Improving the governance of sport organisations

Sean Hamil and Geoff Walters, lecturers and researchers at the Birkbeck Sport Business Centre in the School of Business, Economics and Informatics have been investigating governance within the sport industry since 1999, and have been helping to shape policy debates ever since. Good sport governance is to lead an organisation effectively to ensure that it is well managed and that the activity and environment of the sport can grow and develop in a controlled and sustainable way.

Hamil and Walters’ findings about the football industry have contributed to parliamentary inquiries, including the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s inquiry (2011) into the governance of English football.

At that time, the committee considered particular challenges of the game such as whether there is too much debt in professional football; the merits of supporter’s trusts owning stakes in clubs, whether football clubs should be treated differently from other commercial organisations, and whether the FA and leagues, who govern the game, are “fit for purpose”.

All the witnesses to the committee were asked to consider whether the government should intervene to galvanise changes to the game. Hamil pointed out that the last time the government passed the Football Spectators Act 1989, it had an overwhelmingly positive impact. In fact, the legislation implemented all-seater stadiums in the top two divisions and introduced a range of safety requirements after the 1989 Hillsborough disaster.

Research undertaken by the Birkbeck Sport Business Centre on the broader sports sector has been used by the Sport and Recreation Alliance, the representative body for England’s sport governing bodies, to improve governance practices across national governing bodies of sport. In particular, the research informed the development of the Voluntary Code of Good Governance for the Sport and Recreation Sector, a best practice guide that has been adopted by more than 70 national governing bodies of sport in the UK.

The code was designed to enable sport and recreation organisations to aspire to - and maintain - good governance and act as a catalyst for change. It is a tool to help Boards perform their role by outlining seven principles in the following areas:

Integrity
Defining and evaluating the role of the board
Delivery of vision, mission and purpose
Objectivity
Standards, systems and controls
Accountability and transparency
Understanding and engaging with the sporting landscape

Organisations can apply the code in a flexible way and define what each principle means in the context of that organisation. For example, some organisations may want to specifically highlight the voice of the athlete, the role for Sport Heroes or the passion of its volunteers.

The great success of the London 2012 Olympic Games has illustrated the enormous value that well-organised sports, and sporting events, can add to the life of a country – both economically
and socially. The UK is a particularly relevant context in which to study the governance performance of sport organisations, as recent years have seen rapid commercial growth and a shift from amateur to professional structures across many sports.