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Sports Governance and Visa Refusal Challenges: Examining the Role of Sports Governing Bodies in Facilitating International Participation

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Abstract
The cross-border mobility of athletes, coaches, officials and administrators plays an increasing role in international sport. But the visa denials, delays, and immigration restrictions have become glaring obstacles to involvement in international sports competitions. This study investigated visa refusal issues and looked into the role of sports governing bodies that will assist in making athletes and sports stakeholders participate internationally in Ghana. The study was based on an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative case study design guided by four theories (Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, Good Governance Theory and Network Governance Theory). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 25 participants, which included sports administrators, athletes, coaches/team managers, and sports governing body officials. Correspondence and other relevant documents, such as visas and organisational reports, were also examined. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The results indicated that visa refusal, visa delays, too much paperwork and financial strain had a negative impact on the preparation, participation opportunities and international exposure of athletes. Support was offered by sport's governing bodies in the form of documentation, advocacy, embassy engagement, and stakeholder coordination, but these modes of support were inconsistent and not clearly institutionalised. The participants suggested the creation of special international participation units, a formal visa-support policy, better cooperation with immigration authorities, and better administrative capacity building. The study has found that collaborative governance is a key factor in fostering equitable participation of athletes in sports across the globe and in enhancing athlete mobility.

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1. Introduction
1.1. Background
Sport has become more global, and today, it is a key component of international involvement. Athletes, coaches, officials and administrators frequently cross-national boundaries to compete in tournaments, attend training camps, attend qualification events and participate in international exchange programmes. This is sometimes called "athlete mobility" and is now an integral part of elite sport development and the international sport system. Cook *et al*. (2024) [7] highlighted how mobility is integral to sport, influencing athletes' experiences, pathways and social and career progression. As the sports landscape grows more global and competitive on the international stage, the governance issue of access to sport across borders is coming to the fore.

The benefits of the international competitions to sports persons and countries are great. Athletes are exposed to increased levels of competition, develop technical/tactical skills, grow their networks, and increase their scholarship, sponsorship, and career opportunities. At the national level, participation in international sports generates national identity, improves diplomatic relations and enhances the socioeconomic development of countries through the dissemination of visibility and prestige. The transformative role of sport in advancing inclusion, social cohesion and sustainable development has been consistently recognised by international bodies like UNESCO (UNESCO, 2023) [12]. There is, therefore, a growing focus on the need to ensure equitable opportunities for participation at an international level in the international policy context.

Despite these advantages, athletes and sports delegations are increasingly facing issues associated with international travel, especially when it comes to gaining entry visas to host nations. The conditions of visa refusal, delayed visa processing, bureaucratic delays and immigration requirements have become a serious issue to participation in international sporting events. Athletes and officials in developing countries are impacted disproportionately by these challenges, resulting in limited access to sport, the ability to represent their country, and access to international sport experiences. Visa-related barriers may result in: Not being able to compete, compromising the training schedule, financial loss, and psychological stress for the affected athletes and support personnel.

Visa denials have wider implications for national sporting results and the effectiveness of the organisations. Visa denials can negatively impact investments made by countries in athlete development and participation in international events. When a country invests in preparing athletes and is unable to have those athletes participate due to a visa denial, it can negatively impact those investments. Moreover, the constant visa difficulties could further widen the divide between different international sports, potentially limiting opportunities for athletes from specific parts of the globe.

Given the increasing interdependence of sports, more focus must be paid to the structural and governance issues affecting the movement of sports.

In this context, the role of sports governance becomes important in making it easier for international participation. Sport organisations, such as national sports authorities, national Olympic committees and sport-specific federations, are required to offer the institutional support required for athletes and officials to be able to compete in international competitions. Good governance in sport refers to a set of principles including transparency, accountability, responsiveness, effectiveness and stakeholder engagement (Lindholm, 2024) [19]. Academic voices are growing in resonance and increasing in numbers, so that the rights and welfare of athletes must be at the heart of the governance of sport, with sports organisations taking steps to ensure that athletes' rights are safeguarded and barriers to participation are eliminated (Seltmann & Fiege, 2024) [26].

Sports organisations have wider duties than the management of their own competitions, and they are tasked with activities such as advocacy, organisation of logistics, liaison with embassies and host institutions, and liaison with government authorities involved in the immigration process.

Good governance can make visa application processes more efficient, help prepare the athletes' paperwork for travel and be able to deal diplomatically with relevant stakeholders when a problem occurs. On the other hand, poor governance can make the visa process harder for athletes, resulting in support that fails to meet their needs in the lead-up to major events.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

As a result of the globalisation of sport, there are more occasions for athletes, coaches, sports administrators and officials to travel to participate in international events across national boundaries than ever before. As a result, the ability to move internationally has become an essential part of sport development and sporting excellence in the 21st century. Nevertheless, in the era of growing international participation, the athletes and sports delegations are still unable to represent their countries at international sporting events due to various reasons, such as visa denials. The barriers have become an important but under-studied issue in the field of sports governance.

While sports governance has been a growing field of academic research, most of the existing literature has dealt with aspects of accountability, ethics, regulation, institutional reform, and governance structures in sports organisations (Agafonova, 2024; Duval, 2024; Lindholm, 2024) [10, 19]. There has been very little work done so far on the analysis of the role sport's governing bodies play in enabling athletes' mobility and addressing visa-related issues that potentially impede international participation. Cook *et al*. (2024) [7] maintained that sport mobilities is a new area of study that offers a useful approach to analysing the mobility of athletes and other sport actors between borders. Yet empirical research on the governance aspects of visa rejections is limited, especially in the African context.

Several recent events in Ghana illustrate how visa issues in sport can be an issue of great concern. Some of the athletes from Ghana, including World Championships qualifier Sarfo Ansah and Rose Yeboah, were reportedly refused entry visas by the Hungarian Embassy in Accra just before the World Athletics Championships in Budapest, 2023, even though they had made the cut. Likewise, Ghanaian athletes from the Ghana University Sports Association (GUSA) delegation were reported to have experienced visa challenges, which were affecting their involvement in international competitions in Germany. The Government of Ghana, in recent times, formally protested Canada's refusal to grant a visa to Thomas Partey, the Ghana midfielder who was to open the scoring in Ghana's first game of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, alleging that the move harmed the spirit of presumption of innocence and also harmed Ghana's competitive preparations. The incidents do not form a stand-alone group but are instead common and have far-reaching consequences for international sporting activity.

Visa denials have an impact that goes beyond the competition. The emotional toll, financial impact, training delays, lack of career progression and exposure to high-level competition are just some of the negative consequences that can occur when an athlete is turned down for a visa. Visa denials at the organisational level can affect investments in athlete preparation, be detrimental to national representation, and compromise the credibility of sports organisations that

facilitate participation at the international level. However, long-term, if immigration restrictions remain a constant issue, this can further widen disparities in the world of sport, in favour of those delegations and athletes who come from countries where there are fewer restrictions in place.

While these challenges are important, the existing research on visa-related issues in sport in general has taken a legal, policy-driven, or descriptive focus, with a main focus on the rules and regulations of immigration and the eligibility of athletes. There has been limited research on governance, and even less research on the experiences of athletes and sport officials, in addition to the institutional responses to the experiences of sport governing bodies. Without this evidence, policies, administrative procedures, and working arrangements to assist athletes and to reduce the negative impacts of visa denials are limited.

It is appropriate, both in terms of timing and need, to close this knowledge gap. International sporting calendars are getting longer and longer, and countries are increasingly turning to sport as a means of development, diplomacy and national identity; sport governing bodies need to be well prepared to predict and address sporting challenges posed by mobility. Otherwise, it can lead to sustained lack of opportunities for athletes to participate in international events, ineffective use of resources and degraded national sporting results. It is therefore important to explore the reactions of sports governing bodies to visa refusal challenges and develop governance strategies that can facilitate equal opportunities for international sporting participation.

In light of this, the present study aimed to explore the issues of sports governance and visa refusal by studying the role of sports governing bodies in facilitating international participation. In particular, the study sought to understand what barriers sports stakeholders face in relation to visas, what governance mechanisms they have in place to overcome these barriers and how effective these mechanisms are, and what recommendations there are for ways to enhance the governance processes to ensure the mobility of athletes and their international participation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Review

2.1.1. Sports Governance

Sports governance is the framework, systems, processes and relations through which sports organisations are governed, controlled and made accountable (Lindholm, 2024) [19]. It includes decision-making procedures, policy development, stakeholder involvement, transparency, accountability and ethical behaviour in sports organisations. The modern view on governance in sport highlights that sport's governing bodies have a role to play in protecting the welfare of sports participants and promoting fair participation opportunities that is not solely focused on the administration of sport. The rising profile of 'good governance in sport' is tied to a growing awareness of issues of legitimacy of sport organisations, athletes' rights and effectiveness of sport institutions. Seltmann and Fiege (2024) [26] state that athlete-centred governance models need to be proactive in identifying and addressing barriers that prevent athletes from participating and thriving in sports.

However, governance effectiveness should not only be measured based on administration efficiency but also on the ability of organisations to help athletes have access to opportunities, such as international competitions. In the scope of this study, sports governance is defined as the actions carried out by sports governing bodies to help athletes and officials clear the visa hurdles in order to participate in sports at the international level.

2.1.2. Participation in Sport on an International level.

International participation in sport involves athletes and sports officials involved in sporting competitions, training camps, conferences and exchange programmes outside of their countries of origin. International sport helps to develop athletes, improve the standards of competition, create intercultural understanding and raise national honour. In addition to being an opportunity for technical knowledge and skill development, international competitions offer athletes the chance to enhance performance results and build professional connections. From the national level: success in international sport builds up the nation's diplomatic ties and helps to achieve general national development. But these opportunities depend on there being institutional support systems and favourable immigration policies. This internationalisation of sport has thus turned cross-border involvement into a 'must' requirement for the development of top athletes.

2.1.3. Athlete Mobility

Athlete mobility involves the movement of athletes from one geographical area to another for sporting activities such as competition, education, employment, and professional development. For Cook *et al*. (2024) [7], mobility is a defining feature of modern sport, influencing the identities of athletes, their opportunities and career paths. The authors also argued that the new discipline of sport mobilities can offer valuable insights for understanding the enabling or disabling conditions of sport mobility. Mobility is a very useful thing, but not available for all athletes. Nationality, immigration policy, financial availability and organisational assistance are factors that affect the ability of athletes to play abroad. Thus, athlete mobility needs to be viewed not only in terms of movement, but also as a social and political phenomenon.

2.1.4. Visa refusal and immigration restrictions

A visa refusal happens when an immigration official in a foreign country refuses a visa application for entry into that country. Visa barriers are a reality in the sporting community and can manifest as outright rejection, processing delays, red tape and restrictive immigration laws. These can hamper athletes' preparation routines, restrict access to international matches, and cause financial and psychological pressures. In recent years, the impacts of immigration policies on international sport participation have come into focus as a result of various events. The International Olympic Committee has stressed that the athlete and official visa issues should not cause disruption at the event and called on the cooperation of the organiser and immigration officials. Visa barriers, thus, are not just an immigration issue, but also a governance challenge which calls for concerted institutional responses from sports organisations.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Stakeholder Theory

The Stakeholder Theory developed by Freeman (1984) [12] suggests that organisations have responsibilities to various stakeholders who affect the success of the business. In sport, stakeholders include athletes, coaches, sport administrators, sport sponsors, governments, supporters, and international sport federations. The theory is important for this study because athletes are one of the stakeholders whose participation interests are important and ought to be protected by sport's governing bodies. This means that problems with visas that impact on sportspersons can be seen as failing to address the needs of the stakeholders in the governance arena. The theory guides the objective of studying the role of sports governing bodies in responding to visa issues. Institutional Theory According to the Institutional Theory, institutional contexts, including both regulatory and normative spheres as well as culture, influence organisational practices. Sports organisations are situated in institutional environments that are shaped by both governmental regulation and international sporting needs and demands, as well as society's expectations. Institutional barriers affecting international participation are visa policies. Sports organisations can then implement certain measures to meet the immigration criteria and, at the same time, ensure the mobility of athletes. This theory justifies the objective of exploring governance strategies used to enable cooperation from the international community.

2.2.2. Good Governance Theory

The key principles of Good Governance Theory are Accountability, Transparency, Responsiveness, Participation, Effectiveness and Equity. In sport, these principles are now becoming the basic conditions for the legitimacy of the organisation. According to Lindholm (2024) [19], the governance frameworks should not put stakeholder interest or institutional responsiveness before anything else. Therefore, sports organisations need to show proactive steps to eliminate obstacles to athlete participation. A good response to visa issues could thus help identify the quality of governance. This theory will be used as the main lens to evaluate the effectiveness of organisational responses. Network Governance Theory. According to Network Governance Theory, to solve complex societal issues, a collaborative governance process with a number of actors is needed. The solution to visa issues cannot be provided by sports organisations alone; it necessitates cooperation between the embassies, immigration authorities, governments, host institutions and the international federations. The theory, therefore, details the need for connections and inter-organisational relationships in enabling international involvement.

2.3. Empirical Review

2.3.1. Visa Challenges in International Sport.

There is growing evidence that visa restrictions are starting to have an impact on international sporting involvement. In recent times, there have been reports of immigration issues that will deter athletes, officials and support staff from travelling to major sporting events. For instance, future international sports events have raised the question of greater coordination between sports organisations and immigration officials to ensure the smooth running of events without being hampered by visa-related issues. Although a growing problem is being acknowledged, there are limited empirical studies that investigate visa refusals in sport. Current research has tended to centre on legal and policy aspects and paid little attention to organisational responses. It means there is a need for research that investigates the ways in which sport's governing bodies are dealing with visa issues that stakeholders are facing. The principles governing the administration of sports organisations. The rules and rules of governance in sports organisations. Sports governance has been studied mainly in terms of accountability systems, ethical leadership and sporting reforms. The concept of a balance between organisational autonomy and stakeholder interests is increasingly becoming important in modern sports governance, as argued by Agafonova (2024) [2]. There is, however, limited research that has focused on governance around the athlete mobility and participation at the international level. Little work has been done, therefore, to establish how much sports organisations actively enable travel arrangements and promote affected sports participants.

2.3.2. Athlete Experience with Travel Restrictions

When the athlete is travelling, he or she may feel frustrated, uncertain and excluded. Obstacles to immigration can hinder the preparation of performances and limit exposure to the international community. The sport mobilities perspective proposes that movements in and around sport are not evenly distributed and are influenced by the broader social and political landscape (Cook *et al*., 2024) [7]. Although the athlete experience has been studied more and more, there is a lack of knowledge about the perception of athletes on sport's governing bodies' support regarding a visa issue.

2.3.3. Organisational Support Mechanisms

Organisational support mechanisms can include various forms of administrative assistance, documentation services, engagement with the embassy, policy advocacy and partnerships with stakeholders. Theories of network governance point to the benefits of collaborative strategies in building the capacity of an organisation to solve complex issues. However, there are few empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of such support mechanisms to reduce visa-related barriers. It is therefore critical to understand the current practices and the perceptions of stakeholders on their effectiveness.

2.3.4. Identify any gaps in knowledge.

The literature that was reviewed shows that international involvement is an essential part of athlete development and national sporting success. But with the growing number of visa denials and immigration restrictions, it is a growing challenge to ensure equitable access to international sporting opportunities. While the focus of governance scholars has been on athlete welfare and on accountability of sporting organisations, empirical studies on the function of sports governing bodies for facilitating international participation are limited. In addition, previous research has tended to focus mainly on the experiences of athletes and officials from developed countries, and fewer studies have examined the

experiences of athletes and officials from developing countries and, especially, in African environments where visa obstacles may be more severe. The nexus of sports governance, athlete mobility and immigration issues, however, has been poorly researched. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by studying sports governance issues and visa refusal issues, while focusing on the role, strategies and effectiveness of sports governing bodies in enabling international participation.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Fig 1

2.5. Brief Explanation

The framework proposes that sports governance practices influence the extent to which sports organisations establish effective institutional support mechanisms. Such mechanisms include visa advisory services, documentation support, liaison with embassies, and collaboration with government agencies. These support systems affect the management of visa challenges, including visa refusals, delays, and administrative barriers encountered by athletes and sports officials. Effective management of these challenges is expected to improve international participation outcomes, reflected in increased athlete mobility, successful participation in international competitions, reduced travel disruptions, and enhanced opportunities for athlete development and national representation.

Accordingly, the framework assumes that the quality of governance within sports organisations indirectly shapes international participation through its influence on institutional support and visa management processes.

Table 1: Possible Theoretical Linkages

Framework Component	Supporting Theory
Sports Governance Practices	Good Governance Theory
Institutional Support Mechanisms	Stakeholder Theory
Management of Visa Challenges	Institutional Theory
International Participation Outcomes	Network Governance Theory

3. Material and Method

3.1. Research Paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm was used to guide this study because it posits that reality is socially constructed and that the meanings individuals assign to their experiences are the best way to understand it (Creswell & Poth, 2018) [8]. In this context, the interpretivist paradigm is suitable for examining the perceptions, experiences and interpretations of the participants on the role of sports governing bodies in enabling international participation, as it is experienced differently by

the athlete, administrator and sports official. The paradigm enables the researcher to explore the understanding of stakeholders on governance practices and institutional support mechanisms in relation to international sporting mobility at a deeper level.

3.2. Research Design

This study was of a qualitative, case study type. Yin (2024) [34] argues that case study research can be used to investigate a phenomenon in its context in depth, especially if the phenomenon/case is in the contemporary world and the boundary between phenomenon and context is not easily distinguished. The qualitative case study design is warranted due to its ability to provide the researcher with the opportunity to discuss the complexities of visa refusal and to explore the governance responses of sports organisations from various perspectives.

Table 2: Justification for the Research Design

Methodological Component	Justification
Interpretivist paradigm	Explores participants' subjective experiences and meanings.
Qualitative approach	Provides rich descriptions of visa-related experiences and governance practices.
Case study design	Facilitates an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its natural context.

3.3. Study Setting

The study was carried out in the selected sports organisations of Ghana, such as the national sports governing bodies, National Sports Authority, Ghana Olympic Committee, selected national sport federations and other sport organisations. The environment is conducive in Ghana, as the athletes and sports officials have complained of visa-related issues at times, which have hindered their involvement in international competitions.

The setting also provides opportunities for learning about how sports organisations address barriers to sport related to immigration and how they can support stakeholders in sport when they come from overseas.

3.4. Population

The target groups included stakeholders with knowledge and experience on Visa issues and international involvement in sport. The study population comprised of:

1. Sports administrators;
2. Officials from sports governing bodies;
3. Athletes who have had visa denials and delays;
4. Team managers and coaches in international competitions.

These are the groups that are likely to deliver a variety of perspectives on governance practices, institutional responses and lived experiences with visa-related barriers.

Table 3: Target Population

Participant Category	Rationale
Sports administrators	Understand organisational policies and procedures.
Governing body officials	Provide insights into governance strategies and institutional responses.
Athletes	Share first-hand experiences of visa refusals and their consequences.
Team managers/coaches	Explain operational challenges during international travel preparations.

3.5. Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experiences on visa refusal issues in sport. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose information-rich cases that can provide in-depth information about the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015) [24]. Further, snowball sampling was also used, with participants suggesting other people they knew who had relevant experience, including people involved in sports who had faced issues with visas.

3.6. Sample Size

In qualitative studies, information richness was given priority over statistical representativeness. Creswell and Poth (2018) [8] indicated that the quality of sample size in qualitative research is related to the essential information needed to reach meaningful conclusions. The study thus involved about 25 participants in the following distribution:

Table 4: Proposed Sample Size

Participant Category	Number
Sports administrators	7
Athletes	8
Coaches/team managers	5
Officials from governing bodies	5
Total	25

The sample proposed will be judged as sufficient to reach data saturation, meaning that no significantly new information will be gained from additional interviews.

3.7. Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews (semi-structured) were the primary data collection technique. The free expression of participants' opinions, combined with the researcher's ability to go deeper in the analysis of new aspects of the problem, allows for the execution of this approach (Kallio *et al*., 2016) [17]. The interviews will focus on:

1. Experiences of visa refusals;
2. Organisational support received;
3. Governance practices employed;
4. Suggestions for improving institutional responses.

Document Analysis: Document analysis was used in conjunction with interview data. Some relevant documents are:

1. Visa application guidelines;
2. Federation correspondence;
3. International competition reports;
4. Organisational policies;
5. Immigration-related communications.

Document review helps to build context and data triangulation.

3.8. Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments were used, namely the Interview Guide, which is an instrument composed of open-ended questions that correspond with the research objectives.

Document Review Checklist - The checklist was used to systematically review relevant documents.

Table 5: Alignment between Objectives and Data Sources

Research Objective	Data Source
Explore visa-related challenges	Athlete and administrator interviews
Examine governance roles	Governing body interviews and documents
Identify strategies employed	Interviews and organisational reports
Assess the effectiveness of responses	Stakeholder interviews
Recommend improvements	All participant categories

3.9. Trustworthiness

The study will adopt Lincoln and Guba's (1985) [18] criteria for establishing trustworthiness.

Credibility: Credibility was enhanced through member checking, prolonged engagement, and triangulation of interviews and documentary evidence.

Transferability: Thick descriptions of the study context and participants enabled readers to determine the applicability of findings to similar settings.

Dependability: An audit trail documenting methodological decisions and data management procedures was maintained.

Confirmability: Reflexive journaling and external review of coding procedures minimised researcher bias.

Table 6: Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness

Criterion	Strategy
Credibility	Member checking and triangulation
Transferability	Thick description
Dependability	Audit trail
Confirmability	Reflexive journaling

3.10. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, based on the six stages suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022) [4]:

1. Familiarisation with the data;
2. Generating initial codes;
3. Constructing themes;
4. Reviewing themes;
5. Identifying and labelling themes;
6. Producing the report.

Thematic analysis was suitable as it helped to identify and interpret patterns that were repeated in participants' experiences.

3.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant IRB before data collection. The study was conducted based on the following ethical principles:

1. **Informed consent:** Participants were provided with information about the study and gave their consent to participate.
2. **Confidentiality:** Participants' information was anonymised by the use of pseudonyms.
3. **Anonymity:** Personal information will not be revealed.
4. **Voluntary participation:** Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.
5. **Data security:** Electronic data will be password-protected; hard copies will be securely stored.

Ethical considerations are crucial to protect the rights of participants and ensure integrity in conducting research.

4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presented the findings of the study on sports governance and visa refusal challenges: examining the role of sports governing bodies in facilitating international participation. The findings were derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with sports administrators,

athletes, coaches/team managers, and officials from sports governing bodies, as well as documentary evidence obtained from organisational records and visa-related correspondence. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, resulting in five major themes that aligned with the research objectives.

Table 7: Presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. Distribution of Participants

Participant Category	Number
Sports administrators	8
Athletes	7
Coaches/team managers	5
Officials from governing bodies	5
Total	25

4.2. Theme 1: Nature of Visa Refusal Challenges

Participants reported various difficulties with visas when participating across the country. The main problems reported were visa denials, a time-consuming visa application process, too many documents, a lack of communication between embassies and financial losses due to making multiple visa applications. Refusals of visas have had an impact on athletes' preparation and on their ability to participate in significant international events, according to athletes. It was a disappointing and heart-wrenching experience for one athlete when they were refused a visa two weeks before they left for the championship: "I have spent nearly a whole year preparing for the championship, but then, when the day arrived, I was refused a visa, which was emotionally devastating for me, since all of the preparation went down the drain. (Athlete 4)

Likewise, one team manager said, "Sometimes, it was not a complete rejection, but delays; by the time I was approved, I was already in the midst of the competition.

The financial cost of multiple applications and supporting documentation was also mentioned. These results indicated that visa hurdles went beyond the immigration process and had a profound impact on the performance, health and international exposure of athletes.

4.3. Theme 2: Governance Roles in Facilitating Participation

The sports governing bodies were mentioned to have served in different capacities to facilitate the participation of participants in sports. These were functions such as giving support letters, arranging travel, communicating with embassies and giving administrative advice in visa application procedures.

A sports administrator stated: "Invitation letters were generally drawn up by our federation, and we would send a letter directly to the organiser to ensure that the athlete had the necessary paperwork. (Administrator 6)

They often tried to get involved when problems arose, by contacting the relevant embassies and briefing them on the significance of the competition," said an official from a governing body. (Official 3)

Some of the participants felt the support they received was not consistent, even with all these efforts.

One athlete commented: "The level of support was related to the sport in question; some federations were proactive, others left it to the athletes to do it themselves. (Athlete 8)" The results illustrated the significant facilitative functions played by sports organisations, albeit there was a great difference in their level of involvement.

4.4. Theme 3: Institutional Strategies that already exist

Participants discussed a range of strategies that sports organisations are using to tackle issues around visas. Some of these strategies were to apply for admission earlier, have liaison officers, work in partnership with host institutions and distribute standardised documentation packages.

Table 4.2 summarises the strategies reported by participants.

Table 8: Institutional Strategies Used to Address Visa Challenges

Strategy	Description
Early application processes	Athletes were encouraged to submit applications well in advance.
Embassy engagement	Officials communicated directly with embassies where necessary.
Documentation support	Federations prepared official letters and supporting documents.
Stakeholder collaboration	Organisations worked with event organisers and government agencies.
Administrative guidance	Participants received advice regarding visa procedures.

"We started writing out lots of months before competitions, from experience, we found delays," said one of the officials from the governing body. (Official 1). These results suggested that proactive planning is an important measure adopted to reduce the visa-related problems.

The perceptions of the effectiveness of the governance response need to be addressed (Theme 4.5).

There was a range of views about the effectiveness of the governance responses. Some recognised that there was an improvement in the level of organisational support; others felt that the provision in place was still not satisfactory.

A sports administrator commented: "Some progress had been made, as federations had become more appreciative of the challenges; however, there was still a lack of coordinated policies." (Administrator 3)

In some instances, the support was of assistance but when the final decision was made by embassies, little was available to the federations. (Athlete 2). Some noted that there were no formal procedures and that this rendered organisational responses ineffective.

We were lacking in systems and not relying on personal relationships and emergency measures, said a coach. (Coach 4) Overall, the results showed that there was still a lot of room for improvement with governance responses providing some assistance.

4.6. Theme 5: Suggested Improvements

The players made a few recommendations to improve the role of sports governing bodies to achieve international

involvement. Most commonly proposed enhancements were:

1. Formation of special international travel teams in sports clubs;
2. Development of the visa support policy;
3. Strengthening the ties between sports bodies and immigration officials; and
4. Programmes for building the capacity of administrators;
5. Implementations of emergency support for affected athletes due to visa denials.

"Athletes should be focused on preparing for events and not administration; there should be an office that focuses on administration and international travelling. (Athlete 9).
The government ministries, embassies and sports federations should provide special accommodation for the accredited athletes, it was suggested. (Official 4). This was reflected in recommendations for multi-jurisdictional governance solutions to address visa-related challenges.

4.7. Summary of Findings

The researchers found that visas and immigration restrictions were found to have a negative impact on participation in sports activities abroad. Sporting organisations were taking on more facilitative roles (e.g. reporting support, consulting with stakeholders), but these were not perceived to be carried out consistently and not institutionalised enough. Formalised policies, strong inter-organisational relationships and support were identified as a need, as were most strategies, which were reactive rather than preventative.

Table 9: Summary of Major Themes

Theme	Key Findings
Nature of visa challenges	Refusals, delays, documentation burdens, and financial costs
Governance roles	Documentation support, advocacy, and coordination
Institutional strategies	Early applications, embassy engagement, stakeholder collaboration
Effectiveness of responses	Mixed perceptions; lack of formal systems
Suggested improvements	Dedicated units, policy development, and stronger partnerships

The findings presented in this chapter formed the basis for the discussion and conclusions presented in Chapter Five.

5. Discussion, and Conclusion,

5.1. Discussion of Findings

This study focused on the problems of sports governance and visa refusal, and explored how the sports governing bodies facilitated the participation of foreigners in sport. Existing literature and theoretical frameworks were discussed and analysed with their findings.

5.1.1. Nature of Visa Refusal Challenges

The results showed that athletes and sports officials had faced visa rejection, delays, high levels of documentation and financial costs in applying for visas multiple times. These situations hindered athletes' participation in international competitions, had a negative impact on athletes' training and preparation, and limited opportunities for international exposure. This confirmed the existing literature indicating that barriers to participating in sport internationally have become more restrictive over time (Cook *et al*., 2024) [7]. The results also converged with the sport mobilities view, which suggests a lack of equal access to movement in sport and an impact of sport on wider institutional and political structures. Thus, sporting competence was not the only factor influencing athlete mobility, but also the external immigration processes.

5.1.2. Governance roles in facilitating participation.

It was revealed that the sports governing bodies had offered administrative assistance in the form of official documentation, liaising with embassies and arranging with the event organisers. But there was variation across organisations in terms of the amount of support. The results were consistent with Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) [12], which focuses on the role that organisations play in relation to stakeholders whose interests have an impact on organisational legitimacy and success. As key stakeholders, athletes were dependent on ensuring that sports organisations would protect their interests in participating in sport. The findings highlighted that there was not always a strong sense of support from stakeholders as their expectations were not always met. The results also confirmed the findings of Seltmann and Fiege (2024) [26], who concluded that the interests of athletes and their rights must be at the heart of sports in today's governance structures.

5.1.3. Existing Institutional Strategies

The study found that sports organisations had implemented several strategies, including, among others, the early application of visa, working with stakeholders, engaging with the embassy, and supporting documentation. These methods were mostly reactive in nature, but they did help to provide some relief. The results were consistent with the Institutional Theory, which proposes that organisations will change their behaviours based on the regulatory pressures and the environment. Sporting organisations seemed to adapt their processes to meet immigration needs, although there were no standardised systems in place.

5.1.4. How Effective The Governance Responses Are Perceived To Be

Participants' perception of governance responses was in the moderate range. Some recognised organisational initiatives, but others expressed concerns about the lack of formal policies and integrated interventions. This discovery confirmed Good Governance Theory, which calls for a stance of responsiveness, effectiveness, and accountability in organisations, as well as stakeholder engagement. The results indicated that sports governing bodies had shown some sport

responsiveness, but sport governance effectiveness was limited due to weak institutional capacity and a lack of formalised support systems.

5.1.5. Suggested Improvements

The importance of improved inter-organisational cooperation, visa support mechanisms and policy changes was highlighted by the participants. The results confirmed the Network Governance Theory, which suggests that a coordinated action between several actors is needed to handle complex social problems. Visa problems did not end with the requirements of sports organisations, and required collaboration between governments, immigration authorities, embassies and international federations.

5.2. Conclusions

The study found that visa refusal challenges had had a noticeable impact on the international dimension of sports participation, as they had negatively impacted the preparation of athletes and made opportunities for exposure more limited, and had placed a financial and psychological burden on stakeholders. The study also found that sport's governing bodies have also contributed in some important facilitative ways, such as by providing administrative support and engaging stakeholders. But the interventions were mainly unstructured and unstandardised across organisations. As a result, this was seen as a limited response in effect to governance. The study also found that other solutions would have to be identified in the form of collaborative governance models between sports organisations, governmental institutions, immigration authorities, and international sporting institutions in order to tackle visa-related hurdles. The overall results showed the need to enhance athlete mobility governance structures and increase the fairness and equity in access to international sport opportunities.

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