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Professionalization of voluntary sport organizations – a study of the Quality Club Programme of the Norwegian Football Association

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: This research investigates Norwegian football clubs' participation in the Quality Club Programme (QCP) as a case of professionalization consisting of two stages – short term: more education, knowledge and documentation as well as better skills and improved organizational structure; long term: potential problems related to bureaucracy and full-fledged professions. In light of this distinction, the researchers ask the clubs why they take part in QCP and what they want to get out of it. This paper also invites reflections on the more troublesome part of voluntary organizations' participation in processes of professionalization. Finally, we explore what the clubs understand to be the driving forces behind the programme and discuss whether these factors are conducive to the aims that the clubs have for their participation.
Research Methods: The data comprise semi-structured interviews with 22 football clubs analysed by theme-based coding and categorization.
Results and Findings: Clubs take part in QCP because they are expected to (i.e. institutionalization), to increase their autonomy and to improve their control over important resources: volunteers (i.e. resource dependency). To achieve this, the clubs see better routines, more predictability and improved structure as imperative. This study's results show that what clubs report as making the programme function does not always work in favour of the clubs' aims.
Implications: The findings indicate that broad, multi-institutional approaches and action-oriented theories are necessary for understanding the choices and actions of voluntary sport clubs. Also shown is how the tools chosen for organizational development could be contrary to organizations' aims.

Introduction

We are living in an age of experts, which implies unstoppable demands for more knowledge, better education and improved documentation (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). These great demands for what could be described as professionalization also have implications

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for voluntary sport clubs (Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014; Ruoranen et al., 2016; Wicker, 2017). From a sport management point of view, professionalization consists of two stages. The first entails a short-term process, which includes 'specialised training and skill, exclusivity, complexity, code of ethics, gaining specific credentials and establishing professional–client relationships' (Dowling et al., 2014, p. 521). At a later stage: 'Professionalization is understood to be the process through which occupations change to obtain a professional status' (Dowling et al., 2014, p. 521). Voluntary sport clubs are still far away from being professionalized as defined by this second and more demanding meaning of the term; yet, a timely question concerns what involvement in professionalization in the first concrete meaning of the term – education, training and increased skills here and now – might imply for sport clubs in the longer run.

One example of how such professionalization processes reach small-scale voluntary sport can be found in Norwegian sport, where, in early 2014, the Football Association of Norway (NFF) initiated a *Quality Club Programme* (QCP) (NFF, n.d.), inspired by the English Standard Chartered Programme (Howie & Allison, 2015) and the UEFA's grassroots programme (UEFA, 2011). The aim of QCP is to help football clubs develop through education, documentation, the learning of ethics and societal values, and improved organizational structure. If successful, the clubs are certified as quality clubs.

Professionalization projects such as QCP present voluntary sport clubs with a dilemma. On one hand, the traditional qualities of voluntary organizations are still, in many people's eyes, what make voluntary organizations worthwhile. They allow for something different than the aims promoted by the dominant, short-sighted performance- and profit-oriented ideologies of modern societies; voluntary organizations are simpler, less bureaucratic, and potentially more dynamic than larger, highly structured and diversified organizations. They operate with less strict and formalized demands for qualifications and are, thereby, typically more open and inclusive. On the other hand, voluntary organizations are also vulnerable because of their size and lack of formal competencies and their weak, undefined organizational structure. They are often poor in terms of economic and political resources, and they are regularly difficult to lead because of blurred lines of authority.

The common diagnosis is, nevertheless, that sport clubs should be more efficient, responsible and transparent than today, and the dominant outcome of clubs facing this professionalization dilemma is that 'Sport is professionalising in response to communities that expect more from sport than its former ad hoc structures' (Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011, p. 108). In the short run, these developments – better educated coaches and leaders, more documentation, and a stricter and more differentiated division of labour – are mostly seen as positive and helpful: The clubs will be more efficient and better prepared for a more demanding future. Going down the professionalization road could, however, influence several of the characteristics traditionally associated with voluntary sport clubs and make them more dependent on markets and politics: 'Yet the modernization process treads a fine line between defining a clear set of organizational objectives and lapsing into "excessive formalization" which can prove to be organizationally dysfunctional … ' (Houlihan & Green, 2009, p. 695).

Even though the way sport clubs meet these challenges is consequential for the development of both each single sport club and the larger process of professionalization, few studies have looked closely at how clubs at the local level relate to these dilemmas inherent

to the process of professionalization. The main contribution of this study is to find out how sport clubs themselves think about and handle such dilemmas. This study asks how the clubs approach both the concrete, short term and apparently positive aspects of QCP; how they reflect on the long term, abstract and potentially more troublesome aspects of such professionalization processes; and how they foresee organizational change embedded within these processes.

This study will examine the clubs' stances in regard to this dilemma by first asking them directly about their participation in QCP: Why do they take part and what do they expect to get out of it? Second, to come closer to the uncertainty and ambiguity of such projects, the author invites the clubs to engage in more elaborate reflections on their experiences with QCP and professionalization. The clubs want to improve, but organizational change is cumbersome and mostly incremental. To better understand what type of shifts the clubs experience, this paper will, third, discuss how QCP might develop over the longer run based on the clubs' own descriptions of what makes participation in QCP work: Which social mechanisms do the clubs point to as decisive for these processes? Will QCP deliver the expected long-term benefits or will the clubs continue as before with their loose structure and ad hoc administrations?

By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute better answers to the larger questions of how processes of professionalization actually work out for voluntary sport clubs at the local level and to critically show some of the dilemmas – potential benefits and challenges (Kikulis, 2000) – professionalization entails. To achieve these aims, we first present QCP, including the context, previous research and relevant theoretical perspectives. Next follows a description of the data and methods, and then the results are presented in two sections. This paper concludes with a discussion of how participation in projects of professionalization might impact voluntary organizations.

Context, previous research and theoretical perspectives

Context

The aim of QCP is to help clubs improve along four dimensions: activity, organization, competence and societal- and value-work (see Table 1 for details). Participating in the programme is voluntary and through application; thereafter, the NFF assigns a supervisor for each club. Clubs are certified according to whether they achieve specific standards along the four dimensions and at three levels (i.e. gold, silver and bronze). NFF consists of 1818 clubs, and as of late 2017, 192 were certified as quality clubs (bronze level), while 190 were in the certification process. In 2017, the first silver quality club was certified.

To interpret the study's results, it is useful to see QCP and Norwegian football as unfolding within three contexts. First, Norwegian sport is, to a large extent, based on voluntary work (Seippel & Skille, 2015). This makes recruitment and the organization of volunteers a decisive task for the clubs (Breuer, Feiler, Llopis-Goig, & Elmose-Østerlund, 2017). Other imperative tasks are the recruitment of members as well as securing economic funding and access to facilities (Breuer, Hoekman, Nagel, & van der Werff, 2015; Enjolras & Seippel, 2001). Second, Norwegian public authorities and sport organizations all have specific sport policies. Crucial among these are inclusive visions, such as

Table 1. Requirements for Qualifying as a Quality Club (Bronze Level, at the time of the study, author's translation).

Activity

- Recruitment Plan: The club should have a plan describing how to recruit new cohorts of players and how players are received and given equal opportunities.
- Sport Plan: The club should have a sport plan that meets the minimum criteria.
- Training Responsibility: The club shall have a person responsible for supervising coaches.

Organization

- Organizational Chart: The club shall have an organizational chart with role descriptions.
- Finances: The club should have a plan for financial management.
- Start-up Manager: The club shall have a person responsible for the start-up year for the players.
- Club Guide: The club should have a club handbook according to NFF template for level 1.
- Referee Coordinator: The club shall have a person responsible for recruitment and supervision of referees.
- FIKS Responsibility: The club should have a person who is responsible for FIKS (data, registering of players, etc.).

Expertise

- Management Expertise: The majority of the club's board should have NFF leader 1 courses.
- Training Expertise: Club trainers should be competent.

Societal- and value-work

- Values: The club should base its operation and activities on football's values and prepare its own values.
- Home Games: The club's home games should be carried out according to NFF guidelines.
- Guidelines for Child and Youth Football: The club shall demonstrate that the activity corresponds to NFF guidelines for children and youth football.
- Annual Meeting: The club shall hold an annual meeting on values, policies, fair play and one theme from 'safe environment'.
- Police: The club must confirm that all the relevant offices have delivered valid police certificates.
- Damage and Insurance: The club should inform about NFF's policies for injury prevention and insurance. NFF extended individual insurances should be familiar to parents and players. All clubs should have a first aid kit on training and matches.
- Safe Contexts: The club should select one theme each year, make members familiar with the theme, and develop and implement policies.

'Sport and physical activity for all' (Whitepaper nr 26, 2012, p. 13), 'Joy of sport for all' (NIF, 2015, p. 4) and 'Football fun, opportunities and challenges for all' (NFF, 2012, p. 6). To reach these aims, public authorities rely mainly on two policy tools: They provide economic funding for the construction of sport facilities, and they fund the organizational infrastructure for sport (Bergsgard & Nordberg, 2010). Third, 'Norwegian football has never been lower ranked' was the message in a leading Norwegian newspaper in June 2017 (Aftenposten, 2017) and an indication of some of the challenges facing Norwegian football. Success at the elite level seems to belong to the past, and the growth in the numbers of active players and spectators appears to have stalled. Hence, the challenges facing the largest organized sport in Norway represent a worrying background for the implementation of QCP.

Institutionalism and resource dependencies

Most researchers seem to agree that a large and complex set of theories is necessary to grasp the complexity of professionalization and organizational change (e.g. the 'integrative model of organizational change' as suggested by Cunningham, 2002 and the multilevel

model as proposed by Nagel, Schlesinger, Wicker, et al., 2015). Given the contextual factors and the processes QCP is intended to spur, it seems, first, that *new institutionalism* makes sense in a voluntary sport setting (Cunningham, 2002; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Washington & Patterson, 2011). Within this theory, the basic insight is that organizations operate beyond technical efficiency criteria and instead develop by responding to expectations and demands from higher levels in their surroundings. The new institutional approach claims that institutional signs from policies, laws and professions influence how organizations act. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) also suggest three social mechanisms that could be useful for studying such processes: mimetic, normative and coercive imitations (O'Brien & Slack, 2004).

Previous research has shown that voluntary sport organizations seldom react uniformly to external pressures (Fahrner, 2009; Nichols, Wicker, Cuskelly, & Breuer, 2015; Oliver, 1991; Thiel & Meier, 2004). To grasp the more complex and multi-institutional context (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017), the topic could be approached through the *institutional logics* perspective proposed by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012). As an example, Gammelsæter (2010) has shown how football clubs relate and react to other clubs, sports, families, (local) politics, communities and sponsors in different ways. The 'new institutionalists' are also accused of having an understanding of organizational change that is too deterministic and of underestimating the significance of strategic, rational agencies as well as field dynamics and social relations (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004, p. 159; Anteby, Chan, & Dibenigno, 2016, pp. 212–220; Giddens, 1984; Oliver, 1991; Stevens & Slack, 1998; Washington & Patterson, 2011). A viable response to this challenge would be to think of the micro foundations of institutions consisting of organizations operating as intentional actors (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010; Micelotta et al., 2017), as in the *resource dependence* perspective (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Here the main rationale for action is to gain control of resources. This perspective also implies a simple social mechanism – striving for control of interests – that fruitfully supplements the above institutional mechanisms.

From these perspectives, it is interesting to see (i) whether the clubs report expectations from public authorities, sport organizations/clubs or other institutional actors as being significant for their participation in QCP or (ii) whether more instrumental reasons are important, and if so, which types of resources the clubs aim for and which interests are dominant and over which they experience a lack of control.

Professionalization: structure, legitimacy and looseness

In the present case, a distinction is made between stages in processes of professionalization, where the first stage concerns a situation in which skills, knowledge and expertise are introduced into organizations. In later stages, professionalization could affect power, influence and communication, both within organizations and between organizations and their environments (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Larson, 1977; Wilensky, 1964). A question of special relevance for the present case is how characteristics specific to voluntary organizations are challenged in such processes (Andreassen, Breit, & Legard, 2014; Dowling et al., 2014; Eliasoph, 2013; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, et al., 2015; Seippel, 2010; Staggenborg, 1988).

A familiar theme in organizational sociology is the tendency for organizations to develop into *bureaucracies*, with structures of power not necessarily in accordance with democratic ideals (Du Gay, 2000; Michels, 1915/1962). The topic of the professionalization of voluntary organizations follows up on this theme. As an example, Hwang and Powell (2009) found how professionalization in a sample of US charities resulted in organizational rationalization, increased strategic planning, independent financial audits, stricter programme evaluations and an increased use of consultants. In an analysis of voluntary sport organizations, Thibault, Slack, and Hinings (1991, p. 95) stated that 'there is a clear link between professionalization and bureaucratization'. In a more recent study, Lucassen and de Bakker (2016) showed how sport organizations tend to take on hybrid forms at the intersection of state, market and civil society.

The second organizational aspect of professionalization regards the internal structures of organizations. First, although not often explicitly stated in the literature on professionalization, organizations such as voluntary sport clubs – with their clearly differentiated activities (e.g. various sports, levels, gender and age) – are *loosely coupled* and split into parts that do not always communicate very well with each other (Orton & Weick, 1990). Second, the organizational literature is concerned with the possibility that organizations adhering to professional values and practices might respond by using strategies of decoupling or resistance (Heinze & Di, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; O'Toole & Grey, 2016). Bromley and colleagues (Bromley, 2012; Bromley, Hwang, & Powell, 2012) have followed up on these theories and have found a tendency for organizations to avoid or adjust to external expectations by either not doing what has been stated or doing something having not very much to do with the main aim of the organization.

Third, there are certain characteristics of voluntary organizations, besides their looseness, that could influence how they react to professionalization processes. Most importantly, voluntary organizations are often supposed to be difficult to lead and to have leaders with *weaker authority* than for-profit organizations (Swidler, 1979). This comes from the exit option being nearby in voluntary organizations: If people are bossed around, they do not have to stay (Hirschman, 1970; Warren, 2001). For-profit organizations build on a wider spectrum of incentives (e.g. more utilitarian, fewer norms, less emotional) than voluntary organizations (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014; Knoke & Prensky, 1984; Nowy, Wicker, Feiler, & Breuer, 2015; O'Toole & Grey, 2016; Thiel & Mayer, 2009). Taken together, the study's theoretical perspective makes it possible to identify both the reasons clubs have for taking part in a professionalization programme such as QCP and why participation in such a programme might involve dilemmas and challenges for voluntary sport clubs.

Data and methods

Given the lack of knowledge on how clubs think about and handle processes of professionalization, the study has an exploratory character, and the researchers have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Silverman, 2011). For analyses, the study adhered to a balance of inductive and deductive strategies – an abductive logic – where the researchers relied on a theoretical framework while also achieving a flexible interview situation where new issues could be brought forward (Charmaz, 2013; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

Interviews

The data are based on interviews structured through an interview guide. The interviews took place in spring 2015 and lasted an average of 70 min each. The main researcher and assistant conducted 17 interviews together; separately, the researcher did 3 and the assistant 2. The interviewees were the persons in the club responsible for the club's work with QCP. In 15 cases, this responsibility rested with 1 person, but 7 clubs sent 2 informants, and 1 club even sent 3. Nineteen clubs provided interviewees who had positions on the boards of the clubs, 3 sent employees, and 3 provided both employees and board members.

The researchers structured the questions central to these analyses around two types of queries, each tracing the temporal elements of the process of professionalization (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). First, we asked the clubs *directly* why they took part in QCP. The purpose was to get an immediate and overall impression of their concrete, short-term justification for participating in the programme. Looking for more reflexive, specific and problematizing long-term reasons, we then asked *counterfactually*: If they had not taken part in QCP, what would have been different?

Sample

The aim of the study was to ascertain some *typical* clubs and the *diversity* (Gerring, 2008) of their behaviour in working with QCP. Thus the sample is primarily purposive and not necessarily representative. The researchers first sampled 32 clubs from 4 regional districts representing geographical and structural variation (Table 2 and Figure 1). The clubs were relatively large: from 144 to 1243 members, with a mean of 603 (Figure 1). In the end, 22 clubs took part in the study. Number of members, type of club (multisport/single sport/ alliance club) and regional location could all make a difference as to how the clubs respond to and experience their participation in QCP. Larger clubs could be better situated for the QCP process, and single sport clubs (football only) are not restricted by the larger club. Attrition occurred mainly because some clubs were difficult to reach and did not seem particularly interested in participating in the study. A few clubs claimed they had not been in the QCP programme long enough to be of interest for the study.

It is important to bear in mind that the sample comprises clubs who have chosen to take part in QCP and clubs who have agreed to participate in a study on QCP (i.e. a sample selected on the dependent variable; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994), and we should, therefore, assume that these clubs are more positive towards QCP and NFF and more concerned with organizational development than football clubs in general.

Table 2. Type of sport clubs and regional belonging.

	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Total
Multisport clubs	3	5	5	1	14
Single sport clubs	1	2	0	1	4
Alliance clubs	3	0	1	0	4
Total	7	7	6	2	22

Note: In an *alliance club*, there is a relation between one sport club (the alliance club) and one autonomous single sport club. This organizational form is mostly chosen to avoid economic risks for the 'original' club when one part of the club has more risky projects.
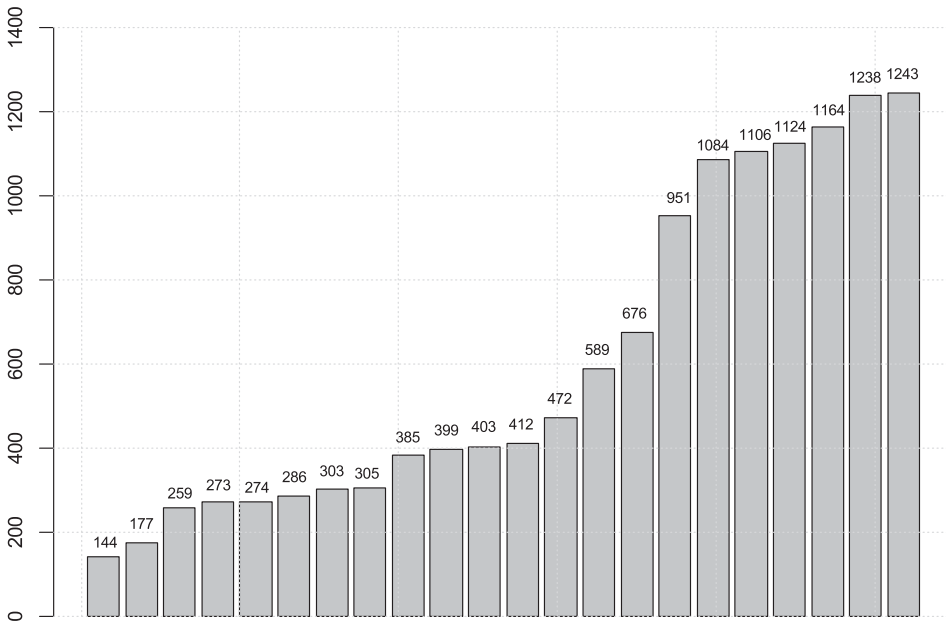
Figure 1. Number of members in the football clubs included in the study.

Analyses

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The researcher and assistant discussed experiences from the interviews and possible interpretations immediately following each interview and wrote short memos. The transcripts were analysed using theme-based coding and categorization. At the same time, as data were being analysed abductively with an explicit theoretical start and end point, the texts were read more inductively, back and forth (i.e. open coding), to discover new and unexpected information (Charmaz, 2013; Gibbs, 2007). Texts were coded by the researcher and assistant separately before the texts and coding were discussed together. Quotes were translated by the author, and clubs were numbered randomly.

Result 1 – why-directly: concrete short-term consequences

When looking for short-term and concrete aims and asking directly, 'Why does your club participate in QCP?', two types of answers dominated. The first type refers directly to what the clubs want to achieve: stronger structure, better routines, more stability and more influential 'club management'. The second type of answers addresses precipitative causes: expectations from significant others or specific problems facing the club.

Better structure, routines, stability and 'the Club as Boss'

The most common and immediate answer is some version of improved structure and order, delivered in a very general and – occasionally – tentative way. Club 5 says, 'No, well, we are here to strengthen our organization', while Club 4 thinks, 'The quality concept says it, it is to

improve the quality of everything', and Club 7 suggests, 'To improve, maybe'. The answers tend to be self-evident – to strengthen, increase quality, improve – and simultaneously harbour a certain insecurity: 'No … ', 'maybe … ' and 'The concept says it'. This indicates that the responses to the immediate *why-question* sometimes lack an articulate and precise answer, and the clubs do not seem to be, on this general and immediate level, very concrete or explicit as to why their clubs take part in QCP.

Some of the clubs, being more explicit, apply concepts more indicative of what they think of as *improvement* and *better structure*; key terms turn out to be *routines* and *stability*. Club 13 states that 'The most important thing was to put things into a system, simple as that', a response supported by 'Club 10 is not a club with many routines', whereas Club 9 emphasizes:

> What is most important to us is to get some stability in the club, that people should know our values and that it should be easy to identify people having the various tasks. It should be easy to take on a task (role). (Club 9)

In short, the clubs are asking for order (i.e. stability and predictability), which should be provided by routines and, in turn, will make it easier to volunteer and take on roles and positions within the club.

> And it is not my intention to sit here for many years, but right now I think it is fun. However, we must prepare for other people taking over, people moving in and out of it, some kind of rotation of people. (Club 10)

An aim emphasized by many clubs is the wish to improve and prepare the organization so that more people will take up voluntary work and organizational positions more easily (Swierzy, Wicker, & Breuer, 2018). A specific reason for developing the club is the aspiration to appear more coherent and united, that is, as a club with an identity (Albert & Whetten, 2004), than the fragmented, ad hoc, and coach/parent-centred clubs that are often encountered. This is what one club representative experienced when he started volunteering for the club:

> We [the club] did not take part in x, we were not at y. You know, the club was dad-centred … I found out it could not be like this, we have to understand what is happening in our environments and do something. That is the background for us entering QCP. (Club 11)

Next, many interviewees made the point that they want the club to be in charge and state that the club must position itself in ways that make it independent of single (strong) persons. Club 10 has a succinct version of this stance: 'So, what I consider important is to run the club more professionally in the way that it is the board and the club that decides', whereas Club 3 states that

> We are a club beginning to be more club- than coach-managed … Actually; we are making the decisions, not them. Forget about it, if not, go somewhere else. Even though we are not good at asking them to go somewhere else, that is what we think. (Club 3)

Expectations, situations and tools

While many of the clubs think participation in QCP will improve their organizational structure and assist the club in setting rules and becoming the central decision maker,

several of the answers also point towards clubs' participation being driven mainly as responses to something in the surroundings. The most widespread version of such accounts is, simply, that the club was informed about QCP: 'Yes, we received an inquiry from the football association about participation, and, it is a bit random' (Club 1).

Clubs do not necessarily need reasons to take part in QCP other than being asked to take action. Some of the more prestigious clubs also experienced a (vague) institutional pressure, where they felt that the football community expected them to take part: 'And, then you know, there are expectations that X also should … that we should be in the front. So, then, it is natural that we should [participate]' (Club 8).

A club more directed towards a broader set of actors' expectations is Club 1, stating: 'We want to, through our club-academy … and our vision, to be the flagship in our part of the country. So, we are proud of getting things done' (Club 1).

Even though no clubs directly admit to participating because of status, many of the clubs nevertheless report that reputation is important. One club very directly answered that the most important argument within the club for working with QCP was 'to use the quality mark' (Club 16). Some of the clubs emphasized that they chose to participate because they found themselves in a precarious situation, making it almost mandatory to take part:

> When it [QCP] came up, it was obvious that this was the tool that we were looking for. We actually knew what we had to do, and also where we wanted to go. But, we lacked the tools … Yet, here came the tool kit so we could just start. It was all a matter of good timing. (Club 13)

In short, some clubs knew both what they wanted to do, and what they had to do, but nevertheless lacked the final push to actually *do* it because they did not know how best to do it. Thus, in that specific situation, the offer from QCP was what they needed in order to set a new course of action.

Result 2 – why-contra-factual: abstract, long-term consequences

When asked directly, most clubs reported rather vague reasons for participating in QCP. Hence, the researchers assumed that asking the clubs counterfactually what would have happened if they had not taken part in QCP would elicit some more concrete and elaborate thinking on how they actually expected the QCP process to develop and what, eventually, made the process work or not. We present three types of reflections found in several clubs: repeating and explicating the *structure argument*, pointing out *how* QCP could help (social mechanisms: time, enabling, monitoring, and leveraging) and QCP's (lack of) *implications*.

The first and recurring argument is the present lack of structure versus *the hope of a well-structured future*, without QCP 'It had all been by the old, but we had not got the structure which we are about to develop now … but, the club would have continued' (Club 12), and 'This makes for a future, because you have to start working a little. A little more structured when it comes to tasks which have been a little loosely organized previously' (Club 19). The question is, again, made more concrete by emphasizing the routines and the 'club as boss': 'And then we will work out routines and descriptions of roles which makes it easier/more convenient for new people to continue the work within the club' (Club 2) and 'Then it is easier to make persons take up positions' (Club 11).

Some of the clubs pointed to aspects of the processes representing *social mechanisms* (Goertz, 2017; Hedström & Bearman, 2009) to indicate how QCP might help bring about change. A recurring theme is *time*: Things will be more structured, more routinized and easier, but the process will also be quicker than what would otherwise have been the case. The representative from Club 2 thinks, 'We would not have made it without QCP. At least not now', and a member of Club 20 says, 'I think it would have taken much more time'. A similar point comes from Club 13, stating that 'We would not have come this far in structuring it … yes, we would have been slower'. Implicit in these and other answers is this proposition: We could have achieved the same without QCP – but it would have taken more time.

Next, several clubs talked about how QCP *enables* them – how QCP presents the clubs with the tools they need to develop the organizations when they receive a list of demands and expectations, means, and goals: 'We do not have to invent it … It states what we are supposed to do' (Club 20). Moreover, several plans and actions are difficult to sustain because members can be easily led astray. Clubs need someone to *constrain* and/or coordinate their actions (Elster, 2000; Foucault, 2001; Ostrom, 1990), and QCP *monitoring* helps by forcing the clubs to focus upon the tasks ahead of them: 'But we see that it has been very convenient to have all these points [the demands] because you get conscious and focused, right?' (Club 1) and 'You get focused on these things when you are part of a programme like this' (Club 21). Finally, the fourth way QCP works is by being used as *leverage*: forcing other people to pay attention and assign importance to the issues covered by QCP: 'It increases the focus … when we come and present this for the board … we have to do something about the referees … it counts more when we say that this is a demand raised within a larger NFF-programme' (Club 7), and without it 'we would not have got any focus from the board' (Club 5).

Finally, against the background of the rather modest short-term improvement described by most clubs, there are also examples of more cynical views on the consequences of QCP. One typical statement was: 'I do not think there would be large differences, but I think it is easier to find things. That things are more visible … That the club is the boss. And that, I think, is positive' (Club 14). Then, there was the critical view and, when asked what would be different, the 'converted' club stated: 'We could have used our time and energy directly in the club [laughter]' (Club 17), and 'Without QCP we would have been in ruins. In short, I think that [club's name] in a few years would not have been' (Club 18).

Discussion and conclusion

This research has studied how a selection of Norwegian football clubs reason about their participation in QCP, which we take to be a case of professionalization. For voluntary organizations, such a project presents a dilemma between what appears to be short-term, concrete, and obviously positive changes and, potentially, long-term, abstract challenges. This makes it timely to ask why clubs actually want to take part in such a programme, what they expect to get out of their participation and what they might see as problematic with it all.

To answer these questions, *new institutionalism* and *institutional logics* were invoked to grasp the influence of the institutional context. To understand the clubs' strategic interests

and how their participation in QCP enhances their control over resources of interest, *resource dependency* theory was used. Three topics from critical studies of professionalization were utilized to explore how the clubs involved in professionalization think about the long-term challenges of structuralization, looseness/decoupling, and leadership/authority.

For the first question of *why*, some clubs reported they were part of the programme because it was expected by the 'football system' or because they compared themselves to neighbouring clubs, which made them feel obliged to take part: factors usually addressed in institutional theory and operating through normative and, tending towards, coercive isomorphic mechanisms. Looking for a wider set of influences, the institution of most importance for football clubs as it appears in the responses to QCP seems, however, to be *the family,* where volunteers, mostly parents of young members, are recruited (Hayoz, Klostermann, Schmid, Schlesinger, & Nagel, 2017; Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2018; Strandbu, Stefansen, Smette, & Sandvik, 2019). For the clubs, the challenge is to give the impression of an organization with integrity, a clear identity, explicit policies, and competency and responsibility in the eyes of potential volunteers.

One of the rationales for DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) seminal paper was the idea that 'structural change in organizations seems less and less driven by competition or by the need for efficiency' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 147). The findings of this article, however, indicate that voluntary football clubs absolutely position themselves for improved competition and efficiency: A smoother and better-working organization resting on improved structure is exactly what they look for. So, even though institutional perspectives partly fit as explanations for why clubs take part in QCP, what appears as the real driving force is a feeling of a lack of control (i.e. predictability and stability) over the structural development of the organization. Participation in QCP appears, in this context, as a tool to (re)gain control of the organization by developing better structure, which in turn would make for a more predictable organization and thereafter would make it easier to recruit and retain volunteers. In this way, the clubs aim to gain control over one of the most important and pressing resources for their functioning: volunteers. It is interesting to note that other resources important for voluntary football clubs (e.g. members, facilities, money) are, in the context of QCP, perceived as less-pressing problems than volunteers.

In summary, institutions matter, but it seems important to note that a wide spectrum of institutions (as invoked in the institutional logics perspective) should be included – especially the family (from where volunteers are recruited) in this context. Moreover, it is also important to take the agency aspect into account: Even though the clubs' reasons at first might appear vague, their motives are basically about control of one of the clubs' resource bases: volunteers.

To understand these processes of professionalization, a decisive question is how the clubs themselves describe the processes and what they identify as the factors making things work out. Besides institutional factors and interest in the control of resources (e.g. volunteers), several social mechanisms were identified as important and explicitly linked to successful outcomes of participation in the QCP programme. First, the clubs were given the *tools* and *enabled* to do what they wanted to do. Then, a *time* schedule was introduced, and clubs were *monitored* and *disciplined* to do what QCP demands, which was what they often wanted to do anyway but were not able to. Finally, taking part in the programme worked as *leverage* in the larger organizational context and put

pressure on a wider set of actors in and around the club. Taken together, it seems reasonable to say that the effects of QCP stem from 'exogenous shocks' (Hall, 2010, p. 205): The organization is challenged to change from the outside, which then spurs a set of more concrete social mechanisms operating inside.

One of the enduring queries in the area of professionalization studies concerns the problems participating clubs might experience (e.g. whether and how professionalization goes together with undue *structuration*, i.e. bureaucratization in a negative sense of the term). The idea is that stricter and more constraining structures are side effects of the true goals of a more effective and responsible organization, resulting from a more knowledge-based administration. What is interesting to note in this study is the lack of concern about negative bureaucratic implications and the almost unconditional embracement of QCP: More knowledge, better documentation and improved structure are what most of the clubs strive for. They are the main motivations for club participation, not a dangerous side effect. Other, more concrete 'main effects' are, for most of the clubs, rather vague.

Other recurring worries in the literature on voluntary organizations and professionalization are the *loose* linkages between the parts of organizations, the problem with weak authority and distant leadership, and the (implicit) push in the direction of decoupling that often comes with professionalization. For the clubs in this study, part of the problem – and the reason they want stronger structure – is this experience of looseness. Clubs are 'dad-driven', and sub-organizational units tend to do as they please regardless of club policies. Accordingly, there is a need for re-coupling (i.e. making the clubs more united and leaving the leaders with more authority). On one hand, the clubs take part in QCP to structure the organization, to strengthen the authority of (the leaders of) the organization and to (re)connect its groups. On the other hand, the means chosen, according to previous studies (Bromley et al., 2012; Micelotta et al., 2017), easily have the effect of loosening rather than strengthening the structure of organizations. The query then becomes whether and how QCP might help bring about a more structured organization and how structuring will actually help the clubs to develop as desired.

The follow-up question then becomes how the clubs' reflections on their reasons for taking part in QCP and the way organizational change could occur fit with the actual enactments of the participation as reflected in the *social mechanisms*. First, it is remarkable how the clubs envision the outcome of the QCP process, with themselves as forceful autonomous actors (i.e. the club in charge) with well-developed identities versus the cure they actually point to: external support and pressure (e.g. enabling tools, discipline, monitoring, leverage) and better structure to relieve the clubs from a lack of inner strength. On one hand, the clubs have realistic descriptions of their situations and admit a lack of competencies and influence. On the other hand, the pictures drawn in their narratives ignore or forget the importance of continued exogenous support for empowering and developing the club in the directions they aim towards. In ways, this looks like a case of narrative fallacy (Taleb, 2007, pp. 62–84), in which actors misrepresent themselves as decisive actors in a process better understood as sequences of events where various incentives – here mainly stemming from exogenous sources – interests, and resources are what determine the development of processes. As such, the clubs themselves point to the drivers of the process as a set of social mechanisms, a focus that reflects exogenous pressures. In doing so, however, they also indicate a misfit between the clubs' visions of autonomy and the way they actually describe the incentives (based on external sanctions) making the desired changes.

A succinct way of formulating the challenge emanating from this situation was given by one of the interviewees talking about QCP as 'a kick in the ass' (Club 16). They were realistic and clear about the long-term challenge: how to keep the impetus from QCP's kick alive. When the effects of exogenous pressures (i.e. enabling, tools, discipline, monitoring, leverage) end, has something *inside* the organization fundamentally changed which makes it reasonable to expect that the incentives for those active in the organization will differ from those before QCP?

The demands for qualifying as a quality club involve two main factors. First, there has to be more and better documentation: What does this club look like? What do we want to achieve? How do we actually achieve these aims? The second requirement is more education for coaches and administrators. The question is whether these measures really make the clubs more apt to achieve the structural effects they envision. Are a set of documents and more educated volunteers sufficient to provide the incentives necessary for changing the patterns of interaction within the club? Education is a medication that has to be retaken by every new generation of volunteers (often short-lived), which implies a challenge for the clubs: They want to ease the organizing of volunteering at the same time as the main remedy makes volunteering costlier (regarding time and money). In short, there seem to be reasons to question the sufficiency of the endogenous incentives stemming from QCP for furthering the hoped-for developments: autonomy, routines and improved structure.

Sport clubs taking part in professionalization processes face a dilemma between short-term concrete and positive aims and more troublesome long-term challenges. The findings of this research indicate that the clubs are mostly concerned with some type of middle-range (in regard to time) issues. They are not very clear about concrete immediate results, nor are they worried about the more abstract faraway problems identified in the sport management literature. Instead, they would like to see their clubs as more autonomous and better structured in a not-too-distant future.

This study has given a picture of how organizations reflect on their participation in a specific type of professionalization. The study has obvious short comings, which also point to some of the potentials for further studies of the professionalization of voluntary organizations.

We positioned the study as *explorative*, and this indicates two possible improvements (both concerning sampling). One is that the explorative character could be deepened along the lines followed in this study: Include more clubs and conduct more and different (focus group) interviews to confront the clubs' views on the questions discussed here. A better understanding of relevant social mechanisms could also benefit from such approaches. Alternatively, the study could be taken in the other directions and aim for empirical generalizations: How does the professionalization of voluntary sport organizations take form in general? This would require other data – larger samples, random samples, and, in the best of worlds, longitudinal data – and different analyses.

Methodologically, the researchers were inspired by an *abductive* perspective, which has its strength in its relation to theory. Two ways ahead seem possible. One would be to use other, more, and different theories to get at other sides of the phenomenon in question. Another would be to tone down the role of pre-existing theories and have a more grounded-theory-like approach: being more devoted to the unknown and 'new' theoretical insights. *Interviews* were the chosen method, and this (again) points towards two challenges. First, there is the problem of retrospective studies. In the case of this research, researchers should be especially wary of the possibility that actors ascribe 'new' meaning to old

processes. The response could be for future studies to work with other data sources – first and foremost: observing what clubs actually do. Observations could be helpful for investigating the factual consequences of participation in processes of professionalization.

It can always be claimed that a study should have looked at something in greater depth. This study has focused on some aspects of the professionalization of voluntary organizations, but there are of course more aspects that could have been addressed, such as different types of education and expertise, various organizational measures and different types of outcomes regarding the question of how professionalization implies power shifts and dependencies.

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