2022 to spring 2024, employing semi-structured interviews conducted with sport managers and coaches affiliated with Romanian sport organizations. The interviews were carefully crafted to explore the complex interplay of dynamics between sport managers or executive council members (considered part of the power elite) and coaches (representing the less empowered sector) when a member of less empowered sector endeavors to integrate into the power elite. This intricate exploration sought to uncover the multifaceted processes through which individuals from these distinct groups negotiate and navigate their roles, relationships, and identities within the sport management framework. By delving into these nuanced dynamics, the interviews aimed to shed light on the challenges, power dynamics, and socio-cultural factors influencing the integration and inclusion of coaches into the realm of sport management.

Careful consideration was given to the selection of informants from both dominant and subordinate groups, ensuring a diverse representation of perspectives within the Romanian sport management landscape. The chosen informants possessed backgrounds in sport and management education, coupled with substantial experience in coaching or sport management roles, ensuring a rich and comprehensive exploration of viewpoints.

The semi-structured interview approach, a qualitative research technique, was employed, allowing for flexibility and depth in gathering insights.

The research methodology underwent four stages, commencing with a thorough literature analysis to inform the development of the semi-structured interview questions. In the second stage, three focus groups were organized to engage with the practical realities. The questionnaire development was based on insights gathered from these focus groups, which included specialists, researchers and lecturers in higher education, specializing in the area of sport management (focus group 1), sports-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (focus group 2), and representatives from elite athletes and coaches (focus group 3) (O. Nyumba et al., 2018).

Following each interview, data analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and topics, enabling iterative refinement of the interview questions. Additionally, feedback and insights from two specialist academicians well-versed in qualitative research were incorporated to enhance the robustness of the interview process (Mashuri et al., 2022).

Interviews continued until saturation was reached, signifying that no new information or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. As a result, it was concluded that the collected data comprehensively represented the attitudes and perspectives of sport managers and coaches serving or intending to occupy positions on the executive councils of sport organizations in Romania. (Hoekman et al., 2022).

This comprehensive survey encompassed five topics aimed at elucidating critical aspects of the selection process for sport executive council members within sport organizations in Romania:

1. Balancing Affirmative Action

2. Recruitment Strategies
3. Organizational Culture
4. Diversity Strategies in Board Selection - Insights from Coaches
5. Career Advancement Insights - Coaches' Perspectives

This comprehensive survey aimed to provide valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the selection process for sport board members, with the ultimate goal of enhancing transparency, fairness, and effectiveness within sport organizations in Romania.

Ferkins & Shilbury (2012) assert that the concept of negotiating "fit" offers a foundational framework for analyzing the variety of strategies employed by both the power elite, represented by sport managers, and the less empowered sector, consisting of coaches as employees of sport organizations, in their efforts to foster inclusivity and improve representation within the sport management sphere.

Through this lens, the study scrutinized the intricate interplay of tactics and dynamics as individuals from both groups sought to navigate and assert their notions of suitability and compatibility within the organizational context.

### 2.3. Data Acquisition Process

The semi-structured interview form consists of 25 primary questions. The data collecting took place in 5 September 2022 - 16 March 2024. Consent on one's own responsibility, as per the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, was a prerequisite and obtained before the commencement of the study. The Ethics Committee of the Doctoral School of Physical Education and Sport Science (ID: 12/4.09.2022), University of Pitesti, Romania, granted approval for this research. During the interviews, participants were provided with information regarding the research's objectives, procedures to ensure confidentiality, and the utilization of collected data exclusively for research purposes, thereby safeguarding their anonymity. Each participant willingly gave their agreement and participated in interviews done in Romania, either in person or online. These interviews had an average duration of 60 to 90 minutes.

The researcher employed a structured four step analysis procedure to analyze the data. Initially, transcripts of interviews were meticulously examined to identify participants' perspectives on strategies, challenges, and implications in sport manager selection, as well as insights into recruitment and selection dynamics. In the second step, two academics with Ph.D. degrees in sports sciences independently analyzed a portion of the data set, comparing coded quotations with the entire data set to ensure accuracy. Subsequently, topics were identified and potential interconnections explored in the third stage. In the fourth step, emerging topics and the entire data set underwent final analysis, with relevant data samples selected for inclusion in the research report (Atkinson, 2002). Finally, the results of the analysis were synthesized with pertinent literature. NVivo12 software facilitated these analysis processes (Tang, 2023).

## Results

### **Navigating entry boundaries - strategies, challenges, and implications in sport manager selection**

Chelladurai and Kim (2022) posited that power elite, such as sport managers, employ diverse strategies to maintain social homogeneity within a given position or occupation. In the context of the current study, incumbent board members demonstrated a tendency to regulate entry boundaries through two primary strategies. One strategy involved the implementation of affirmative action policies, while the other centered around recruitment and selection procedures.

#### **Balancing affirmative action - realities in sport manager selection**

Most managers, especially those involved in sports entities, acknowledge the importance of competent representation in leadership positions. They argue that the issue of promoting a skilled coach to the board is often deliberated upon when a board vacancy arises. Sport managers supporting affirmative action policies credit these measures for the rise in the quantity of esteemed executive

council members. They attribute the increase in esteemed executive council members to the enactment of these measures.

Such measures include the selection of a qualified individual who, when applying alongside an influential candidate, is judged to be similarly qualified.

Although various competencies are mentioned by the sport managers, the key aspects of this criterion emphasize that executive councils should not be biased in terms of the skills possessed by their members and that positions should be based on qualifications rather than social categories (such as less empowered sector). This aspect also encompasses two additional criteria that again underscore the board's role as the primary decision-making body of a sports organization: the board's capacity to advance the sport entities, both organizationally and in terms of the sport itself, and the importance of the board being familiar with specific circumstances and managerial visions.

Simultaneously, some sport managers insist that each person possesses a unique combination of qualities, skills, experiences, and characteristics that distinguish them from others. This recognition emphasizing that comparing individuals solely based on their qualities can be challenging because these qualities are inherently distinct and not interchangeable. Finding qualified board members, especially coaches who have never been managers before, is very challenging. As one of them expressed, "Given that many of them merely shuffle paperwork from one desk to another without showing any initiative, the effectiveness of affirmative action is limited."

However, these sport managers ascribe limited authority to themselves for implementing affirmative action measures. "They believe that the backing of other executive council members is crucial for implementing affirmative action, especially if individuals without connections and influence are to be chosen. As one sport manager put it, "There are valuable people in the workforce whom you can promote, but the executive council must be willing to do so."

Another sport manager, who understood how crucial it is to have skilled people in leadership roles and supported affirmative action, didn't take responsibility and believed his colleagues were to blame for the lack of progress. He said, "If we need to talk about inclusive leadership issues, they'll probably be delayed, with other more important matters taking priority."

These sport managers not only ascribe the absence of backing from their peers to the underrepresentation of individuals from less empowered sectors on the executive council but also narrowly define the circumstances under which these individuals would be chosen. Specifically, they emphasize that candidates from less empowered sectors must possess qualities that current executive council members lack in order to be considered for selection.

In the realm of sports management, a predominant viewpoint among sport managers is characterized by a reluctance to enthusiastically embrace the active implementation of affirmative action initiatives. Central to their argument is the assertion that the selection process should transcend mere categorization based on social factors, instead advocating for a comprehensive evaluation framework that encompasses a diverse array of representation and efficiency criteria for potential candidates. This perspective emphasizes the importance of a nuanced approach to decision-making, one that prioritizes a holistic assessment of individuals' qualifications and capabilities while simultaneously recognizing the imperative of fostering diversity and maximizing organizational performance.

Although these sport managers believed that their executive council endorsed affirmative action, acknowledging the significance of both representational diversity and organizational effectiveness in their discourse, their actions suggest that this verbal commitment may not translate into the actual hiring of new members. So, it's not surprising that most sport managers thought the number of new executive council members would change naturally, without needing specific policy measures. They say they support affirmative action in theory, but they don't always follow through in practice. This shows a preference for what Piggott (2022) calls "homologous reproduction" - a continued preference for members of the dominant group because they're seen as the "best" fit.

#### **Strategic recruitment practices in sports management- formality and informality**

Recruitment practices among most sports managers involve a combination of formal and informal methods aimed at identifying suitable candidates. Formally, vacancies are announced

several months before the formal selection process commences. This announcement typically involves reaching out to known individuals who may be potential candidates, soliciting nominations from sport clubs and other relevant organizations, and utilizing various channels such as the internet, sport assemblies, and newsletters for advertising purposes. However, this formal approach often yields limited results.

In response, sports managers often resort to informal avenues, leveraging their personal networks to identify potential candidates: "You seek individuals whose life circumstances are suitable. Considering the complexities of life, incorporating parents with young children onto the board might pose challenges. While it's not impossible, more often than not, it's older individuals who find themselves on boards, primarily due to the flexibility afforded by their life circumstances."

Another facet of the informal recruitment process entails identifying individuals who exhibit compatible conduct or skills for board engagement (communicating effectively, engaging in constructive discussions, demonstrating professionalism, confidently advocating for their positions). We seek someone capable of voicing their perspective during board deliberations while also demonstrating a willingness to align with majority decisions. Additionally, the ideal candidate should possess competencies that align with the board's needs or complement the skills of departing members. The specific criteria for selection depend on the vacancy being filled. The board's requirements serve as the guiding framework for identifying suitable candidates. Certain responsibilities must be fulfilled, and it is essential to identify individuals who possess the requisite capabilities to fulfill these obligations.

#### **Between quality and cultural fit - challenges in sport manager selection**

Selection procedures in sports management entail the establishment of formal criteria for each board vacancy. These criteria typically revolve around having a clear vision for the future of the association and the sport, possessing the ability to grasp the broader context, having experience in governance, and demonstrating a strong affinity for the sport. Additionally, candidates are expected to possess a combination of relevant skills, knowledge, attitude, and time availability conducive to effective board membership. For instance, experience in governance, politics, or corporate environments is deemed advantageous due to the networking opportunities and sponsorship connections they bring: "It's really helpful if someone has worked in government, politics, or companies before. That experience brings a lot to the table. If a candidate knows how things work in governance or politics, it helps us build better networks and get permission for things we want to do. And if they have connections in companies, it's great for getting sponsorships."

The foremost priority in candidate selection, underscored unanimously by all participating sport managers, is creativity. Within this context, creativity encompasses various elements such as innovative problem-solving abilities, forward-thinking strategic planning, the capacity to envision and implement novel initiatives to enhance sports programs or events, and the ability to adapt to changing trends and challenges within the sports industry.

However, while candidates are expected to bring value to the board, they are also expected to assimilate into the existing board culture without altering it significantly. This alignment with the prevailing culture is essential for candidate acceptance, regardless of their background.

Notably, candidates from less empowered sectors face the additional challenge of adapting to a culture that may not fully resonate with their own, despite their qualifications and capabilities.

The notion of "fit" within the board culture is emphasized, with the expectation that new members, including those from subordinate groups, must seamlessly integrate into the existing dynamics.

Nevertheless, caution is advised against selecting candidates solely based on affirmative action policies, without considering their compatibility with the board's culture. Making selections solely based on demographic representation, rather than considering cultural fit, risks undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of the board.

Consequently, while there is a moral imperative to diversify board membership, maintaining continuity in board culture remains a priority for incumbent members. This gate-keeping approach



significantly shapes how individuals from subordinate groups navigate their entry into these boards, highlighting the complex interplay between diversity initiatives and organizational culture.

#### **Insights into recruitment and selection dynamics- perspectives from coaches**

We conducted interviews with members of the less empowered sector (coaches) to gain insight into their perspectives on the recruitment and selection processes, as well as their strategies for advancing their own candidacy in these processes.

#### **Network dynamics and deliberate recruitment strategies in executive council selection - insights from coaches**

Our findings reveal that all interviewed coaches were part of predominantly group networks, which played a significant role in their recruitment for these high-level positions. However, mere membership in these networks was not enough. Each coach was approached to join the executive council for specific reasons, one of which was to bring a fresh perspective from the field. As one coach stated, "They sought new recruits because the executive council lacked diversity in terms of age, and they desired a greater representation of younger members." Essentially, their recruitment was a deliberate effort by the respective executive council to diversify the age composition.

The coach highlighted that having an executive council comprised solely of old board members was no longer considered legitimate. Prior to the recruitment process for a new executive council member, an incumbent member from the less empowered sector was consulted by other executive council members to gauge his comfort level as the sole new addition and to consider adding another friend from the subordinate group. He expressed his stance by stating, "If you believe I require another coach friend, you are mistaken. I am content. It is more important to find the right individual than to prioritize friendship. I value someone who can integrate seamlessly into the team, regardless of their personal relationship with me."

One coach expressed his bewilderment, saying, "I found myself wondering why they consulted me when the board consisted solely of older individuals." Another coach reluctantly accepted the position, despite initial reservations, stating, "I hesitated to accept this role and declined multiple times because I held low regard for the existing members of the executive council. Most of them are chosen through political influence. They don't have any real connection to sports as a phenomenon and probably aspire to advance further in governmental or ministerial roles rather than actively contributing to the development of sports."

Furthermore, some coaches were hesitant to join the executive council due to their concerns about the expected role and the potential consequences of unpopular decisions. One coach explained this reluctance, saying, "When they approached me about joining the council, I was fully focused on leading my team to the national finals. I thought to myself, 'If I become the only new member among four incumbents, with one or two often absent, I'll end up taking all the heat for any problems that arise.' So, I decided to pass on the opportunity, not wanting to take on that kind of responsibility."

These findings suggest that while these coaches possessed ambition, they were discerning about accepting an executive council position, placing importance on specific circumstances. They felt the need to tread carefully in expressing their aspirations, emphasizing their dedication to the role itself. One coach shed light on the perception of ambitious behavior within the power elite, cautioning, "Displaying superior qualifications may provoke backlash. It's crucial to demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm instead. Excessive ambition among individuals from less empowered sectors can impede progress; humility tends to yield better outcomes. Based on my experience, adopting a modest approach can lead to significant achievements."

#### **Pathways to advancement - insights from coaches on achieving higher positions**

One coach explained how he achieved his goal of getting a higher position: "Success in sports governance boils down to a few key principles," the coach began. "Firstly, you gotta have the right attitude. It's all about being committed and investing your time in the work the board does. But most importantly, it's about passion for the sport. We need folks who are completely loyal to their role and always prioritize what's best for the sport, not just what benefits them personally"

The coaches felt that they were chosen as candidates because they fit the criteria set by affirmative action policies and had the necessary experience in sports. One coach explained: "Being

on the board isn't just about having a title; it's about being there for the right reasons," the coach emphasized. "A bad board member only looks out for their own club or region, forgetting about the bigger picture of developing the sport. At this level, social skills are key – you gotta talk, discuss, and act professionally. You need to be able to stand up and state your case, express your opinions during meetings, but also be willing to accept and work with the decisions made by the majority."

Unlike previous board members who had to climb up the ranks, those selected in recent years didn't have to go through the same process. However, they all had backgrounds in sports and/or master's degrees.

Coaches with similar backgrounds knew they were sought after and could join executive boards because of their experience in sports, governance, and sometimes politics. Another factor in their selection was their track record of sports performance. This highlights another aspect of the selection criteria.

One coach shared his experience with the selection process," the coach recounted: "There weren't many friendly faces there, especially none who could handle tough stuff nicely. Maybe that's why they chose me.' So, what I'm saying is, if any of you ever end up on a board, remember this: you gotta have humor, be friendly, and stay open. These things don't just make things nicer, they help us talk better and fix problems together."

## Discussion

The discussion reveals the intricate dynamics surrounding sport manager selection, emphasizing the delicate balance between affirmative action, recruitment strategies, and organizational culture. Despite the acknowledgment of the importance of diversity and inclusion, challenges persist in effectively implementing affirmative action measures. Sport managers grapple with the tension between promoting deserving candidates from less empowered sectors and maintaining continuity in board culture. While affirmative action policies aim to diversify board membership, their effectiveness is contingent upon the support of incumbent members and the ability to navigate entry boundaries. Ultimately, achieving meaningful diversity in sport management requires a nuanced approach that considers both the quality of candidates and their cultural fit within the existing organizational context. The study also underscores the nuanced considerations coaches take into account when contemplating executive council positions, including concerns about potential repercussions and perceptions of ambitious behavior. Additionally, it sheds light on various pathways to advancement perceived by coaches, ranging from excelling in current roles to meeting affirmative action criteria.

### **Balancing affirmative action - realities in sport manager selection**

The discussion on balancing affirmative action in sport manager selection reveals a nuanced landscape among sport managers. While there's a collective acknowledgment of the importance of diverse representation in leadership, opinions diverge on the practicality and impact of affirmative action measures.

Supporters of affirmative action policies credit them for increasing esteemed executive council members. They argue for a selection process based on qualifications rather than social categories, emphasizing the need for a nuanced evaluation framework. However, challenges arise in assessing candidates' unique qualities and experiences, especially for those transitioning from coaching to managerial roles.

Sport managers stress the importance of support from fellow council members in implementing affirmative action. Yet, some defer responsibility or prioritize other matters, revealing a reluctance to actively embrace inclusive initiatives. Despite verbal commitments, actions often fall short, reflecting a preference for maintaining existing power dynamics.

This discrepancy highlights the gap between rhetoric and action, perpetuating a cycle of homologous reproduction where dominant group members are favored. Ultimately, the discussion underscores the complex dynamics at play in achieving diversity and organizational effectiveness within sports management.

Cho (2020) conducted a study investigating how employers' personal dispositions, particularly implicit biases related to race and gender, influence their perceptions of candidates for entry-level sport management positions. The research was divided into two sections based on the conceptual framework. In the first section, the focus was on the preference for higher social status groups, such as white men, drawing from implicit bias, social role theory, and intersectionality. The second section explored tendencies toward in-group favoritism based on subjective uncertainty reduction theory and social identity theory. The study highlights the complex interplay between personal dispositions, implicit biases, and perceptions of candidates in the hiring process, with implications for promoting diversity and addressing biases in employment practices.

Vianden and Gregg (2017) emphasize the importance of studying the perspectives of privileged social groups, particularly heterosexual white male undergraduate sport management majors, in addressing the lack of diversity in the sport industry. Their focus group study with 22 participants sheds light on perceptions related to diversity in sport management, the role of women in the field, meritocratic hiring policies, and individual responsibility for fostering change. The authors call for sport management faculty and administrators to encourage self-reflection among white male students, challenging them to recognize their privileges and take active steps towards promoting diversity and social justice in the sports industry.

Cunningham (2019) offers a comprehensive examination of diversity within sport organizations, covering a wide range of dimensions such as race, gender, age, ability, appearance, religion, sexual orientation, and social class. It provides practical strategies for managing diversity effectively in both workplace and sport environments. Additionally, Cunningham emphasizes the crucial role of diversity training in creating inclusive workplaces where all individuals feel valued and respected.

#### **Strategic recruitment practices in sports management- formality and informality**

The strategic recruitment practices in sports management reflects the blend of formal and informal methods utilized by sports managers to identify suitable candidates for board positions. While formal approaches involve announcing vacancies well in advance and utilizing multiple advertising channels, informal avenues, particularly personal networks, play a crucial role.

In these informal networks, managers seek individuals whose life circumstances align with the demands of board membership, often favoring older individuals due to the flexibility afforded by their life circumstances. Moreover, informal recruitment emphasizes identifying candidates who exhibit compatible conduct and skills for board engagement, such as effective communication, professionalism, and the ability to advocate confidently for their positions.

These recruitment practices underscore the importance of board cohesion, with managers prioritizing candidates who share similar demographics and perspectives. Ultimately, the specific criteria for candidate selection depend on the vacancy being filled, guided by the board's requirements and the need to identify individuals capable of fulfilling the responsibilities associated with the position.

A research findings provide insights into the expectations of employers regarding sport management opportunities. The most commonly sought-after management and leadership expectations include achieving results, working effectively with people, utilizing resources efficiently, and providing clear direction. Entry-level recruitment tends to prioritize skills such as excellent communication, strong planning and organizational abilities, and effective problem-solving skills. Selection criteria often emphasize experience, qualifications, and a suitable work ethic or passion for the field. Overall, this research offers a benchmarking profile of sport management opportunities in Australia, which can serve as a basis for further research and development of curricula tailored to the needs of the industry. (Emery et al, 2012)

#### **Between quality and cultural fit - challenges in sport manager selection**

Selection procedures prioritize candidates' quality, encompassing knowledge, experience, and personal attributes. Candidates are expected to assimilate into the existing board culture, which presents challenges for individuals from subordinate groups. While diversity initiatives are important, selecting candidates solely based on demographic representation risks undermining

board cohesion. Maintaining continuity in board culture remains a priority, shaping how individuals from subordinate groups navigate entry into these boards.

Stenling et al. (2020) aimed to investigate board-selection processes and their impact on board composition, addressing two main questions: the criteria used in these processes and how they are prioritized. The study is significant in the context of good governance, access to positions of power in sports organizations, and representation issues. Using interviews with representatives from Swedish national sport organizations, the study found that trade-offs occur among various representation and efficiency criteria, leading to the formation of hierarchies of criteria. Contrary to previous suggestions, the study reveals that trade-offs are not solely between gender and merit. The implications suggest the need for future studies to consider the range of evaluative criteria involved in board-selection processes. Additionally, the study provides insights for sport management practitioners to understand and address representation issues effectively.

Fink and Pastore (2012) discovered that diversity within positions of power in sports, particularly in interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional settings, is significantly lacking, especially concerning individuals who do not fit the traditional profile of white, heterosexual males. They noted that the underrepresentation of diverse groups extends beyond demographics and includes attitudes, values, and leadership priorities among those in leadership positions in sports. Drawing on insights from the corporate world, they proposed a framework comprised of three dimensions: noncompliance/compliance, reactive diversity management, and proactive diversity management. This framework aimed to provide a fresh perspective on the lack of diversity within Division IA intercollegiate athletic organizations and offers potential applications in kinesiology, physical education, and sport.

#### **Network dynamics and deliberate recruitment strategies in executive council selection - insights from coaches**

One of the central findings of the study revolves around the pivotal role of networks in the selection process of executive council members. Coaches were predominantly part of group networks, which significantly influenced their recruitment for high-level positions. However, mere membership in these networks did not suffice; coaches were approached for specific reasons, often aimed at diversifying the age composition of the executive council and bringing fresh perspectives from the field.

Interestingly, the study reveals deliberate efforts by executive councils to diversify their age composition, recognizing the importance of representation from younger members. This shift underscores evolving perceptions of legitimacy within executive councils, where an exclusively older composition is no longer considered acceptable.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the nuanced considerations coaches undertake when evaluating executive council positions. While ambition is evident among coaches, they are discerning about the circumstances under which they accept such roles. Concerns about potential repercussions of unpopular decisions and perceptions of ambitious behavior within the power elite significantly influence their decision-making process.

Parnell et al. (2023) investigated the recruitment strategies of Sporting Directors in elite-level football clubs, particularly focusing on the role of network theory in these strategies. They conducted a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with 25 Sporting Directors from English Premier League and English Championship clubs. The findings suggest that, contrary to conventional recruitment practices, trust and familiarity play a more significant role in football recruitment. This reliance on closed networks, termed homophily, could potentially limit information flow and innovation within the industry, thus affecting organizational performance.

#### **Pathways to advancement - insights from coaches on achieving higher positions**

In exploring pathways to advancement perceived by coaches, the study uncovered various strategies and considerations. Some coaches emphasize the importance of focusing on excelling in current roles, while others attribute their selection to fitting the criteria set by affirmative action policies and demonstrating experience in sports. Additionally, coaches with backgrounds in sports,



governance, and sometimes politics are highly sought after for executive board positions, underscoring the multifaceted nature of selection criteria.

Furthermore, coaches carefully navigate perceptions and stereotypes associated with subordinate groups when vying for higher positions. Demonstrating professionalism and avoiding negative stereotypes are crucial considerations in their selection process.

de Schepper et al. (2021) aims to investigate the extent to which sport management students engage in critical reflection during work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences and whether these skills meet the needs of employers in the sport industry. They surveyed 314 WIL stakeholders to compare perceptions across students, Academic Supervisors, and Industry Supervisors. The study found disparities in perceptions, with Industry Supervisors noting that students mainly focused on seeking feedback and reflecting on career ambitions. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening social critical reflection skills to better align with industry needs and enhance graduate employability. The classification of critical reflection skills into six dimensions provides a useful framework for assessing and improving students' skill development in sport management.

In another study, Škorić (2018) examined the perspectives of future employees in sports organizations regarding the essential knowledge and skills required of sport managers. They surveyed fourth-year students from the Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Zagreb, who were studying Economics and Management of Sport. Over five academic years, 537 questionnaires were collected. The findings revealed that the majority of students highlighted the significance of interpersonal skills, especially communication and teamwork, for sport managers. Furthermore, students identified willingness to take risks, organizational abilities, expertise in sports management, and entrepreneurial skills as critical competencies for sport managers. Notably, expertise in sports management was the most frequently ranked as the top priority by the students.

### **Limitations, Implications and Future Research Directions**

#### **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into executive council selection processes in sports organizations, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study primarily focuses on the perspectives of sport managers and coaches, potentially overlooking the viewpoints of other stakeholders involved in the selection process, such as board members and administrative staff. Additionally, the study's sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts within the sports industry. Moreover, the study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases or inaccuracies, as participants may provide socially desirable responses or omit relevant information. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables, necessitating caution in interpreting the findings.

#### **Implications**

Despite these limitations, the study offers several implications for practice. Firstly, the findings underscore the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity within executive councils to enhance organizational effectiveness and legitimacy. Sport organizations should prioritize efforts to recruit and retain qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that decision-making bodies reflect the demographics of their stakeholders. Additionally, the study highlights the need for ongoing training and development programs to equip executive council members with the skills and competencies necessary for effective leadership in diverse environments. By fostering an inclusive organizational culture, sport organizations can harness the full potential of their executive councils to drive innovation and success.

#### **Future Research Directions**

Building on the insights gained from this study, future research could explore several avenues to further advance understanding in this area. Firstly, longitudinal studies could investigate how executive council compositions evolve over time in response to changing organizational dynamics and external pressures. By tracking changes in demographic representation and decision-making processes, researchers can assess the long-term impact of diversity initiatives on organizational performance. Additionally, qualitative research approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could provide richer insights into the experiences of underrepresented groups within

executive councils, shedding light on the barriers they face and strategies for overcoming them. Furthermore, comparative studies across different sports organizations and geographic regions could identify contextual factors that influence executive council selection processes, informing the development of tailored interventions and best practices. Finally, experimental research designs could test the effectiveness of various diversity interventions, such as mentorship programs or bias training, in promoting inclusive leadership and organizational outcomes. By addressing these research gaps, scholars can contribute to the ongoing efforts to create more equitable and inclusive sport organizations.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the intricate process of sport manager selection, revealing the interplay between affirmative action, recruitment strategies, organizational culture, diversity initiatives in board selection, and career advancement insights. Despite advocating for qualification-based evaluations, sport managers face challenges in assessing candidates' unique qualities, especially during transitions from coaching to managerial roles. The importance of support from fellow council members in implementing affirmative action is emphasized, yet some reluctance persists, reflecting a preference for maintaining existing power dynamics. Informal recruitment methods prevail, prioritizing board cohesion and similar demographics among candidates. Selection procedures prioritize candidates' quality, with continuity in board culture shaping entry into these boards. Networks play a pivotal role in executive council member selection, with coaches often sought to diversify perspectives. Coaches navigate stereotypes to advance professionally, underscoring the need for nuanced evaluation frameworks and active embrace of inclusive initiatives in sports management.

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