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Sarah Richardson & Sarah Jane Kelly

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Unlocking Nonprofit Innovation for Growth: Director Insights from Australia

Sarah Richardson ^a and Sarah Jane Kelly ^b

^aUQ Business School, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; ^bQUT Graduate School of Business, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

Our research unlocks the new construct of “innovation for growth” in nonprofits, defined as “innovation activities undertaken in the pursuit of revenue growth.” By interpreting rich quantitative and qualitative data from a survey of 101 directors of mid-to-large, mainly Australian nonprofits, it advances nonprofit-innovation and -governance scholarship, and reveals perceived organizational strategies and returns for nonprofit marketing leaders and boards seeking to pursue this innovation type. The research can also be drawn on to inform innovation policy for nonprofits, thus supporting the development of a thriving, impactful sector and providing flow-on benefits for society.

KEYWORDS

Board culture; board diversity; board strategy; innovation for growth; nonprofit governance

Introduction

The nonprofit sector is significant yet confronted by innovation-related issues (e.g., increased competition, multistakeholder accountability, mission/market tensions: Faulk et al., 2021; Phillips & Smith, 2011; Radbourne, 2003; Rentschler et al., 2021; Topaloglu et al., 2018) that risk impeding its sustainability, growth, and prosperity. Despite this critical sector’s precarity and evidence that innovation facilitates organizational sustainability and impact, our historic understanding of the levers and outcomes of innovation in nonprofits is patchy (Faulk, 2014; Terzo et al., 2023).

To begin with, innovation in nonprofits has generally been viewed through the lens of the substantial for-profit innovation corpus which has focused on product (and more recently, technological) innovation, regularly characterizing it as radical, planned change (Bierwerth et al., 2015; Lassen et al., 2006). And the specialized study of innovation in resource-constrained contexts that focuses on improving societal outcomes, akin to nonprofit contexts (see e.g., frugal innovation: Basu et al., 2013; bottom-of-pyramid innovation; Prahalad, 2012), has also largely been restricted to for-profits. Further, the scattered nonprofit-innovation literature, unlike its for-profit counterpart, has not connected

CONTACT Sarah Richardson  srichardson@srconsulting.com.au  UQ Business School, The University of Queensland, 39 Blair Drive, St Lucia, Brisbane QLD 4072, Australia

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innovation with growth (nor with other performance such as social impact), centering instead on nonprofit-innovation processes (Teasdale et al., 2023). Nevertheless, several nonprofit process-related studies are broadly relevant to our topic: five innovation-management internal-communication practices (concerning innovation strategy, service and process innovations, innovation's importance, organizational learning, and intersectoral networks) were positively correlated with nonprofit social performance (do Adro et al., 2022) and nonprofit resources, both financial- and especially human-slack resources, were positively correlated with innovation (frequency, degree) (Meyer & Leitner, 2018). Even social innovation has often been characterized in process terms, disconnected from results, one review classing two-thirds of Canadian social enterprises as low in innovation (new-process use), yet half as high in financial performance (commercial-revenue dominance), and one-third as high in societal transformation (social impact) (Madill et al., 2010). Moreover, the governance of innovation in nonprofits is likewise understudied despite boards overseeing strategy/performance and thus being critical drivers of innovation and scholars having identified an innovation-governance gap in nonprofits (Adams et al., 2010; Bruneel et al., 2020; Hilmer & Tricker, 1994; Meyer & Leitner, 2018). And innovation management, in terms of leaders' entrepreneurial orientation and its organizational impact, has only recently begun to be investigated in nonprofits (Stock & Erpf, 2023). In fact, innovation governance has largely been examined in for-profits, drawing on agency theory which assumes information-transparency/profit-maximization conditions that are atypical to nonprofit multistakeholder, mission-focus, and minimal-reporting contexts (Boyd et al., 2017; Kumar & Zattoni, 2019). Finally, governance/innovation relationships in for-profits and nonprofits alike have historically been seen as monofactorial not multifactorial (Bezemer et al., 2023; Kumar & Zattoni, 2019).

In the research this article presents, we set out to identify governance levers and policies which enhance nonprofit innovation for growth, motivated by a belief that effective governance of this innovation type might help address nonprofit-sustainability and -growth challenges. We sought to answer three questions:

Research question 1 (RQ1): Which board and contextual factors increase the pursuit of growth-directed innovation in nonprofits?

Research question 2 (RQ2): What innovation-related board practices were conducted prior to the growth?

Research question 3 (RQ3): How are nonprofit innovation-related aims and policy viewed?

Conceptualizing nonprofit innovation for growth and its levers

Defining innovation and growth

Innovation is defined as introduced new or improved products/services or processes, and innovation activities as implemented actions that should produce organizational innovation (which are classified into four activity types, namely implementations of new/improved product, process, marketing, and organizational innovation activities) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [O.E.C.D.] & Eurostat, 2018). Growth is defined as an increase in an organization's size or scale (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [O.E.C.D.], 2007). Innovation is well understood as enabling organizational differentiation, survival, and growth (Baregheh et al., 2009; Ferreira et al., 2015), and enhancing societal progress and prosperity (O.E.C.D., 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [O.E.C.D.] & Eurostat, 2018).

The character of nonprofit innovation for growth

Thus, it is surprising the concept of innovation for growth had been relatively unstudied in nonprofits (prior to our research). This is particularly significant for marketing scholarship because nonprofit marketing involves developing and implementing innovation to create differentiation that should stimulate organization growth and social impact (Radbourne & Fraser, 2023; Weerawardena & Mort, 2012). Despite this scarcity, prior to the survey research outlined in this article, we have already made significant contributions to nonprofit marketing, strategy, and management scholarship through our two previous studies which collectively characterize this new construct.

First, our literature review published in 2023 synthesized 27 disparate articles to name this construct “innovation for growth” and define it (i.e., as revealed in the literature) as “new or improved goods, services, or processes that are [social] purpose-aligned and lead to financial growth” (Richardson et al., 2023). This interpretation offered sector specificity by connecting different fields' ideas of (1) innovation (i.e., new products or processes), (2) nonprofit motivation (i.e., organizational societal-purpose alignment), and (3) outcome orientation (i.e., for financial growth).

Second, in our follow-up interview study, we extended this conceptualization (i.e., as revealed in the data from interviews with 26 nonprofit directors), characterizing “innovation for growth” as nonprofit specific and directed to growth that is typically financial, thus setting the scene for future studies to explore this innovation type as a nonprofit revenue-generating strategy (Richardson & Kelly, 2024). Interestingly, the interview-study findings echoed the earlier literature-review definitional ideas by revealing nonprofit innovation for growth traits of small-scale cumulative change and connectedness (i.e., innovation), social-

purpose alignment (i.e., nonprofit pursuit), and scale for impact (i.e., financial growth which enables impact).

The levers of nonprofit innovation for growth

Before our studies, the scattered nonprofit-innovation research had identified various governance levers, drawing on theory and empirics. We consequently began our survey by positing several theoretically and empirically based hypotheses for testing regarding governance and nonprofit growth-directed innovation relationships.

Internal governance. Boards are ultimately responsible for organizational strategy and performance, and, therefore, are critical drivers of innovation and its organizational impacts (Hilmer & Tricker, 1994; O.E.C.D., 2012) and, in the case of nonprofit directors, collectively govern alongside multiple stakeholders within a relational-governance system (Phillips & Smith, 2011). Thus, we propose particular characteristics and behaviors of the board impact organizational outcomes.

How the board is structured. Extant literature builds on agency theory's premise how the board is structured (e.g., board size, diversity) influences organization outcomes (Fama & Jensen, 1983) to argue larger boards can provide greater resource access and advice, along with legitimacy and external network connection (Hillman & Dalziel, 2003) which, in the case of nonprofits, may lead to higher philanthropic and other revenue (Faulk & Stewart, 2017). Indeed, board size has been positively related to fundraising revenue in U.S. nonprofits (Vecco et al., 2021) and U.S. sport foundations (Yang & Babiak, 2023).

Similarly, the literature suggests more diverse boards can help with better decisioning because of many perspectives (Adams et al., 2015), which should also hold true in nonprofits. Certainly, board-gender diversity has been positively related to value creation in Italian grant-giving foundations (Hinna & Monteduro, 2017); board ethno-racial incidence to entity performance in U.S. charities (Sessler Bernstein & Fredette, 2024); and board professional-background diversity to caseload and interorganizational accomplishments in U.S. community-mediation centers (Gazley et al., 2010).

We therefore hypothesize:

H1: A larger or more diverse board enhances nonprofit innovation for growth

How the board relates. The existing literature also features ideas of board-cohesion theory which presumes how the board relates impacts organization performance (Forbes & Milliken, 1999).

In short, this theory postulates board members' abilities to work together can benefit organizations in that more cohesive groups (i.e., those with more goal agreement and mutual attraction) tend to improve decisioning through lack of negative conflict (Summers et al., 1998). Nonprofit empirical research supports this proposition. Board cohesion (measured by group attraction, member satisfaction, and member interactions) has been positively related to innovation in U.S. disability organizations (Jaskyte, 2018) and, in hypothesized models, board cohesion (measured by board-social capital and chair-/board-C.E.O. relationship) to innovation in developing country nonprofit organizations (Jaskyte, 2012) and generally (Jaskyte, 2015).

Thus, we conjecture:

H2: A cohesive board enhances nonprofit innovation for growth

How the board operates. Several connected theories, which dominate the extant literature and can apply equally to for-profits and nonprofits, further reinforce the theorized board/nonprofit performance relationship by also positing how boards operate affects organization outcomes.

First, under board-decision theory, board decisioning (measured by effort norms, cognitive conflict, and knowledge/skills use) is presumed to directly (and also indirectly via cognitive conflict's association with cohesiveness) influence board effectiveness (board strategy/monitoring performance) which, in turn, influences organization performance (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Thus, it can be argued boards with more productive querying/deliberation will tend to enjoy greater board cohesiveness, thereby indirectly affecting innovation and organization outcomes. Indeed, balanced board questioning/decisioning has been positively related to innovation in U.S. disability nonprofits (Jaskyte, 2018).

Second, according to agency theory, boards (i.e., principals' representatives) conduct strategic tasks to maximize principals' interests (Fama & Jensen, 1983) (which for nonprofits may refer to funder, other stakeholder, and broader-society interests), and so it can be surmised boards with greater strategic involvement are more likely to sustain improved innovation and organization performance (Golden & Zajac, 2001). A small body of nonprofit-innovation empirical research corroborates this proposition. For example, board-strategy involvement has been positively related to innovation commitment, industry standing, and financial performance in Canadian nonprofits (and firms) (Zhu et al., 2016).

Third, stakeholder theory holds boards engage with various groups to optimize stakeholder welfare (Freeman, 1984), which suggests boards that foster stakeholder engagement can incorporate multiple views in their decisioning, and thereby improve entity-goal fulfillment (Fasan & Mio, 2017). Again, there is evidence to support this in the extant nonprofit

literature. Stakeholder engagement has been positively related to advocacy success in European interest groups (Albareda & Braun, 2019) and U.S. charities (Guo & Saxton, 2010); to strategic planning and decisioning in Finnish policy nonprofits (Vehka & Vesa, 2023); and, along with market orientation (i.e., differentiation/innovation focus) to fundraising revenue and sector-capacity building in U.S. community foundations (Esposito & Besana, 2018).

So we hypothesize:

H3: A strategic board enhances nonprofit innovation for growth

External governance. Alongside the theorized board influence, we also considered external influence, because context has been shown to affect innovation (Autio et al., 2014). We draw on two interconnected theories to propose particular characteristics of the board's context also influence nonprofit outcomes.

What organizational context the board operates in. The existing literature reflects resource theory's presumption the board's organizational context (e.g., organization size, workforce capability) affects organization outcomes (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). So it can be assumed that larger organizations are likely to have more resources and loss-bearing capacity, which could improve innovation activity and organizational performance (Camisón-Zornoza et al., 2004). Indeed, organization size has been positively related to innovation quantity in U.S. educational nonprofits (Jaskyte, 2013) and to civic-engagement and community-organization investment in U.S. foundations (Suárez & Lee, 2011).

This literature also suggests greater workforce skills/experience could strengthen innovativeness and innovation adoption in organizations (Damanpour, 1991; Demircioglu, 2020). Certainly, executive/staff market orientation (i.e., differentiation/innovation focus) has been positively related to revenue generation in Indian environmental-donative nonprofits (Modi & Sahi, 2022) and administrative-task outsourcing (thereby enabling strategic-skill prioritization) to mission performance in U.S. community nonprofits (Pope et al., 2015).

We consequently hypothesize:

H4: A larger or more experienced organization enhances nonprofit innovation for growth

What environmental context the board operates in. In our final line of argument, another subset of the extant literature draws on institutional theory to premise boards/organizations operate in a distinct environment that influences organization outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Indeed, there is much in this literature to support the idea being a nonprofit (i.e., “nonprofitness”) can enhance innovation, product/service quality, and organizational financial/nonfinancial performance (DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990). Being a nonprofit may relate to nonprofit-legal status (e.g., tax benefits), activity pursuit, community connection, and/or social-goal attunement. For instance, nonprofit traits (steerage, economic-surplus focus, performance motivation) have been positively related to innovation in U.A.E. universities (Bhayani, 2015); nonprofit-membership maintenance to innovation, and consequently revenue growth, club ranking, on-pitch performance, and media profile in German football nonprofits (Ward & Hines, 2017); and nonprofit status to cases settled in U.S. community-mediation centers (Gazley et al., 2010).

This literature also posits organizations with cross-sector alliances are likely to exhibit specific governance structures (e.g., flexible, dynamic frameworks) and processes (e.g., trust-building, conflict management, collective leadership), which together contribute to enhanced board effectiveness and stronger innovation and performance outcomes (Stone et al., 2010). Empirical studies in nonprofits back up this supposition. Nonprofit cross-sector collaborations geared to social purpose have been positively related to new business models, continuous learning, resource access, and localization in a multi-study literature review (João-Roland & Granados, 2020) and to social-problem reconceptualization, community participation, and allied social-services integration in Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Sweden (Rey-Garcia et al., 2018).

Institutional logics literature further proposes dynamic environments (e.g., COVID contexts) may encourage organizations to become more strategic which, in turn, enhances innovation and performance (see e.g., Kim & Mason, 2020). Certainly, a COVID focus has been positively related to core-activity maintenance and innovation (Fuller & Rice, 2022) and to service delivery (Mumford, 2022) in U.S. nonprofits, two studies which demonstrate how some entities can weather and excel in a period of sustained environmental and social turbulence.

Institutional logics also suggest holistic regulation (i.e., an environmental context where laws are geared towards achieving both financial and social goals) can enhance organizational outcomes. The more established for-profit literature in this space can be placed alongside its somewhat undeveloped nonprofit counterpart to signal conceivable future nonprofit regulation and its effect on nonprofit innovation and performance. For example, corporate board-independence regulation has been positively related to innovation and financial performance in U.S. Fortune-500 firms (Miller & Del Carmen Triana, 2009); corporate board-gender regulation to improved firm-market value in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, and Norway (Kuzmina & Melentyeva, 2021); and environmental regulation to

firm performance in a global literature review (Cohen & Tubb, 2018). We may see governance regulation and its associated performance impact along these lines in the nonprofit sector, as several examples already appear to foreshadow. For instance, U.K. nonprofit governance has been recently bolstered with a new regulator established in that jurisdiction whose oversight unprecedentedly extends to large nonprofits (i.e., no longer the historic coverage of only sizable public firms) and greater reporting requirements through adjustments to the Corporate Governance Code (e.g., resilience declaration, audit/assurance policy) (Simmons & Simmons, n.d.). And certainly reporting regulation has been positively related to nonprofit-reporting quantity and quality in the United Kingdom versus Ireland (where regulation was in development) (Connolly et al., 2017), and the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (where regulation did not exist) (McConville & Cordery, 2018).

Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H5: An innovation-conducive environment enhances nonprofit innovation for growth

We now connect these hypothesized factorial relationships with nonprofit innovation for growth in a visualization (Figure 1) and offer a tabular summary of the model's development and testing (Table 1).

Methodology

The survey this article details was designed to identify governance levers and policies which enhance nonprofit innovation for growth, thereby building on the insights from our prior literature review and interview study (Richardson &

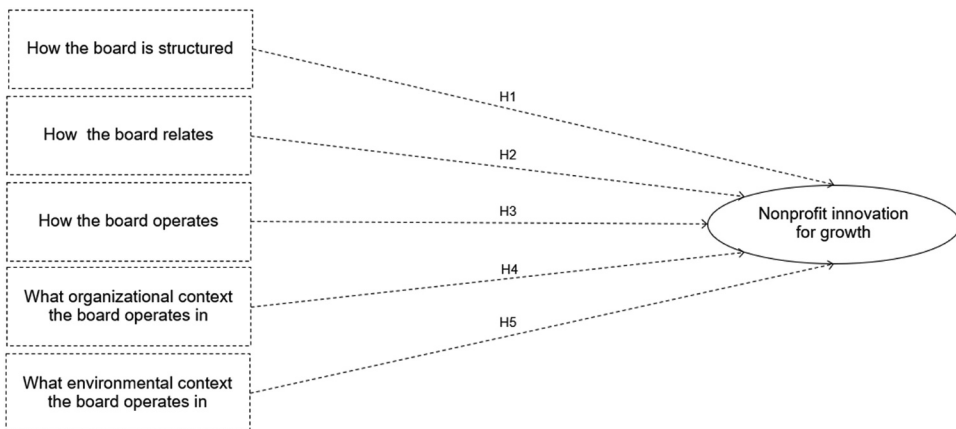


Figure 1. Hypothesized factorial relationships with nonprofit innovation for growth.

Table 1. Development and testing of the conceptual model.

Theories	Hypotheses	Construct measures	Questions
Agency (Fama & Jensen, 1983)	H1: A larger or more diverse board enhances nonprofit innovation for growth	Board size (Jaskyte, 2013); Board diversity (age: Jaskyte, 2015; gender: von Schnurbein & Fritz, 2017; professional background: Zhang et al., 2020; ethnicity: Hunt et al., 2015; skills/lived experience: Jaskyte, 2018; thought: Bandura, 2015)	<i>This board-compositional or relational variable helped (i.e., increased) nonprofit innovation for growth.</i>
Board cohesion (Forbes & Milliken, 1999)	H2: A cohesive board enhances nonprofit innovation for growth	Board cohesiveness (Jaskyte, 2012) Chair-/board-C.E.O. relations (Jaskyte, 2012)	
Board decision (Forbes & Milliken, 1999) Agency (Fama & Jensen, 1983) Stakeholder (Freeman, 1984)	H3: A strategic board enhances nonprofit innovation for growth	Board questioning/decisioning balance (Joly, 2022) Board-strategy involvement (Jaskyte, 2017) Board-stakeholder engagement (do Adro et al., 2022)	<i>This board-practice variable helped (i.e., increased) nonprofit innovation for growth.</i>
Resource (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978)	H4: A larger or more experienced organization enhances nonprofit innovation for growth	Size in revenue (Jaskyte, 2013) Staff skills/lived experience (Bedsworth et al., 2008)	<i>This organizational variable helped (i.e., increased) nonprofit innovation for growth.</i>
Institutional (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)	H5: An innovation-conducive environment enhances nonprofit innovation for growth	Being a nonprofit (Ward & Hines, 2017) Alliance participation (do Adro et al., 2022) COVID (Kim & Mason, 2020) Regulation (McConville & Cordery, 2018)	<i>This environmental variable helped (i.e., increased) nonprofit innovation for growth.</i>

Innovation for growth measured by “innovation activities undertaken in the pursuit of revenue growth” (Richardson & Kelly, 2024).

All construct terms replicated those used by Richardson and Kelly (2024).

Kelly, 2024; Richardson et al., 2023). We conducted an online survey in Qualtrics and analyzed it quantitatively in Stata and qualitatively using narrative techniques. For research question 1 (*Which board and contextual factors increase the pursuit of growth-directed innovation in nonprofits?*), we used a measurement model and investigated multifactorial relationships (i.e., the perceived influence of various levers), because our two earlier studies had conceptualized multifactorial not monofactorial ones. Before distribution, the primary investigator and an expert researcher, who are seasoned directors, both independently trialed the survey. Accordingly, some questions were modified

for construct clarity and several nonessential ones removed, with the final survey trialed at 10 min.

Survey frame

We focused the research on growth-directed innovation in mid-to-large, predominantly Australian nonprofits for several reasons.

Australia's nonprofit sector is significant yet faces the aforementioned global nonprofit-innovation challenges of increased competition, multistakeholder accountability, and mission/market tensions, along with local challenges including small/marginal entity predominance, complex regulation, and workplace-health and -safety issues (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission [A.C.N.C.], 2023a, 2023b; Langford & Anderson, 2023; Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2021; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023). Nevertheless, nonprofit-innovation research in Australia is scarce, earlier studies having largely investigated North-American and European contexts (see e.g., Moi et al., 2014; Renz et al., 2023).

Larger entities appear more able to navigate these innovation hurdles than smaller ones, with organization size positively related to nonprofit innovation (Jaskyte, 2011). Indeed, in Australia, mid-to-large nonprofits seem comparatively robust, contributing almost all sector revenue (99%) and healthy average surplus (A1,357,231) whereas their small counterparts barely break even (A2,722 average surplus) (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission [A.C.N.C.], 2023a).

Sampling

The survey opened in March 2023, following ethics approval (2022/HE002225) from the Low & Negligible Risk Committee at the primary investigator's university. Respondents were recruited via convenience sampling, the primary investigator sending a dedicated e-mail to their board and executive networks and posting on the LinkedIn groups of the Australian Institute of Company Directors (A.I.C.D.), Governance Institute of Australia, and Women on Boards, with all e-mails and posts containing a survey link and requesting recipient participation and network sharing (i.e., snowballing to extend sample size). The survey's welcome paragraph detailed the survey's ethics approval and anonymity of responses, and respondents provided informed consent for their data use by submitting the survey, as this paragraph had advised.

Inclusion criteria were (1) respondents who have board-member experience of a medium or large nonprofit/s that grew in revenue during their tenure, (2) the candidate mix offers diversity in director traits and nonprofit background,

and (3) participants are mainly Australia-based. These criteria were used to (1) permit experience of larger nonprofits only, recognizing such entities have different/better innovation outcomes than their smaller counterparts (Jaskyte, 2011), (2) draw on lived experience of growth-directed innovation as opposed to speculation, and (3) enable insight into a relatively neglected context under consistent jurisdictional conditions supplemented by other country participation for illumination purposes only. The primary investigator's extended networks and governance associations' LinkedIn groups were contacted to sample director populations, not general populations, to satisfy the inclusion criteria.

Questionnaire

Excluding the screening and profiling queries, the survey comprised seven question groups which represented questions on model factors (4), motivation/policy perceptions (2), and information sources (1).

Respondents were asked to answer the survey questions from their nonprofit innovation for growth experience in **one** mid-large nonprofit that had grown during their tenure, and to nominate their agreement level regarding the model factors, each factorial group containing a statement, name, list of measures, and a numbered five-item Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The survey indicated: *Please select your level of agreement with the following statements. This [e.g., board-compositional, -relational, or -practice] variable helped (i.e., increased) nonprofit innovation for growth.* Respondents were also asked to register their innovation-related pre-nonprofit-growth board practice and nonprofit-motivation, -policy, and -regulation views using the same numbered five-item Likert scale, together with information-source reliability perceptions via a multiple-choice query.

Measures

In the survey, mid-to-large nonprofits (qualifier question) were measured by +A0.5 M annual revenue, and medium and large nonprofits (profiling questions), respectively, by A0.5–3M and +A3M annual revenue (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission n.d.). Innovation for growth was measured by “innovation activities undertaken in the pursuit of revenue growth” (Richardson & Kelly, 2024). Likewise, the measurement model's exogenous variables were measured by prior research terms (Table 1).

Final sample

Data collection concluded in July 2023. One hundred and seventy-nine participants responded, 22 exited before qualifying (157 pre-qualified

respondents), 31 did not qualify (having answered no to the screening question: *Are you (or were you) a board member of a nonprofit anywhere, of +A\$0.5 M revenue/year whose revenue increased during your tenure?*) and were automatically exited from the survey (126 qualified respondents), 25 left after qualifying, and 101 completed the survey.

Because of convenience sampling and snowball recruitment, population size and response rate are unknown. Nevertheless, the sample, in its heterogeneity, broadly represents the Australian nonprofit director population (Australian Institute of Company Directors [A.I.C.D.], 2023) and nonprofit profile (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission [A.C.N.C.], 2023a), and thus conforms to a standard survey expectation of sample representativeness (Salamon, 2010) (see tabular comparison, Table 2).

Robustness checks

Common-method bias, which can occur from a single data source, was managed by surveying only participants with nonprofit-growth director experience (i.e., constant endogenous variable), using a simple pre-tested questionnaire (Eichhorn, 2014), and employing construct measures from prior literature (which also ensured construct validity) (Borsboom et al., 2004). Reliability bias was curtailed by adopting a Likert scale (Hair et al., 2014), and the associated item-nonresponse (Scott et al., 2011) and data-estimation bias (Newman, 2014) were limited by making the innovation for growth questions mandatory (the survey concluded with optional comments and respondent profilers).

Two checks offered assurance of construct complementarity and comprehensiveness.

First, the measurement model's exogenous variables demonstrated both accuracy (Nunnally, 1978; i.e., their alphas surpassed the 0.70 threshold; Hair et al., 2014) and complementarity (Podsakoff et al., 2003; i.e., their alphas subordinated the 0.95 maximum; Streiner, 2003) (Table 3).

Second, the variables further displayed complementarity through their largely acceptable correlation levels when paired (i.e., not greater than the 0.60 standard; Azim, 2012) (Table 4). The anomalies (i.e., indicators of potential multicollinearity) were interactions of several board-diversity constructs (board-gender and -age diversity; board-thought and professional-background diversity; board-thought and -skills/experience diversity). Since these variables were intentionally incorporated as different measures of board diversity, their notion-situated correlations are unsurprising. Nevertheless, despite their factorial grouping, instead of developing composite variables to represent them, we individually analyzed them to isolate any potential association differences. We also point out these statistics generally approached the benchmark (i.e., were not extreme aberrations).

Table 2. Comparison of sample and sectoral characteristics.

	Characteristics	Sample	Australian nonprofit directors*/nonprofits
Board leadership experience	Chair experience	63%	31%
Length of board experience	<5 years	20%	18% (<4)
	5–10 years	35%	34% (4–10)
	11–15 years	19%	25% (11–20)
	15+ years	26%	23% (20+)
Depth of board experience	<3 boards	37%	
	3–5 boards	37%	
	6–9 boards	19%	
	10+ boards	7%	
Gender	Male	30%	53%
	Female	70%	47%
Age	<35 years old	3%	4% (<39)
	35–49 years old	16%	16% (40–49)
	50–64 years old	71%	68% (50–69)
	65+ years old	10%	12% (70+)
Nonprofit size	Medium, A0.5M–A3M	45%	47%
	Large, A3M+	55%	53%
Nonprofit location	Australia	86%	100%
	United States	8%	
	United Kingdom/New Zealand	3%	
	Non-Anglo countries	3%	
Scope of purpose	Social welfare	30%	26%
	Health	25%	13%
	Education	19%	16%
	Human rights	7%	2%
	Government advocacy	6%	1%
	Natural environment	5%	3%
	Other	8%	39%
Total sample: 101			

References: Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission A.C.N.C., 2023a); Australian Institute of Company Directors (A.I.C.D.) (n.d.). Australian director data is based on the A.I.C.D. nonprofit survey's respondents' profile, not their membership. Australian nonprofit-scope data is based on all registered nonprofits, not only medium/large ones.

Two additional checks further reinforced data robustness. First, the measurement-model and perspectives data appeared to be distributed normally, being spread around their means without many outliers, and thus typical of many natural phenomena (i.e., standard deviations below the 2:1 maximum/minimum benchmark) (Julious, 2005) (Tables 5 and 6). Second, the t-tests for the mean differences to zero largely met their criteria (i.e., t-values ± 1.96 ; $T < t$ probabilities +95%), and therefore indicate non-neutral and greater than expected net agreement levels (Julious, 2005) (Tables 5 and 6). The nonconformances (i.e., sub-benchmark t-values/probabilities) were COVID and regulation (measurement-model data) and innovation on the standard board agenda and innovation for growth goal of most nonprofits (perspectives data), which reflected respondents' net disagreement regarding those survey statements (i.e., mean < 3).

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of measurement model.

Factor	Item	Sign	Item-test correlation	Item-rest correlation	Average inter-item covariance	Alpha
Board structure	Size	+	0.546	0.476	0.250	0.876
	Age	+	0.594	0.542	0.252	0.876
	Gender	+	0.616	0.557	0.247	0.876
	Professional background	+	0.684	0.637	0.245	0.874
	Ethnicity	+	0.592	0.537	0.252	0.877
	Skills/experience	+	0.685	0.637	0.245	0.873
	Thought	+	0.736	0.698	0.244	0.872
Board relations	Cohesion	+	0.732	0.690	0.243	0.872
	Chair-/board-C.E.O. relations	+	0.564	0.493	0.249	0.875
Board operations	Question/decision balance	+	0.674	0.630	0.249	0.874
	Strategy involvement	+	0.731	0.692	0.245	0.873
	Stakeholder engagement	+	0.622	0.570	0.250	0.876
Organization context	Size in revenue	+	0.491	0.428	0.257	0.879
	Staff skills/experience	+	0.545	0.484	0.254	0.878
Environment context	Being a nonprofit	+	0.344	0.260	0.263	0.884
	Alliance participation	+	0.417	0.348	0.261	0.881
	COVID Regulation	+	0.323	0.233	0.264	0.885
Test scale			0.254	0.883	0.272	0.887
Total sample: 101.						

Results

Relationships of the model

According to the Likert-score responses, our hypothesized board and contextual factors increased innovation for growth in participants' nonprofits.

The three board factors of structure, cohesion, and practice were all seen as having strengthened this construct, based on respondents' average net agreement with the factors' associated statements. Several measures of board structure (diversity of professional background, skills/experience, thought), board cohesion (cohesiveness, chair-/board-C.E.O. relations), and board practice (question/decision balance, strategy involvement) were viewed as having particularly enhanced it, as expressed in the marked strong agreement (in combination with moderate agreement) with those statements (Figure 2).

The two contextual factors were also generally recognized as having enhanced this innovation type, based on respondents' average net agreement with most statements relating to organizational context (size in revenue, staff skills/experience) and environmental context (being a nonprofit, alliance participation), with the Likert scores signifying an especially positive perceived impact of one organizational-context measure (workforce skills/experience)

Table 4. Spearman's rank correlation of measurement model.

	Size	Age	Gender	Professional background	Ethnicity	Skills/ experience	Thought	Cohesion	Chair-/ board- C.E.O.	Questions/ decisions	Strategy involvement	Stakeholder engagement	Size in revenue	Staff skills/ experience	Being a nonprofit	Alliance participation	COVID	Regulation
Board structure	1																	
Age	0.279	1																
Gender	0.289	0.607	1															
Professional background	0.435	0.346	0.405	1														
Ethnicity	0.161	0.553	0.519	0.318	1													
Skills/experience	0.412	0.386	0.433	0.594	0.330	1												
Thought	0.333	0.277	0.328	0.656	0.375	0.709	1											
Cohesion	0.396	0.263	0.355	0.566	0.175	0.406	0.331	1										
Chair-/board-C.E.O.	0.411	0.247	0.283	0.357	0.196	0.443	0.370	0.535	1									
Questions/decisions	0.499	0.264	0.299	0.396	0.277	0.474	0.430	0.453	0.410	1								
Strategy involvement	0.406	0.255	0.307	0.536	0.180	0.517	0.490	0.583	0.264	0.595	1							
Stakeholder engagement	0.248	0.254	0.211	0.350	0.315	0.453	0.307	0.398	0.406	0.303	0.446	1						
Size in revenue	0.231	0.085	0.202	0.088	0.205	0.025	0.072	0.119	0.077	0.177	0.114	-0.053	1					
Staff skills/experience	0.094	0.266	0.136	0.324	0.174	0.166	0.338	0.183	0.185	0.290	0.358	0.329	0.158	1				
Being a nonprofit	0.266	0.079	0.143	0.213	0.082	0.095	0.117	0.099	0.242	0.169	0.127	0.185	0.108	0.314	1			
Alliance participation	-0.012	0.258	0.288	0.061	0.314	0.070	0.153	0.109	0.067	0.136	0.196	0.144	0.198	0.314	0.246	1		
COVID	-0.026	0.149	0.171	-0.012	0.173	0.092	0.046	0.070	0.227	0.048	0.021	0.184	0.147	0.171	-0.000	0.041	1	
Regulation	0.061	-0.019	0.021	-0.182	0.023	-0.002	0.100	-0.120	0.125	0.148	0.002	-0.046	0.115	0.002	-0.001	0.048	0.256	1

Total sample: 101; $p < .05$ for all data.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of measurement model.

Factor	Measurement variable	Mean	SE	SD	CI Lo	CI Hi	t value	PT < t	PT = t	PT > t
Board structure	Size	3.41	0.105	1.051	3.199	3.613	3.884	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Age	3.50	0.097	0.976	3.302	3.688	5.098	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Gender	3.65	0.113	1.135	3.429	3.878	5.785	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Professional background	4.23	0.109	1.094	4.012	4.444	11.275	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Ethnicity	3.28	0.100	1.001	3.080	3.475	2.783	0.997	0.006	0.003
	Skills/experience	4.18	0.103	1.033	3.974	4.382	11.458	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Thought	4.11	0.102	1.029	3.906	4.312	10.835	1.000	0.000	0.000
Board relations	Cohesion	4.17	0.105	1.059	3.959	4.377	11.088	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Chair-/board-C.E.O.relations	4.25	0.100	1.004	4.049	4.446	12.487	1.000	0.000	0.000
Board operations	Question/decision balance	4.06	0.100	0.946	3.857	4.255	10.535	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Strategy involvement	4.31	0.108	1.018	4.100	4.529	12.183	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Stakeholder engagement	3.89	0.105	0.994	3.678	4.097	8.428	1.000	0.000	0.000
Organization context	Size in revenue	3.69	0.105	0.964	3.486	3.902	6.639	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Staff skills/experience	4.01	0.109	1.006	3.795	4.229	9.274	1.000	0.000	0.000
Environment context	Being a nonprofit	3.41	0.122	1.116	3.166	3.653	3.345	0.999	0.001	0.001
	Alliance participation	3.55	0.106	0.966	3.343	3.765	5.227	1.000	0.000	0.000
	COVID Regulation	2.89	0.129	1.179	2.634	3.149	-0.838	0.202	0.405	0.798
Total sample: 101.		2.70	0.111	1.009	2.478	2.919	-2.720	0.004	0.008	0.996

(Figure 3). Yet conversely, participants mainly disagreed two environmental-context measures (COVID, regulation) had increased innovation for growth in their nonprofits.

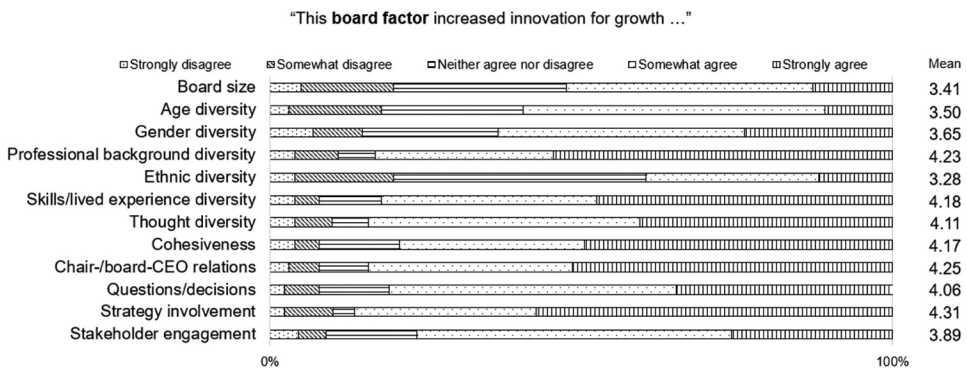
Perceptions of nonprofit-board practice and nonprofit policy

Regarding their innovation-related pre-nonprofit growth board practice, participants indicated most specified activities were conducted and further emphasized the board's active involvement in innovation and strategy during this period through their consistent agreement with the four strategy statements: (1) *Innovation for growth strategies developed/revised by board*, (2) *These strategies aligned to purpose and risk appetite*, (3) *Innovation for growth activities aligned to strategies*, and (4) *Strategies communicated, measured, monitored, reported* (Figure 4). These results also mirror those from our earlier interview study which had identified the perceived importance of growth-directed innovation for financial viability and social impact, and a desire by boards attuned to innovation for growth to combine growth and purpose-alignment goals to effectively pursue both (Richardson & Kelly, 2024).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of perspectives.

Perspectives		Mean	SE	SD	CI Lo	CI Hi	t	PT < t	PT = t	PT > t
Pre-nonprofit growth board practice	Board abreast of innovation trends	3.35	0.120	1.129	3.110	3.586	2.910	0.998	0.005	0.002
	Innovation on standard board agenda	2.76	0.134	1.262	2.498	3.030	-1.765	0.041	0.081	0.959
	Shared innovation for growth mindset by board	3.13	0.125	1.179	2.886	3.383	1.079	0.858	0.284	0.142
	Innovation for growth strategies developed/revised by board	3.45	0.126	1.187	3.199	3.700	3.572	1.000	0.001	0.000
	These strategies aligned to purpose & risk appetite	3.76	0.117	1.108	3.531	3.997	6.505	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Appropriate resourcing of innovation for growth	3.08	0.124	1.170	2.832	3.325	0.634	0.736	0.528	0.264
	Innovation for growth activities aligned to strategies	3.54	0.115	1.088	3.310	3.768	4.678	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Stakeholder interest recognized in activities	3.33	0.121	1.146	3.084	3.567	2.683	0.996	0.009	0.004
	Strategies communicated, measured, monitored, reported	3.33	0.133	1.250	3.062	3.589	2.459	0.992	0.016	0.008
Nonprofit motivations & policy	Innovation for growth goal of most nonprofits	2.90	0.116	1.055	2.673	3.134	-0.833	0.204	0.408	0.796
	Strong innovation for growth policies & strategies of most nonprofits	2.46	0.105	0.954	2.250	2.666	-5.179	0.000	0.000	1.000
	Nonprofit innovation for growth culture driver to join a board	3.60	0.132	1.199	3.341	3.864	4.577	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Support for legislated board-gender ratios to foster nonprofit innovation for growth	3.10	0.151	1.376	2.796	3.397	0.638	0.737	0.525	0.263
	Support for legislated board-independence mechanisms to foster innovation for growth	3.71	0.112	1.018	3.488	3.933	6.359	1.000	0.000	0.000

Total sample: 101.



Innovation for growth = innovation activities undertaken in the pursuit of revenue growth.
 Text represents but does not replicate questionnaire statements.
 Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Figure 2. Perceived positive impact of board factors on nonprofit innovation for growth.

Nonetheless, other feedback seems to counter the apparent position of respondents, and of boards as a whole, of the merit of treating innovation for growth as an explicit aim. For instance, participants disagreed innovation had been on their nonprofit’s standard board-meeting agenda during this pre-growth period. And in terms of perspectives about nonprofit motivations regarding innovation, respondents disputed most nonprofits have an innovation for growth goal or strong policies to foster it (Figure 5).

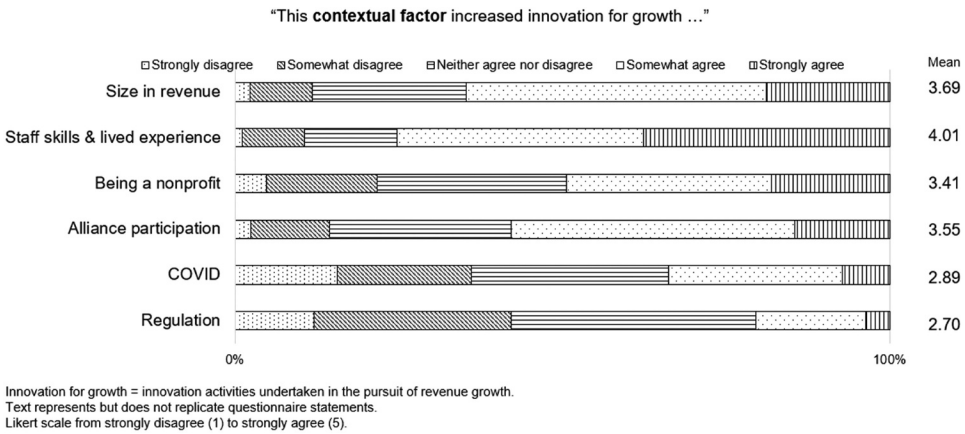


Figure 3. Perceived positive impact of contextual factors on nonprofit innovation for growth.

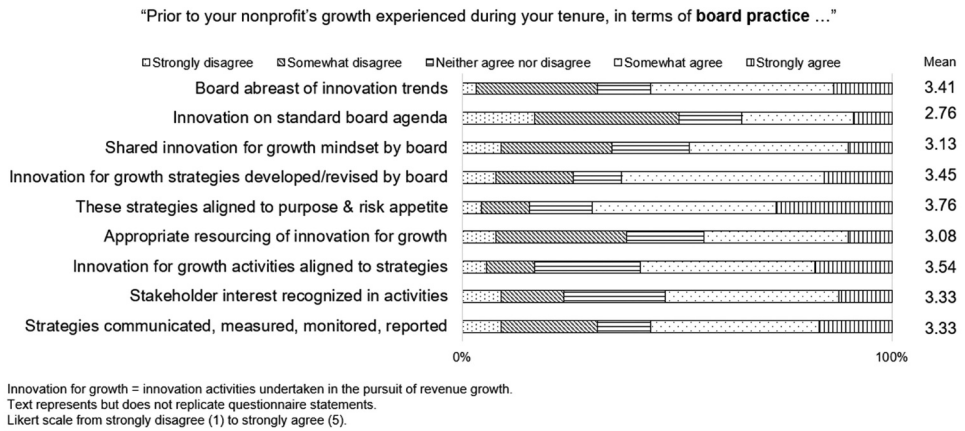


Figure 4. Pre-nonprofit growth board-practice views.

Further, respondents revealed their ambivalence toward outside advice by underrating external (and potentially independent) sources regarding innovation for growth (e.g., from government, academics, the media), instead highly scoring organizations themselves and personal experience, sometimes backed up by support agencies (e.g., think tanks, incubators) and governance associations (Figure 6). This suggests participants may give little credence to external pressures to adopt innovation for growth as a desirable goal, alternatively relying more on concrete organizational and personal lived experience, and indicates some initial trust-building activity would be required for providers such as government and the higher education sector to play an important educational role here.

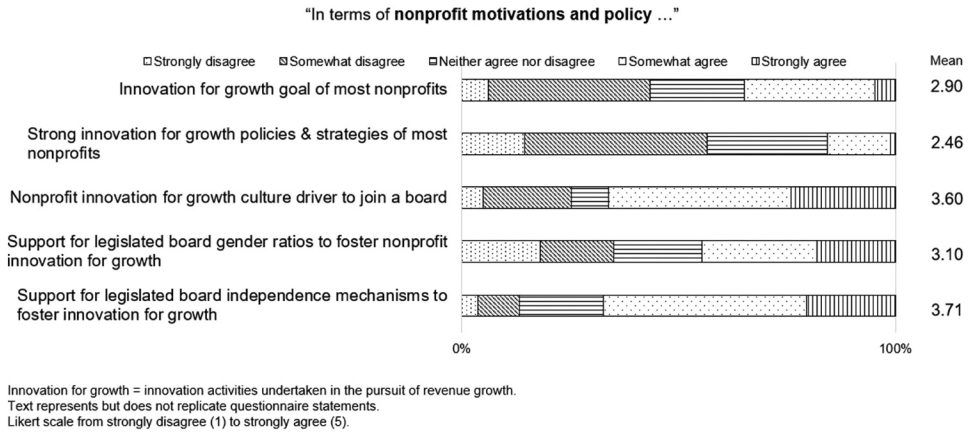


Figure 5. Nonprofit-motivation and policy views.

Respondents also stressed these various concerns in their comments, which further substantiated the impression participants gave of nonprofits' general reluctance to embrace innovation for growth and of perceived expertise, mindset, and innovation-culture hurdles,

For example, respondents consistently signaled expertise scarcity: "Risks . . . are often outside . . . [those] board members are knowledgeable in" and "[Nonprofits] focus on purpose delivery only and rarely attract people . . . that have innovation and growth as a driving factor of organizational success, let alone possess a growth and innovation capability."

Respondents articulated too, in their view, nonprofits have a closed mindset: "We need directors that want to innovate," "[Nonprofits] only seek professional advice from within the sector . . . [which] leads to safe, and at times mediocre, outputs working against innovation," and

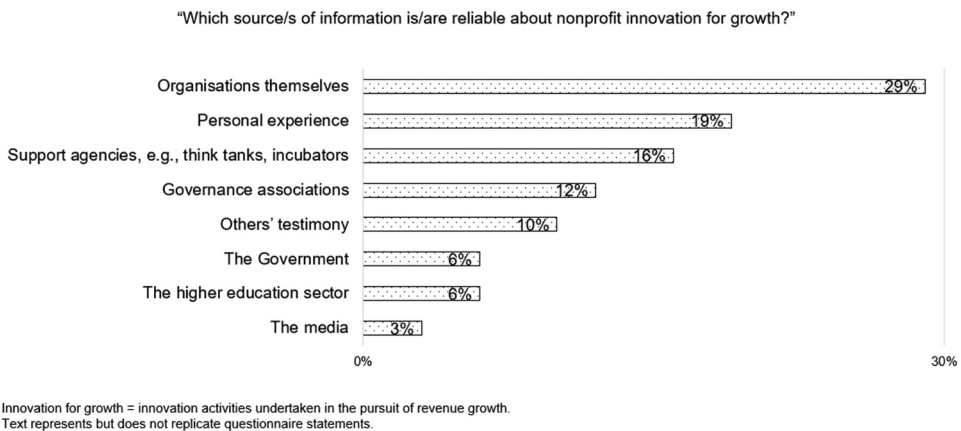


Figure 6. Reliability of information sources on nonprofit innovation for growth.

“[Nonprofits] fail to ask or consider leveraging ... [third-party] relationships.”

Further, participants claimed an innovation-culture dearth: “[Nonprofit boards] see growth as a commercial imperative and not [nonprofit]-aligned ... [rather than through] ... risk-mitigation ... [and sustainability lens(es)]” and “[Nonprofit risks] create barriers to growth ... [not] the right culture ... [and do not] foster [board] confidence in pursuing growth and innovation.”

Despite these concerns, overall our survey shows participants are clearly convinced innovation for growth in nonprofits is important. For instance, through their Likert-score choices, respondents indicate an innovation for growth culture is a driver to join a nonprofit board. And they would support regulation in terms of legislated board-independence and -gender ratios to foster this innovation type in nonprofits (Figure 5).

Discussion

The results from our empirical study have important implications.

Implications for scholarship

First, the research provides original innovation knowledge by revealing nonprofit innovation’s distinctiveness, progressing the established strategic-marketing literature and the emerging social-entrepreneurship literature where innovation is a central theme (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012). It also adds to the outcome-focused innovation field, which is only recent and still embryonic. See, for example, an innovation-definition review across for-profit/nonprofit innovation where the smallest category, merely 8%, featured goal-oriented definitions (Baregheh et al., 2009) and a social-entrepreneurship review where only the final development stage (2015–2019 of the 1990–2019 corpus) exhibited a data and outcome focus (Teasdale et al., 2023). In these regards, our research also offers a study agenda by encouraging scholars to recognize nonprofit innovation’s sector specificity and assess nonprofit-innovation outcomes, for instance by employing nonprofit-distinct measures of innovation and evaluating nonprofit-innovation performance.

Second, the research advances general-governance discovery through its investigation of relational and process factors and its modeling of multifactorial relationships, prior studies having mainly concerned input/output factors (Elsayed et al., 2022) and conceptualized monofactorial relationships (Bezemer et al., 2023). It also advances nonprofit-governance inquiry through its examination of identified focus areas for nonprofit-governance study. The top five literature-gap and -importance

priorities include board diversity, organization disruption, and nonprofit governance/organization performance relationships (Renz et al., 2023), and research calls have featured nonprofit-relational governance and its contextual drivers (Ostrower & Stone, 2010; Phillips & Smith, 2011).

Third, our research contributes methodologically through its board-member sample, Australian data, and survey method, extant governance and innovation research having generally studied executives (Vehka & Vesa, 2023), collected data from U.S. and European contexts, and used archival methods. These regions together have monopolized corporate-board strategy (77%) and nonprofit-governance studies (82%) (Bezemer et al., 2023; Moi et al., 2014) and archival techniques have increasingly dominated for-profit governance strategy studies (75%) with surveys subordinating (10%) in the 2015–2020 period, which represents a respective increase (+12 points) and decline (–2 points) from the 2008–2014 period (Bezemer et al., 2023).

Implications for practice and policy

Our research also delivers important benefits for nonprofit practitioners, policymakers, and the broader sector and its stakeholders.

First, the research will help nonprofit marketing leaders improve their innovation practice, thus creating value for their nonprofits (Donelli & Rentschler, 2023; Faulk & Stewart, 2017; Radbourne & Watkins, 2015). By drawing on the evidenced positive effects on nonprofit growth-directed innovation of staff skills/experience, being a nonprofit, and harnessing alliance participation, these leaders can legitimately invest in capacity building, develop alliances, and emphasize the organization's "nonprofitness" and distinct social purpose in their differentiation strategies. The quantitative and qualitative insights regarding growth-directed innovation's importance, along with the modeling's identification of particular levers, can also assist them to justify innovation investment to their boards, thereby supporting their boards' innovation oversight.

Second, the research creates new know-how and builds capacity for nonprofit boards by pinpointing nonprofit innovation-related resource, attitude, and normative challenges they can address. It further develops much-needed internal capability by revealing perceived organizational strategies and returns of pursuing this innovation type (Rentschler et al., 2023). For example, since an innovation for growth culture influences joining a nonprofit board, emphasizing this culture may help director recruitment and also potentially generate cultural spillover benefits for staff morale, organization reputation, and funding. Moreover, by taking account of the perceived levers, nonprofit boards can develop and implement enhancement strategies, including board-compositional

changes, director education, and board-practice reforms, along with externally focused programs counting new/stronger alliances and regulation-driven advocacy.

Third, the research contributes to innovation-governance policy dialogue and direction, for instance around board-gender/-independence mechanisms and innovation-structural reform in nonprofits, thereby assisting government and other decision-makers. This should aid in developing a thriving and impactful nonprofit sector with flow-on benefits for society at large. At the same time, the research supports heightened governance-accountability expectations in Australia and is in line with calls for innovation-policy progress in Australia and other countries (see e.g., Chan et al., 2019; Graefe, 2004; Langford & Anderson, 2023). And overall, it can work to reinforce the goals of Australia's nonprofit regulator (the A.C.N.C.) of promoting a robust, vibrant, independent, and innovative sector and boosting its sustainability.

Limitations and future research

There are certain limitations to our study that suggest scope for further investigation.

First, it could be limited by bias. Common-method bias can occur from a single data source (i.e., of both endogenous- and exogenous-variable data). However, we designed our survey instrument specifically to capture respondents' perceptions of each factor's influence (measured by the factor's exogenous variables) on the innovation construct (innovation activities undertaken in the pursuit of revenue growth). And we conducted robustness checks to mitigate the potential risk of this bias (see methodology section above). Self-selection bias can also result, for example, if a study involves a socially desirable subject, and it seems likely those interested in the idea of innovation for growth responded to our survey. Nevertheless, convenience sampling is common and our sample broadly represents the Australian nonprofit-director population and nonprofit profile (Table 2). Information bias from self-reported data is a further consideration of online surveys. However, we managed this risk by ensuring respondent anonymity (Eichhorn, 2014), and we deliberately collected perceptions of nonprofit directors to enable grounded research on the effective pursuit of nonprofit innovation for growth and respond to governance-research calls to complement predominantly archival and executive data (Vehka & Vesa, 2023). Also, such socially constructed variables provide valuable information and are prevalent in organizational studies when objective ones are nonexistent (Johansen & LeRoux, 2013). Further research, though, might usefully gather endogenous and exogenous data from different sources, employ behavioral and observational methods such as experiments and case studies, and/or adopt objective measures of our construct, including innovation quantity or innovation-based revenue growth.

Second, the study did not permit regression modeling, factor analysis, or a similar method for three reasons. We could not separately examine either (1) nonprofit innovation and nonprofit growth, having intentionally operationalized innovation for growth as an integrated construct, defining it as “innovation activities in pursuit of revenue growth”; (2) nonprofit innovation for growth’s pursuit and its achievement, having studied only the strategy of goal-directed innovation not whether this revenue-based innovation strategy had been achieved; or (3) nonprofit growth and nonprofit revenue maintenance/decline, having sampled only respondents who had experienced nonprofit-revenue growth during their board tenure. Nevertheless, causal data is uncommon in nonprofit-governance studies (Renz et al., 2023), other research has identified an innovation/firm-growth relationship (Ferreira et al., 2015), and the information we gathered is rich. New investigations, though, could use longitudinal data and causally examine determinant relationships to nonprofit innovation for growth as well as nonprofit innovation for growth ones to nonprofit growth.

Third, our research did not study innovation for nonfinancial growth, such as innovation directed toward social impact. However, we purposely investigated innovation for growth through a resource-centric, revenue-based lens. This enabled us to provide unique perspectives on an evolving construct and build on our prior exploration of this nascent topic in which we defined the construct in financial terms. Indeed, in our earlier systematic review, we defined it by bringing together growth-directed themes discovered in the literature it synthesized with current nonprofit-board responsibilities and reporting metrics that are predominantly financial (Richardson et al., 2023), and this typical focus on financial growth was also revealed in our subsequent interview study (Richardson & Kelly, 2024). In the survey reported here, we continued to define it financially as “innovation activities undertaken in the pursuit of revenue growth.” Nevertheless, we can expect such innovation strategies adopted by boards could generate innovation which leads not only to revenue growth but also, potentially, either directly or indirectly, to social impact, and a productive line of fresh enquiry could examine relationships to innovation directed toward such nonfinancial growth.

Fourth, nonprofit status and COVID were each tested as perceived influences, despite surveying only nonprofit directors whose nonprofit-growth experience likely occurred during COVID. However, these research-design choices were made because “nonprofitness” (Ward & Hines, 2017) and COVID (Kim & Mason, 2023) had been found to enhance nonprofit innovation. Helpful future studies, though, could use for-profit/nonprofit comparative data to identify the effect of sector on this innovation type (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2009), and others could

employ pre/during/post comparative data to isolate the influence of events such as COVID on growth-directed innovation (Fuller & Rice, 2022).

Conclusion

This article reporting on a survey of 101 nonprofit directors in Australia provides an original snapshot of the effective governance of innovation for growth in this critical yet vulnerable sector. By decoding rare and rich empirical data, our research unlocks the nascent construct of nonprofit innovation for growth, progressing the innovation and governance literatures. For nonprofit marketing leaders and boards, it conveys effective organizational strategies and benefits of pursuing this innovation type. And for government and other stakeholders, it could advance regulatory policy regarding nonprofit innovation, which should ideally help build a robust, dynamic nonprofit sector that meaningfully contributes to society.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Sarah Richardson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4876-2771>

Sarah Jane Kelly  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4664-5248>

Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to ethical, legal, or other concerns.

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