Measuring the formalisation of community sports clubs:

Findings from the UK, Germany and Australia

**Abstract**

This article illustrates how non-profit community sports clubs run by volunteers in the UK, Germany, and Australia can be clustered on the basis of formalisation. Although the literature has speculated on a trend towards formalisation this has not been measured. Three different data sets which were not specifically collected for this purpose were used to measure formalisation. Our analysis shows how the replication of existing surveys could measure formalisation. For each country available sports club data were used to perform cluster analyses. A set of indicators for formalisation was chosen based on the literature and whether the factors are accompanied with formalised procedures and processes within sports clubs. The results revealed a two-cluster solution for clubs in the UK, a three-cluster solution for Australian clubs, and an eight-cluster solution for German clubs (because the German sample was larger). In each country, there was evidence of a spectrum of sports clubs from informal to highly formalised clubs with the exception of the UK where the clusters were labelled formal and semi-formal. Without a survey specifically designed to measure formalisation the article shows how existing surveys might be used to make international comparisons.

*Keywords*: Formalisation; Sports club; Non-profit organisation; Volunteers

**Introduction**

Community sports clubs1 typify grass-roots organisations that are typically small and almost entirely reliant on volunteers to run them, although there are also larger clubs in some countries like Germany (Wicker and Breuer 2013). The clubs are important in providing opportunities for members to play sport (Reid 2012) and this is reflected in their role in government strategies to promote sports participation to achieve social objectives (e.g., Sport England 2008, 2012). It has been argued that pressures to formalise arise from resource dependence on government (Gazley and Brundney 2007) or other funding bodies like national governing bodies (NGB) (e.g., Green 2008), response to government policy and/or NGB strategy (Harris *et al.* 2009, May *et al.* 2013), club prioritisation process (e.g., Sport England 2013a), commercialisation (Enjolras 2002), and growth (Amis and Slack 1996). Recent sporadic evidence shows that clubs have increasingly displayed features of formalisation during the last years: For example, in Germany more sports clubs have employed paid staff (Breuer *et al.* 2012) and have implemented written policies and procedures (e.g., Breuer and Wicker 2011b). This suggests that sports clubs may have become more formalised, but research is not available that shows these changes in other countries.

The broader context of this article is the debate over the impact of formalisation on organisations in which volunteers play roles in governance and delivery. Formalisation is generally seen as improving the effectiveness of an organisation in delivering a service as it permits a more precise allocation of resources, for example – through the use of job descriptions. However, this approach transferred from the private sector may not apply equally to volunteer led organisations because outputs of the organisation are not only the service provided to others, but also the rewards experienced by the volunteers themselves (Haldane 2014). The volunteers’ time, skills, and enthusiasm are an input, but their rewards of well-being are simultaneously an output. The adoption of more formal management practices need to consider the impact on the service provided, but also on volunteers’ experience and motivations. Volunteers are not motivated by a wage, but by being able to express shared values and the social rewards of conviviality (Cuskelly *et al.* 1998, Doherty and Carron 2003). Thus, the management of volunteers is different to that of paid employees (Rochester 2013) as effectiveness of the organisation is defined differently. Herman and Renz (1997) advocated a multiple stakeholder approach to measuring effectiveness, in which the volunteers themselves were a key stakeholder, but in this respect theory of volunteer management is under-developed and there is a danger that policies promoting formalisation do not sufficiently understand the impact on volunteers. For example, in England, Sport England promotes its *licensing* system for clubs with junior participants, *Clubmark* as a condition of funding to NGBs of sport (Sport England 2013b). As with other sport policies this could be regarded as an imposition of neo-liberal *new public management* governance practices (Grix and Phillpots 2011). Adopting *Clubmark* requires adoption of more formal procedures (Sport England 2013a), but the impact on volunteers themselves has not been considered.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that it is practical to cluster clubs by the degree of formalisation using datasets in the UK, Australia, and Germany which have been used previously in another context (Cuskelly *et al.* 2006, Nichols *et al.* 2012, Wicker and Breuer 2013). Although the data used were not collected for the specific purpose of examining formalisation, a set of formalisation indicators could be selected in each country-specific dataset. This study advances the following main research question: what is the degree of formalisation among community sports clubs? The results show that when applying cluster analysis to sports club data, distinct clusters of clubs are found that differ regarding the degree of formalisation. This study demonstrates how future research could both make international comparisons and identify trends in formalisation.

**Conceptual framework and literature review**

**Defining formalisation**

Formalisation is the extent to which “written rules, procedures and instructions are developed in an organization . . . [and it is a] . . . central feature of Weber’s bureaucratic ideal type” (Adler and Borys 1996, p. 62). Formalisation entails rules governing behavior that are explicit in role descriptions, and prescribed independently of the personal attributes and relations of individuals. It is part of a *rational systems* approach to management, more typical of the private or public sectors, in which an assessment of the organization's needs, goals, and external influences provides the criteria for deciding what the organization will do, its structure and design (Morgan 2006, Schulz *et al.* 2011). This includes the tasks required from volunteers, the qualities volunteers need to complete those tasks, how volunteers are deployed, and how many are deployed to each task. A critical review of the potential advantages and limitations of formalisation in volunteer led organisations is developed below.

**Drivers of formalisation**

Many drivers of formalisation are enabled or constrained by the macro-political ideology of neo-liberalism. Clubs may be dependent on government resources (Gazley and Brundney 2007) or resources channelled through NGBs (Green 2008) or local government. These resources will usually be conditional on adopting formal management practices to promote public policies. Nevertheless, clubs may not be aware of these polices or actively promote them (Harris *et al.* 2009, May *et al.* 2013) even if they have been in direct receipt of resources; as Garrett (2004) found in respect to clubs which received funding from the Sports Lottery Fund in England. The drivers towards formalisation that could be identified in the literature are listed below.

First, Amis and Slack (1996) showed that organisational size can be considered a driver of formalisation in the sense that large organisations show higher levels of formalisation. While in general several size indicators are available (physical capacity, volume of inputs and outputs, available discretionary resources, number of personnel), the total number of members in the organisation was used as a size measure because voluntary sport organisations are designed to benefit their members. Their research indicated that larger sport organisations show higher levels of standardisation respectively increasingly formalised procedures. The underlying assumption is that with increasing organisational size, the number of repetitive tasks also increases and can therefore be standardised (Amis and Slack 1996).

For smaller clubs their organisational size can constrain formalisation. For example, Nichols and James (2008) found, in a sample of 34 netball clubs, that smaller clubs simply do not have the capacity, and arguably the need, for formality. As they note, this has implications for sport policy because the government has a tendency to support clubs with more formal management practices, thus marginalising smaller clubs, even though they provide sport programmes for a high share of participants (Nichols and James 2008). Their analysis used 21 formal management practices to allocate clubs to two clusters, formal and informal clubs. This work was developed by May *et al.* (2013) who also documented that level of formalisation of voluntary sports clubs increases with increasing membership numbers. Their study was based on a sample of 45 clubs and was the only one designed specifically to measure formality, with 31 questions in 6 domains. The applied instrument was in turn developed from Nichols and James’ (2008) analysis. Their cluster analysis resulted in three clusters of clubs labelled as informal, semi-formal, and formal clubs. The larger number of clusters may have reflected the larger sample size.

Second, the level of professionalisation can be considered a driver for formalisation. Following Dowling *et al.* (2014, p. 8), professionalisation can be defined as “the process by which sport organisations, systems, and the occupation of sport, transforms from a volunteer driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon”. For a detailed review and discussion of professionalisation we refer to the comprehensive review of Dowling *et al.* (2014). Importantly, professionalisation and size or capacity is typically interrelated with smaller clubs being less professionalised. Nichols and James (2008) used the term professionalisation interchangeably with formalisation and allocated clubs a *professionalisation score* according to the number of the 21 formal practices adopted. This was justified by the assertion that the formal management practices were more typical of organisations using professional (paid) employees. The distribution of the professionalisation score showed that more than half of the clubs had a relatively low level of professionalisation. A subsequent cluster analysis indicated that there are two forms of clubs, i.e., formal and informal clubs, although the sample was limited to only 34 netball clubs. Taylor (2004) used professionalisation in the same way – as emulating the practices of organisations with paid staff. It was considered to reflect a change in the nature of clubs from member-activist organisations (Rochester 1999) to organisations focussing on service delivery. As noted above, the different types of organisations might have different measures of effectiveness.

Third, an organisation’s level of traditionalism (as opposed to contemporariness) may also affect formalisation. Research into volunteer led sports clubs in England (Taylor *et al.* 2003), based on focus groups in 72 clubs and 1,005 telephone interviews, concluded that clubs lie on a spectrum between “traditional, informal organisations” and “contemporary, formal organisations” (Taylor 2004, p. 103). The former was equated to Hoggett and Bishops’ (1985) mutual enthusiasts: motivated by a collective enthusiasm for their sport and the social rewards of membership, seeking to minimalise any form of formal management and regarding professionalisation as a threat to the organisation’s culture. In contrast, *contemporary* clubs had a stronger focus on organisational performance and were more *formal and managerialist in approach* – meaning they were more likely to use formal mentoring, job descriptions, and to have volunteer co-ordinators. A key difference between the two types was that the traditional clubs were more likely to concentrate on core tasks when under pressure, while the contemporary ones were more likely to be proactive in looking for new solutions. However, no attempt was made to support this conclusion with a statistical cluster analysis as the data were not collected in a form which permitted this.

Another driver may be the need to compete for members in a more competitive market with the private sector, as noted by Enjolras (2002) in Norway. These drivers towards formalisation overlap. For example, the club leadership may decide they wish to develop the club by gaining Sport England *Clubmark* accreditation to compete more strongly for junior participants and make the club eligible for grants from local government. As the club grows more formal procedures are required.

**Effects of formalisation**

From a theoretical point of view, in general, formalisation may be experienced as enabling or coercive formalisation, but the effect in practice will be context specific and depend on the view of the individual volunteer. Enabling formalisation occurs when the goals of the individual and the organisation are perceived as congruent (Adler and Borys 1996). If they are not seen as congruent, then formalisation may be experienced as the coercive imposition of management control. In the case of sports clubs, volunteers might find formal role descriptions enabling if they reduce role ambiguity, ease succession planning and help new volunteers establish themselves in the club. Conversely, such role descriptions may make volunteers feel uncomfortably accountable. It may emphasize a formal management hierarchy as opposed to a more traditional system based on informal but socially defined roles; and thus challenge the position in this structure of some existing volunteers.

The evidence is mixed regarding the effects of formalisation on volunteers. Evidence supporting the beneficial effects of formalisation comes from recent studies of good practice in clubs recruiting from outside the normal sources of existing members and parents of junior participants (Taylor *et al.* 2011). Also, it was considered helpful in previous research when volunteers are provided with written job descriptions or can rely on manuals that explain critical organisational procedures (Schulz and Auld, 2006, Warner *et al.* 2011). In contrast, other studies show that volunteers experience a variety of problems when trying to implement public policies in their clubs and the associated guidelines which demand higher levels of formalisation. For example, in Harris *et al.*’s (2009) study club volunteers express concerns about the confusion in relation to policies, the top-down approaches to policy, the uncertainty about the deliverability of the policy, and ultimately about the alignment of policy objectives with the clubs’ survival and developmental objectives. Consequently, some volunteers have resistant and indifferent views on the delivery of policy objectives for sport, while others are more reactive and supportive. In a different study, Morgan (2013) emphasised that volunteers experience issues regarding the implementation of policies such as the *Big Society*, while acknowledging the good intent of such policies. Specifically, financial resources are needed for implementation, but the intense competition and bureaucratic acquisition of resources leads to problems among volunteers and puts pressure on the voluntary sector. Hence, the balance between enabling and coercive formalisation is very complex. It is illustrated by Papadimitriou’s (2002) study of Greek clubs, which lamented a lack of formalisation – presumably because the author believed it was required to increase effectiveness; while at the same time attributing this to “the amateur orientation of the voluntary management” which “has delayed any attempt at standardization in the daily functions of the clubs” (p. 216); presumably because the volunteers opposed formalisation.

**Research context**

**Sports clubs and volunteers in the UK, Germany and Australia**

This paper focuses on sports clubs in the UK, Germany and Australia. In England there are a minimum of 85,000 clubs (Nichols 2013) and over the UK approximately 100,000. Estimates are complicated by the reliance on NGB statistics which vary in their definition of a club, and because some clubs will be unaffiliated to NGBs, normally because they do not want to compete within the NGB structure (for a more detailed discussion see Nichols 2004). The average membership is 117 adults and 107 junior members. On average there are 21 formal volunteers2 per club, but this is far fewer in sports with small clubs, such as netball. In England, sport is the largest area of formal volunteering (Cabinet Office 2013) and within this, sports clubs run by their members account for 75% of all sports related volunteers indicating that community sports clubs represent a significant proportion of grass-roots organisations and are an important context for volunteering. Clubs typically represent just one sport. Ten per cent of clubs employ paid staff predominantly in service delivery roles, such as bar staff, facility maintenance, or coaching (Taylor *et al.* 2009). The data used in this paper is from a club survey promoted across the UK; however the discussion of sport policy is restricted to that of Sport England. There are four quasi autonomous arms of the UK government - home country sports councils for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, plus UK Sport, which focussed on promoting elite level sport. Our discussion of policy focusses on Sport England, which covers the largest number of clubs.

In Germany, there are approximately 91,000 sports clubs with an average size of 420 members. German sports clubs are typically larger than clubs in other countries because approximately half of the German clubs are multi-sports clubs, providing programmes in more than one sport. On average, each German sports clubs has 23 formal volunteers. Approximately one third of the clubs employ paid staff and less than 5% employ paid executives although this proportion has been increasing (Wicker and Breuer 2011). In Australia there are more than 50,000 sports clubs (Commonwealth of Australia 2011). The number of volunteers in Australian sport lies between 1.6 million and 2.3 million for an average of 32 volunteers per club.

**The situation of formalisation in the UK, Australia, and Germany**

In the three countries in our study sports clubs run by their members have developed within a tradition of an independent voluntary sector in sport, but are increasingly perceived by national governments as an important component in achieving policy objectives such as increasing participation in sport, child protection/safeguarding, and School Games (e.g., Brackenridge 2002, Harris *et al.* 2009, Malkin *et al.* 2000, May *et al.* 2013, Nichols *et al.* 2005). This emphasizes the role of the sports club as delivering a service to existing and prospective members, in a competitive market, and thus formalisation is promoted by government and NGBs as a means of improving this service.

In the UK, Sport England (the quasi autonomous arm of the government responsible for sport) has strongly promoted an accreditation system for clubs with junior members, *Clubmark* (Clubmark 2013), as part of consolidating the role of clubs in its strategies (Sport England 2008, 2012). Attaining this accreditation involves the club in adopting formally defined roles and procedures to help ensure a good quality experience for junior participants. For example, clubs require a defined role of *welfare officer* who has to implement child protection policies.

In Germany, clubs have to document that they contribute to public welfare to get an official club status (e.V.) that goes along with tax reductions. Also, some national governing bodies (NGBs) provide certificates for their clubs depending on the type of sport programmes they provide. For example, the German Gymnastics Federation has a certificate called *Sport Pro Health* that was obtained by 54% of all gymnastics clubs (Breuer and Wicker 2011a). Thus, in all three countries, the clubs’ dependency on the government has led to the promotion of more formal management practices.

In Australia, agencies promote accreditations called *Good Sports* (around alcohol management) and *Play by the Rules* (around discrimination, member protection, harassment and child safety). *Play by the Rules* encourages sports clubs to adopt formalised policies and codes and behaviour designed to provide a safe environment and to maintain responsible behaviour and fair decision-making. The Australian Sports Commission also has an online tool called *club health check* which is available to sports clubs interested in self-assessing the performance of their club on a number of criteria including planning, communication, risk management, policies and procedures.

**Methodology**

**Clustering clubs by formalisation in three countries**

It is acknowledged that the data of the sports club surveys were conducted at different times, using different questions, and not with the initial objective of identifying clusters of formalisation. This means that the survey instruments and the resulting variables were not identical across countries limiting the comparability of results. Houlihan (1997) has noted the challenges associated with comparable approaches. Possible challenges relate to the correspondence of concepts, selection of indicators, quality of data basis and interpretation of results, ethnocentrism and the frame of reference in which comparison takes place, and the possibility that similar results are driven by different factors (Houlihan, 1997). While this study is based on comprehensive sports club survey data from three countries, the selection of formalisation indicators is driven by the available variables in each dataset. This means the underlying concept of formalisation is operationalised in different ways and the results are also in part driven by the available indicators of formalisation.

Despite the challenges of comparable approaches, Houlihan (1997) sees value in comparative analyses because policy makers can learn from other sport systems facing similar problems. This is also the case for sports clubs; several studies showed that sports clubs across countries experience similar problems mainly relating to the recruitment and retention of volunteers and the clubs’ financial situation (e.g., Cuskelly 2004, Lamprecht *et al.* 2012, Lasby and Sperling 2007, Taylor *et al.* 2009, Wicker and Breuer 2011).

**Selection of formalisation indicators**

The indicators of formalisation which will be included in a cluster analysis were selected based on the literature and whether they are linked with formalisation in the clubs’ reality. First, since research showed that bigger organisations are more formal (Amis and Slack 1996), a measure for club size (total membership) was included in the UK and German analysis. Also, professionalisation was found to represent an indicator of formalisation (Nichols and James 2008). Therefore, the UK and German analysis also include employment of paid staff because it will require formal procedures.

Second, some indicators were chosen because they are associated with formal procedures in the clubs’ reality. In the UK analysis, the type of club status (Community amateur sports club [CASC], Charity, Clubmark) was considered because the registration procedure is a formal process. Such registrations are not available in Germany. Use of facilities also represents an indicator of formalisation that is included in the UK and German analysis: ownership, construction, and maintenance of a facility would require greater formality and the use of public facilities is also associated with a formal application procedure. Research documents the planning regulations associated with sport facilities (Sport and Recreation Alliance [SARC] 2011). Yet, the data do not allow a distinction between clubs that need public facilities to provide their programs because they do not have access to other types of facilities (this would be coercive formalisation) and clubs which decide to require new land and develop their own facility because they have the financial resources. The UK data also cover specific positions in a club like a volunteer coordinator which is a formally defined role; such a role is not present in German clubs. Also, having a junior section in the club requires formal procedures and is therefore an indicator in the UK and German data.

The UK and German data are comprised of a sample across all sports clubs, while the Australian sample consists only of rugby clubs. This will be unrepresentative of clubs in Australia as these clubs will tend to be bigger and are more likely to own facilities. However, this does not negate the purpose of the analysis. While the UK and German data include similar indicators, formalisation is measured with a set of human resource management (HRM) indicators in the Australian data (Table 1). They also give information about formalisation since many HRM practices are accompanied by formal procedures. For example, in the area of screening practices, verifying the accreditation of coaches and officials and conducting suitability checks of volunteers (e.g., child protection, responsible service of alcohol) implied formality. Overall, some of the indicators used have not yet been covered in previous research. The overview also reveals that not necessarily specific scales are needed to measure formalisation because the available variables can also be linked with formalisation.

**UK sample and analysis**

The UK analysis is based on the Sport and Recreation Alliance (SARA) data which were collected using an online survey of clubs (for details of the method see Nichols *et al.* 2012). Clubs reporting their status as profit-making, informal (defined as just a group of friends playing together with no committee or accounts etc.), and other were removed from the sample, leaving only non-profit clubs for the analysis (93% of the complete sample of 2,991 clubs). After an exploratory analysis it was decided to omit 34 very large clubs (those with 1,000 or more adult members or 600 or more junior members) as their inclusion might have distorted the cluster analysis through their high membership numbers. They could represent an extra cluster of very big clubs – but the small number of clubs in this cluster would have made it unlikely that they would have been significantly different enough from other clusters on any of the measures of formality to produce a statistically distinctive cluster. These clubs represented just over 1% of the non-profit clubs and, in terms of size, were not representative of the other clubs in the sample. This exclusion resulted in a final sample of *n*=2,685 clubs.

Several indicators for formalisation were chosen and used in the cluster analysis. These included *Total membership* – a continuous variable calculated by combining adult and junior membership. This measure of club size was highly correlated with club income, expenditure, and number of volunteers. Thus, this single variable represented a group of highly correlated variables – which were themselves not used in the analysis (Hair *et al.* 2010). Further variables were *Club status* (as a charity, a community amateur sports club, or as a Clubmark club); *Paid staff*; *Volunteer co-ordinator; Type of playing facility used* (whether owned by the club, hired, or leased); and *Junior section* (indicating whether a club had five or more junior members). Junior refers to players under 18 years of age; senior refers to adults over or equal to 18 years of age. While these indicators were already used in previous research (Nichols *et al.* 2012), this study also includes a variable capturing use of public sector sports facilities as this is also accompanied with formal procedures. The variable *Public facility* indicates whether the club hires facilities which are owned by local authorities.

For the UK sample, a two-step cluster procedure was used for the analysis. An automated procedure based on the Schwarz Bayesian Criterion was used to identify the number of clusters. This criterion gives an idea of how well different cluster solutions fit the underlying data and what cluster solution (number of clusters) should be preferred. To assess the potential impact of the resulting classification varying according to the initial ordering of cases the procedure was repeated four times – once for the data in its original order and then three repetitions with cases ordered randomly. A final decision on the number of clusters present was made on the basis of consistency and interpretability of the resultant classifications with regard to previous theoretical understandings. This followed guidance that “the researcher must evaluate alternative cluster solutions ... to select the optimal solution” (Hair *et al.* 2010, p. 538) because no single objective procedure is available to determine the correct number of clusters.

To analyse whether there are significant differences between the two clusters with regard to the formalisation indicators, two statistical tests were applied: the Mann Whitney test was employed to analyse differences between the two sports club clusters for continuous variables, while the Chi²-test was applied to categorical variables (Field 2009). The Mann Whitney test is a non-parametric test that should be applied when continuous variables are not normally distributed. The Chi²-test is used for categorical variables (Field 2009).

**German sample and analysis**

The source for the German data is the Sports Development Report 2009 (Breuer and Wicker 2011b). The purpose of this project is to assess the situation of sports clubs in Germany using a nationwide online survey. For the 2009 wave, 63,468 e-mail addresses of sports clubs were made available by the regional sports federations and the respective clubs were invited to take part in the online survey. Due to dropouts (5,399) the sample had be adjusted to 58,069 clubs. Altogether, *n*=19,345 clubs participated in the survey (response rate: 33.3%). The sample is representative for sports clubs in Germany with regard to size, year of foundation, and federal state.

The German sample uses formalisation indicators similar to the UK sample. The variables used for the analysis are *Total membership* (total number of members); *Number of paid staff*; *Junior section*; *Own sport facilities* (indicating whether the club possesses its own sport facilities); and *Public sport facilities* (indicating whether the club uses public sport facilities that are owned by the community). A cluster procedure similar to the UK study was applied for the German data. A two-step cluster analysis was used due to the mixture of continuous and categorical variables. In addition to the variables used in the cluster analysis, the share of multi-sports clubs in each cluster is provided since this is an important feature of German sports clubs. Similar to the UK data, Mann Whitney and Chi²-tests are applied to test for significant differences among club clusters.

**Australian sample and analysis**

The Australian sample is limited to community rugby clubs (from the Australian Rugby Union), while the UK and German sample comprises clubs from a variety of sports. Community rugby clubs in Australia are non-profit organisations governed and operated by volunteers using land leased from local government or other public sector entities. They are considered typical of many Australian sport clubs in terms of their governance, operations, and fundraising. Rugby clubs often raise funds to make capital improvements to leased land such as clubhouse facilities, spectator amenities, and car parking. In Australia, 356 community rugby clubs responded to a survey and provided useable data about their volunteer management practices from a human resource management (HRM) perspective along with other descriptive data (Cuskelly *et al.* 2006). The survey included 37 HRM practices (measured on a five-point Likert scale) which were representative of seven HRM constructs: planning, recruitment, screening, orientation, training and support, performance management, and recognition (Table 1). Confirmatory factor analysis was used to validate the seven HRM constructs using all but one of the 37 HRM items. The HRM item that was dropped from the analysis was the extent to which the club used coercion to recruit volunteers (reverse coded).

Insert Table 1 here

The purpose of the cluster analysis was to develop a taxonomy of relatively homogeneous and exclusive groups of cases with a view to understanding the extent to which clubs had formalised volunteer management practices. Ward’s method of hierarchical agglomerative clustering using standardised *Z*-scores and squared Euclidian distances was employed to develop the taxonomy of volunteer management practice. This method was selected to minimise within-cluster differences and to avoid problems with *chaining* of observations found in the single linkage method (Hair *et al.* 2010). As Ward’s method is sensitive to outliers, *Z*-scores for the seven HRM dimensions were checked for outlying cases (more than 3 standard deviations from the mean) prior to cluster analysis.

**Results and discussion**

The results of the cluster analysis for the UK data are presented in Table 2. They show a two-cluster solution comprised of larger, more formal clubs (Group 1) and smaller, less formal clubs (Group 2). There are significant differences between the two clusters with regard to all formalisation indicators. Adding the variable *Public facility* to the cluster analysis produces a two-cluster instead of a three-cluster solution as shown in Nichols *et al.* (2012). It seems that the last two groups comprising semi-formal and informal clubs were merged into Group 2 which is labelled semi-formal clubs in this study, while approximately 60 of the previous semi-formal clubs moved into Group 1 (formal clubs) leading to a lower average total membership (*M*=238 in Nichols *et al.* 2012 vs *M*=230 in this study).

The two clusters of UK sports clubs confirms the two-cluster solution documented in the research of Nichols and James (2008) and Taylor (2004). It is slightly different from the three-cluster solution shown in May *et al.* (2013); the cluster of informal clubs is missing. Yet, different measures of formality were used in May *et al.*’s (2013) study and the applied indicators may also determine the results to some extent. Specifically, the use of public facilities was not used as a measure in their study. Thus, it seems that the inclusion of this indicator hinders the existence of an informal club cluster – since both May *et al.* (2013) and Nichols *et al.* (2012) documented three clusters excluding this indicator. Another explanation for the two-cluster solution could be the demise of smaller, informal clubs (like the informal clubs in Nichols *et al.*’s [2012] study) that have difficulties recruiting members, have an aging volunteer base, may no longer survive, and are not replaced.

While Taylor’s (2004) view is that there are formal and informal clubs, we would argue that the two clusters in this study are more reflective of *formal* and *semi-formal* clubs since the clubs in Group 2 show relatively high percentages on some formalisation indicators including paid staff (15.6%), Clubmark registered (36.6%), hiring a facility (95.4%), public facility (37.1%), junior section (62.6%), and volunteer coordinator (33.9%). Thus, we would argue that these clubs are faced with several formal procedures when hiring a (public) facility, employing paid staff, registering for Clubmark accreditation, installing a junior section and a volunteer coordinator. Previous research indicates that there are bureaucratic hurdles particularly in the context of facilities and child protection that have to be taken by sports clubs (Brackenridge 2002, Malkin *et al.* 2000, SARC 2011). Therefore, the denomination semi-formal clubs seems more appropriate than informal clubs. But the absence of an informal group of clubs also shows that the overall level of formalisation among clubs in the UK is relatively high. As stated earlier, this is because the government and NGBs promote formalisation as a means of improving the clubs’ services and achieving desired policy outcomes including increasing participation in sport (Harris *et al.* 2009, May *et al.* 2013).

Insert Table 2 here

The results of the cluster analysis for German sports clubs are summarised in Table 3. They reveal an eight-cluster solution with the higher number of clusters likely being a result of the larger sample size. Overall, the range goes from informal (Group 8) to highly formalised clubs (Groups 1 and 2). Along the same line, average total membership increases from informal to formal clubs. Average membership numbers in Groups 1 and 2 are relatively high compared with the other clusters and with the average membership in sports clubs in other countries (Lamprecht *et al.* 2012, Taylor *et al.* 2009). One peculiarity of the German sports club system is the presence of multi-sports clubs. The results confirm that the share of multi-sports clubs in the cluster increases with increasing club size.

Contrary to the UK results, the transition from informal to formal is more nuanced because of several clusters that could be considered semi-formal clubs. The denomination semi-formal is selected for those groups of clubs because they show a sufficiently high percentage or number on two or three of the four formalisation indicators. The more nuanced set of clusters also shows that the percentages on junior section and sport facilities are zero or hundred in most cases indicating that the large sample allowed the creation of clusters that are very distinct in these indicators. On the contrary, the percentages on the formalisation indicators in the UK data are more mixed. The last club cluster (Group 8) indicates that there are still some German clubs that can be considered almost *purely* informal since they are faced with formal procedures only to a very low extent. While the UK clusters could be compared with the results from other UK studies, there is no study available in the German context that gives indications about the level of formalisation of clubs and could serve as a point of comparison.

Insert Table 3 here

The results of the cluster analysis for the Australian data are displayed in Table 4. The analysis resulted in a three-cluster solution including larger, formal clubs (Group 1), smaller, semi-formal clubs (Group 2), and smaller, informal clubs (Group 3). The level of formalisation is determined by the extent to which HRM practices are applied that are typically accompanied by formal procedures. Average total registered players serving as a proxy for total membership is significantly higher in formal clubs, while the informal and semi-formal clubs show no significant differences in terms of registered players. Interestingly, the Australian results confirm the three-cluster solution presented by May *et al.* (2013) and Nichols *et al.* (2012).

Insert Table 4 here

In summary, across the three countries community sports clubs (only rugby clubs in Australia) can be distinguished by the degree of formalisation. The association of formalisation with size is in accordance with previous research (Adler and Borys 1996; Amis and Slack 1996) and implies that if clubs increase in size, they will inevitably become more formalised. Interestingly, this was not a finding of the earlier survey of Greek sports clubs (Papadimitriou 2002) perhaps because of other factors militating formalisation. Unfortunately there is no reliable data on changes in club size in the UK. In Germany, no significant changes in club size could be observed between 2005 and 2009 (Wicker and Breuer 2011, 2013) and this is the only country at present where longitudinal analyses are possible. The association of formalisation with professionalisation is also in line with previous research (Nichols and James 2008).

It would have been theoretically possible to examine the level of formalisation among clubs by applying the instrument designed by May *et al.* (2013) in all three countries, although this would require it to be built into major surveys. One of the authors attempted to introduce similar measures into the 2009 survey of English clubs used in this paper, but was unable to do so as it was regarded as making the survey too complex by the survey’s sponsors and did not address their main objectives [the then Central Council for Physical Recreation, since renamed as the SARA). Thus, this research chose a more pragmatic approach. The starting point has been to use the three data sets available, which were not designed for the purpose, but allowed us to use much bigger samples.

The derivation of clusters is not a completely objective procedure. As noted above, the cluster solutions were evaluated by the researcher. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the use of different research tools leads to different findings. This is referred to as the *Rashomon effect* which has already been observed in other disciplines including ethnography (Heider 1988) and medicine (Reider 2012). Thus, the availability and selection of formalisation indicators also drives the results in each country. For example, using the different types of registration and the presence of a volunteer coordinator in the UK data affects the UK clusters, while these four variables were not available in the German and the Australian data because these aspects do not play a role in these countries. Also, it must be acknowledged that the eight-cluster solution for German clubs is a result of the larger sample size used for the analysis. Furthermore, the changing nature of the clusters in the UK sample from a three-cluster solution (Nichol *et al.* 2012) to a two-cluster solution when adding only one variable (*Public facility*) indicates that the results are driven by the selection of indicators. Having said this, the present study shares the challenges of comparative studies as outlined by Houlihan (1997). In the case of sports clubs, more comparative surveys are needed across countries to mitigate this effect in future studies.

**Implications – why formalisation is important**

The degree of formality is important because it will affect the experience of volunteers and the very nature of the voluntary organisation (Harris *et al.* 2009, May *et al.* 2013). Some volunteers will regard formality as enabling and some as constraining (Adler and Borys 1996), depending on the degree of congruency between the objectives of the volunteer and those of the organisation. To refer back to Taylor’s (2004) typology, if volunteers and potential club members have a choice of club, they are likely to choose the traditional, informal or contemporary, formal variety; to match their preference. However, this choice may be reduced if there is a trend towards formalisation. This may occur because public support to clubs is focussed on the more formal and larger ones and they may grow even bigger at the expense of the smaller ones which may become extinct. In England, there appears to have been a significant reduction in the number of clubs between 2002 and 2009 (Nichols 2013). It is not clear if it is the smaller ones which have been lost although the reliance of clubs on a small core of volunteers to maintain the structure suggests that the smaller clubs are the most vulnerable to the loss of a few key volunteers. Thus, it is probable that there is a trend towards larger and more formal clubs – although this is not apparent in the only country where we have longitudinal data, Germany. If so, the experience of club membership and volunteers will be inevitably changed, and this may be common across the voluntary sector. Those who value informality may have less choice to experience it.

In relation to the ability of clubs to be a vehicle for government policy, May *et al.* (2013) found that while the small informal clubs were generally apathetic or completely ignorant of this, the more formal, larger clubs were more aware and sympathetic, although they still did not see themselves as a vehicle for government policies. Earlier Nichols and James (2008) concluded that the smaller clubs just did not have the capacity to meet the requirements of policy, such as gaining Clubmark accreditation or adopting more formal volunteer management practices. Those clubs would inevitably be disadvantaged in gaining public support. This will again promote the expansion of the bigger clubs as they are more able to gain grants and access to facilities. Thus, the ability to measure and monitor changes in formalisation is important if it represents fundamental changes in the nature of voluntary organisations and their potential relation to the state.

**Conclusion**

This study shows that clustering community sports clubs by formalisation is possible in three different countries – as one would expect from previous research (e.g., May *et al.* 2013; Nichols and James 2008). Contrary to previous formalisation research that used scales specifically designed to measure formalisation (May *et al.* 2013) this study applied a more pragmatic approach using already available datasets which are bigger than in previous research. This procedure revealed that the present sports club surveys were rich in formalisation indicators, e.g., types of registration, use of facilities, employment of staff, presence of a junior section, roles like a volunteer coordinator that are accompanied with formal procedures in the clubs’ reality. Thus, specific formalisation scales may not be urgently necessary because this study produces similar results. Examining the level of formalisation among sports clubs is important because of the way it affects the experience of volunteers and its impact on the ability of clubs to be vehicles of government policy – but also because it transforms the nature of the voluntary sector. Thus, it is especially important to try and measure change.

The cluster analyses in the three different countries demonstrate the potential for further research to compare the distribution of clubs by clusters across different countries. To do this precisely would require national surveys to use consistent questions. Further research could also identify if there is a trend towards formalisation and the rate of change using longitudinal data that allow analysing the development of clubs over time. It could also measure if there is a polarisation between more and less formal clubs. This would be expected to occur if the stimulus to formalise is based correctly on the premise that a more formal club will be able to provide a better service for members in a competitive market, and thus would be expected to grow, at the expense of less formalised clubs. Moreover, the need for external funding or grants from NGBs or other institutions could also stimulate formalisation. These questions are important because they help understand the nature of the voluntary sector in sports provision.

**Notes**

1. The focus of this research is on non-profit sports clubs which are local amateur sports clubs that provide sporting opportunities for the population and also the basis for elite sport development. They are an example of organisations in which volunteers play major roles in both governance and delivery. Typical professional football clubs with high revenues and investors are not represented in this study.
2. The literature typically distinguishes between formal and informal volunteers (Cnaan *et al.* 1996). Formal volunteers are characterised by a formal voluntary position in a club like president, treasurer, secretary, coach, or judge, while informal volunteers do not have a formal position and rather work sporadically for the club in the context of, for example, organising events, providing food and beverages, driving children, or cleaning facilities. Other terms like core and secondary volunteers are also used (Wicker and Breuer 2013).

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Table 1

*Overview of the HRM items in the Australian sample (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always; Cuskelly et al. 2006, pp. 153-155)*

| In managing your volunteers to what extent does your club …. |
| --- |
| Planning practices |
| Identify potential volunteers before the season commence |
| Target individuals for volunteer positions based on their skills |
| Engage in succession planning to replace key volunteers |
| Provide role or job descriptions for individual volunteers |
| Actively encourage turnover of volunteers in key positions |
| Maintain a database of volunteers' skills, qualifications and experience |
| Recruitment practices |
| Match the skills, experience and interests of volunteers to specific roles |
| Fill key volunteer positions prior to the AGM |
| Develop positions to meet the needs of individual volunteers |
| Actively recruit volunteers from diverse backgrounds (e.g., minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities) |
| Use advertising for volunteer recruitment (e.g., newsletters, online, local papers) |
| Use word of mouth to recruit volunteers |
| Actively recruit volunteers that are not directly associated with the club |
| Screening practices |
| Verify the accreditation of coaches and officials |
| Conduct suitability checks of volunteers (e.g., child protection, responsible service of alcohol) |
| Orientation practices |
| Introduce new volunteers to people with whom they will work during the season |
| Conduct induction sessions for specific groups of volunteers (e.g., coaches, managers, committee members) |
| Encourage volunteers to operate within a code of acceptable behaviour |
| Organise induction meetings for new or continuing volunteers |
| Training and support practices |
| Mentor volunteers, particularly when starting in a new role |
| Provide support to volunteers in their roles (e.g., assist with the resolution of conflicts) |
| Provide sufficient resources for volunteers to effectively carry out their tasks |
| Manage the work loads of individual volunteers where they are excessive |
| Assist volunteers to access training outside the club (e.g., coach accreditation) |
| Cover or reimburse the costs of volunteer attendance at training or accreditation courses |
| Reimburse volunteers for "out of pocket" expenses |
| Supply volunteers with food and beverages when volunteering |
| Provide club uniforms or clothing for volunteers |
| Performance management practices |
| Monitor the performance of individual volunteers |
| Provide feedback to individual volunteers about their performance |
| Address performance problems amongst individual volunteers (e.g., a volunteer who fails to complete essential tasks) |
| Recognition practices |
| Recognise outstanding work or task performances of individual volunteers |
| Plan for the recognition of volunteers |
| Thank volunteers for their efforts (e.g., informal thank yous) |
| Publicly recognise the efforts of volunteers (e.g., in newsletters) |
| Provide special awards for long- serving volunteers (e.g., life membership) |

Table 2

*Two cluster solution for the UK data – group profiles*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Group 1  Formal  (*n*=1,102) | Group 2  Semi-formal  (*n*=909) | *p* |
| Total membership (mean) | 230.2 | 87.4 | <0.001 |
| Paid staff (% yes) | 37.4 | 15.6 | <0.001 |
| CASC registered (% yes) | 34.1 | 0 | <0.001 |
| Charity registered (% yes) | 11.3 | 1.0 | <0.001 |
| Clubmark registered (% yes) | 42.8 | 36.6 | 0.005 |
| Owns facility (% yes) | 45.2 | 0 | <0.001 |
| Leases facility (% yes) | 47.9 | 0 | <0.001 |
| Hires facility (% yes) | 38.7 | 95.4 | <0.001 |
| Public facility (% yes) | 14.8 | 37.1 | <0.001 |
| Junior section (% yes) | 75.7 | 62.6 | <0.001 |
| Volunteer coordinator (% yes) | 40.3 | 33.9 | 0.003 |

Table 3

*Eight cluster solution for the German data – group profiles*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Group 1  Formal  (*n*=68) | Group 2  Formal  (*n*=1,655) | Group 3  Semi-formal  (*n*=2,082) | Group 4  Semi-formal  (*n*=2,008) | Group 5  Semi-formal  (*n*=739) | Group 6  Semi-formal  (*n*=228) | Group 7  Semi-formal  (*n*=432) | Group 8  Informal  (*n*=307) | *p* |
| Total membership | 6,074.43 | 593.48 | 330.22 | 196.16 | 109.53 | 64.91 | 60.93 | 49.62 | <0.001 |
| Number of paid staff | 108.94 | 3.61 | 2.63 | 1.43 | 0.75 | 0.77 | 0.74 | 0.46 | <0.001 |
| Junior section | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | <0.001 |
| Own sport facilities | 76.5% | 100.0% | 0.0% | 100.0% | 0.0% | 100.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | <0.001 |
| Public sport facilities | 88.2% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 21.5% | 100.0% | 0.0% | <0.001 |
| Multi-sports club1 | 85.3% | 66.2% | 48.8% | 15.4% | 13.0% | 13.2% | 35.4% | 11.4% |  |

*Note:* 1This variable was not included in the cluster analysis. It is displayed because many German sports clubs provide more than one sport.

Table 4

*Three cluster solution for the Australian data – group profiles*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Group 11  Formal  (*n*=133) | Group 21  Semi-formal  (*n*=139) | Group 31  Informal  (*n*=84) | *p* |
| Total registered players2 | 213.2a  (152.2) | 90.4b  (54.0) | 91.2b  (60.7) | <0.001 |
| HRM constructs3 |  |  |  | <0.001 |
| Planning | 3.54 (0.60) | 3.02 (0.45) | 2.31 (0.40) | <0.001 |
| Recruitment | 3.19 (0.46) | 2.78 (0.39) | 2.31 (0.39) | <0.001 |
| Screening | 4.12 (0.93) | 3.53 (1.08) | 2.86 (1.14) | <0.001 |
| Orientation | 4.18 (0.57) | 3.35 (0.64) | 2.60 (0.65) | <0.001 |
| Training and support | 4.04 (0.46) | 3.69 (0.52) | 2.90 (0.60) | <0.001 |
| Performance management | 3.69 (0.79) | 3.04 (0.80) | 2.16 (0.64) | <0.001 |
| Recognition | 4.37 (0.55) | 4.08 (0.58) | 3.02 (0.58) | <0.001 |

1Mean score (standard deviation).

2Total registered players (proxy for total membership). Groups significantly different on Scheffe multiple-comparison post-hoc test (*p*<0.05) indicated by different superscript letter.

3Three groups all significantly different on Scheffe multiple-comparison post-hoc test (*p*<0.05).