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Examining the Impact of Unified Management on Board Roles in Federated Governance Systems: A Study of Golf in Australia

Ian O'Boyle¹  | Lesley Ferkins² | Joshua McLeod³ | David Shilbury³ | Leila Heckel¹

¹UniSA Business, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia | ²AUT Sports Performance Research Institute new Zealand, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand | ³Deakin Business School, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Correspondence: Ian O'Boyle (ian.oboyle@unisa.edu.au)

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ABSTRACT

The exploration of ways to address the complexity of relationships, power dynamics and multiple perspectives within federated governance systems in sport has been an ongoing theme within sport governance scholarly and practice communities for several decades. A major area of concern for affiliated organisations where reforms have occurred has been the changing behaviours, roles and power dynamics of regional and national boards when new practices and structures are adopted within the federated system. Using collaborative sport governance concepts infused by systems thinking, this paper explores the impact that the adoption of a unified management approach can have on perceptions of board roles in the sport of golf. In an exploratory qualitative case study, participants from affiliated golf organisations (regional and national boards) are interviewed ($n = 21$) to gain their insights into this phenomenon. Findings show perceptions of significant role ambiguity amongst board members, a perceived diminishing role for state boards, a sense of increased accountability for national boards and perceived negative impacts on board member succession. In making sense of our findings, we highlight the complexity involved, how board role changes in one context can impact other parts of the system and how collaborative governance theory and systems thinking remain an important lens for understanding and guiding effective governance practice within federated governance systems in sport.

Governance in the non-profit sport organisation setting has generally followed two distinct approaches. Federated governance has been the norm in several geographically large nations where a sport is governed by multiple organisations typically all affiliated with a national body and claiming jurisdiction based on location. Examples include sports in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and several European countries. Unitary governance, as the name suggests, involves a single national entity exercising power and authority over a sport without a host of affiliated legally autonomous entities contributing to the governance of the sport. Some examples of unitary governance codes include sports in Ireland, Norway, Italy, Japan and China. The

manner in which a sport is governed within a country in terms of federation versus unitary, often mirrors the political governance mechanisms that exist within that nation. For instance, Australia (the setting of the present research) is a federation consisting of six states, two territories and a commonwealth (national) government.

The vast majority of Australian sports are governed in a way that is a direct reflection of this political system, with a separate governing entity existing in each state who, for better or worse, must interact with a national governing body to exercise governance for that sport within Australia. While the multiplicity

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of governing bodies has served some sports well and, to an extent, has been able to coexist and work together (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016), often, however, again mirroring Australia's political system (with its challenges laid bare by the Covid-19 pandemic), the relationships between these entities have become frayed and conflict has taken hold (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016, 2017). This conflict can then lead to behaviours such as a lack of trust between affiliated organisations and a retreat to protectionism that ultimately inhibits whole-of-sport progression and can limit the effectiveness of national sport organisations (NSOs) as they try to enact leadership to grow the sport on a national level (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016, 2017; Piggot-Irvine et al. 2020; Shilbury and Ferkins 2015).

Systems thinking represents a way to conceptualise such complex relationships in a holistic manner which helps in understanding tensions and how to work with a multiplicity of governing entities connected to a common purpose (McLean et al. 2025) such as in the federated sport governance system described above (and below). Systems thinking has a long history within organisational and management theory, gaining traction from the 1970s with the development of applied systems thinking (Jackson 2001). Checkland (2000) developed systems thinking further in the organisational domain, introducing soft system methodology (SSM) as an approach to resolving situations of a multifaceted nature. The key principles of SSM comprise a human-centric approach, interactive processes, problem structuring, holistic perspective and a collaborative approach (Checkland 2000).

Similarly, Jackson's (2001) work comprehensively sets out the evolution of systems thinking and how systems ideas have come to be applied to organisational settings and managerial problems. He urges a holistic approach and advocates that systems thinking is inherently creative because of its drive to encompass multiple viewpoints and multiple techniques in pursuit of efforts to bring the component parts of an organisation or system together to serve the needs of the whole. He coined 'creative holism' to represent this step change in systems thinking. Such aspirations and ways of thinking are directly relevant for the context of the present study, that is, the governance of the sport of golf in Australia. This is because we purposefully position the affiliated golf organisations in Australia as a 'federated governance system' with the aim of this system being to govern the sport of golf across Australia.

This federated governance system is portrayed by an overarching NSO, Golf Australia, seven state/territory associations (SSAs) and 1530 golf clubs. While the NSO provides an overall vision/sense of purpose for the sport and gives national direction and performance pathways, the SSAs are responsible for offerings in their respective jurisdiction and for supporting regional and local clubs, which all contribute to this federated governance system. Although SSAs may share the same vision/purpose as the NSO and work towards the same goals, they operate as separate legal entities. For example, SSAs have their own board, constitution and strategies when it comes to financial, operational and marketing matters. This configuration has raised issues including the duplication of resources and lack of knowledge transfer as well as with issues in areas of member recruitment/retention and sponsorship (Zapata Rincon 2020)

[narrative]. Such issues can make the sport highly inefficient and unable to realise its potential. Hence, Golf Australia has enacted what it has called a 'unified management approach'. Such a move potentially has implications for governance of the sport as a whole and thus rich in insight for the study of sport governance systems (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2018).

Over the past 5 years, the debate around sporting codes evolving their management and governance structures to facilitate greater 'interconnections' and dynamic relationships and interdependence has gained some traction (Sport Australia n.d.). Several federated sport governance systems within Australia specifically have either fully or partially undertaken some form of structural change, including the sports of sailing, triathlon and touch football. Other countries, including Australia's closest neighbour New Zealand, have also explored a unitary approach, with the sports of triathlon and cycling adopting this approach to varying degrees. Although nuances exist in the way each of these sports has gone about such change and what stage of transition they are at, ultimately, they have attempted to leave purist federated sport governance systems behind in an attempt to create more streamlined, effective and efficient management and/or governance systems (Sport Australia n.d.).

One of the major challenges in the initial stages of transitioning away from traditional federated sport governance systems is to achieve the buy-in, trust and support of the myriad of stakeholders within this system. Most crucially, however, the autonomous state/regional/provincial organisations within the system must be willing to transfer their autonomy, power and authority, along with their financial and non-financial assets if unitary governance is to be adopted. This is not an easy task to achieve. Compounding the concerns that these state associations will likely have is the continuing role, if any, state boards would occupy in a newly implemented unified approach. The fiduciary and non-fiduciary duties, decision-making powers and oversight responsibility previously entrenched at a state level would become the responsibility of a national board and CEO. In turn, this places increased pressure on the national board of directors to fully understand the intricacies and challenges faced by a diverse group of state and regional stakeholders and to make decisions that serve the needs of individual states while simultaneously achieving whole-of-sport progression.

There is a small but growing body of work that has investigated federated sport governance systems (Ferkins et al. 2018; Dowling et al. 2018; Henry and Lee 2004; Shilbury and Ferkins 2011) to help guide practical efforts to strengthen the governance of sport. Some of these studies have been conceptual and others have examined specific sports to learn more about the impact of evolving governance systems (Dowling et al. 2018; Shilbury et al. 2016). The present study joins this platform of work by examining perceptions of the impact that a change to unified management within the federated governance system of golf in Australia has had on board roles in these affiliated sport governing bodies.

Hence, the aim of the current paper was to explore the impact of the adoption of unified management on perceptions of board roles within a federated governance system. To achieve this, we closely examine the case of the sport of golf in Australia, which

has partially transitioned from a federal to a unified management approach with impacts for its governance system. The drivers of this change came about as a result of the tensions embedded in the federated governance system, as noted previously and the potential to achieve economies of scale, which would provide more financial security for state associations, particularly smaller ones. Five state associations have entered into a 5-year 'service agreement' with Golf Australia, whereby all operational and management activities are now overseen by the national body, while two states (New South Wales and Western Australia) remain under the previous federal approach with fully functioning boards and are operationally autonomous from the now unified national and state bodies.

As noted in the data presented later in the paper, the two states that remained outside of the one management approach had a perceived lack of trust with the national body and were of the opinion that they were large enough to continue as a completely separate entity without any impact on the functioning of their normal operations. This context provides a unique opportunity to explore the challenges and complexities of transitioning to a unified management approach and its impact on board roles while having important implications for the study and practice of federated governance systems. While this research is most immediately relevant to the Australian context where sport governing bodies are actively considering and debating transitioning to unified management models, the challenges of federated sport governance have been reported across the world (McLeod et al. 2021), and thus, we expect the findings to be of wide interest.

1 | Evolving Study of Sport Governance

Over the past decade, there has been an increased focus on sport governance research. A significant portion of this work has centred on the non-profit area of sport and many of those studies have been positioned in the Australian context (see Dowling et al. 2018 for a detailed scoping review of the international field). With a specific focus on work that involves the federated context of sport governance, scholars have increased our understanding in areas such as the capability of voluntary boards, including their ability to take part in complex relationships within and between affiliated organisations across a sporting code (Shilbury 2001; Shilbury et al. 2013; Shilbury and Ferkins 2011), including board cohesion, behaviours and performance (Baile and Robinson 2007; Hoye and Doherty 2011; Schoenberg et al. 2021).

Significant management and governance change within any organisation or network of organisations is a large undertaking and requires the investment of time and other resources, which is further complicated by the voluntary nature of these boards. Leadership has also emerged as a new focus for sport governance work as many sports continue to grapple with the complexities of leading in a fast-evolving and dynamic environment where they must become involved in relationships with a large volume of internal and external stakeholder groups (Magliocca and Christakis 2001; Takos et al. 2018; O'Boyle et al. 2020). Finally, collaborative sport governance is also gaining prominence as a way to understand and guide the governance of sport

organisations co-existing within a federated setting (Shilbury and Ferkins 2015; O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016; Shilbury et al. 2020).

2 | Infusing Collaborative Sport Governance With Systems Thinking

The intersection of systems thinking, and sport governance is a small but growing area of inquiry (Dowling et al. 2018; McLean et al. 2025), largely shown up in studies examining the utility of collaborative sport governance (Shilbury and Ferkins 2015). Its proponents argue that systems thinking which, in considering the whole, emphasises the interconnectedness of various components within a system, offers a valuable framework for navigating the complexities of the collaborative processes needed within collaborative sport governance (Shilbury et al. 2020; Katina et al. 2019). Indeed, systems thinking and collaborative sport governance are potentially instructive for investigating perceived impacts on board roles in changing situations such as the sport of golf's efforts to transition towards unified management. Jackson (2001) is recognised for his step change in systems thinking by arguing the need for the integration of social theory and systems thinking which he proposes as 'critical systems thinking'. As he explains, 'critical systems thinking and the methodologies associated with it were developed precisely to allow analysis of complex societal problems and intervention to resolve such problems' (233). In doing so, critical systems thinking is considered a strategic or big picture approach to the discipline of systems thinking, well suited to the study of social systems such as the federated context of sport governance.

It becomes clear that the major tenets of systems thinking are closely mirrored within collaborative sport governance theory. As one of the few theories applied with a specific focus on sport governance, collaborative sport governance theory proposes that effective governance within the complex structure of federated sport governing bodies primarily depends on building strong inter-board connections (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016). This is with the express purpose of appreciating that no singular approach (e.g., from the national body) prevails, and that multiple contributions to governance from the member bodies are valued to guide the sport. In critical systems thinking, Jackson (2001) also emphasises pluralism, recognising that no singular approach is sufficient to address complex problems. Indeed, collaborative sport governance theory has seen increased attention over the past 5 years, with trust and leadership identified as important areas of inquiry that warrant further scholarly focus in the sport governance domain (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016, 2018; Ingram and O'Boyle 2017; Shilbury and Ferkins 2015; Shilbury et al. 2020). As argued in this present article, this inquiry may be aided by bringing elements of critical systems thinking to this context. Shilbury et al. (2016) outlined a research agenda to advance collaborative sport governance theory through a synthesis of public sector administration literature (including systems theory) where collaborative governance has its foundations. The authors pose many options for future research, including calling for work to explore how the separate legally autonomous nature of member associations may impede mutual understandings and how reforms may help to overcome a myriad of perceived barriers to

effective collaboration. Shilbury et al. (2016) also suggest that research that explores individual embedded case studies (multiple organisations within the same system) when investigating collaborative governance theory would be of high value due to their ability to generate deep understandings of the social processes and relationships underpinning federated sport governance models. Methodologies such as action research have also featured in this work which, in part, speaks to Jackso's (2019) call for methodological pluralism and a holistic approach to seeking improvement within the federated sport governance system (see Shilbury and Ferkins 2015). Action research is also known for its focus on critical reflection (and taking action) and attention to power imbalances, a key concern for proponents of both critical systems thinking and collaborative governance theory (Ansell and Gash 2008; Jackson 2019).

This intertwining between systems thinking and collaborative governance theory is a highly relevant backdrop within which to frame this work and we see our attempts to do so as a first step, encouraging other scholars to consider bringing the two domains closer together. Using this lens to explore perceptions of the changing role of state boards in sport governing bodies that are adopting unified forms of management and/or governance holds much promise for what we might learn about sport governance systems.

2.1 | Unified Management and Unitary Governance

In sport governance research, scholars often turn to the literature on corporate and other non-profit fields of governance to help inform their own work in the sporting landscape. In this instance, however, there is a dearth of literature that affords attention to the terms unified management and unitary governance or systems that closely resemble such structures. O'Boyle and Shilbury's (2017) paper is one of the few studies to specifically focus on this area where they explored the case of touch football in Australia, who at the time operated under what could best be described as a hybrid management and governance structure, where four states and two territories were 'unified' with the NSO and two states remained under the federated model—a similar situation to the current One Golf model. O'Boyle and Shilbury (2017) were able to compare and contrast the governing arrangements between the split of unitary versus federated bodies and found that the unified states experienced significant benefits in relation to financial security, sharing of resources, mutual understanding, economies of scale and effective use of time and other resources.

Conversely, the federated states retained a level of distrust towards the national body and the unified states and the notion of a unitary governance structure as a whole. One of the major findings in O'Boyle and Shilbury's (2017) paper was that significant board role ambiguity existed at the state level once the unitary governance model was adopted and likewise, the national board within Touch Football was unclear about how their role had now changed given state boards no longer occupied meaningful levels of power and authority. The authors called for further work in this domain to better understand the complexities involved in this structural change and how state and national

boards could transition to a new governance environment with reduced ambiguity on both sides.

Summing up, while the literature has explored several areas central to the dynamics of sport governance, far less work has focussed on new or evolving sport governance systems. Systems thinking has explored cases of interest within other governance contexts (e.g., Katina et al. 2019), but little research exists relevant to the sport governance space. Given this absence, the current paper will be an important addition to the existing literature and can act as a foundation upon which other areas of systems research and governance studies can be based. Golf's transition to unified management provides an opportunity to further study federated governance systems and to do so with both a collaborative governance and system's thinking lens. The paper is also warranted given the interest from industry in adopting unified management and/or unitary governance structures and can provide a relevant case example of how the sport of golf went about this transition, with particular focus on the challenge of re-conceptualising state and national board roles. The following section describes the method undertaken for the current work, followed by a detailed discussion around the study's findings. We conclude with recommendations for further research and impacts on current theory, coupled with important implications for current and future practice as noted above.

3 | Method

The method employed for the current study is a qualitative exploratory case study which sits within an interpretative-constructivist research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). The case involves a multiple embedded case design (Merriam 2020), where three separate organisations are embedded within the case who all belong to an affiliated group of entities, the system of golf sport governing bodies within Australia. Qualitative case study methodology provides researchers with tools for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena in specific contexts such as the one described in this research and is highly appropriate to explore issues related to management, governance and behavioural change within this system of golf entities. An interpretative-constructivist research paradigm and multiple embedded case design also sit well with some of Jackso's (2019) methodological features for investigating complex issues. This includes attempts at systematic examination of assumptions, being sensitive to power dynamics, and paying attention to the context for the inquiry (see below). The following sections provide detail on the data collection and analysis processes employed for this research.

3.1 | Data Collection

The One Golf model was officially launched in October 2018 after several years of consultation with state associations. The data in the current study were collected towards the end of 2019 and early 2020 and describe the situation of One Golf relative to state and national boards at that point in time. Data were collected through participating organisations including Golf Australia as the NSO, Golf South Australia and Golf Victoria as two state organisations that previously operated under the

TABLE 1 | Coding.

Initial codes	Axial codes
Buy-in from States	Ambiguity at state board level
Measuring/reporting on the process	The diminishing role of state boards
Role of leadership	Holding national board to account
Barriers to One Golf implementation	The changing role of the national board
Trust	Board member succession
Role of state boards	
Strategic planning	
Motivation for One Golf model	
Collaborative governance with clubs	
Unitary model implementation process	
Immediate benefits of One Golf model	
Immediate challenges of One Golf model	
Communication/engagement within the network	
Increased accountability for national board	

traditional federal model but had now transitioned to the unified management model known as One Golf. The selection of golf and its affiliated organisations was based on several factors including being one of the few Australian sports that had undergone a transition to unified management with implications for governance and the perceived willingness of the sporting system to be involved in the research.

For context, the golf system would be considered a medium-sized sporting system in terms of Australian NSOs. There are seven state/territory organisations, 1530 clubs and 400 000 members within the golf network in Australia (Golf Australia n.d.). In this way, as noted above, in drawing from systems thinking, we are positioning these interconnected golf organisations in Australia as a federated governance system within which its component elements share a common aim being to govern the sport of golf across Australia (Van Bottenburg 2021). All seven state/territory organisations were approached to be involved in the research, but buy-in was only received from the three organisations noted above. Reasons for lack of participation from other states/territories involved lack of time and resources on behalf of board members, and an unwillingness to be involved given there were some sensitivities around the potential changes in management and governance processes from some states. Given that the perspectives of those state bodies are missing represents a limitation of the research, although this is countered by the rich insights gained from the participating states. Indeed, it has been noted in previous research focused on case study methodology that case studies that incorporate too many case sites can negatively impact the rigor of findings (Merriam 2020).

The primary instrument for collecting data was via semi-structured interviews ($n = 21$) with the CEO and board members of each of the three entities agreeing to participate with interviews lasting between 45 min to 1 h and 30 min. Interview questions were structured around the transition from autonomous to unified management and the impact on board roles and included both broad and more probing follow-up questions (Weiss 1994). Examples of questions posed during interview were: ‘What impact has One Golf had on your organisation’s management and governance systems as a whole?’ (broad); ‘How do you think state boards can continue to contribute to

the governance of golf within Australia under the One Golf model?’ (probing). Data collected from multiple participants helped to clarify meaning and ensured fairness in interpretation, while also allowing for converging lines of enquiry and sensitivity to context and power dynamics (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Jackson 2019; Merriam 2020; Misener and Doherty 2009).

In total, a document of over 16 000 words and 35 pages was compiled that contained the views of participants via direct quotes on the transition from an autonomous to a unified management structure and its resulting impact on governance and the effects on state and national boards.

3.2 | Data Analysis

Data were analysed using an interpretive open and axial coding process without the use of software applications (Maxwell 2013). Sentences and passages with common phrases, sentiments, opinions, and views were grouped together to form an initial round of open coding. In total, 14 initial groupings were generated and constant referral to the existing literature and the purpose of the research took place. Examples of these initial groupings included: Buy-in from States; Strategic Planning; Communication and Engagement; and Immediate Challenges of Unitary Model. Axial coding, combining both inductive and deductive processes subsequently occurred (Maxwell 2013), where some of these initial 14 themes remained while others were collapsed and amalgamated with other groupings to form a final thematic structure (see Table 1) presented in this paper and along with the extant literature form the basis of our ‘Findings’ and ‘Implications of Sport Governance Research and Practice’ sections below. Specifically, the themes that we surfaced as a result of our empirical investigations and discussed below are: Ambiguity at State Board Level; The Diminishing Role of State Boards; Holding National Board to Account; The Changing Role of the National Board; and Board Member Succession (see Table 1). To de-identify participants and to ensure responses remain confidential, respondents from Golf Australia are represented by G1–G7, Golf South Australia: S1–S7 and Golf Victoria: V1–V7.

4 | Findings

Reasserting the aim of the current paper, to explore the impact of the adoption of unified management on perceptions of board roles within a federated governance system, the findings described in detail below provide new insights into this area of systematic governance research that has received minimal attention previously. The findings lead with a discussion around how the new management approach has led to perceptions of role ambiguity for state board directors compounded by a perspective that their roles have been diminished particularly in terms of operational oversight and authority. The focus then turns to emergent themes concerning national board roles and how perceptions of their accountability function have increased while illuminating concerns around board member succession at both state and national levels. These findings provide important implications for practice and an equally important theoretical contribution to the existing sport governance literature including the area of collaborative sport governance and the value of systems thinking within this setting which is further discussed in the sections below.

4.1 | Ambiguity at State Board Level

The consensus view of participants involved in the study was that they were unsure of the new role that state boards were occupying under the newly adopted unified management model. Prior to the adoption of One Golf, each individual state board would have had significant power and authority over the state association's finances, policies, procedures and staff and was the key body involved in the strategic direction of golf within those jurisdictions. However, the adoption of One Golf and the service agreement mechanism described earlier appeared to create a strong sense of ambiguity amongst state boards in relation to their new role under the One Golf model as is evident in these representative quotations:

I think some of the states are still a little confused. Not a lot, but there's still a grey area, a couple of grey clouds hanging over their heads on what they should be doing, what they shouldn't be doing.

(G5)

I think the board as a state level, and I'm sure it would be the same for the other states, are still grappling with what does their role look like going forward, and GA hasn't been able to provide particularly good clarity on how they see it fitting in.

(S2)

The latter of the above quotes summarises the consensus from state board participants who felt that the onus was on Golf Australia to provide clarity and direction over the new and revised role for state boards under the One Golf model. Although it was acknowledged that significant consultation occurred during the lead up to the transition, the reality of the new structure created significant ambiguity at both state and national board level. Reflecting this level ambiguity, participants from state boards noted in the extracts below that less board meetings

were now occurring and the reduction in authority and responsibility appeared to be well underway:

I think a lot of the state boards are wondering too. Are we relevant anymore? Why are they having meetings? And I know anecdotally they're having fewer meetings than they were. And who knows, I guess they might end up having no meetings?

(G6)

Everyone's a little bit confused as to what our role will be, and we're still waiting to see, so our meetings have gone from monthly to every second month and at this stage it's really just making sure that One Golf delivers what its promised, and at this stage that's been hard to judge. So, I think we're all a bit in limbo.

(S1)

Their thinking is that they've become slightly insignificant, in terms of their roles. They're not meeting as often. We used to meet, when I was there, maybe eight times a year. Eight to nine times a year, and they've only met twice this year so far, and it's October.

(G5)

4.2 | The Diminishing Role of State Boards

Along with this level of ambiguity amongst participants from state boards, there was also a general acceptance that the role they had in terms of leadership and authority was likely to diminish within the system. This in and of itself may not necessarily be an unexpected or unwanted situation given the desire to create more streamlined structures and decision making; however, the problem was compounded by the lack of clarity and ambiguity noted previously. Several participants noted that state boards had become disempowered and were simply occupying a caretaker role while waiting for their roles to become completely disbanded:

I think it will diminish over time. I think their offices will get smaller. You know that's the whole point really. That's the whole point of the exercise is to reduce the doubling up and to save more money and put more money into golf.

(G6)

My personal opinion is the role of the states will diminish over a period of time. I think golf is the most over governed sport in Australia.

(G5)

Well, our board, our role has changed substantially. As to the point where we would at some point be made redundant.

(V1)

If you go back to governance principles around why you have a board in the first place, and that is the independent arbitrator of

what management are doing and the guidance is there on culture and on strategy, that really is lost now to the boards, because we don't expect the same degree of influence and control, [and] visibility of what's going on and therefore having the state board advise on that is like, it's ridiculous to think that that could even be a concept. So, I can't understand how the role doesn't diminish.

(V2)

This seemingly inevitable diminishing role for state boards in the system raised several key concerns with participants who felt that the governance mechanisms and relationships with local clubs could be severely impacted. Much discussion around unified management models and unitary governance both in theory and practice involves the relationship between national and state boards (Katina et al. 2019, Kiel et al. 2006; O'Boyle and Shilbury 2017), but little focus has been placed on the impact of these approaches on local clubs. If state boards are completely disbanded, there may be a settling-in period for local clubs who could be unsure of new reporting arrangements and new governance mechanisms. In time, this governance mechanism may prove to be both effective and efficient but the period where new relationships and procedures must be adopted will undoubtedly create challenges for both parties. This concern was reflected in several quotes from participants:

I mean 'one model' said, 'Well we'll just abolish all the State Boards, and we'll just amalgamate everything,' which is sort of the Big Bang approach. And you don't really need States Boards, you could have taken that approach. But then where was the accountability and where was the link from the clubs, they still live in a State where the clubs are, but there needs to be a level of accountability. That blowtorch has got to come from somewhere.

(G4)

I think at the moment they play a really important role because if we're trying to condone messages to the golfer in that state I think they're a huge advocate ... the state boards along with the staff located within the states are the biggest advocates for what Golf Australia's trying to do.

(G7)

When we first went down this process, we realised that going down this process ultimately would mean there would be no board of Golf Victoria. But they've got to have some mechanism of engaging with the clubs in Victoria.

(V1)

4.3 | Holding National Board to Account

Although there was broad acceptance that state board roles were going to diminish over time, many participants also argued that they should never be completely disbanded as it was essential to ensure GA adhered to formal agreements that were made in the evolution of the system. Most importantly, and as noted previously, each state board that entered the One Golf model signed a 5-year 'Service Agreement' with Golf Australia that set out

various key performance indicators and conditions that were required to be met on the part of the national body. Many participants from the state boards now felt that their primary role was to hold the national board to account in relation to the details set out in these various Service Agreements:

You've also got every State with a Service Agreement keeping Golf Australia accountable to that Service Agreement and the States have generally said they see that as one of their key roles, is making sure that the Service Agreement is delivered and everything in that happens.

(G4)

'We had a number of subcommittees and looked at every aspect of the operations here in South Australia as the old board. But now we just see our role as keeping an eye on Golf Australia and making sure that they're doing all the things that they said they'd do in the Service Agreement.

(S6)

In reality our main role going forward is to make sure that the Service Agreement we signed and entrusted Golf Australia to deliver, is being delivered.

(V5)

Although an inevitable secession of authority and transfer of power would have to take place, several participants made explicit comments that they did not view the complete disbandment of state boards as a prudent decision to make. The primary reason for this was for state boards to act as a safety net if the One Golf model ultimately proves not to be successful:

I think there's a slight hesitation from the South Australian board to dissolve our old board structure and move into a new structure until we know this thing works.

(S7)

Under the One Golf agreement there is still a duty to maintain the entity because if it doesn't proceed in the manner that it's supposed to proceed, then there is a wind back.

(V6)

One Golf will be successful as long as the state boards still continue as a force within that Structure ... that's got to continue. (S3)

It might be that in 10 years the state boards cease to exist because everything's just folded in, but you know, there's a bit of water to go under the bridge before that happens.

(G1)

Within the realm of holding the national board to account, there was acknowledgement that the concept of trust would be a key factor to allow the national body to have oversight of the financial and non-financial resources of state bodies and that state boards would allow the national body to exercise

authority within the jurisdictions that would have previously been within the authoritative remit of state boards. This notion of trust within governing arrangements is not unique to this situation (see O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016) but does appear to be a significant enabler in dictating the potential success of such a model. Indeed, making explicit and working towards ideas that guide both collaborative governance and systems thinking may further enable the 'component entities' (i.e., state and national golf bodies) to understand their own and each other's roles and thus how to work together within this evolving environment. In particular, baseline notions of a share purpose (to govern the sport of golf in Australia) and an appreciation of their interconnected and interdependent influence with each other as key aspects of collaborative governance and systems thinking that can engender trust (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2018). Some representative quotes of the importance of inter-board trust included:

I think Golf Australia already had a level of trust from many of the states and that is reflected by how quickly some of them came across. So, I think there was already a level of trust. It's one thing trusting in an organisation, it's another thing handing over control of your state's golfing future to that central organisation. So, for some, the trust was already there. For others, it had to be developed, I think.

(G6)

Without the various organisations having a level of trust, you can't have blind trust of course, you've got to be sceptical and do your due diligence, but you've got to, at crucial points in time you have to trust that each party is going to do what they say they're going to do. So, it does play an important role.

(V5)

4.4 | The Changing Role of the National Board

Much of the focus in the findings thus far has centred on the changing or diminishing role of state boards within the One Golf model. What becomes quite apparent as the roles of state boards diminish is that the role of the national board must conversely become more complex and all encompassing. From a governance perspective concerning strategic direction, policy, and procedure, the national board is essentially now taking on a significant number of roles that were previously entrenched at the state board level. This raises key concerns about the expertise, capacity and experience of those charged to lead and govern at a national level from both a management and governance perspective. Under the previous federated management model, Golf Australia was generally a small organisation that was not necessarily required to be directly involved in the management and governance of affiliated states. Under the One Golf model, they now assume the majority of that responsibility, with state boards occupying a seemingly diminished role:

Golf Australia was a smaller operation in terms of the staff and what they did. Then all of a sudden, they've got the key leadership roles in a huge organisation that they don't really understand about and haven't had any experience dealing with.

(V1)

We've got a larger model to work with ... we've got a budget that's quadrupled in a very short period of time. Our resources have got to be better managed, our finances have got to be better managed, because we're now looking after a hell of a lot more than we did before ... we just have to look at things in a greater capacity, I suppose.

(G5)

The national board will have to be on the ball in terms of the whole of the country. I think the pressure will be on GA and the GA board to make this thing happen and fulfil all of the promises that the one model promises.

(S6)

Given this large change in responsibility and remit at the national board level, several participants felt that the transition of authority was happening too quickly which was disadvantaging both the national and state boards. It was suggested that greater levels of engagement and communication with state boards could have occurred so the national board could fully understand the complexity and nuances of issues and challenges within each individual state. It was even suggested that some form of temporary delegate board composition system or sub-committees be adopted to assist with this transition of power and decision-making process:

The state board's role is clearly diminishing. I don't know that Golf Australia have appreciated fully the requirements to run the business that Golf Victoria was running. So, they need to appreciate the extent of the operations and could use Golf Victoria board a little bit more.

(V4)

Now I think with their responsibilities, they have to reset and that could include either adding selected presidents and whatever else from various state boards onto the GA Board as invited members or however they need to do it. Or through consultative type interest groups. But I think there certainly needs to be a level of collaboration.

(V6)

I think Golf Australia's board level has often taken a national view, but not got their hands dirty and gone down into the weeds of the green grass. So, I think that there is learning, and certainly, there may be committees and other consultants or interest groups that need to be established as part of the framework, to make sure that the services are getting delivered and the right volunteers and support networks are there in place.

(S6)

Further to the argument that state boards should not be completely disbanded and that high level collaboration and engagement with state boards should continue (i.e., collaborative governance), was the relationships that state boards have with

individual funding bodies through pre-existing agreements. It is unlikely that such funding arrangements could be simply transferred to the national body as the benefactor if they have been previously negotiated with state organisations. This situation, as an example, illuminates the level of complexity involved in attempting to adopt unified management and its impact on the federated governance system within the sport and the vastly increased role a national board would have to occupy if the state boards ceased to exist (and thus the system is dismantled):

The other thing that was really important to us, and still is, is our relationships to the Victorian Government [which] is very strong. Our premier is very sold on golf, so it was important to us that that relationship be well managed, and that we stay in the loop on that. So that was very important too.

(V3)

I don't think the Golf Australia board and the CEO had our skills and our networks. So, I think that's definitely been frustrating for us, because we had those relationships in Victoria and we had a lot of respect as an organisation, and that's probably been impacted.

(V3)

Instead, as noted above, a greater appreciation for and understanding of the role that each state, national (and local club) entity could play if the federated governance system were to be embraced as such within the One Golf management model. As set out in systems thinking and collaborative governance ideas (noted earlier), this includes a more holistic perspective, that prioritises building of relationships and appreciating differing and multiple viewpoints and techniques which may conceivably be lost if the sport became fully unified (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2018; Jackson 2001). Further, recognising component parts of the system but seeking to bring them together to serve the needs of the whole (in whatever capacity is appropriate given the seemingly 'diminished' role of the state boards) is a key aspect of Jackson's (2001) creative holism that may be instructive at this juncture.

4.5 | Board Member Succession

The perceived diminishing role of state boards in a unified management structure clearly presents some challenges in relation to stakeholder engagement and accountability as discussed previously. A further potentially significant problem identified in the interviews is concerned with board member succession at both state and national level. Traditionally, directors who occupy seats on the board of a national organisation like Golf Australia would have had some experience of being board members at a state organisation first. If state boards are ever completely disbanded, then this experiential learning for potential national board members cannot occur. Further, even if state boards are not disbanded but have a significantly diminished role and responsibility, there exists a perception that high calibre individuals would not put their hands up to take on board positions, thus

impacting board calibre at state level and succession planning for national board directors:

I think that will definitely decrease people's interest in coming on. And then that really messes up the quality of the people, if we don't get decent people at state level that really can stuff up the national level board, which has got huge responsibility because you might not have the people of quality that they need at state level, and they have to serve there first.

(S1)

I think it will impact the quality of people that you can attract to the board, because they will look at the type of difference and say well if I'm going to give up my time, I'm probably not going to make much of an impact. I think it will mean that you probably won't get that, the talent pool that you'll be drawing from, there'll be less people that are strategic people with corporate experience or financial management skills or the legal skills.

(V3)

I think maybe people will find it less exciting and important. But that's something we'll have to manage but yeah, it's a diminished role, put it that way.

(S6)

You're not impacting because the role of the board has changed. So, I think it's not going to attract the same calibre of people, no, not at the state level. But hopefully it will at the Golf Australia level.

(V1)

Although the perceived diminishing role of state boards raises concerns about board member succession at the state and national level, conversely, the increased role of the national board may act as a strength when recruiting for board positions at the national level. Augmented responsibility, power and authority as a result of being the sole entity governing a sport across the whole of Australia could potentially attract very high calibre directors who may see such a position as a significant opportunity to create meaningful change and impact within the sport:

I think what it does is give the power to Golf Australia to have such a stronger presence in the market in terms of corporate partners and TV rights and all of that. So that it will be more of a prestigious role to be on that board of a bigger value organisation.

(S7)

From a national board, I think we're probably going to see that getting good people is going to become easier. I would suspect that people are more likely to join a board where there is complete control of a sport nationally, than the model we had before. I think people want to join a board where they have a greater say.

(G6)

5 | Implications for Sport Governance Systems Research and Practice

A key aspect of systems research is the coordination and the integration of systems to enable capabilities greater than the sum of the capabilities of the constituent systems. However, as Katina et al. (2019) point out, there is a lack of qualitative studies exploring how coordination and integration are achieved. Exploring governance reform, using the tenets of collaborative governance, infused with systems thinking holds much promise. Both offer a potentially powerful lens by highlighting the interdependencies between the entities and encouraging holistic problem-solving in pursuit of a shared purpose (Katina et al. 2019; McLean et al. 2025). Perhaps most critically, such an approach seeks to foster collaboration amongst the seemingly diverse stakeholders within the golf system.

The first theme to emerge in our analysis was that there was a clear sense of role ambiguity amongst board members at both state and national levels about their level of responsibility and oversight moving forward within a unified management structure. In the existing literature, board role ambiguity has been highlighted as an area of concern for governing entities as it can potentially cause a severe negative effect on board performance (Doherty and Hoye 2011). An ideal board will be skilled, accountable to its membership and have a clear understanding of its role (Crawford and Carter 2011). In the absence of a clearly defined role and understanding of that role, individual board member performance and therefore board performance as a whole will be negatively impacted by this ambiguity (Sakires et al. 2009).

The findings in the current paper mirror those of O'Boyle and Shilbury (2017) who noted board member role ambiguity also existed in the case of touch football when that sport undertook a change to unitary structures in their sport. It appears that when undergoing such a change, more work needs to be done at both the state and national levels to better articulate the refined roles and responsibilities of boards and their respective contributions towards the whole once a transition to a unified management model is being considered. This in turn may assist boards at both levels to perform better under this new approach and facilitate mutual understanding and an appreciation for the local and national context and accompanying power dynamics. This has also been noted as an important ingredient in such governing relationships particularly in reference to collaborative sport governance theory (Ansell and Gash 2008; Shilbury et al. 2016) and systems thinking (Jackson 2019). Ensuring that state boards—in their evolving role under One Golf—are cognisant of their shared purpose and interdependent influence within the system—continue to meet on a regular basis, which may also help to alleviate some of the sense of ambiguity that these boards were experiencing. The evolving role of state boards under a unified management model is a novel area of research that has received very little, if any, focus in prior sport governance work, or indeed within the corporate governance literature. State boards have outsourced management oversight to the national body but do retain the option to take this back under their control should they feel One Golf is not progressing as they want. Other potential options may be for dual reporting where there is a level of shared

responsibility while also appreciating respective geographic boundaries.

The notion of a complete disbandment of state boards within the system did not prove to be a popular alternative within the participant group due to the need for state boards to retain some level of oversight within the One Golf implementation. A classic example of the well-established agency theory in governance emerges here (Jensen and Meckling 1976) and has ties into other more recent sport governance specific research around inter-board trust in non-profit governing networks (O'Boyle and Shilbury 2016, 2017). Indeed, the concept of trust emerged as an important sub-theme in the findings, as described in participant quotes previously, with several participants noting that a level of trust between boards was crucial to allow the One Golf model to evolve. These findings show that collaborative governance theory and systems thinking remain an important lens for understanding effective governance within sport governing bodies (Shilbury et al. 2016), particularly when they transition from federated/autonomous to unified structures. To date, applications of the theory have predominantly been within the federated sport governance context, with another recent study suggesting collaborative governance is an effective framework for understanding how sport governing bodies could interact with political institutions. However, these findings show that even within unified structures, the central tenets of the theory, namely that there needs to be engagement, trust and collaboration for effective sport governance, remain salient due to the range of stakeholders that are still involved.

The impact that the One Golf model has had on the role of the national board is an interesting and novel finding as there are very few examples in practice or documented within research where the oversight and responsibility of a pre-existing board can change so dramatically with the adoption of a new management structure such as One Golf. The perception of the participants in this research at that point in time was that Golf Australia had completely underestimated the level of increased responsibility the national board would now occupy and the level of understanding they would need related to the nuances of individual states and the challenges they faced. Recent leadership focussed research in sport governance (e.g., O'Boyle et al. 2019, 2020; Shilbury et al. 2020) has examined how the notion of collective leadership could be adopted in such situations which may alleviate the new pressures being placed on the national board but aside from several participants noting how important 'leadership' as a general construct would be in the evolution and implementation of One Golf, none were able to articulate how exactly this leadership would be enacted and what leadership styles (e.g., leader centric, collective leadership, shared leadership) and approaches would be adopted.

Board composition in non-profit sport governance has received a modest level of attention within existing literature over the past decade (e.g., Ingram and O'Boyle 2017; O'Boyle and Hassan 2015). Similarly, within practice, board composition has been a topic for discussion most notably around the inclusion of independent board directors on NSO boards in an attempt to move away from the delegate system of board composition that has been synonymous with federated structures for some time (Crawford and Carter 2011). What has received far less attention

is the area of board member recruitment and succession in order to attract high calibre people to fulfil the responsibilities of these positions. The volunteer nature of these positions has been perceived to be a challenge to attract such high calibre individuals; however, it appears that the perceived diminishing role of state boards and the subsequent pipeline of qualified and experienced board members to serve at the national level may be severely impacted through the One Golf implementation. Offsetting this concern is that the increased power and authority of the national board may help to attract experienced independent directors, but it appears unlikely that they would have had previous experience as a board member within the sport already (other than at local clubs), which may be a disadvantage even to a skills-based board that is seen as current best practice (Crawford and Carter 2011; Sport Australia, n.d).

Lastly, the findings in the current work show that the core tenets of collaborative sport governance theory (e.g., trust, leadership, mutual understanding, sharing of information) as proposed by Shilbury et al. (2016) are also important elements through both the adoption and implementation phases of a unitary management model. Further, the infusion of systems thinking and the idea of creative holism as advanced by Jackson (2003) potentially present a way of approaching the complexity of Golf's current changes, in an iterative, emergent and context-sensitive way, while also holding to the need to foster collaboration in pursuit of a shared purpose. Indeed, it may be the case that had the golf network sought to pursue a course of collaborative governance infused by systems thinking in the first instance and should that process have been successful, then a transition to a unitary management may have been a smoother process, given the necessary behaviours and actions to make this a success may already have been established.

6 | Conclusion

This paper provides a unique insight into the perceptions of board members changing roles and behaviours when a unified management structure is being adopted within a sporting system. There has been very little focus on this area prior to the current research. However, with increasing interest from various sporting codes to explore unitary systems (Sport Australia, n.d.), we anticipate this area of inquiry will continue to grow as researchers and practitioners attempt to increase understanding around the benefits and challenges inherent within such a structural change. The use of collaborative sport governance concepts, infused by systems thinking, is an important conceptual contribution to understanding the impact of unified management on Board Roles in federated governance systems, showing up where systems thinking might be most needed.

The outcomes from this study also build upon previous findings within adjacent areas in the domains of board member ambiguity, inter-board relationships, trust, leadership and board composition. We advocate for further studies to be framed by collaborative sport governance and critical systems thinking and as sport systems continue to grapple with the need for and impacts of governance reform. It is acknowledged that the results from this data set represent a point in time along an ongoing continuum for the implementation of One Golf. Future research could be helpful to re-visit the One Golf phenomenon once some further

time has elapsed to reflect on the entire process of its implementation with particular focus on a whole of system approach and the tenets of collaborative governance in the consolidation of state and national board roles within the new structure. Systems-based methodologies such as action research approaches may also help to understand how collaborative sport governance changes can be enacted. This would greatly help to inform future decision-making processes for sports with an ambition for governance reform which seeks to navigate the complexity, uncertainty and interconnectedness of contemporary sport.

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