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The Talent Development Environment in Elite English U21 Men's Professional Football

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Leeds Beckett University for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

The career trajectory of young footballers has been given attention in recent years, in particular the factors influencing their progression to becoming established senior professional footballers. Researchers have focused on aspects such as the quality of talent development environments (e.g., Mills et al., 2012; 2014a; Mitchell et al., 2021) and understanding junior to senior transitions (e.g., Morris et al., 2015; 2017; 2017). This research is centred on the U21 professional development phase of football in England, which is the final stage the majority of young footballers will encounter before entering a first team environment.

This phase has been identified as the most crucial career transition point, with the ultimate goal of producing a greater number of ‘home-grown’ players (Premier League, 2011). It has been suggested that this phase presents nuanced challenges that players and practitioners must navigate (Dowling et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2013). However, relatively little is known about the daily experiences of players in the U21 phase, and almost no research has focused on the effectiveness of such an environment. This research examines the extent to which the primary objective of the elite English academy system in professional football, i.e., a talent development environment, is being met, with a specific focus on the U21 professional development phase.

A mixed methods approach, both quantitative (scoping review and survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews and ethnography) facilitated the capture of insights into development practice and the perceptions, views and opinions of players, coaches and support staff in this phase of professional football in England. The research consists of four studies.

Study one is a scoping review of all professional clubs’ academies to identify the structure, extent and organisation of U21 football. Findings identify significant variation across the four academy categories and limited web-based information about clubs’ objectives. In addition, a review of the research literature specifically focused on U21 football, reinforced the dearth of empirical literature in this area. Study two surveys players’ opinions about the quality of their talent development environments and general health, across category 1 and 2 clubs. The most positively perceived elements of the players’ environments were a recognition of long-term development and the availability of support networks; the least positive were the absence of holistic quality preparation, communication and alignment of expectations. However, players perceived their general health to be good.

Study three is an interview-based exploration of the organisational structure, value of competition, relationships, attitudes, and the role of coaches in managing and conducting U21 football. Players and coaches provided a comprehensive insight into their environment, highlighting the impact on the developmental agenda of factors such as inconsistent and unstable group composition, limitations in providing an environment that would ready players for first team football, and a lack of competitive challenge. These elements were not conducive to an effective learning environment and impacted negatively on well-being and intrinsic motivation. Study four adopts an ethnographic approach to explore the lived experiences of players and key stakeholders. A practitioner-researcher perspective provides an ‘insider’ insight into the day-to-day workings of the U21 environment, documenting these experiences

over an extended period of time. Findings highlight a range of structural issues relating to the stability of the group and psycho-social challenges emanating from identity, meaning, purpose and belonging. Specifically, the results showed that players beyond their first year experienced a loss of determination and self-motivation due to a lack of exposure to first team football and/or de-selection.

It seems clear from both the concept of the U21 phase and from these accounts of practice that (a) its developmental ambitions might be better termed a 'late development model' and (b) that another more apt descriptor would be 'talent readiness' phase (both in preparing for first team football and a sifting/selecting process by clubs). In summary, this research contributes a unique and novel perspective on U21 football across the English academy system. It casts considerable doubt that its structural integrity, its capacity to 'reach' all players, and the quality of competition as a precursor to the intensity and results-oriented nature of the first-team experience provides an adequate developmental experience for players and readies them for first team football. It presents opportunities for the Premier League and the Football Association to re-evaluate the phase to better meet its intended purpose. This might usefully be centred on the quality of competition, integration of squads and structured incorporation of first team exposure.

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Abbreviation of Terms

TDE	Talent Development Environment
TDEQ	Talent Development Environment Questionnaire
GHQ	General Health Questionnaire
LTD	Long-Term Development
SN	Support Networks
AOE	Alignment of Expectation

COM	Communication
HQP	Holistic Quality Preparation
EPPP	Elite Player Performance Plan
PDP	Professional Development Phase
PDL	Professional Development League
FA	Football Association
EPL	English Premier League
EFL	English Football League
PFA	Professional Footballers Association
FIFA	International Federation of Association Football
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations
CONCACAF	Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football
CONMEBOL	South American Football Confederation
AFC	Asian Football Confederation
OFC	Oceania Football Confederation
CAF	Confederation of African Football
ISO	Independent Standards Organisation

Chapter One: Introduction and Aims

1.1 Introduction

This Research is centred on the U21/23¹ phase in the career trajectory of male footballers in professional football in England. This phase was identified by the Premier League and Football Association in its Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) (Premier League, 2011) as a transition from age-group football (U18) to first-team football. It can be assumed, therefore, that the U18-U21 phase has a developmental ambition; the outcome of which is identified as being ‘ready’ for first-team football. However, the EPPP also incorporates an evident concern that the young person’s welfare should be supported, protected and enhanced. In addition to being a self-evident duty of care, this concern is identified because there is an assumption that senior professional football presents particular challenges, and, therefore, players need to be gradually exposed to the expectations that are characteristic of that level of football. This is evident in the language of the EPPP document: ‘learn how to win and develop strategies for coping with pressure’ (p.42); ‘the environment should at times be hostile’ (p.42).

It is also the case that there are many players aged 18-21 who will experience first-team football – to a greater or lesser extent. However, the Professional Development Phase is intended to suit the wider group of players who are not yet ready, in performance terms, to occupy a regular first-team or squad place, or to supplant older, more-experienced players. As the subsequent review of academic writing will demonstrate, professional football is characterised as a ‘winning is everything’, ‘results before welfare’ business, with both players and managers subject to constant scrutiny. It is further characterised as a meritocracy in which sustaining professional footballers’ careers is subject to variable lengths of contract, constant movement

¹ As a result of policy decisions by the Football Association, there have been changes to the age-group designations for the ‘Professional Development Phase’; vacillating between U21 and U23, and reverting to U21. This will be elaborated upon in the chapter that follows.

of players, and a process in which the pool of professional footballers is constantly being replenished by new recruits.

The U21 Professional Development Phase is a career stage in which the players have emerged successfully from the age-group academy structure but, for the majority, have not yet secured a foothold on a longer-term career. While it may be characterised as a performance-based development period, it is also a period of occupational socialisation, in which these players are being ‘readied’ for first-team football. Understandably, the players’ ambitions are also subject to the consequences of the hierarchy of clubs’ league standing and resources, with impact on public esteem and financial rewards. In other words, the U21 transition period, for the player, is a time when they may have the opportunity to realise their ambition of being a professional footballer, earning a living, and ‘placing’ themselves as ‘high’ in the hierarchy as their talent will allow.

However, it is also the case that the career-focused ambitions of the player have to be set in the context of the football club’s objectives, policies and needs. Subsequent evidence will show that clubs have a primary goal for their academy structure of producing players for their first-team but also with the potential benefit of making a profit from later transfer fees. The evidence will also demonstrate that the pool of U21 players is used as a ‘buffer’ for the first-team, being used both to supplement first-team preparation and to offer opportunities for additional match-practice for first-team squad players.

On the face of it, this suggests a potential tension between the developmental needs of the individual and the ambitions of the club. However, as the review of existing research will demonstrate, there is relatively little evidence of research conducted specifically within this

phase of the game. The broad aim of the research, therefore, is to evaluate the ‘developmental credentials’ of the U21 phase of professional football in England.

The rationale for the research, or statement of the problem, is based on four related arguments, focused on the U21 domain, that have development-related consequences. These are summarised below.

Attrition rates

There is a body of research that supports the assertions that there is a very significant rate of attrition, both within the academy structure and as players progress towards the post-academy stage. This highlights the reality of the difficult path to sustained ‘membership’ of the senior professional level of football, with its gradually increasing expectations and demands (Anderson & Miller, 2011). The statistics available demonstrate the scale of the issue. Of the 265 million footballers across the world, only 0.04% play in a professional league, suggesting that football is highly competitive, even exclusive, and reaching the stage in which the highest levels of expertise are most evident is very challenging (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). In the transition from youth to professional football in England, Green (2009, p.7) notes “that of 10,000 boys who play in England’s football factories (academies) each season, less than one percent of the boys are likely to make it as professional footballers”. To exacerbate this further, the number of boys within football academies across England has increased to 12,500 making progression even more difficult, and around 700 players are released by their clubs each summer, leading to uncertainty about their futures in football (Magowan, 2015). More recently, Michael Calvin’s book *No Hunger in Paradise* (2017) further highlights the reality of the youth system. He estimates that, of all the boys who enter an academy at the age of 9, fewer than half of 1% will ‘make it’ or even make a living from the game. Perhaps the most meaningful

statistic he provides is that only 180 of the 1.5 million players who are playing organised youth football in England at any one time will make it as a Premier League professional.

On the surface, this may seem a surprising set of statistics, and raises the question of whether or not players are prepared for the potentially negative consequences of failing to progress through the system, and the extent to which clubs fulfil such a responsibility. However, it is intrinsic to a merit-based pyramid system with built-in attrition and an (almost) finite number of first-team places across the major professional leagues. The structural factors (number of ‘places’ available in U21 squads [subject to regulation and resources]; number of players required by clubs post-U21) inevitably mean that attrition rates in this domain are going to be high.

These examples illustrate the challenges for talented young players, despite the support mechanisms put in place to assist and guide player development (Premier League, 2019; Richardson et al., 2013). It seems reasonable to assume that an awareness of the intrinsic attrition rate will create a sense of uncertainty or insecurity, and, therefore, the day-to-day experiences of players in this environment is worthy of further investigation. It is also reasonable to ask how clubs, with knowledge of the impact of their decisions on players’ futures, and on immediate emotional and psychological wellbeing, take action to prepare players for such an eventuality.

Academy football as a risk environment

The attrition rates throughout youth football in England may be viewed, from the young and aspiring player’s perspective, as a risk environment in which the ultimate goal will be unattainable for a very high proportion of each cohort.

In football, a number of environmental factors can be argued to have created a particularly ‘intense’ pre-career journey: for example, potential financial rewards, attrition during talent searching, an influx of overseas players, public scrutiny based on results, short-termism in coach/manager appointments, and peer acclaim. These factors are likely to impact on the experiences of younger and young adult players in the system. There is evidence to suggest that being in the youth system is a negative experience that could put the current and future wellbeing of these boys at risk (Cooper, 2021; Swainston et al., 2020). In more populist language, this may be interpreted as a cynical process in which the potential advantages for young players and their families lead them to become embroiled in the ‘production’ system without a realisation of how the experience may affect them (Calvin, 2017). It can also be argued that the risk becomes more evident for players in the U18 and U21 cohorts, at which point the players have committed themselves to particular career aspirations and, therefore, failing to achieve these (at least to the greatest extent possible) may have a greater impact. The initial impact of this has been documented as a negative transition out of the youth structure and a number of studies have produced serious concerns. Blakelock et al. (2016) identified elite adolescent soccer players as one population that may be vulnerable to developing psychological distress following deselection. Another factor that can be impacted by leaving the system is the player’s sense of identity. Brown and Potrac (2009) and Mitchell et al. (2014) suggest that this environment can foster the player’s sense of identity, which in turn leads to a positive association with psychological distress when their career ambitions are cut short. Platts (2012) identified that there were many well-intentioned coaches and welfare officers but found that, in what was considered a cocooned environment, there was insufficient support for players who had been released. Although this enhances the case for further investigation of the developmental and welfare experiences of players – particularly in the U21 Professional Development Phase, in which any absence of further progress may have a significant effect on

the individual – more positive features should also be acknowledged. Rongen et al. (2021) found that academies could promote transferrable life skills, and the requirements of Category status within the EPPP have enhanced club provision in relation to child protection, welfare, coaching hours and education.

Wellbeing in the development phase

Both the positive and negative aspects of athletes' wellbeing have become matters of interest in the academic literature (Cambell et al., 2021; Purcell et al., 2022; Sothern & Gorman, 2021). This concerns both the wider social and cultural factors in environments such as post-academy professional football and the more-specific features of performance development. The need for support interventions has also been recognised (Wilkinson, 2021a; 2021b).

Reinboth and Duda (2006) state that well-being is generally defined in terms of the presence of positive feelings and the absence of negative feelings. The World Health Organization (Herman et al., 2005) defines mental wellbeing as, 'A state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' (2005, p.2). Therefore, the concept of athlete wellbeing encompasses all aspects of an athlete's life, including those that are not sport related.

Emerging literature within the sporting domain considers wellbeing as a critical characteristic for thriving in sport. For example, Brown et al. (2018) provided the first dedicated exploration of thriving in elite sport performers by considering its characteristics, outcomes, and facilitators. They suggested that, when thriving occurs in response to a situation, this could be observed through a high level of wellbeing and a perceived high level of performance. One of

the factors identified as important in facilitating a positive ‘state of being’ is the environment - one that is supportive and focused on long-term development can be less stressful (Ivarsson et al., 2014). The nature of talent development environments is clearly important for facilitating wellbeing and the uncertainty about long-term futures in post-academy football, and its attendant rewards and disappointments, is worthy of further exploration (Adie et al., 2012; Lilja, 2011).

Factors that impact on the transition phase to professional status

Much of the academic research on football academies in England focuses on the younger age groups. However, to fully understand this post-academy U21 phase, a more complete appreciation of the challenges faced by young players in the transition process is needed; for example, the complex and dynamic social and cultural barriers, and expectations and demands placed upon them by a range of stakeholders (Roynesdal et al., 2018). This is evident in the way in which clubs approach talent development; for example, balancing shorter and longer-term goals, the short-term needs of first-team coaches, and the absence of willingness to risk unproven players. Each of these factors appears to be determined by the emphasis on achieving positive results and seasonal objectives.

Moreover, the globalisation and financial changes in football as a result of TV rights agreements has added complexity to the transfer market, which, in turn, can alter the way clubs approach player recruitment and development (Littlewood et al., 2011). Wealthier clubs can buy younger players, including foreign talent, affecting the opportunities for academy players. For example, England has become a major destination for both foreign players into first team squads and young foreign players into clubs’ academies (Poli et al., 2016a; Poli et al., 2016b), which limits opportunities for domestic players. On the other hand, there is limited outward

migration of under 18s from England (Bond et al., 2016). The cumulative effect of these changes is to reduce the opportunities for players progressing through a club's academy structure to senior first teams (Bullough & Mills, 2014; Bullough, 2017).

Implementation of the EPPP, and in particular the introduction of the post academy U21 phase, was aimed at improving progression into a first team environment. This led to an initial increase in player progression, as clubs looked to increase the size of their U21 squads. Fifteen Premier League and nine Championship clubs that enjoy Category One academy status and (at that time) operate under-23 teams, reported a relatively high number of 18-year-olds given initial professional contracts – 65% in 2016 (Conn, 2017a). However, this has to be viewed against the attritional potential for players to progress into first-team football; the potential danger is that players may occupy a place in an U21 squad without making any significant progression to a first team.

The status of players in relation to their stage of development may also be an issue. Players operating in this post-academy phase, on short term contracts, but not necessarily belonging to, or indeed playing for, the first team, are acknowledged to be very talented (in relation to the peer group from which they have emerged) but may not yet be considered to be 'complete' in terms of their footballing expertise nor 'ready' for first-team football (Richardson et al., 2013). This reinforces the developmental aspect of the Professional Development Phase but may also mean that there are a significant number of players who may not emerge from this phase to secure longer-term contracts with the club. Of course, this does not imply that those players will leave the professional ranks; they may secure a contract with a more lowly-ranked club.

Understanding the term ‘elite’

The Football Association itself uses the term ‘elite’ to refer to its development strategy (EPPP, 2011) and that status is assumed throughout the submission. Nevertheless, it is important to elaborate on the meaning associated with this. Inevitably, the term is always ‘relative’, i.e., implying a hierarchy of qualities or a comparison with non-elite. There is, therefore, a ‘structural element’ (implying a small proportion of the total population) and the internal characteristics associated with that ‘level’ (implying a greater evidence of agreed expertise). The earlier evidence presented on attrition rates demonstrates that the number of young adults in clubs’ 18-21 academies is an extremely small proportion of the total population of footballers who aspire to that opportunity. A simplistic understanding that ‘elite’ refers to the ‘best’ means that the term is fully justified both in terms of numbers within the Professional Development Phase and in professional football as a whole.

Nevertheless, there are some inconsistencies in both the application and understanding of the term ‘elite’ (McAuley et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2017). An extensive attempt at defining the ‘elite’ athlete comes from work by Swann et al. (2015). They proposed five criteria to assess an athlete’s ability: the highest performance standard; level of success; years of experience; competitiveness of the sport within the athlete’s country; and the global competitiveness of the sport. These criteria were used to differentiate a ‘semi-elite’ athlete from a ‘world-class’ athlete. However, within a sport, the term ‘elite’ also refers to the ‘collective’, i.e., the level or stratum within which the ‘best’ operate. There are two caveats here. First, this is ‘age related’. Professional players aged 18-21 are elite in relation to their peers in the wider population but not in relation to the first team players whom they wish to emulate. Second, even within this part of the footballing system, individual players will be differentiated by perceived ability.

Perhaps more importantly for this research, there is the question of whether the term ‘elite’ refers to the systems and processes within which the players reside, i.e., the development environment. From the perspective of the EPPP (Premier League, 2011), an ‘elite’ environment is one that ‘maintains high standards to ensure a world leading academy system to produce better players that are world class’ (p.10). For example, it should offer ‘the best coaching and support services to maximise player potential to outperform international competition in the production of home-grown players’ (p.13). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that this system aspires to be ‘elite’ in comparison to its counterparts in other countries. The overarching aim of the research, to investigate the development credentials of the U21 academy environment, is not to evaluate its quality in relation to others but in relation to its stated developmental objectives.

Summary

This introduction was designed to provide a rationale for the research studies that follow and to introduce a number of the issues that are likely to prove relevant. It was partly intended to demonstrate that the Professional Development Phase of the EPPP was an acknowledged ‘brick in the wall’ that represents a player’s journey from academy age-group football to professional first-team status. However, it was also intended to introduce potential issues and to indicate that there was a development focus and practice about which relatively little was known. Perhaps understandably, considerable academic attention is given to those players who have been released from academies or who are not offered post-18 years of age contracts. However, the U21 phase has a stated developmental purpose that could usefully be explored from the perspectives of the *in situ* players and coaches. It should be remembered that de-selection remains a possibility even for those players who have professional contracts.

The brief description of the role of the Professional Development Phase and a very brief indication of some relevant literature suggests that there are questions about the developmental ambitions and practices of clubs, the potential tensions between individual player' ambitions and clubs' objectives and priorities, the realisation that this transition phase is neither a smooth not secure career step, and the ever-present concern that de-selection (or perhaps the threat of de-selection) may be harmful for players' wellbeing. There seems little doubt that this stage of talent development (perhaps 'preparation for mastery') is a stated purpose of the EPPP, the football community (speaking for the players and families), and the clubs (although this is yet to be demonstrated). The underlying question is whether or not these developmental ambitions are reflected in the U21 environment provided by clubs, while recognising the results-oriented nature of professional football, the implications of attrition rates, and the 'numbers game' that limits the opportunities for advancement. The scale of the potential rewards and the lifestyle commitment of players, even at the expense of narrowing educational and other career prospects, may serve to heighten the impact of failing to transit successfully through this phase.

This statement of the problem makes it clear that there is currently insufficient insight into provision in the Professional Development Phase. This research is designed to address this shortcoming:

1. Provision is unlikely to be homogenous across academy categories and as a consequence of club policies and attitudes to young players' development, and resources. There is a need to establish the numbers involved, age profiles, staffing levels and so on, in addition to club policies.
2. A specific enquiry is needed into the players' perspectives on characteristics that might represent sound development practice, as they apply in their clubs.

3. This would be greatly assisted by a more in-depth account of players' experiences in this development phase, and
4. *In situ* observations of the U21 environment and its accompanying emotions, relationships and issues.

This combination of studies has not previously been carried out in the U21 domain in English professional football. It therefore has the potential to make a novel and substantial contribution to knowledge about what has been acknowledged by the football community to be a key transition phase in the career pathway of aspiring professional footballers.

1.2 Aims of the Research

The overarching purpose of this research is to develop a hitherto-underexplored understanding of the extent to which the primary objective of the elite English academy system in football, i.e., as a talent development environment, is being met, with a specific focus on the U21 professional development phase. The focus of the research will be to provide a comprehensive scoping of the U21 phase of football, providing clarity on its structure and purpose; to furnish an account of U21 players' perceptions of their talent development environment and their associated wellbeing; and to document, through interviews and observations with both players and coaches, the factors that impact on the player's career journey. As with all social and relational practices, the U21 professional development phase in professional football is a complex and nuanced environment. This research is designed to explore and capture these subtleties and how they interact in shaping the journey of players as they work towards a career in senior first team football.

The research adopts a mixed methods approach, initially beginning with a broad perspective on provision within the U21 landscape; thereafter narrowing the focus, via a survey of players' opinions and insights, to the context-specific experiences and practices within the environment itself. This approach combines the views and experiences of a range of players and key stakeholders with the researcher's observations from being embedded within a support-staff role in a Category 1 club, and provides a unique insight into development-related practices in this phase of elite-level football.

The overall research question can be stated as, 'To what extent does the U21 professional development phase in English professional football meet its stated talent development purpose'. What follows is a brief overview of each of the studies designed to achieve the overall purpose of the research and address this research question. More specific aims and objectives are provided in the studies that follow.

Study One: The U21 talent development phase of professional football: A Scoping Review

Study One provides a necessary overview of provision in this domain. It is designed to identify the structure, extent and organisation of U21 football in English professional senior league clubs, and to determine the profile of the various components that constitute this phase (e.g., squad sizes, player origins, staffing structures). In addition, it seeks to identify each club's development policies, as they are relevant to U21 football. The research is informed by an extensive review of publicly available information on all professional league clubs' websites. The study also contains a review of the research literature specifically focused on U21 football, in order to understand the current state of knowledge relevant to developmental issues within this domain. Study One addresses the specific aim below:

Aim One – To scope, describe and analyse the provision – structure, extent, composition, organisation, development policies - of the U21 professional development phase in English professional football.

Study Two: U21 squad player perceptions of the talent development environment in English professional football

Study Two is designed to narrow the research focus to the quality of the development environment created. Its purpose is to investigate players' perceptions of their environment by a questionnaire survey based on a talent development survey instrument (TDEQ-5: Li et al., 2015) and a health and wellbeing survey instrument (GHQ-12: Goldberg et al., 1997). The study findings capture players' perceptions about their development and wellbeing status from a representative sample of players across each of the four academy categories within the Football Association-recognised system. Study Two addresses the specific aim below:

Aim Two (a) – To evaluate players' perceptions of the quality of the talent development environment and their wellbeing in U21 professional football in England.

Study Three: Player and practitioner opinions and insights about the U21 talent development environment in English professional football

Study Three explores in more depth the views of both players and coaches about their direct experience of the U21 phase of professional football. The study explores its organisational structure, competition, relationships, attitudes and the role of coaches in managing and conducting the U21 phase, and the perceived impact of these factors on players' satisfaction with their football development and progression. Study Three addresses the specific aim below:

Aim Two (b) - To extend, through more-detailed first-hand accounts, the evaluation of players' perceptions and experience of their environment and perceived wellbeing.

Study Four: An ethnographic exploration of the U21 development environment within a Category One football club

This study complements the semi-structured interviews of Study Three by obtaining a deeper, more contextual, insight through an ethnographical lens, focused on the U21 squad practice of a Category One football club. This study is designed to extend the findings of Study Three by exploring the daily experiences of U21 players and key stakeholders and the socio-cultural challenges they face operating in this phase of football at the elite level. The study utilises participant observations and informal interviews and conversations to document these experiences over a protracted period within the Category One club. Study Four addresses the specific aim below:

Aim Three – To critically explore, identify and illustrate the context-specific factors associated with practice within the U21 environment, and how this contributes to and/or influences the progression and development of players.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The rationale for attending to the research problem, which was outlined in the introduction, identified the key areas associated with the research. This chapter presents a review of the related academic literature, structured in four subsections, that is a necessary foundation for addressing the research questions and that will provide an overall framework for the research.

More specifically, the chapter will focus on the central themes of the research: talent development environments and transitions, and the impact and/or influence they have on players as they navigate their journey to becoming established professional footballers. First, the chapter will describe the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (Premier League, 2011) and introduce the professional development phase (PDP) of the EPPP; the final phase of the football development continuum in England before entering a senior professional first team environment. Second, the chapter will provide an overview of the literature on the culture of professional football and its academies over the past 20 years. The third section reviews the evolving literature on talent development environments, followed by the final section, which examines the concept of (stage or phase) transitions and how transitional models have been understood and applied within elite sport and football to date.

2.1 Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP)

In 1997, former coach and the then Technical Director of the Football Association (FA), Howard Wilkinson, proposed a new strategy for English youth football. His recommendations were entitled the Charter for Quality (Football Association, 1997), an overarching policy that included specific proposals for young player development in the professional game. Intended legislation within the Charter meant that committed clubs would receive increased funding from the FA in accordance with the club's own investment goals for their youth academies. Over the following ten years, the youth developmental structure in the professional game

expanded, and, as a result, by 2006 there were 40 football academies and 48 centres of excellence (Lewis, 2006). However, there were prominent figures in the game calling for yet another review of the academy system (Jackson, 2007) and suggesting that key issues, including the funding of youth football, coaching standards, the impact of the influx of overseas players, and how English players compared on the international stage, needed to be considered. Consequently, in late 2006 the Football Association (FA), the English Football League (EFL) and the English Premier League (EPL) commissioned an independent Review of Young Player Development in the professional game (Lewis, 2006). The report produced recommendations for youth player development, outlining a more dynamic and flexible approach that should be player-focused, with quality coaching provided in an appropriate environment (Lewis, 2006, p.5) and urged the FA, the EFL and the EPL to work together to ensure rapid progress. The review, undertaken by Richard Lewis, Chairman of Review Group, Executive Chairman of the Rugby Football League, said “It has been clear to me during the Review that they have a great deal of common ground. My report is a call for further improvement, to raise the bar even higher, and to leave no stone unturned in the search for excellence. All three organisations are well placed to deliver just that” (Lewis, 2006, p.3).

The EPL, representatives of the EFL, the FA and other key stakeholders supported proposals for the modernisation of the academy system in England and the first fully comprehensive revision of the Charter for Quality, which led to the introduction of the EPPP in 2011. The plan provides a vision for the future development of youth football in the EPL and throughout the professional game, and sets out the processes and criteria deemed necessary to ensure that professional football in England would be equipped to create a world leading academy system that produces more and better ‘home-grown’ players and increase the efficiency of investment in youth development. The plan advocates supportive development-orientated environments to

maximise development of players, allowing time for players to develop before transitioning to the first team. Clubs were encouraged to incorporate the holistic needs of young players (Premier League, 2011, p.10) by exposing them to worthwhile experiences beyond football and providing the life skills necessary to be fully integrated and responsible members of society (Premier League, 2011, p.72). One of the main ambitions of the plan was to enable EPL and EFL clubs to outperform international competition in the production of home-grown players and a create a system that is able to continually improve and sustain success, with a value for money approach that contributes positively to the delivery of the clubs' business plans (Premier League, 2011, p.10). To achieve this, clubs were encouraged to create an elite training environment that demonstrated a number of common characteristics. These included an environment that is challenging, developmental and inspirational - supported by outstanding coaches, education, sports science and medicine and an excellent games programme. In turn, this would consistently produce professional players at the appropriate level of the game for each academy according to its classification (Premier League, 2011, p.13). There were four stages of development built into the EPPP performance pathway: Foundation (5-11), Youth Development (12-16), Professional Development (17-21) and Senior Professional (Premier League, 2011, p.15). In aggregate, the EPPP was intended to promote a longer-term vision, both from an individual player development perspective, and the overall development structure/pathway in professional football in England.

To facilitate the EPPP's core message of improving standards and the number and throughput of home-grown players in England, clubs would be categorised against a benchmark of several performance criteria (Table 2.1). It was proposed that four categories would better reflect the full scope of the academy system and would allow clubs to make their own strategic decisions

as to investment priorities and work towards a classification that works for them and their sustainability.

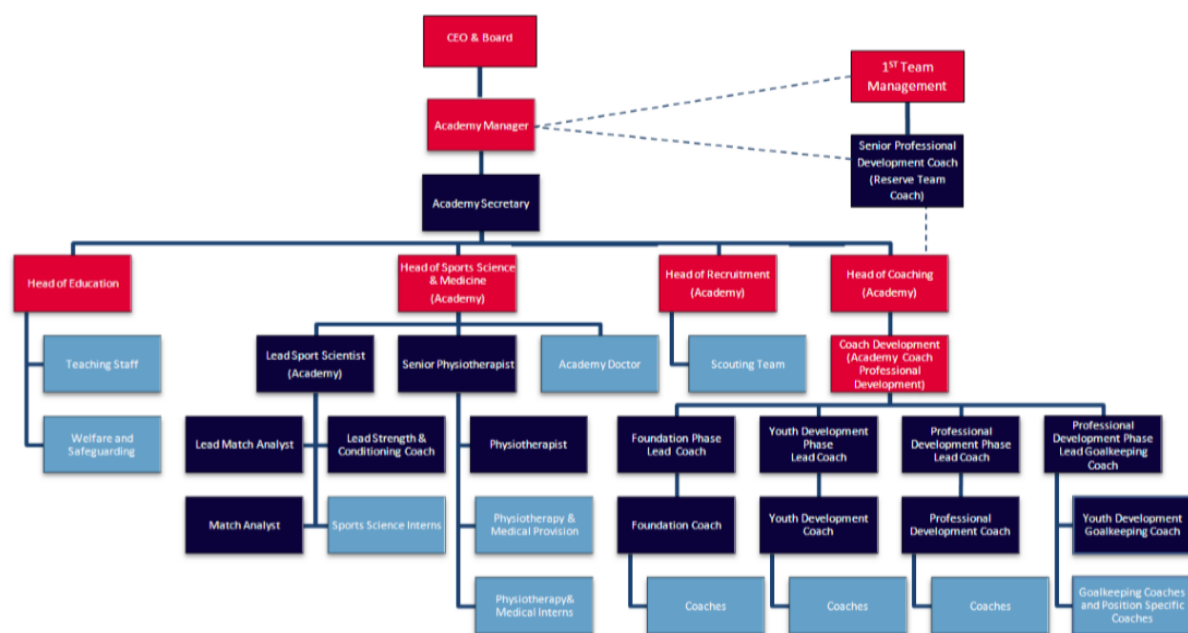
Table 2.1. Classification system (Premier League, 2011, p.31).

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM				
Academy Classification	Key Performance Outputs	Typical Total Coaching Access	Performance Pathway	Training Model
Category 1 The Optimum Development Model	Demonstrate regular graduation of players into the Premier League and the wider professional game	Up to 8,500 hours	U5 to U21 Registration from U9	Foundation Phase: Part Time and Hybrid Youth Development Phase: Hybrid and Full Time Professional Development Phase: Full Time
Category 2 The Development Model	Demonstrate the ability to graduate players into the Premier League from time to time and regularly graduate players into the wider professional game.	Up to 6,600 hours	U5 to U21 Registration from U9	Foundation Phase: Part Time Youth Development Phase: Part Time and Hybrid Professional Development Phase: Full Time
Category 3 Entry Level Development Model	Demonstrate regular graduation of players into the professional game and develop players capable of progression into Cat 2 and 1 Academies.	Up to 3,600 hours	U5 to U21 Registration from U9	Part Foundation Phase: Part Time Youth Development Phase: Part Time Professional Development Phase: Full Time
Category 4 Late Development Model	Demonstrate the ability to graduate players into the professional game.	Up to 3,200 hours	U17 to U21 Registration from U17	Professional Development Phase: Full Time

In order to meet the necessary categorisation criteria for its academy, this system requires clubs to meet minimum facility requirements, agreed contact hours for coaching, to support an appropriate games programme and commit to a defined corresponding staffing structure. As an

example, Category 1 academies should evidence their performance/provision against a number of indicators (e.g., staff expertise, Figure 2.1) to show the extent of their overall investment in the development of their young players, thus enabling the club to reach and maintain the highest category status.

Figure 2.1. Category 1 Academy: Example Staffing Model (Premier League, 2011, p.84).



Key: Senior Management of the Academy, Full time appointments of the Academy, Part time appointments of the Academy

Each club is measured across 10 KPIs (Figure 2.2) and an independent standards organisation (ISO) would carry out an audit of each academy to provide an independent assessment leading to final classification. This was one of the key recommendations of the Lewis Report (2006). The EPL and FA would then match-fund the club's investment. Effective evaluation of each academy's provision would enable accurate benchmarking of the whole system, and lead to objective assessment of the outcome of the processes implemented by clubs, e.g., the

performance environment and the relative productivity of each academy in terms of producing professional players.

Figure 2.2. Audit Tool of academies 10 KPIs (Premier League, 2011, p.28).



A key measurement is the output of an academy, which closely relates to KPI 7 (player development and progression), intended to evaluate an academy's effectiveness in producing professional players. This is done on a points-based system, which records the development journey of every professional player, i.e., a participant in a centre of excellence or an academy, and contracted to a club in the EPL and EFL (Premier League, 2011, p.23). Points are generated through player progression and playing time, rather than simply gaining a contract. Players who play more extensively, and at a higher level, generate more points, resulting in clubs having a clearer picture of the effectiveness of player productivity (Premier League, 2011,

p.25). This is a beneficial process for clubs in that it provides objective data with which to measure the effectiveness of their academies.

The data can also provide a clearer understanding of the value of a player and the compensation required if that player were to be sold. The EPL mapped the development profiles for over 4000 players from 1998-2010, and demonstrated that the EPL had the highest percentage of productively of players (43.57%) compared to the Championship (30.33%), League One (16.63%) and League Two (9.48%). The EPPP also compares the average number of new contracts offered in the EPL from season 2004/5-2009/10 to players developed through the English academy system (160; 48.48% of the total) and to players who have been developed from outside the English academy system (170; 51.52% of the total), showing a greater number of players from outside English academies being offered new contracts (Premier League, 2011, p.26). These figures reinforce one of the key drivers of the plan, that is, to produce more and better-equipped home-grown players for first team football. Understanding future data around the offering of new contracts across the EPL and EFL may be a key performance indicator to identifying its success. The EPL believed that by reducing the reliance on non-academy production and increasing the capture of contracts from its then proportion (48.48%) is critical to the future success of the academy system (2011, p.26).

The metrics used to assess clubs on their category status and the measure of success of the EPPP is clear, and firmly related to the number of players progressing into clubs' first teams, and in particular home-grown players. In 2022, the Premier League published its Insights paper, a review of the EPPP 10 years on (Premier League, 2022). The review details the transition pathway for players in Category One clubs, demonstrating the number of home-grown players who have debuted in the EPL (511). It could be said that this meets the ambition

of the EPPP to increase the number of home-grown players gaining contracts. However, year on year since 2012-2022, this has not grown significantly and it is “not an absolute measure of success – the number of high-quality players was the focus of the EPPP and a professional contract does not necessarily represent ‘breakthrough’ to a career in the professional game” (Premier League, 2022, p.7).

2.2 The Professional Development Phase

The final phase of the development continuum within the English academy system, through which most players will transition before entering a first team, has been labelled by the EPPP as the ‘Professional Development Phase’ (PDP). This refers to participation by those players aged between 17 and 21 years, and can be conceived of as a player’s transition from youth to senior professional football. It has been considered to be the most critical period of time in the career of a young football player (Richardson et al., 2005; 2013). However, it is important to note that this phase contains more than one performance level, as players may transition from an under-18 team into an under-21 team before a further transition into a first team environment, and it can be assumed that performance progression will take place over that period.

The EPPP introduced a specific games programme that was tailored to the needs of players transitioning within this later phase of the PDP, the U21 age group. The aim of this league was to allow those players to face “a [competitive] environment where they can learn to win, and replicates the professional game” (Premier League, 2011, p.59), while allowing a greater focus on player development - technicality, physicality and with intensity to bring players as close to first-team experience as possible (Premier League, 2022).

Initially, to be eligible for this league programme, player must have been aged 21 or under; teams were also allowed to field one over-aged goalkeeper and three over-aged outfield players. However, throughout the period of this research, it is important to note that there have been a series of changes made to the regulations and structure of the competitive elements of the PDP. The first major modification was a change to the format of competitions across all academy categories, which included raising the age limit from U21 to U23. In Category One clubs, changes were made from the traditional 'Premier Reserve League' to the 'Premier under-21 League,' which was later replaced by the Premier League 2 format from the 2016/17 season. Subsequently, for the 2022/23 season, the age limit across all academy categories reverted back to the maximum age of players being U21. The change from U23 was a reflection of the reality of the age of players in the competition, where the current average age at the time was 19 (Premier League, 2022). With this change also came an increase in 'over-age' players, with each team now able to field a goalkeeper over the age limit and up to five 'over-age' outfield players in every match (Premier League, 2022).

One academy tier below the Premier League 2 is the Professional Development League (PDL), which replaced the U21 Professional Development League 2 from 2016/17, bringing together clubs from Category Two academies in two regional (north and south) divisions. Similar changes were made as with the Premier League 2, when the PDL returned to an U21 league for the 2022/23 season. Clubs playing in this league can field four 'over-age' players and one goalkeeper over the age limit. (Premier League, 2021). This effectively means that these leagues also function as a format for senior players on the periphery of first-team squads to remain match fit. The academy tiers of Category Three and Four play in a national reserve league which is called The Central League. The league is intended to provide development opportunities for young players in their pursuit of progressing from the academy structure into a first team environment

(English Football League, 2020). However, there are Category Three and Four clubs that do not enter into this league as a result of being unable or unwilling to populate a specific U21 or reserve team to fulfil the competition. Rather, they have an alternative games programmes that accommodates ‘friendlies’.

To enhance this phase of football and increase the competitive element, clubs are also eligible to enter cup competitions that provide knockout football alongside the regular league campaign (Premier League, 2022). For Category One clubs, there is a domestic and International Premier League Cup. The International Cup features the top 12 Premier League 2 teams in England against 12 equivalent teams from the rest of Europe. This is designed to test the quality of the U21 players against the best young players on the continent and to enable them to adapt to the demands and different styles of domestic and European football – a capacity that many of them may have to develop later in their careers (Premier League, 2020). The PDL clubs have a similar domestic cup competition and some clubs may also enter local cup competitions within the non-league pyramid of English football. A further competition for the top 16 Category One clubs, is the EFL Trophy, which allows them to compete alongside all 48 teams from League One and League Two, potentially giving their players valuable experience in competing against senior professionals.

There are, nevertheless, a number of potential shortcomings in the operationalisation of the EPPP that are of relevance to this research. The EPPP establishes guidelines for clubs to follow when implementing their performance pathway structure (including the 17-21 years Professional Development Phase). However, these guidelines are generic in nature, applying to practice within the entirety of this phase, e.g., training models, coaching hours, and support staff from sports science and medicine domains. From a coaching perspective, the plan

identifies the need for clubs to establish a ‘bespoke development squad’ in order to help the management of player transition from an academy into a first team squad, and states that some ‘progressive’ clubs have already developed these and appointed dedicated staff. It indicates that the responsibility for the management of such a squad should sit within the role of a Senior Professional Development Coach (formerly described as a reserve team coach) and suggests that “The role of the Senior Professional Development Coach is pivotal to the successful transition of academy players into the professional game and that the post holder works closely with the first team coach and/or manager of the club and will oversee the coaching programme for U19 to U21 and have specific responsibility for leading the team in the games programme” (Premier League 2011, p.82).

Although this requirement is essential for achieving ‘category status’, the plan states that “Each club will define its own local arrangements in terms of reporting lines and processes for the successful transition of U19 to U21 year olds into the first team squad” (Premier League 2011, p.82). This means that, although such a post and responsibility is a requirement for category status, it does not state specifically how or in what capacity that person should be deployed, e.g., within the first team or the academy setting. There is a good deal of ambiguity and potential for some confusion in relation to the person held to be responsible for the management of individual players. For example, a player who may still be part of the prior academy phase but is attached to the U21 squad, and one who is signed as a senior professional player but is currently assigned to the U21 squad, will be operating in the same environment. This level of flexibility, on the one hand, gives clubs the capacity to develop a player pathway process that they deem most appropriate to their circumstances. However, on the other hand, it potentially leaves players in this transitional phase open to an absence of specific and targeted information about what is expected of them and how they might progress. In addition, the absence of very

specific role responsibilities for coaching staff attached to this phase of development creates potential for additional role confusion.

Furthermore, although the plan provides significant detail about coaching practice across each category, e.g., hours dedicated to training sessions, it fails to provide detailed guidance on how clubs should and could implement the intended holistic educational programme. This was identified as a means to help prepare players for the demands of potential transitions through the academy system, into a first team, and/or the life skills thought necessary to make the most of a post-football life. There have been some notable changes to the rules applicable to youth football and how this has impacted clubs. For example, there is an extensive range of support staff, especially within Category One clubs, with a significant increase in the overall number of associated staff (Premier League, 2022). Full-time Player Care officers are now mandatory in Category One to Three clubs, and Sport Psychologist in Category One clubs only. Clubs' duty of care is emphasised and the regulations state that all clubs that operate an academy should have a transition policy, a personal development and life skills policy, and an emotional wellbeing action plan, to support holistic development (Youth Development rule, 2023, p.62-65). However, there appears to be no accountability for clubs to provide extensive evidence that this is implemented or more importantly effective. Ultimately the proportion of players who progress into a first team from such a performance development environment is limited (Premier League, 2022). In the context of the overall research problem – the effectiveness of the talent development environment in the PDP - is of interest to understand how the regulatory, structural and processual arrangements and provision, originating in the EPPP, impact on the development of players and the challenges practitioners may face in the U21 working environment.

There is no doubt that the EPPP is well-founded, well-intentioned and has laudable aims. The benefits of a more structured approach to player development are evident, not only to the individual players and the clubs themselves but also to the overall health and development of the English game. The changes in regulations about age limits reflect a growing realisation that the average age of the post-17 PDP squads is 19-20 years and that the (perhaps unspoken) assumption is that successful transition to first team football with the parent club may be unlikely if signs of progression are not evident by this age.

Similarly, the changes to the competition programme and to staffing levels and specialisms identify those as concerns. However, the driver for this research is the quality of the development environment and the focus will necessarily be placed less on the structural criteria than ‘what it looks like’ in practice.

2.3 Football Culture

Traditionally, access to and an understanding of the inner workings of professional football clubs can be extremely difficult for researchers. Often football clubs strive to protect what they perceive to be ‘trade secrets’, which often results in limited or no access, especially when these elite performers are in the midst of their everyday working practices (Nesti, 2010). Tomlinson (1993) described football clubs as being insular – jealously guarded worlds: “Like governments, clubs are interested in good publicity or no publicity at all. They are, therefore, quite suspicious of social researchers and of press and broadcasting journalists, whose interests lie in anything other than the straight report or the novelty item” (1993, p.152). Privacy is certainly understandable in elite sports when the rewards are substantial, and the costs of perceived failure may result in loss of status or employment. However, early and new emerging works are able to provide some essential insights.

From an English perspective, early work by Hunter Davies (1972) a journalist embedded with Tottenham Hotspur in 1971/72, and Eamon Dunphy (1976), a player with Millwall in season 1974-5, offered some real-world accounts of life as a professional footballer, identifying a range of perceptions players expressed within that environment, e.g., insecurity, loneliness and rejection. There are also accounts of the life of a professional footballer before the lifting of the maximum wage (Henderson, 2019; Imlach, 2005), in the 1970s and 80s (O'Neil, 2022), in the 1990s (Nelson, 1995), and from the foot of the English pyramid (Nelson, 1997). Each of these paints a picture of an environment characterised by uncertainty, ruthlessness, physicality, contracts and comparative 'place' within the team/squad.

Later work by Parker (1995; 2001) provided a rich insight into the then relatively unknown culture of youth football, working from within a football academy, and providing an ethnographic account of the lived experiences of youth trainees. Parker's findings identified football as a key location for the demonstration and reinforcement of traditional working-class masculine values. He suggested that the institutional norms, values and assumptions found in professional football environments played a key role in shaping youth trainees' identities (e.g., authoritarian club culture, coaching style and strategies). This initial work by Parker has been expanded by several academics reporting on club culture, notably, Roderick (2006a), and Roderick (2006b) whose research was the culmination of interviews with 47 current and former professional footballers. Findings identified a culture characterised by individualistic attitudes, aggressive masculine identities, violent and abusive language, conflict-ridden relationships between players and manager, particularly surrounding pain and injury, and an attitude of not wanting to appear stigmatised when players are injured or in pain - often finding themselves in compromising health positions.

An understanding of the culture in youth football has also been expanded, with researchers suggesting that these football environments can be aggressive and masculine, with players socialized into hiding their true feelings and encouraged to display ‘macho behaviours’ (Richardson et al., 2004). There also exists a climate of fear and a culture of intimidation, where young players are poorly supported from a psychological point of view (Brown & Potrac, 2009). These personal and interpersonal challenges young players encounter within an academy environment have been reported as contributing factors that might negatively affect their longer-term development (Richardson et al., 2004).

Cushion and Jones (2006) and Cushion and Jones (2014) have highlighted the competitive and masculine culture within youth football, and how this influences and shapes behaviours and ultimately impacts player experiences. Cushion and Jones (2014) found there was a strong culture of conformity, while restricting expressions of individuality, with constant messages about how ‘to dress, eat, train, play and behave’ (2014, p.286). Behaviours and identities were developed in players to show obedience and respect authority, often reinforced through disciplinary practice or threats of violence. Thus, this becomes the cultural norm with an unquestioned acceptance of such behaviours. Nearly a decade on from the inception of the EPPP, Champ et al. (2020a) explored the impact of culture on youth players’ experiences from a practitioner-researcher perspective in a single football club. Working as a psychologist within the club’s academy, the first author’s findings were similar to those of the previous works identified, and that a masculine culture dominated the club, for example, behaviours from coaching staff showing authority, banter, isolation of individuals and strong language. Specifically, the work highlighted an authoritarian management style that demonstrated an exercise of power, dominance, control, and punishments for not adhering to instructions. This was perceived to influenced the identity and development of youth players.

Returning to the earlier section of this review, one of the EPPP's main aims is to incorporate a holistic environment that provides players with the educational resources to help them cope with the environment, prepare them for transitions along their development journey, and/or provide them with the life skills to utilise beyond football (Premier League, 2011). Such an environment has been shown to be an important part of the talent development environment (Henrikson et al., 2010; Henrickson & Stambulova, 2017; Larson et al., 2013; Rongen et al., 2021; Swainston et al., 2020), and that supportive relationships and positive social norms can enhance player experience (Strachan et al., 2011). However, the accumulated evidence presented above suggests that, at best, the environment within which players are being prepared for first team football and for personal qualities and skills more generally, are problematic. It is not immediately obvious that such environments are conducive to personal growth or the further development of 'football talent'. On the other hand, there may be a less-charitable view, which is that the demanding culture of first team football is being replicated to some extent with academies and, thereby, achieving one of the aims of the EPPP.

Methodologically, ethnographic works as a sole source of evidence should be treated with caution. These accounts are often selective and may offer partial interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Maanen, 1995). They can present a narrow focus on an opportunistic example of the general population, and it is difficult to offer generalisations about common practice across, for example, youth football. Nevertheless, such research provides an insight into football culture and has demonstrated a problematic account that is quite consistent over a period of almost 20 years. However, to provide more depth of understanding to the social landscape of elite level football, further work is required, for example, to include players from different clubs, and in particular, from the population of players in the final performance level of transition.

There are, however, some positive examples in more recent times, in which football academies have been shown to provide high quality sporting environments for developing more generic skills that can be transferred into everyday life (Green et al., 2020; Rongen et al., 2021). These studies do not provide a contextual appreciation or appraisal of the organisational culture, but do emphasise coaches' perspectives about the importance of a whole-person approach and the embedding of a holistic educational programme into the career journey of youth players. This is particularly important when a player's career pathway may be short (Green et al., 2020).

The vast commercialization of the game has also driven the prevailing culture of the sport. Richardson et al. (2013) highlight that football is the most popular sport in the world, and subsequently an important part of popular culture (Millar et al., 2021). The game is embraced around the world by millions of people as a significant leisure activity either watched, participated in or used as a vehicle for betting. The association of public interest and commercialism around the game, has led to professional football clubs to act more business-like (Leach & Szymanski, 2015), and at the top level has been influenced by the opportunities to earn vast amounts of money through television deals, sponsorships and now established financial prizes made available in Europe, e.g. UEFA Champions League (Relvas et al., 2010). The modern top-level football club is a multi-faceted business enterprise and now operates in an environment likened to the entertainment industry, all the while ensuring that it continues to achieve sporting success to benefit from the high financial rewards (Nesti et al., 2012).

Investment in elite English clubs has increased dramatically since the 1990s, with clubs being taken over by wealthy owners (Wilson et al., 2013). In turn, the global success of the game has seen an increase in revenues. For example, the broadcast deals secured for the period 2016-2019 (worth £5.14 billion, Karak, 2016) generated 71% of overall income during that period.

Gammelsæter and Jakobsen (2008) argued that the commercialization of the sport has driven it into a culture of ‘win and survive at all cost’. Similarly, Nesti et al. (2012) highlight a culture of ‘short-termism’, describing football as a ruthless, fast-paced and results-focused environment, where everyone must continually justify how their input impacts performance. Gammelsæter and Jakobsen (2008) and Eubank et al. (2014) further suggested that this will be likely to impact upon a club’s organizational dynamics (e.g., autonomy, goals definition, targets, performance measurements), with several culturally-driven challenges that may impact upon operations; for example, interdepartmental communication problems, coach player conflict, interference from owners, negative reporting in the media, and financial pressures. Furthermore, Burgess and Naughton (2010) highlight the dangers of this ‘win at all costs’ approach, which can often be counterproductive and detrimental to the individual development of the players and even negatively impact team performance.

As a result of the potential financial rewards and the consequent need for instant results, there is a perceived need for clubs in England to invest in high quality players from around the world (Relvas et al., 2010). For example, the EPL is home to more of the world’s best players than any other league, making it tougher for young home-grown players to break into the EPL (Premier League, 2022). This may also lead to coaches relying to a greater extent on proven, trusted first team players, rather than players still in an earlier phase of development (Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a). As a result, the progression opportunities of youth players and the willingness for clubs to invest and prepare youth academy players for elite football can be impacted (Richardson et al., 2013). This creates a climate of uncertainty and unpredictability for players making their way in the game. Nesti et al. (2012) suggest that such a volatile employment and deployment environment at both an academy and a first team level is such that for some players and teams, they may encounter very positive and negative situations

several times across one season and many times over their careers. It has also been reported that professional football suffers from the absence of a positive culture and highly credible robust and validated cultural practices that create a distinct cultural distance between youth and senior environments, which appear to hinder the coherent progression of youth players into the professional environment (Relvas et al., 2010).

There have also been studies that have focused on strategies for coping within this environment. Brown and Potrac (2009) and Finn and McKenna (2010) highlighted the importance of football players developing a strong self-concept to help with transitions in and outside football. They suggest that transition periods within sport were potentially extremely demanding, with performance and social sources of strain being problematic, and that coaches believed coping strategies, self-control and positive appraisal strategies would be beneficial for successful transition. Holt and Dunn (2004) identified four major psychosocial competencies that appear to be central to success in elite youth soccer (discipline, commitment, resilience and social support). Furthermore, they suggest that players must learn to cope with stressors if they are to pursue a career in professional sport.

The joint investment from the FA and EPL in player development does appear to offer young players a resource-rich environment, with an array of performance-related positions being established, e.g., sport psychologists, strength and conditioning coaches, and an increase in coaching expertise to help support the development of players and thus the future success of clubs (Richardson et al., 2013). Nevertheless, despite the continued professional development of football academies and the increase in expert staff to support players (Premier League, 2022), both empirical and anecdotal literature still brings into question their effectiveness and productivity in developing players at the top level of the game (Calvin, 2017; Green, 2009;

Magowan, 2015). There appears to be a dichotomy of priorities within the English game between the FA's player development strategy and the commercially driven interests of the EPL. The EPL has a strong focus on the continuing success of the league and to do that it needs to attract the best players in order to create the most attractive product. This results in a potentially huge commercial return (notwithstanding the dangers of over-investment) and an ever-increasing influx of overseas ownership and players (Wilson et al., 2013; Poli et al., 2016a). This may compromise talent selection decisions, challenging the balance between clubs' long and short-term goals of pursuing talent for future development, and securing talent for immediate success and rewarding league position. Furthermore, the suggestions that current practice within youth football is detrimental to player development (e.g., Champ et al., 2020a), may call into question the impact of the EPPP in creating a positive and supportive environment for players.

There is little doubt that the prevailing culture in professional football can be viewed as problematic. There is a combination of a masculine culture with a results-driven environment that seems to lessen individual values and (despite the often significant financial rewards) emphasises club/organisational interests over those of the players. The research evidence suggests that such a culture is also evident (or even encouraged) at youth/academy levels. The introduction of the EPPP has created a structural framework with appropriate development ambitions. Nevertheless, the research evidence suggests that the underlying question behind this study – the effectiveness of the talent development phase in U21 professional football in England – is a valid one.

2.4 The Talent Development Environment

The pathways to expert performance have been investigated by researchers across many different fields, ranging from music, art, and science to education and sport (Coutinho et al., 2016) and the process of identifying and nurturing talent has been recognised to be challenging (Bloom, 1985; Reilly et al., 2003). Researchers in the field of sports science have examined the development of expertise through different lenses; attributing the key factors in athletes' performance as either genetic (nature) or environmental (nurture) (Davids & Baker, 2007). However, as Davids and Baker (2007) suggest, there is no longer any value in the nature/nurture debate and researchers should explore an individual's ability as a combination of both genetics and environmental influences. This earlier conclusion reinforces the current view that the development of sporting talent is a complex task, given the many factors that are involved and the impact that environments have upon it (MacNamara & Collins, 2011). Talent has been conceptualized as multi-faceted (Baker et al., 2018), incorporating a range of contributory influences, e.g., innate talent such as biological, cognitive, physical and psychological capacities, the impact of the environment over time, and social-cultural factors.

One of the earliest and most significant explorations relating to talent development is by Bloom (1985). This has influenced subsequent conceptualisations of talent development models in sport. Bloom shows how athletic careers can be divided into several stages and describes the resultant changes in athletes and in their social environment. The work described a general pattern of development across three stages: the initiation stage, the introduction of youngsters into organized sports, during which they might be identified as talented; the development stage, when athletes increase their commitment, the amount of time for practice, and their level of specialization; and the mastery or perfection stage, where the individuals become experts, developing high-level techniques and reaching their highest level of athletic proficiency.

Similarly, Côté (1999) also identified three phases of the development process whilst examining the families of four talented athletes from rowing and swimming. The three phases were: the sampling years (6-13 years), in which the main focus was to have fun, experience different sports and develop essential motor skills and beliefs about the sport; the specializing years (13-15 years), in which young people started to choose one sports discipline and develop sport specific skills through a more structured programme of practice; and the investment years (above 15 years), where they started to develop higher level technical skills in the pursuit of elite performance.

In the past few decades, there has been a noticeable increase in talent development research devoted to athletic development in sport that has accrued a more-comprehensive understanding of the characteristics athletes require to develop and maintain elite level performance. Taylor and Collins (2020; 2021) capture the talent development process as multi-faceted, and emphasized the need to consider the environment and subsequently the athletes experiences from a collective perspective. They advocate for a shared mental model to understand the needs of athletes and expectations across various stakeholders. Therefore, long-term planning can be incorporated with coherent messages to improve the quality of integrated working practice across pathways and across all stakeholders, providing a shared understanding of talent development to better support and prepare athletes for high-level performance and life outside of sport. This brings about a positive learning environment to develop athlete's ability to cope and learn from challenges, ultimately developing critical skills such as reflection and resilience (McCutcheon's (2022), and other holistic skills, such as decision making, ability to perform under pressure, and future expectations (Till & Baker, 2022).

Megicks et al. (2022) assessed the quality of talent development environments across a range of stakeholder from different sports and identified key principles to enhance such environments. Long-term development was seen as crucial with an emphasis on progress not results and focus on individual development as an athlete and a person (caring environment). Others were, appropriate challenge to instil coping skills and develop resilience, supported by a strong support network e.g., coaches, psychologist, parents etc. Embedment of life skills e.g., self-regulation, in the development programme. And a shared interdisciplinary model to provide clear role expectations and that outcomes are aligned which can all aid long-term holistic athletic development. It also seems apparent in these findings that the head coach would be the driver in this process, requiring a high level of coach expertise across the holistic landscape including the ability to effectively communicate with the network of key stakeholders.

Work by Martindale et al. (2005) progressed the area by investigating the key themes that have relevance for the effective development of sporting talent. Five key generic features that emerged consistently were: long term aims and methods, wide ranging coherent messages and support, emphasis on appropriate development rather than early success, and individualized and on-going development. Later work by Martindale et al. (2007) found similar results when examining coaches' perspectives from a wide range of sports on the goals and systems required to implement effective talent development environments. The combination of the generic features emanating from the research literature and the coaches' opinions provided a more substantial evidence base for the delivery of best practice. This work recognised the importance of a range of influential factors that are crucial for influencing young people directly (e.g., parent influence) and some that have more over-arching and systematic influence on the entire process, such as the environmental culture and sporting policies. Crucially, this body of

literature recognised the importance of understanding the development environment, and how it can create the necessary elements that drive the talent development process.

Henriksen (2010) pioneered a new approach for researching athletic talent development, which prompted a shift in emphasis from the performance development of individual athletes to the broader environment in which talented athletes develop. From this, a working definition of the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) was developed, an approach that is more in line with a holistic ecological approach. In their earlier paper and in subsequent publications (e.g., Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), ATDE was said to comprise: an athlete's immediate surroundings at the micro-level where athletic and personal development take place and the interrelations between these surroundings; at the macro-level, the larger context within which these surroundings are embedded; and the organisational culture of the sports club or team. These elements are said to create an integrated environment in which young talented athletes can thrive. Henriksen et al. (2010) presented the ATDE model as well as the Environment Success Factors (ESF) in their work with a sailing team in Scandinavia. The ATDE model is a holistic approach as it consists of micro and macros-levels, of both athletic and non-athletic domains across a time frame. Alternatively, the ESF model includes a variety of preconditions: (e.g., previous coaching and management resources, training, and financial factors); the process (e.g., everyday activities like training camps, competition and social events); individual/team development and achievements (e.g., athlete acquisition of skills and competencies and team success); and the organisational culture (e.g., espoused values, basic assumptions). All of these factors interrelate and will influence the effectiveness of the development environment. The ESF model predicts that the ATDE's success (i.e., effectiveness in producing senior athletes) is a result of the interplay between these factors. Henriksen et al. (2010) also acknowledged that there was a qualitative aspect to the development environment. For example, effectiveness

would be facilitated by a strong organisational culture (values of open co-operation, individual responsibility and a process focus on performance), and a high degree of cohesion as coaches helped to establish close relationships especially between current elite athletes and prospective elite athletes. The relationship between elite and prospective athletes is emphasized as a key factor in the operationalisation of the environment at a micro level.

Talent development in a football context has also received attention. Mills et al. (2012) acknowledged that the development and success of young players is influenced by an intricate blend of innate, psychological and behavioural factors, but, crucially, a gifted young player must be offered a rich and vibrant development environment in which to develop these characteristics. Later work by Mills et al. (2014a) recognises the need to cultivate appropriate development environments. They refer to Gagne (2003) to underline this, contending that “exceptional natural abilities can remain solely as gifted if not effectively nurtured via the development process into systematically developed talent” (p.1458). Their work has much more recently been developed into an Integrated Model of Talent Development (Mills et al., 2023).

Larson et al. (2013) investigated the talent development environment within a single football club in Denmark. The study identified similar characteristics to those identified by Henriksen et al. (2010) and Martindale et al. (2005), as the environment within the club was characterised by a strong, open, and cohesive organisational culture based on integrated values concerned with the balance of the players’ daily lives in school and sport, not just concerned with football but providing a holistic experience. Adding to the literature on successful transitions in sport, Larson et al. went on to identify eight key features of the environment (training groups with supportive relations, proximal role models, support of sporting goals by the wider environment,

support for the development of psychosocial skills, training that allows for diversification, focus on long-term development, strong and coherent organizational culture, and an integration of efforts across the club) (2013, p.202). More recent studies have advanced this domain further. For example, Larson et al. (2020) conducted research on another football club in the Netherlands, the findings from which complemented and reinforced support for a holistic ecological approach in football. Further contributions by Gledhill and Harwood (2019), Mills et al. (2014b), and Mitchell et al. (2021) have provided an understanding of talent development environments from a player perspective. They found that players generally reported positive responses in environments that endorse long-term development, offer good support networks, prioritise improvement rather than winning, and promote a sense of self-responsibility. In turn, this type of environment has been reported to impact positively on player well-being and can lower stress levels when compared to players with less favourable perceptions (Ivarsson et al., 2015; Lilja, 2011). These findings support the ATDE model (Henriksen et al., 2010) and other contributions that support the importance of the development environment, and highlight the importance of the microenvironment, including the practice of coaches and peers, in fostering well-being among youth academy players.

Nevertheless, and despite the perceived positives highlighted above, there is evidence to suggest that talent development environments in a football context may not provide adequate developmental experiences. Mills et al. (2014b) found that there were deficiencies in areas related to player understanding, links to senior progression, and key stakeholder relationships. Clear links and opportunities to senior progression were particularly criticised, as the study indicated that 65% of respondents felt they had been ‘written off’ before reaching their full potential. These findings draw some parallels with the research of Gledhill and Harwood (2019), and Mitchell et al. (2021) who also found that, although players generally received

good support from a network of practitioners, they considered issues such as communication and understanding how they could progress their careers (e.g., discussing what previous elite performers did to progress, clear goal setting for progression, identifying what the next big test will be in football) to be particularly problematic. Environments displaying these characteristics in a football setting may lead to players exhibiting deficiencies in their psychological resilience to sustain and cope with difficulties throughout their career pathway (Mitchell et al., 2021; Swainston et al., 2020). This seems to contradict one of the key features of Henrikson et al.'s (2010) work, in which a high degree of cohesion between current elite athletes and prospective elite athletes, relationships facilitated by coaches, was vital to the effectiveness of the environment. A positive relationship between aspiring and senior players could ease the transition from youth to first team football. However, research on football environments reports a distinct cultural distance between the experiences of youth players (prospective footballers) and current elite players (first team footballers), which appears to hinder the smooth transition of youth players into a professional environment (Aalber & Saether, 2016; Lundqvist et al., 2024; Relvas et al., 2010). This is compounded by the absence of proximal role models and interchange between youth and senior professionals, highlighting a potential 'gap' in the talent development environment. This may consequently result in a cultural shock for players who transition into the first team environment (Larson et al., 2013), and impact their ability to cope, as they may lack the nuanced understanding, expectations and challenges of first team involvement (Røynesdal et al., 2018).

This body of literature has advanced our understanding of the key features of effective talent development environments in sport. However, research that has specifically explored development environments established to nurture football players into a first team environment has mostly focused on the early development stages within football academies, those that relate

to players under 19 years of age. Although some players may progress into a first team environment at this age, it is likely that the majority will enter into a final stage of post-academy development deemed ‘mastery development phase’ (Richardson et al., 2013), and be exposed to another level of performance development in a different talent development environment. As was established in the introduction to this study, relatively little is known about the development agenda and/or experiences of those that operate within this post-academy stage. This highlights a gap within the research literature that warrants further attention.

2.5 Athlete Career Development and Transitions

Athlete career transitions is well established in the academic literature, in particular within the sport psychology domain (Stambulova, 2016; Wylleman et al., 2016). The impact of maturing bodies, stages in skill acquisition, the time required to establish expertise, movements within educational institutions, and club/squad progression are just some of the reasons that all athletes will experience a series of transitions throughout their journey along a sporting career pathway, - until eventual retirement, which is a transition in itself.

According to Wylleman et al. (2004, p.8), a transition can be understood as an occurrence of one or more specific events which brings about a change in individuals’ circumstances. There is an element of disruption, which can come about through a plethora of events, such as a change of environment or a change in coach (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), and can present a variety of psychological challenges that need to be overcome (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Transitions have been further identified as either normative (events that are predictable and expected to happen), e.g., the transition of a talented player toward a senior environment, or non-normative (events that are unpredictable and unexpected), e.g., injuries or player conflict (Stambulova, 2000). Depending on the nature of these transitions, and whether the athlete has

the ability to cope with the challenge, they may bring about a loss of purpose and/or identity (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Lavallee and Wylleman (2000) brought together a comprehensive collection of career transition literature to describe individuals' experiences of transitions and to introduce some theoretical underpinning. Early studies were derived from thanatology (stages of dying) and social gerontology (the study of the aging process). One of the first studies in gerontology focused on how people transitioned into retirement (Atchley, 1979). However, neither of these models (i.e., social gerontological and thanatological models) has a sport specific character, and both perceive the career termination as a singular, negative and often traumatic life event. However, athletic retirement studies indicated that adaptation to the post-career took, on average, about one year, and far from all former athletes experienced career termination as a negative life event (Alfermann, 2000; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). While the focus of this study does not necessarily imply that transitions in development stages will lead to a cessation of footballing activity or employment, for some relatively young footballers the transition to a new sub-culture (less likely) or 'away' from the parent club (more likely) may be a traumatic event.

One of the early models devised to make sense of these transitions was from Schlossberg (1981) who drew upon a range of other conceptual frameworks focusing on adult development, to characterise transitions into retirement as a process and examined the interactions of people and environments. In this model, three major sets of factors interact during a transition: the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (e.g., psychosocial competence, gender, age, previous experience with a transition of a similar nature); the perception (weight given to) of the particular transition (e.g., role change, affect, occurrence of stress); and the

characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments (e.g., the evaluation of internal support systems, institutional support). However, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) offer a critique of this model, arguing that it lacks the contextual detail that athletes would experience, and put forward a model centred more on athletes and the nuances they may experience as they enter retirement. Stambulova (2003) offers a more comprehensive model of career transition, seeing it as a process and not a single event and suggesting that there are critical time points in an athlete's career that need to be taken into account, such as specific contextual demands and an athlete's capacity to cope with the transition. This led to the transition process being re-appraised and researchers such as Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) took this forward by offering a conceptualisation that moves the focus of career transitions research from end-career termination to a more holistic life-span perspective, in which athletes encounter distinct phases and transitions. They devised the 'transition developmental model', which incorporates the normative transitions that athlete typically face, both within the sport and outside of the sports environment. This model also describes the age at which typical transitions take place. This model was later adapted into the 'holistic athletic career model' (Wylleman et al., 2013) (see Figure 2.3). This more holistic model suggests that athletes face transitions at several stages and levels across their athletic lifespan, comprising athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational and financial factors. The athletic level includes the three stages defined by Bloom (1985) (initiation, development, mastery), plus an additional 'discontinuation' phase. The second level represents psychological changes through childhood to adulthood, and the third level focuses on the psychosocial interactions during a sporting career, with key stakeholders such as parents, peers and coaches. The fourth level describes progression through educational establishments, e.g., initial schooling through to higher education or vocational development/training. The final level comprises the source of the financial support available over time.

Figure 2.3. The holistic athletic career model (Wylleman et al., 2013).

AGE	10	15	20	25	30	35
Athletic level	Initiation	Development		Mastery		Discontinuation
Psychological level	Childhood	Puberty Adolescence		Young adulthood		Adulthood
Psychosocial level	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents		Partner Coach Support staff Teammates Students		Family (Coach) Peers
Academic/ Vocational level	Primary education	Secondary education	(Semi-) professional athlete			Post-athletic career
			Higher education	(Semi-) professional athlete		
Financial level	Family	Family Sport governing body	Sport governing body Government/NOC Sponsor		Family	Employer

Within the model, the dotted lines specify the likely age at which transitions will take place. The model is valuable for acknowledging the role and extent of transitions and some of the factors likely to be relevant. However, it is important to acknowledge that models such as these provide only a generic account of likely transitions and need to be appraised in relation to the developmental and career profile that applies in the context of specific sports. This reinforces the need, in the context of this research, to establish those specific factors that impact on footballers in the post-17 stage of the career journeys.

There have also been a number of studies, conducted across sports, that provide an understanding of athletes experiencing a within-career transition. Finn and McKenna (2010), Jones et al. (2014) and Pummell et al. (2008) identify some similarities in their general findings, indicating that transition to higher levels of competition is associated with a variety of stresses

or demands. For example, Finn and McKenna (2010) identified a range of stressors impacting athletes from team sports that are external to the sports context, such as managing free time. Similar findings highlighted pressure to perform, and understanding transitions, i.e., dealing with the uncertainty and loss of control that may accompany a transition period. Social support and self-regulation were identified as important means of helping athletes to cope with such demands. Despite the similarities in findings, there were also several differences. In Jones et al. (2014), there was no mention of players experiencing academic challenges, e.g., balancing sport with school/college/university, which is reported in both Pummell et al. (2008) and Finn and McKenna (2010). Once again, this highlights the importance of considering the specific contextual factors associated with the sport, as the demands and potential barriers are likely to differ from sport to sport. For example, Jones et al. (2014) conducted their research in professional rugby league. Without expanding the discussion at this stage, some professional team sports (with football in mind), in which players may specialise early and in which there is potential for significant financial reward, may encourage young people to have a focus solely on a sporting career, with less attention to higher or further education.

Some research literature has explored junior to senior transitions in football. Dealing successfully with the transition from youth to senior football has been perceived by professional players as crucial to surviving within what is perceived as such a demanding sport (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). The development of a youth footballer is an extended process that can be traced from early childhood through to professional status. During this period, the young player is exposed to a number of experiences and challenges that might influence or hinder their 'natural' progression. The most pressing of these, of course, is the constant selection and 'sifting' process that characterises the talent identification process. Not only is the player subjected to the trials and tribulations of 'growing up' but he (and more recently, she) is also

required to navigate this journey whilst being identified as a gifted individual (Relvas et al., 2010). How a youth player deals with the different constraints and transitions experienced during this development period will have an impact on their future career (Richardson et al., 2004).

Researchers such as Morris et al. (2015; 2016; 2017) have explored the youth-to-senior transition in a football context. Their work draws upon Stambulova's (2003) model of athletic development, suggesting that a focused programme of support within youth academies had a better transition outcome (i.e., progression rate), when compared to academies with no focused programme of support (Morris et al., 2015). They also offered key stakeholder and player perceptions on the demands, barriers and support (Morris et al., 2016; 2017) that were reflective of the club's understanding of those factors that had previously been found to influence transition outcomes (Morris et al., 2015). Results found that athletes go through a period of adaptation as they change their environment from a caring to a more 'brutal', success-driven one. With this comes an increase in physical and mental demands that may be exacerbated by a lack of control, e.g., the uncertainty around new contracts, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. The implication is that these changes require a corresponding set of personal characteristics and resources (e.g., knowledge of what to expect to help players prepare, self-awareness, and opportunities to speak to senior players). Some caution should be exercised over any simplistic interpretation of any such periods of change; there are many other contextual variables that may impact transition outcomes within football clubs. For example, financial investment in player development, players' abilities relative to others, the subjective opinions of managers/coaches, the coaching expertise available, and the wider cultural implications such as player origin, and the impact of regulatory and commercial factors. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that a proactive approach that targets support and resources

to assist players to overcome the challenges associated with transition into senior sport may be beneficial for youth players' development and, potentially, a club's success, both in terms of reputation and financial return.

This body of work provides some evidence that there is a necessary period of adaptation when athletes move to senior sport, resulting from a significant change in their environment (Nesti, 2010; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Richardson et al., 2013) and consequent challenges such as a reduced tolerance to failure, high demands, and expectations about performance (Reilly et al., 2003). However, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) have suggested that in a football context, the term transition may not be suitable for describing what is being experienced by players in such an unpredictable environment. They suggest that it should be understood less as a period of time, preferring the term 'critical moments' or 'boundary situations', derived from an existential psychological perspective. This is similar to the definition of a transition as a response to an event, but with an acknowledgement that these critical moments are ever present and may occur regularly in the day-to-day life of a footballer at any level (Nesti et al., 2012). If captured and understood, critical moments will best provide the authentic lived experience of players and, despite the challenges they present, can also offer an opportunity for growth. Players can learn within their environment, develop courage, self-belief and be better able to cope within the high-pressure environment (Nesti, 2010). Without this, it can be difficult to advance and progress into professional football (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Adding to the conceptual model presented by Wylleman and Lavallee, (2004) and injecting an understanding of the contextual factors such as culture and environmental differences between performance levels, Richardson et al. (2013) proposed a novel model that provided a greater

understanding of player development across the landscape of professional football (see Figure 2.4).

<i>Athletic level</i>	<i>Academy (16-19s) Development</i>	<i>Post-Academy Developing Mastery</i>	<i>First team Mastery</i>
Psychological level	Adolescence	Social insecurity & comparison	(young) Adulthood Limelight stardom
Psycho-social level	Peers, parents, coach, sports psych, Ed & welfare	Partner New coach(es) Family	Manager New coach(es)
Environmental and cultural level	Process oriented Nurturing Caring Empathic	Uncompetitive Lonely Isolated Uncertain Stagnant	Outcome oriented Ruthless Masculine macho Heightened competition Team
Nature of support	Highly supportive	Bereft of social support	(Typically) crisis management, sophist

Figure 2.4. Socio-cultural model of elite player development in professional football, academy, post-academy and first team level (Richardson et al., 2013).

The model appears to present a more nuanced and contextualised description than that of other traditional models, e.g., Wylleman and Lavalée (2004). It is valuable for identifying the period of development that sits between the conclusion of a player's academy scholarship and first-team involvement. This level of a player's development is deemed 'post academy, development mastery', during which a player would receive a professional contract, but not necessarily belong to or play for the first team. The model suggests that, within the 'development mastery' phase, there are additional challenges a player may face, e.g., social insecurities and isolation, but also highlights the potential cultural difference between 'developing mastery' and 'first team mastery', a recognition shared by Relvas et al. (2010). This also suggest that players may benefit from an awareness and understanding of these cultural changes in environments and the demands and expectations required of them when managing the transition between phases. This is a notion recognised by Røynesdal et al. (2018) who examined the role of context-related features when moving up to first team level. They suggested that players transitioning into a

first team environment would need to adapt quickly to ‘fitting in’ with first team standards, and understanding behaviours and values that can help them prepare for the transition. Richardson et al. (2013) warn that if players have not been adequately prepared for this challenge, they may lack the necessary skills and experience to navigate, adapt, and perform successfully in a first team environment.

Individual players will differ in their rate of progress through these performance levels and phases, and it is necessary to consider the balance between the impact of environment and playing ability. However, the model confirms that there are differences in individuals’ stage of development in the professional development phase. This confirms the value of further research that explores the transitional and talent development issues within this final phase of football progression before entering a first team squad/environment. Currently, there is limited empirical research into this specific post-academy environment, and the impact of the players’ experience on their progression. One study by Dowling et al. (2018), which drew upon Richardson et al.’s (2013) model, has provided some critical insights into the perspectives of U21 development coaches in this phase of football. Findings highlighted the progress clubs had made in integrating the ‘developing mastery phase’ into their work. There were some positive developments as a result of introducing the EPPP structure, e.g., making the U21 coach’s role more established within the club’s performance structure. However, there were varying views by these coaches about their ambitions for this phase. Reinforcing the earlier work of Richardson et al. (2013), some coaches reported the importance of preparing players for the potential transition into a first team, recognising the need to create an environment that closely mirrors that of a first team and enabling players to develop the psychological skills to be able to cope with the inevitable demands of a change in environment. However, generally, coaches felt caught between the two environments and not sure how to create the appropriate

environment that would attend to player development and preparing them for the transition. This was further complicated by the constant movement of players in and out of the U21 squad, and the need to accommodate a diverse range of players at different stages of maturation, which impacted coaching practice, team culture and the overall environment.

Further exploration of this crucial phase of football is warranted as there appears to be a gap in the research, and in our awareness and understanding of the players' experiences in this post-academy development phase. A more comprehensive understanding of the quality and integrity of the phase would greatly contribute to our comprehension of its impact and/or influence on the performance (and personal) development and subsequent career transitions of players. It also seems evident that the reality of a player's experience as they navigate through specific transitions may best be understood when exploring it from that individual's perspective – but when combined with and set in the context of their environment. This entails exploring the everyday challenges encountered by players and the impact of these over time, rather than focusing solely on transitions as 'end points', as is common in traditional models.

2.6 Summary

As already outlined in the first chapter of the thesis, the focus of the research is on the effectiveness of the talent development environment in U21 professional football in England. The review of literature that forms the substance of this chapter was designed to provide a foundation for the research that follows. In overview, the research literature has provided a valuable background for the study into the U21 development phase, but has also established that there is a very limited body of knowledge that pertains to or has been derived from the U21 domain itself. It would be reasonable speculation that easier access for researchers to the

younger age-group academy provision has led to the preponderance of research into the earlier stages of professional football development.

The introduction of the EPPP (Premier League, 2011) established the Professional Development Phase as both a concept and a physical presence, and provided a set of criteria with which clubs have been classified into one of four categories. The age limits and associated competitions have been subject to change over time. Nevertheless, and despite limited information on the scope and scale of the provision, the U21 post-academy phase is firmly established as a specific player grouping and with clear objectives to create an increased population of ‘home grown’ players and a more effective transition or ‘readiness’ for first team football.

The literature emphasises the importance of transitions in sporting careers, which the Professional Development Phase of the EPPP was intended to be, and models such as that of Richardson et al. (2013) provide a useful, but relatively generic, starting point for further exploration. There were two further features of the relevant literature that deserve attention. First, there is a considerable body of work that characterises the senior, first team football environment as results-dominated, masculine in values and with a high degree of turnover, uncertainty and psychological pressure. There is some evidence that these characteristics are present in academy football environments, whether by design or imitation. It is important to recognise that the scale of the sport and the potential benefits that may accrue to individuals (whether financial or status) have created a vast network and framework of participation in which ability (and perceived potential ability) relative to others is a constant source of concern. Each of the development phases results in a ‘sifting process’ that culminates with relatively few players making the final step from academy to post-academy to first team football.

Second, the emphasis within the extensive literature on talent identification and development tends to focus on the earlier stages of identification, precursors to athletic ability, and the role of specialisation rather than the mechanics of the development process itself. In addition, the hierarchy of stages in talent development has tended to treat ‘mastery’ as an end point, rather than a more-nuanced stage of development. Nevertheless, there has been a very welcome move with the associated literature to emphasise the role of the talent development environment as an appropriate focus for research, and the criteria associated with judgements about the quality of the environment are helpful in providing a foundation for enquiry into new developmental domains.

The overarching purpose of this research is to develop a hitherto-underexplored understanding of the extent to which the primary objective of the U21 elite English academy system in football, i.e., as a talent development environment intended to be a purposeful readiness for and transition into first team football, is being met. The research is directed to three aims:

The approach taken to the research, which is explored in subsequent chapters, does not lend itself to the testing of specific hypotheses. However, the review of literature has suggested that there would be merit in giving attention to the idea of the Professional Development Phase as a transition or readiness for first team football, acknowledging the change in environmental culture between academy football and the first team environment, considering the nature of talent development in this context, and exploring the dynamics of U21 provision as they are operationalised. The literature has provided sufficient evidence to lay a foundation for exploring the U21 phase as profitable but perhaps problematic area of enquiry.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Research philosophy

Based on a research question that focused on a practical, consequential issue (i.e., the realisation of a policy ambition by the Football Association and professional league clubs) and with a secondary aim of recommending changes for more effective practice, the research study adopted an approach based on pragmatism. Pragmatism's 'test of merit' has been described as "the purposive efficacy of general practices – success in the realisation of aims, goals and purposes" (Rescher, 2012, p.22). Crucially, therefore, pragmatism is concerned with problem solving (Prasad, 2021), rather than the search for perfect knowledge or truth. King (2022) questions its epistemological roots, suggesting it should be valued more as a methodological approach, "its focus is not simply to know more but to apply, problem solve and enhance awareness of one's interaction with the world" (2022, p.3153). Elder-Vass (2022) notes the similarities with critical realism and the sharing of a fallibilist understanding of knowledge, but notes that pragmatism tends to focus on inquiry at the 'micro' level.

The emphasis on practical consequences has led to a characterisation of pragmatism as a focus on 'what works'. This 'crude pragmatism' has been criticised in sport coaching research (Jenkins, 2017). Although there is undoubtedly some utility for the practitioner in this approach, pragmatism is more nuanced, in particular in its capturing of opinions and experienced reality (Morgan, 2014), and mapping the consequences of those experiences and meanings. Kelly and Cordiero (2020) provide an account of pragmatism and represent its essential character in three principles: an emphasis on actionable knowledge; a recognition of the interconnectedness of awareness, knowing and acting; and a view of inquiry as an experiential process.

Pragmatism “emphasises practical and useful solutions to applied research questions and the consequences of inquiry” (Giacobbi, 2005, p.19), and “tests the veracity of facts through dialogue within communities” (Giacobbi, 2005, p.22). Put simply, this research has offered an approach that is considered more useful for answering practical problems; developing understanding in how ‘real world’ processes function in applied contexts’ (Cruickshank et al., 2014). This perspective abandons the notion that there exists a single reality, or an objective truth that is derived from a positivist outlook. This truth of the ‘reality’ in the context of football may be captured in the opinions and experiences of the players and coaches, but mediated by acknowledgement of the culture and social relationships. The aim is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and offer practical solutions to the insights and understandings about the developmental agenda in the U21 phase of football. This approach appeared to suit the research being undertaken and to form an appropriate underpinning research paradigm.

Grounded within a pragmatic research paradigm, the research employed a mixed method approach for the overall purpose of exploring the developmental environment in U21 professional football and the extent to which its objectives are being met. A mixed method approach is one in which both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in a single study (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2017). These methods, i.e., quantitative and qualitative, can be evident in equal amounts, or either one can be prioritised to suit the research design (Thomas et al., 2015). However, it is important to note that, although the research adopts a pragmatic approach, it acknowledges different ontological and epistemological assumptions will inevitably lead researchers “to generate different questions, develop different research designs, use different techniques to collect various kinds of data, perform different types of analyses, represent their findings in different ways, and judge the ‘quality’ of their studies using different criteria” (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p.3).

A mixed method research approach is increasingly being used in sport and exercise psychology (Ryba et al., 2022). It is considered to have the potential to answer research questions more adequately (Giacobbi, 2005) and can more thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest (Rumbold et al., 2018). The research design was based on the adequacy of particular methods for addressing the research question, not on a commitment to a particular paradigm or philosophical position (Bryman, 2006). The pragmatic approach is more concerned with methods that can be defined as tools for data collection and analysis and do not necessarily need to be entangled in issues of philosophy (Feilzer 2010).

Tensions have been acknowledged when using mixed methods (Sparkes, 2015), in particular the issue of integrating or combining methods (Matović & Ovesni, 2021). However, the different studies that were used to address the research question employed different methods and the emphasis was on aggregation and integration of findings. Therefore, combining different paradigms was not a concern, as each had something to offer (Greene, 2007), and each research method could be linked adequately to a particular paradigm (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009; 2011). To address the research question, an exploratory sequential design was adopted. Accordingly, each phase of data collection informed the next (Jackman et al., 2017), providing a quality criterion that frames the study as a whole (also see, Rumbold et al., 2018; Thrower et al., 2019). However, they are distinctive studies in their own right, providing aims/objectives, insights and outcomes (also see, Redwood-Brown et al., 2018; Richard et al., 2017). The research began from a positivist perspective, with a quantitative methodology in which there was a focus on operationalising concepts (i.e. the structure and function of talent pathways, with a broad scoping review in Study One), and measurement (i.e., surveying the perceived quality of the talent development environment and how this may impact wellbeing in Study Two). These steps were taken to create a baseline of objective knowledge (what was

understood by professional clubs to constitute this domain) within the research process (Creswell, 2013) and to inform future studies.

This was followed by a qualitative phase, which saw a further shift in paradigm to a constructivism/interpretivism/postmodern perspective; first, conducting a range of interviews with players and coaches in Study Three, and second, observation of practice to provide a more-detailed insight into the lived experience of those within the U21 professional football environment. From an ontological perspective, this is quite opposite to the positivist approach, as this line of inquiry does not assume an objective single truth but emphasises the extent to which individuals construct their own meaning (Hassmen, 2016). Furthermore, it considers not only the individual but also the surrounding environment and how meaning is socially constructed (Cronin & Armour, 2015). Participants views will develop subjective meaning of the phenomena and provide a broader understanding of interests, emotion and values (Potrac et al., 2014). This is particularly valuable for surfacing the perceived truth for each individual, and enabling the researcher to reveal what may be hidden beneath the surface observation. This approach attempts to embrace contextual factors as well as the individual's lived experiences.

Qualitative inquiry is a broad approach, which examines social circumstances and makes sense of social experiences (see Laimputtong 2019; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). From an applied perspective, this approach addresses the participants' (players and coaches) perceived experiences, navigation of players' development and progression challenges and their career trajectory into a first team environment. This is particularly pertinent in professional football where the internal context (staffing and structures) undergoes rapid changes within a short timeframe. This is driven, in the main, by the consequences of a results-driven environment (Lyle, 2024) and the consequent impact on staff turnover. This is most evident in the first team

context, leading to a culture of short-termism and high staff turnover on a regular basis (Nesti et al., 2012). It was important that these social and cultural forces could be captured in the methods employed. These post-positivist forms of qualitative research have the potential to deepen further our understanding of cultural, social and psychological influences in the context of talent development in football. When applied within a mixed methods framework, and offering an open paradigm with a variety of methodologies, such perspectives can contribute to a more holistic expansion of means of analysis and interpretation.

3.2 Researcher Biography

The idea of exploring and understanding the developmental journey of footballers started for me a long time ago, and well before I ever thought about this line of enquiry for a PhD. Sparks and Smith (2014) advocate for researchers to outline their personal biographies to provide credibility to the research. It has also been said this is particularly pertinent when conducting ethnographic research to be able to provide clarity throughout data collection and analysis, as someone which has experience of working in football (Roderick, 2013). Consequently, I felt it important to provide some context as to my own journey and who I am, which will provide an understanding of my positioning, and how my thoughts and experiences previously within the game may influence my research in some way.

Bryman (2016) said that a researcher will be drawn to a research question that often resonate with them, which is certainly true in my case. My first real experience of football, was stood on the kop at Hillsborough at eight years old watching my beloved team. With my dad stood next to me, surrounded by thousands of fans, that first goal was an onslaught on the senses. My love of the game was born!

Growing up I played at youth level for my local team, and initially there may have been some potential to go into a professional academy, but I never could quite reach the required standard to be taken on. Therefore, there was never any notions of ‘what could have been’ or ‘end of a dream’, I was contented playing Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings with my mates.

Whilst at university, I continued playing both for the university and my local team. At this point, I was also deciding on the career path I wanted to take. Whilst studying for my undergraduate degree I undertook various coaching badges across many sports including football, and at the end of my degree I went over to America to coach for the Major League Soccer franchise. Initially, football coaching was my preferred career pathway, then, at the age of 22 I accepted a post in a college environment teaching sports science on a full-time basis whilst undertaking a post graduate degree. It is at this point I started to become ever more interested in the psychological influence of sporting excellence. I quickly moved into teaching sport and exercise psychology in a higher education-oriented role which allowed me to expand my knowledge and research interests.

During this time, I was offered an opportunity to work within a football academy, on a part-time basis providing psychological support to young players. Subsequently, I enrolled onto the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences accreditation programme for psychological support and eventually became accredited as an applied practitioner. At the time of first starting to work in football, sport psychology was not as accepted as it is today. Initially, I found this very challenging, as some staff didn’t see a value in it, or deemed it as unimportant to the performance agenda. However, there were a couple of forward-thinking people at the club who supported me in developing a psychological support programme. After a year I moved onto another club to work in their academy. Again, at first there was a resistance to this type of work

by some of the internal staff, but eventually my work became more recognised as a critical part of player development and I became a valued and respected member of the staff team. After five years of working within the academy, I was promoted to work directly with the U21 and first team squads. It was at this point when I became interested in the experiences of players as they endeavoured to make their way through the U21 phase into a first team.

It is fair to say, that with over 10 years' experience of working within football, I have acquired extensive knowledge of the working practices e.g., technical, tactical, social and psychological aspects. I have been lucky enough to be involved in many facets of the performance environment, and observe practice in all settings such as the dressing room, managers office, board room and the dugout. I have observed the player journey, the struggles and sacrifices they make in pursuing their dream of making it one day. I have witnessed the highs of promotions and the lows of relegations, the setbacks of injury, not getting in the team, the bravado, and not securing that contract. These experiences both personally and professional are what ultimately drove me to this area of research and my initial motivation for exploring a PhD.

Chapter Four

Study One: The U21 Talent Development Phase of Professional Football: A Scoping Review

4.1 Introduction

This scoping review forms part of a programme of research into the talent development phase (U21) of professional football in England. As previously demonstrated, there is a very limited account of this phase of football in the academic literature, despite it being recognised by the Premier League as a distinct and significant stage in a footballer's career (Premier League, 2011) and one which has been defined as the most critical transitional period in a player's career journey (Richardson et al., 2013). The purpose of this review, therefore, is to explore the extent and nature of the U21 development phase of professional football; thus, providing a more informed starting point for the research as a whole.

The preceding literature review described the current landscape in English elite youth football and reviewed academic research that focused on talent development environments and the pivotal transition from youth to senior football. This provided key insights into a football academy setting. For example, a nuanced understanding of talent development environments in football has been derived from studies such as those conducted by Larson et al. (2013; 2020) and Mills et al. (2012; 2014a; 2014b). Furthermore, the process of preparing players to make the step from youth to senior professional contracts has been investigated in studies by Larson et al. (2014), Finn and McKenna, (2010), Morris et al. (2016) and Morris et al. (2017). Organisational structures that exert potential influence on this trajectory have also been examined (Morris et al., 2015; Relvas et al., 2010).

The literature review also provided a clearer understanding of the factors that exert influence on the transition from youth to senior levels within professional football, such as the additional pressure (i.e., uncertainty of getting a contract, physical demands) these players face from a number of key stakeholders and external forces (e.g., parents, coaches, teammates, fans and the

media) (Morris et al., 2015; 2017). This supports the notion that a major change in their environment requires a period of adaptation when athletes move into senior sport, one that Finn and McKenna (2010) suggest can take up to four years. This also reinforces the potential influence of the environmental differences identified by Nesti (2010), Nesti and Littlewood (2011), Richardson et al. (2013), and Mitchell et al. (2020), who found that football players are often moving from a nurturing environment that is focused on their individual development and well-being to one which is characterised as ruthless, outcome focused, and masculine oriented.

Nevertheless, the current academic literature principally focuses on the U18 phase of player development, consequently limiting any insights into the U21 age group phase. This is particularly surprising given that the framework for developing players (Premier League, 2011) has been in place for over ten years and a call for the exploration of U21 football was identified before the introduction of the EPPP (Relvas, et al., 2010), and reinforced shortly afterwards (Richardson et al., 2013). This constitutes a noticeable gap in the available research that offers any informed practice that can inform clubs and/or practitioners, and thus, it seems appropriate to pursue a deeper exploration of the U21 phase, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the realities and nuanced intricacies of this developmental phases and their transitions.

The limited research that focuses on the U21 professional football domain, despite its putative place in the development hierarchy, but in which a transition into a first team environment is assumed to take place, fully justifies investigation. In simple language, not enough is known about this development phase. This scoping review is intended to provide a context and baseline information that, of itself, is a valuable contribution to the field and with which to

understand more fully the specific research studies that follow, and identify further lines of enquiry.

In order to achieve this, the following objectives will be addressed:

1. To investigate if and how U21 football is organised in English senior league clubs and to determine the profile of the various components that constitute this phase (e.g., squad sizes, player origins, staffing structures).
2. To identify and explore publicly available information on clubs' development policies relevant to U21 football.
3. To review the literature specifically focused on U21 football, in order to understand the current state of knowledge relevant to developmental issues within this domain.

The review consists of two distinct studies, with the findings from each aggregated into a summary section. Part 1 addresses the first two objectives of the study through a desk-based scoping exercise that collates and analyses information about the U21 phase that is publicly available from professional clubs' websites. Part 2 addresses the third objective of the study; that is, a scoping review of the current body of relevant academic literature. This approach is designed to offer a comprehensive response to the research objectives identified above, whilst also providing an informed starting point for the research as a whole.

4.2 Part 1: Desk Top Review

The aim of the review was to gather information about the provision of U21 football across the English league system. This involved a survey of publicly available information presented on football clubs' official websites.

4.2.1 Procedure

In order to obtain a comprehensive account of the information available, the review accessed the official websites of all senior professional football clubs in England. These websites were deemed to be the most authentic, valid, and accurate sources of information, and most likely to consist of reliable and up to date data.

Each website was reviewed between the 8th and 26th of June 2020. The initial phase involved a survey of a small sample of websites to ascertain the nature and range of available information about the U21 phase. This initial review confirmed that data both on the structure and composition of the club's U21 provision and textual accounts of the club's relevant policies were available – to a greater or lesser extent. Thereafter, using this information, a framework was devised consisting of the number of players, player ages, their country of origin, the league their club is affiliated to, and staffing roles within this phase. Subsequently, a content analysis approach was adopted, enabling the summation and reporting of the textual information representing key messages about talent development and U21 football. Data from the websites were then categorised and tabulated, which allowed for any key themes to be clearly displayed and addressed in relation to their developmental implications and consequences.

4.2.2 Sample and Inclusion

A total of all 93 professional football clubs' websites were reviewed. Only clubs that had undergone evaluation and been benchmarked within the Football Association's classification system for academy provision, a framework guided by the EPPP (Premier League, 2011), were included in the study. This system groups clubs according to the level and quality of their

provision. Clubs are placed into one of four categories reflecting their compliance with what are considered to be good practice in relation a range of criteria²

Category One implies a superior level of provision, with Categories Two, Three and Four offering a lesser range and quality of provision. All of these clubs were part of the English Premier League or English Football League, with four exceptions. It is relevant to note that, if a club exits the Football League (i.e., is relegated to the National League), it retains its designated category status for a period of two years. For this reason, clubs falling into this category were also included in the analysis, thus providing a comprehensive account of the academy system in English professional football.

4.3 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data consisted of descriptive statistics representing U21 provision within each of the category classifications. These are presented in tabular form, with numbers, means and standard deviations where appropriate.

Given the limited research available about U21 football, there are no specific theoretical or conceptual frameworks that might be used to analyse the accompanying narratives about the clubs' policies or approaches. Therefore, an inductive approach was employed to organise and analyse the textual content from the web pages of each club's official website. This followed the methodology outlined by Bengtsson (2016) and the inductive content analysis insights from Elo and Kyngas (2008).

² Clubs may apply to the Football Association for an Academy Licence. In order to achieve this, clubs are audited with respect to a range of provision: philosophy, player performance management, specialist staffing, competition structure, education and welfare, talent identification and recruitment, facilities and finance. On this basis, clubs are placed into one of four hierarchical categories. (<https://www.thefa.com>)

In accordance with the framework outlined by Bengtsson (2016) and similarly applied in a sporting context by Heaviside et al. (2018), the following four stages were performed:

- Stage 1: Decontextualisation. This initial stage involved reading and re-reading each website to become familiar with the data. Following this, the data were deconstructed into units representing the different perspectives on talent development held by each club. These units were then inductively coded to represent and reflect its content.
- Stage 2: Recontextualisation. This consisted of a ‘confirming process’ that entailed re-reading the original websites in conjunction with the units to ensure that all content pertinent to the study’s objectives had been considered and included, while excluding any irrelevant material.
- Stage 3: Categorisation. Data were then coded, leading to the inductive grouping of codes into sub-themes (low order themes), and further synthesised into more common themes (higher order themes). This categorisation process gave rise to overarching dimensions, beyond which no further meaning could be identified (see Table 4.6).
- Stage 4: Compilation. The final stage involved interpreting and discussing data, drawing conclusions from them, and identifying any key concepts.

4.4 Results: Extent of Provision

The survey of club’s websites indicated that there was a total of 892 players associated specifically with U21 or reserve³ squads across all four categories. It is important to note at this stage, however, that not all clubs identified player profiles and this total represents only those player profiles that were available. All Category One clubs published their U21 squads. 4 Category Two, 35 Category Three and 3 Category Four clubs did not have published data on

³ Before the academy or age-related football structures came into being, clubs generally had a ‘reserve’ team for younger players and those not playing in the first team. There were ‘reserve league’ structures in place. The ‘reserves’ have generally been replaced by the most senior of the academy teams (u21, U23). However, a small number of Football League teams continue to use the term.

U21 squads. This was a result of those clubs not operating a specific U21 squad of players.

Table 1 illustrates the categories and their respective acquisition frequencies.

Table 4.1. Descriptive data representing the clubs who have category status.

Category status	One				Two				Three				Four			
No. of clubs	24				21				42*				6			
League origin	PL	C	L1	L2	PL	C	L1	L2	PL	C	L1	L2	PL	C	L1	L1
	15	8	1	0	3	14	2	2	1	2	17	18	0	2	2	2
Player totals	511				273				71				37			
Av. squad size	21.29 (SD=6.46)				18.2 (SD=5.45)				10.14 (SD=4.67)				12.3 (SD=4.94)			
Av. age	18.89 (SD=0.66)				20.17 (SD=0.34)				19.43 (SD=0.47)				18.9 (SD=0.14)			
Age range	17-36				16-25				17-22				17-21			

*Four non-league clubs have category three status.

Key: **PL** – Premier League, **C** – Championship, **L1** – League 1, **L2** – League 2.

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of teams within each category, including the total number of players in each category, average squad sizes, average ages, player age ranges and league origin. The number of players in Category One clubs make up the largest population of players at 511 players (57.2%) with Category Two clubs the second highest at 273 players (30.6%). This is also represented in larger average squad sizes in Category One and Two clubs. Category Three clubs have a total of 71 players (7.95%) and Category Four is made up of just 37 players (4.14%) of all players across the academy structure. The total number of players is affected by the number of published squads, although the average squad size, age and age range are likely to provide a good indication of provision. Out of the 892 player profiles examined, 698 profiles were published with information about the player's place of origin, as indicated in Table 4.2. The dataset was categorised into three main groups: players that originated from the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, European players from nations affiliated with the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) confederation and players originating from Non-European countries represented by the Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF), the South American Football Confederation

(CONMEBOL), the Confederation of African Football (CAF), the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and Oceania Football Confederation (OFC).

Table 4.2. Player Origins when nationalities were identified on club websites.

Category	One		Two		Three		Four	
	Player totals		Player totals		Player totals		Player totals	
<i>UK</i>	326	73.4%	186	86.1%	6	85.8%	25	80.6%
<i>ROI</i>	17	3.8%	6	2.7%	0	0	0	0
‘Domestic’ Total	343	77.2%	192	88.8%	6	85.8%	25	80.6%
European	76	16.81%	14	6.44%	1	14.2%	5	16.1%
Non-European	25	5.55%	10	4.52%	0	0	1	3.2%

Of the 698 players in U21 squads and whose origins have been identified, much the majority are of UK or ROI origin (81%). When added to those originating from other European (i.e., UEFA) confederation countries, the population is 95%. Those players from non-European countries comprise 5% of the total. However, player origins are not equally represented across categories. Category One clubs have the highest number of players originating from outside the UK and ROI, accounting for 101 players (76%), with Category Two clubs comprising the bulk of the remainder (18%).

Although, once again, the paucity of data from Category Three and Four clubs does not permit too strong a conclusion, there appeared to be a correlation between squad size and category status. Category One and Two (about which we might infer greater resources) had larger squad sizes. The average age did not differ markedly, although it was interesting that the Category

One clubs exhibited the highest average. The lower limit of the age range was similar across categories, although the upper limit was higher in Category One and Two clubs.⁴

Football academies are affiliated to a particular league, on the basis of their category status. There are five leagues in total. Table 4.3 illustrates the current affiliation of clubs with these leagues at the time the research was conducted. All Category One clubs operate an U21 squad and compete in Premier League 2, which sub-divided into two Divisions. In the case of Category Two clubs, 19 out of 21 clubs operate an U21 squad. The other two clubs (both League Two clubs) do not operate a specific U21 squad, although they do maintain a ‘reserve squad’ and play fixtures featuring U18 and senior first team players. All 21 clubs in this category play in either the Professional Development League North or South. Of the Category Three clubs, 23 out of the total of 42 clubs operate either a U21 or reserve squad. In terms of competition structure, 14 of the clubs play in the Central League, while 9 clubs play ‘friendly’ non-league matches. 19 clubs in this category do not operate either a U21 or reserve squad. In Category Four, 2 out of the 6 clubs providing information operate dedicated U21 or reserve squads and play in the Central League; two clubs in this category operate a ‘B’ team and will play friendly non-league matches. The other two clubs do not operate either a U21 or reserve squad.

⁴ Some players within U21 squads assume dual roles, as players and coaches. These individuals are typically nearing the end of their playing careers and aspire to transition into coaching roles. This factor contributes to the broader age range evident within Category One Clubs.

Table 4.3. U21 league structure

League	Category	No. of teams	Club status
Premier League 2 – Division 1	One	12	PL - 10 Championship - 2
Premier League 2 – Division 2	One	12	PL - 5 C - 6 L1 - 1
Professional Development League (north)	Two	11	PL - 1 C - 9 L2 - 1
Professional Development League (south)	Two	10	PL - 2 C - 5 L1 - 2 L2 - 1
Central League	Three & Four	16	PL - 0 C - 1 L1 - 9 L2 - 7

Key: **PL** – Premier League, **C** – Championship, **L1** – League 1, **L2** – League 2.

The survey of clubs' websites revealed that only 30 clubs from a total sample of 93 clubs made any reference to the detail of their staffing deployments and the roles these members of staff fulfilled (representing 32.3% of all clubs with a category status). The information available was heavily weighted to Category One and Two clubs, 13 Category One clubs (54.2% of the total), 10 Category Two clubs (47.6% of the total), 6 Category Three clubs (14.3% of the total) and 1 Category Four club (16.7% of the total). These deployments were roles specifically dedicated to U21 squads. For the most part these roles were identified as coaches, with terminology such as head coach, assistant coach or goalkeeping coach. In addition to coaching roles, other specialist positions were also identified, although they were not explicitly linked to a particular squad of players. It was evident that each club had a number of different specialist roles available to its academy, clearly influenced by its category status, as illustrated in Table 4.4 below. Notably, clubs in Category Four did not report any roles beyond coaching positions.

Table 4.4. Non-coaching roles by category status.

Category	Role	Number of clubs
One		
	Sport Scientist, Fitness Coach	13
	Sport Psychologist, Player Care	4
	Physiotherapist	4
	Analyst	3
	Nutritionist	1
	Loans Manager	1
Two	Analyst,	2
	Physiotherapist,	2
	Sport Scientist, Fitness Coach	2
Three	Strength and Conditioning Coach	1

4.5 Content Analysis of Club's Policies

The second research objective focused on identifying and exploring public messaging from clubs' websites about their stated policies, approaches and intentions in relation to the development of players and with a specific emphasis on U21 football.

Results derived through qualitative content analysis represented the collated narratives of all those clubs within each category that contained key statements on their website (as depicted in Table 4.6). It is worth noting that only 30 out of 93 clubs (32%) made any reference to this subject on their websites. Table 4.5 shows the number of clubs within each category that contributed to the data, with Category One clubs representing 47% of the total, followed by Category Three clubs (33%), Category Two clubs (17%) and Category Four clubs (3%). From this sample, only 8 clubs, equivalent to 27%, made any specific reference to developing the talent (or development more generally) of U21 players.

Raw data themes were categorised into lower and then higher order themes before being organised into four general dimensions: player (athlete) talent development; player (athlete) progression; organisational investment, and environment. A summary of statements made by clubs about how they facilitate talent development is provided in Table 4.6.

Table 4.5. Demographic characteristics of the 30 clubs that make any statements about their academy.

Participant (Club)	Number	Specific reference to U21	Status
Category 1	14	3	PL-6 C-7 L1-1
Category 2	5	3	PL-1 C-3 L2-1
Category 3	10	2	C-1 L1-4 L2-4 Nat L-1
Category 4	1	-	L2-1

Key: **PL** – Premier League, **C** – Championship, **L1** – League 1, **L2** – League 2.

4.6 Part 1: Analysis of Club Website Development-Related Policies

The football clubs' approach to academy development, and therefore their putative policies, was assumed to be represented by the statements made on their official websites. An overview of the clubs' statements and the development of themes is provided in Table 4.6. A total of 19 distinct raw data themes about clubs' football academies as a whole were inductively placed into 8 different lower and 4 higher order themes. The statements from clubs' websites, across all categories, were most frequently associated with the cultivation of a nurturing culture and environment, namely, to ensure "holistic support", which occurred 22 times. Although being mentioned in different ways, there was a group of statements that referred to the club's preferred style of play, exemplified by statements such as "playing attack minded football" and "teaching technical and tactical skills that allows teams to control games".

4.6.1 Player (athlete) Talent Development

It was clear from the statements made that the majority of clubs were aware of a player development responsibility. A significant number of clubs made statements relating to the

‘player-centred’ nature of their aims. Providing support to develop young talent and help them “reach their full potential” emerged as a recurrent key message and was most commonly cited (19 times). In order to achieve this, one club advocated the combination of “quality coaching tailored with a relevant education package”, while another club took pride in its commitment to “meeting the needs of individuals” at each phase of their development. This aim was formulated in the mission statement of one club, as evidenced in the following example: “Our mission is to identify, develop and support talented young footballers in order for them to achieve maximum potential”.

Further to the above, providing players with an environment that maximised professional standards also emerged as a theme; one club stated that it did this by “providing a safe and professional learning environment”. These findings suggest that clubs are aware of an approach to academy practice that goes beyond merely the progressing of football abilities; an aim of enabling players to realise their individual potential and thereby increase their prospects of success.

4.6.2 Player (athlete) Progression

Although a player-centred approach was advocated, there was an instrumental purpose underpinning the academy structure. It was evident that a primary objective of clubs was to produce players for their first team, with an implied assumption that this would contribute to financial and playing effectiveness. This emerged as the most common theme, being reported 18 times. The following quotation highlights one club’s perspective: “Ultimately, the objective is to produce young men who will go on to represent the clubs first team”. The Chief Executive Officer of another club made explicit remarks about this particular objective: “Our future is going to be built around how we develop players and bring them through to our first team”.

Clubs took pride in showcasing the achievements of past players who had progressed to their first team, which may also have been part of a ‘marketing’ ploy. A further recurring theme that emerged was the clubs’ commitment and focus on nurturing what was described as ‘home-grown’ talent; one club stating that: “We have a philosophy that drives the development of young players because we want a team with young, home-grown players”.

These findings represent a strong commitment to young players’ progression, with an emphasis on home-grown talent. This approach may help clubs to attract local talent in a competitive market but also reinforces the perception of their role as an organisation embedded in and supportive of their local communities. Nevertheless, it seems likely that this also represents a sound financial approach to recruitment and building future resources.

4.6.3 Organisational Investment

Category One and Two clubs reported that they had made substantial investments in their facilities or were about to do so. Some of these are described as “world class” and “state of the art” with multi-million-pound investment. A wide range of facilities was identified, including medical care, high-spec gyms, rehabilitation centres, and hydrotherapy pools. Additionally, those clubs investing in substantial facilities also reported that they provide excellent classroom space for education, performance analysis, team communication and communal areas for relaxation and dining. From a coaching perspective, these ‘resource-heavy’ clubs also boast up to 18 outdoor grass pitches, showcase pitches, undersoil heated pitches, and both indoor and outdoor 4G pitches.

One Chief Executive stated that the club’s academy facility was currently undergoing a major redevelopment and is “set to be one of the finest academy facilities in the world”. These

statements demonstrate that Category One and Two clubs place great importance on high-quality facilities and view them as a major part of the talent development process – and have the financial resources to implement such a vision. The range of facilities suggests that the intention is to address all facets of players’ performance. However, the absence of this key message from Category Three and Four clubs is likely to highlight a considerable financial disparity between these categories rather than a different interpretation of what would constitute a supportive environment.

4.6.4 Environment

The type of development environment (perhaps also described as a prevailing ‘culture’) clubs describe was a prominent theme across all categories with “holistic support” emerging as the most common message, followed by a “supporting and caring environment”. The website statements suggest that clubs perceived it as their responsibility to cultivate an atmosphere, in which players could feel safe and secure and were encouraged to express themselves freely. This is highlighted in the following extract: “We strive to create an environment where developing players are encouraged to experiment, make errors and express themselves.” One club stated that it was important to provide a holistic experience and prepare players for all eventual pathways, either within the game or for a career outside football: “We strive to produce well-rounded, well-educated, and respectful individuals capable of pursuing a successful non-playing career whether it is within or outside of the football industry through a holistic approach. Providing an inclusive environment for all players and their families.”

These statements demonstrate that a number of clubs recognise the importance of holistic development, acknowledging its value not only in enhancing performance and progression

within their club but also in fulfilling their responsibilities to provide the required support for players who may face a transition out of football at a young age.

4.6.5 Specific Information about Clubs' U21 Football

Much the majority of the public statements made by clubs on their official websites referred to their academy provision as a whole. Only 8 clubs out of the 30 clubs that gave statements about policies, approaches and intentions in relation to the development of players included any specific information or statements about U21 football. Of the Category One clubs, only 3 Championship clubs provided information specific to the U21s; none from Premier League clubs. Of the Category Two clubs, 3 provided some background, as did 2 clubs from Category Three. None originated from Category Four clubs. A total of 7 distinct raw data themes about U21 football were inductively placed into 2 different lower and 1 higher order themes. The two main themes to emerge from these messages centred on how this phase aids players in “understanding the requirements of being a first team footballer” followed by how the phase can offer “continued support” for players making the transition. This is expressed in the quotation below: “It’s another stage of development that provides players with a higher level of coaching and competitiveness to further prepare them for our first team. This mirrors the first team as much as possible, so players are aware of what’s needed for that next step.”

Although a small number of clubs elaborate on the role and importance of their U21 squads, the content of these statements is rather limited and does not offer a comprehensive insight into the purpose and practice associated with this phase. Clubs predominately promote their Academies as a whole ‘package’ and may assume similar purpose and practice within each phase, without placing any specific focus on the U21 phase of football development.

Table 4.6. Clubs' statements associated with the development of talent within Academies.

General dimensions	Higher order themes	Lower order themes	Frequency by category level			
			1	2	3	4
Player talent development	Maximise talent potential	Developing young talent	2	3	2	
		Reach full potential	7	2	3	
		Attending to individual needs	3	2	1	
		Maximise professional standards	1	3	3	
	Teach fundamental skills	Teach technical and tactical skills that allow teams to control and influence the game	1			
		To play attack-minded football	1	2		
		Play an attractive brand of football	1	1		
Player progression	Progression to first team squad	Producing players for the 1 st team	11	2	5	
		At least 50% player progression into first team squad	3			
	Home grown indigenous	Increase quality and quantity of home-grown English players	4	2	3	
Organisational investment	Investment in facilities/technologies	Continued investment in facilities	3	3		
		World class facilities	2	1		
Culture & environment	Psychosocial skills	Supportive and caring	4	6	4	
		Educational and social support	4	2	3	1
		Holistic support	8	2	9	3
		Self-improvement	2	2	3	
	Challenge	Professional	3	2		
		Competitive	2	2	1	
		Teamwork	2	1	1	
	Relationships with stakeholders	Effective communication & relationships	4			
U21-related statements [These statements refer specifically to the U21 phase]	Philosophy of practice	Winning mentality	1			
		Ownership of own learning	3			
		Understand the requirements of being a first team player	2	1	3	
		Openness to loans			1	
	Socialisation	Standards		4		
		Continued supportive environment		3	2	
		Introduction to a higher level of football			1	

4.7 Discussion of Desktop Evidence

The intention of the first part of the scoping review of U21 football in English senior league clubs was to determine the profile of its various components, such as squad sizes, player origins and staffing structures. Additionally, it sought to collate information on clubs' developmental policies through publicly available information. To this end, data were collected from all clubs with a category status. The emphasis within the policy statements centred on their promotion of player development and the strategies they employ for this purpose.

The evidence revealed that clubs across all four categories operate squads that could be classified as either U21 development squads or reserve squads, representing a clear and recognisable domain. Variations in provision were significant across categories, and, to some extent, within categories. It is reasonable to assume that these differences are a result of the significant resource disparities between leagues in the English system⁵, and the consequential impact on academy provision. The policies underpinning clubs' development practices were not widely available, with only a small number of clubs providing such information.

4.7.1: Number of Players

Category One and Two clubs have a significantly larger numbers of players in their U21 academy squads, in comparison to Category Three and Four clubs. A majority of these larger squads originate from Premier League or Championship clubs, which typically possess well-established academies. The significance of these larger squads is that dedicated numbers of players are available to compete in all relevant competitions and provide support for the first team if required. However, with reference to development opportunities, the larger squad sizes

⁵ See Consultancy.uk (2019). Gap widens between have and have-nots of English football. (<https://www.consultancy.uk/news/22303>). Accessed 30.09.2023.

and consequent competition for positions may limit playing time and opportunities to impress. If players do not consistently take part in matches and face high levels of competition, their overall development may be adversely affected, potentially hindering their progression (Mitchell et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2013).

Category Three and Four clubs, which collectively represented just 12% of all players identified in this phase, operate with much significantly smaller average squad sizes.⁶ These clubs typically have less financial stability and fewer resources available for investment in their academies (Plumley et al., 2020). As a consequence, they have fewer dedicated U21 squads and fewer associated support staff. Interestingly, this may present younger players with opportunities to transition earlier from the U18 squad to the U21 phase. If this is the case, it may enable them to impress coaches, and, if they develop to the required level, enhance their prospects of earning a place in the first team. A further consideration in terms of development and opportunity, for those clubs in Categories Three and Four, is that nurturing talent from within their own club resources, rather than relying on the transfer market, may be an appealing prospect.

4.7.2: Player Ages

The data in the study reveals that the average age of a player in this phase is 19. This closely aligns with the statistics available on the composition of those players participating in the first 6 games of the 2023-24 Premier League 2 season.⁷ Notably, the statistics show that there are

⁶Data in this context present some anomalies due to the unique development models employed by two Category Four clubs (Brentford [Premier League] and Huddersfield [Championship]). These clubs have chosen to depart from the traditional youth academy structure and instead maintain a late-development model, only incorporating a B team for this phase. Consequently, their eligibility aligns with Category Four academy status. Nevertheless, they have dedicated squads in this phase, which isn't typically represented within Category Three or Four clubs. In fact, in Category Four, these are the only two clubs who have squads in this phase.

⁷ See <https://fbref.com/en/comps/852/stats/Premier-League-2-stats#coverage> The average age of those players in the 26 clubs comprising Premier League Divisions 1 and 2 for these 6 games was 19.09. This included a very small number of overage players.

relatively few players participating in this competition at age 21 and above. Consequently, matches at this level are more representative of youth competition rather than senior play, and may perhaps be better considered a post-U18 stage of play and development, rather than representative of a stage of play populated by players who are at the later stages of the 18 to 21 years of age phase. The relatively younger age of the U21 squads raises a number of issues. One explanation may be that 21 is an age by which decisions about a player's likelihood of progressing to a longer-term contract in the league system have already become evident. The younger age profile, therefore, presents a potential tension between a developmental agenda and a 'sifting' process. This explanation may be reinforced by examining the age of players in first-team football. Although the average age of players in the English League system is in the mid-20s, the statistics from the first 11 games of the English Premier League season (2023-24) show that 16% of players who had played any number of those games were aged 21 or younger.⁸

4.7.3: Player Origins

The number of non-home countries players in U21 playing squads may reduce the opportunity for home countries players to progress. Nevertheless, it does not militate against a developmental agenda or the need/responsibility to support all players. The data on player origins reveal that clubs in this phase employ much the majority of players from the UK and the Republic of Ireland, although there are a significant number of players from overseas (19%). Once again there is some congruence with statistics from the first 6 games of the 2023-24 season in Premier League 2, in which 15% of those players whose origin is identified are from overseas. This study found that 95% of those U21 international players in the desk-top

⁸ See <https://fbref.com/en/comps/16/League-Two-stats> The comparable figure for the EFL League Two is 18%.

survey were affiliated with clubs from either Category One or Two, with the majority located in Category One (77%).

However, while the majority of players progressing into U21 football are from the UK and ROI, there has not been a significant increase in the number of English players transitioning through the ‘player development structure’ and into a first team from the period 2012/13 to 2020/21 (Premier League, 2022 p.9). This is supported by Poli et al. (2018), who reported that only 10% of players in the English Premier League first team squads had originated in (i.e., been ‘trained in’) that club. Additionally, Bullough and Jordan (2017) found that only 369 indigenous home-grown players made their debuts during the period from 2006/7 – 2015/16, a number lower than any other top five European country. The Premier League state that its league is home to more of the world’s best players, particularly, in the most successful clubs, which can impact playing opportunities and progression into the clubs’ first teams (Premier League, 2022 p.9). However, it is more likely that progression opportunities are limited by factors such as large squad sizes, which intensify competition within first teams, and the short-term pressures on head coaches to succeed (Nesti et al., 2012).

4.7.4 Staff Roles

Only 30 clubs from a possible 93 displayed information about their academy staffing structure. These clubs reported dedicated coaching roles specifically attached to U21 football, including positions such as head coach, assistant coach and goalkeeping coach. However, while other support and performance roles were acknowledged to exist within these clubs’ academies, they did not specify to which phase of football they were attached. Consequently, it is difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of the scope and breadth of staffing within this phase of football. Nonetheless, a recent publication by the Premier League reveals that the workforce

within academies has grown considerably and has become more multi-disciplinary. In Category One alone, more than 30 mandatory full-time roles have been created, contributing to an estimated workforce of over 2,000 people (c.f., coaching 692 practitioners, sport science and medicine 588, education and player care 159, performance analysis 151, recruitment 134, academy operations 157), of which 50% have full-time contracts. This substantial growth represents an increased investment of £35 million since 2012 (Premier League, 2022 p.35). Although this provides a clearer picture of the totality of roles within Category One Academies, it does not fully address the scale of the staffing complement who are specifically associated with U21 football.

Personal experience of academy structures suggests that a number of these non-coaching roles are not attached to a particular squad of players. Rather, practitioners in these roles are likely to operate across multiple player squads or even have a broader responsibility encompassing all academy squads, ranging from U9 – U21. This practice might be more prevalent in clubs with limited resources, especially those in lower categories. Given that a robust support network has been acknowledged to be crucial for creating a successful development environment (Martindale et al., 2005; 2007), the absence of specialist and group-dedicated roles may impact the required support provided to players. In such cases, these clubs may need to find other ways to compensate for the lack of resources in order not to hinder player development and performance. In such instances, a focus on organisational culture and teamwork becomes critical (Henrikson et al., 2010).

4.7.5 Club Statements

Key statements on clubs' websites that provide information on the vision, aims, and objectives for their academies in developing talent, along with their short-term goals, were limited, across

all four categories. The range and detail of information specifically referring to U21 football was even less evident. This suggests that clubs, by and large, do not actively promote, or see the need to promote their academy programmes on their websites. This does not mean that clubs do not use other means of targeting potential entrants. Where clubs do describe their approach, it tends to be presented in a broader context without specific focus on U21 development. This reinforces the limited availability of information in the public domain about this phase of football development, and renders gaining insights into clubs' overarching development philosophy about their academies very challenging, especially in this final phase preceding entry into a first team squad. It is important to note that due to the study's small sample size, the extent of conclusions that can be drawn from these findings is limited.

4.8 Part 2: Scoping Review

The purpose of a scoping review is to “summarise existing research findings with the aim of systematically mapping implications for practice, and identifying research gaps” (Perry et al., 2021, p.2). This scoping review set out to address a broad research question, that is, to examine the current state of knowledge and to comprehend any developmental issues associated with U21 football. This necessitated the identification of appropriate search terms and the selection of relevant academic databases for conducting a thorough search. There has been a recent increase in the use of scoping reviews, especially in areas in which the evidence base is in its infancy or emergent (Reeves et al., 2018). Scoping reviews serve as an intermediary approach between initial exploration and full systematic review, offering a suitable bridge for guiding research direction and informing applied practice. This investigation is particularly well-suited to a scoping review, given that the U21 phase in the English league system is still relatively new, and research in this domain is in its infancy. An initial exploratory review confirmed that the evidence base was not extensive.

The methodological process followed the guidelines of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analysis extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) as established by Tricco et al. (2018). These guidelines have been consistently used in recent scoping reviews conducted by Perry et al. (2021), Pham et al. (2014), and Reeves et al. (2018). The review process followed five steps: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) charting data, and (5) summarizing and attaining data and reporting results.

The research question centred on the extent to which the current research literature on U21 football provides a comprehensive account of its practice, with particular reference to talent development. The objective was to identify and review any existing literature on U21 football and to evaluate the extent to which the findings constitute a valuable insight. This process provided an overview of the current research landscape, enabling the identification of gaps within the literature and recommendations for future research. More specifically, the scoping review as a whole was designed to provide an evidential backdrop that would set the scene for and inform subsequent research within the thesis.

The review was designed to include all peer-reviewed journal articles that exclusively examined or discussed men's U21 football in the English academy structure. For the purpose of this study, U21 football was defined as the phase of football that occurs after a player's scholarship years and before their involvement with a first-team squad. Therefore, studies involving younger players from football academies that focused on other phases of talent development (such as U16s or U18s), were excluded from consideration.

4.9 Search Strategy and Identifying Relevant Papers.

The search strategy began in 2021 and concluded in May of the same year. The following four databases were searched: SPORTDiscus, Pubmed, Psych INFO and Academic Search Complete. These databases were chosen as their scope was closely aligned to the objectives of the study. The search strategy sought to examine literature related to U21 football and therefore encompassed the use of relevant terms associated with it. Journal articles were identified using the following terms, which were searched within the titles and abstracts: terms football OR soccer (these terms were considered separately) AND terms covering this phase of football: ‘under 21’ OR ‘under 23’ OR ‘professional development phase’ OR ‘development squad’ OR ‘post academy’ OR developing mastery’ OR ‘reserve team’.

4.9.1 Eligibility Criteria

During the initial screening process, articles identified in the search underwent an assessment based on their title and abstract to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the review. If the information was unclear at this stage, the full text article was examined.

To be considered eligible for selection, articles had to meet the following criteria: (a) must be related to this phase of football, (b) include a population consisting of male performers from within the elite English academy structure, (c) focus solely on football without including other sports, (d) be written in English, (e) be published in peer reviewed journals, or peer reviewed reports (books) and (f) have the full text available. The criteria for inclusion did not extend beyond this into ‘grey literature’ such as national governing bodies documents. This decision was made to optimise efficiency, as unpublished literature has been shown to have minimal impact on the results and conclusions of reviews (Hartling et al., 2017). There were no

restrictions based on the publication year, following the approach seen in other scoping reviews (Arksey & O' Malley 2005; Reeves et al., 2018).

4.9.2 Selection Process

All articles that were considered to have met the eligibility criteria following the screening of title and abstract were then obtained for a comprehensive full text review. Each article was downloaded and organised within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Corp, Redmond, WA), creating a search framework that facilitated the identification of key study features such as publication year, methods, and sample characteristics. Each of these articles were then reviewed and any which did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded. Additionally, the reference list of all full text articles that were eligible for selection were screened to identify other potentially eligible papers. This review process is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

4.10 Results

The searched yielded a total of 1347 potentially relevant articles. After the removal of duplicates, 1285 articles remained and were subjected to eligibility screening by title and abstract. From this pool, 1233 were excluded and the remaining 54 articles were assessed for eligibility. Additionally, during the screening process, one other potential article was identified and added to the review. Following the full text review of these articles, 49 of them did not meet the eligibility criteria and were excluded. This process resulted in the inclusion of 6 articles for the final review, as summarised in Table 4.7.

General characteristics of the studies

The research sources included in the review primarily feature players as the most common participants ($n = 49$), followed by coaches ($n = 6$). In terms of research methodologies, the

majority of papers adopted a quantitative approach ($n = 3$); others utilised qualitative methods ($n = 2$). One of the articles is a book chapter. The research designs among the five peer-reviewed articles were varied. Of the three quantitative studies, data were collected through questionnaires on mental wellbeing. In all cases, the data were collected from players. Both qualitative papers employed interviews as their data collection method, with one featuring players and the other focusing on coaches. These papers are empirical in nature, with their primary focus on player development and/or coaches experiences. One source was a book chapter, which focused on the influences on player development (Table 4.7).

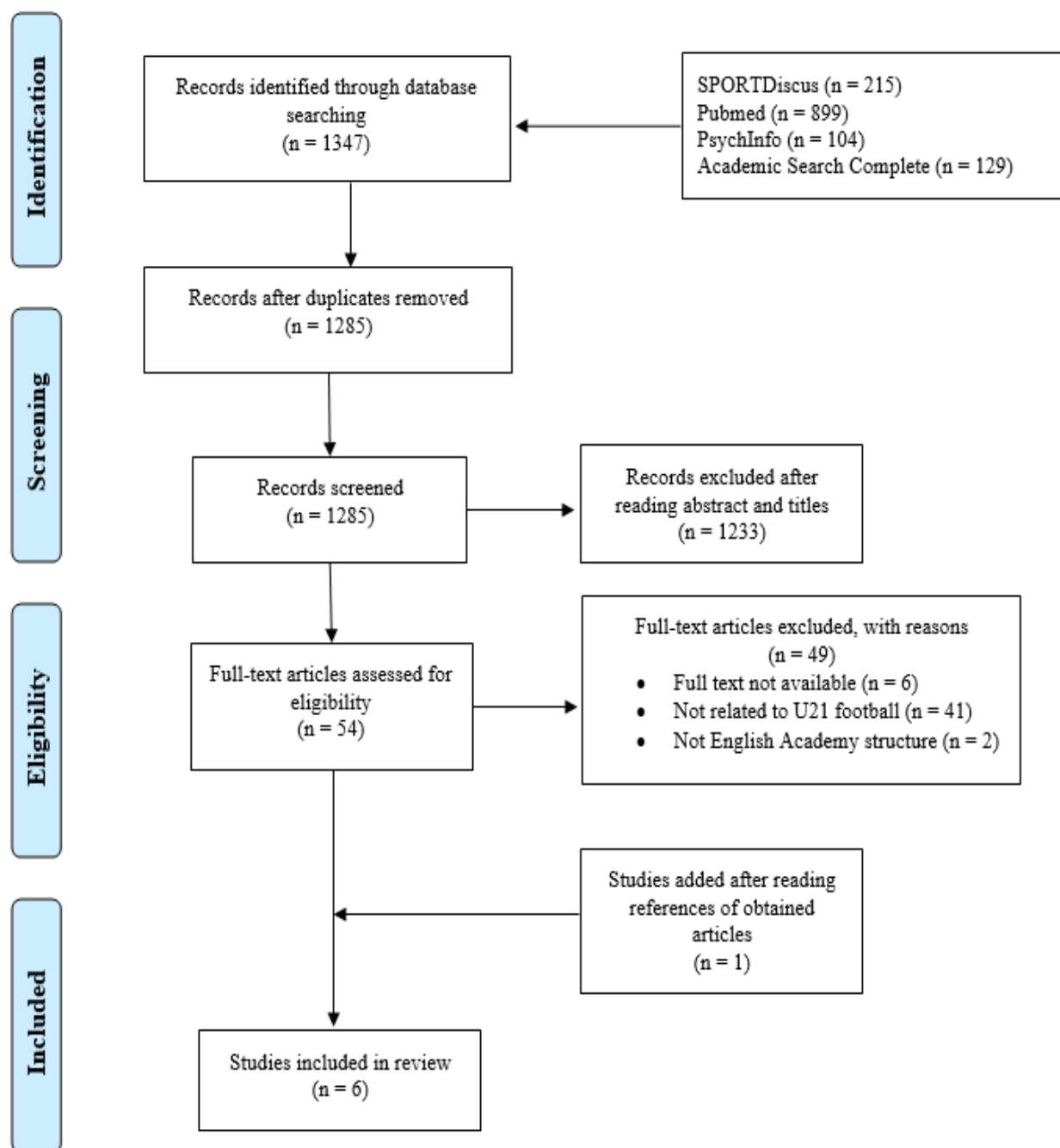


Figure 4.1. PRISMA flow chart showing screening process.

Table 4.7. Overview of studies included for analysis.

Author & Year	Aims/Purpose	Sample	Method	Theoretical lens	Key findings
Abbott et al. (2018)	Examined if subjective wellbeing in soccer players was affected by match location, match results and opposition quality.	11 U23 soccer players in PL2.	Well-being questionnaire.		Sleep quality, stress, and mood were influenced by match location and match result. Mood and stress were still negatively affected 3 days after suffering a defeat, suggesting the disappointment of losing a match persists for several days.
Abbott et al. (2019)	Examined the influence of injury, match selection and training load on mental wellbeing.	25 male soccer players from U23 squad in PL2.	Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being questionnaire.		Time out, injured and not being selected to play games significantly affected MW. Time out injured had the strongest influence on MW. Neither training load nor match result influenced the players MW.
Abbott et al. (2020)	Assessed changes in soccer players perception of mental fatigue and relationship between mental fatigue and other subjective measures of wellness.	10 U23 soccer players in PL2.	Brief Assessment of Mood questionnaire		Perception of mental fatigue acutely increases following matches and is linked to match outcome. A subjective measure of mental fatigue is closely correlated with other subjective measures including sleep, muscle soreness, fatigue and motivation to train, as such, more sensitive measures of measuring mental fatigue may be required.
Dowling et al. (2018)	Explored U21 development coach's thoughts, perspectives, and approaches within this phase of development towards an understanding of their philosophy, role and function in the athletic development process.	Six U21 development football coaches.	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews over 8 months.	Wylleman and Lavalley (2004); Bloom (1995); Richardson et al. (2013).	Clubs differed in their approach to integrating the mastery development phase. Creating the right environment for players was an essential part of their role, despite no clarity over what the right environment might be. Coaches appeared to favour creating environments that can replicate the first team environment to prepare under 21 players for the transition. Suggests coaching roles were not always defined and more support was needed from key stakeholders, regarding clarity of the role and players development.

Table continued

Author & Year	Aims/Purpose	Sample	Method	Theoretical lens	Key findings
Richardson et al. (2013)	Sociological and cultural influences on player development.	Book chapter 8: Additional levels and stages of player development (Table 8.3) Richardson et al 2013 p 149.		Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavalée (2004).	Argued a need for additional level and stages of player development that may be aligned to Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavalée's (2004). Proposed a model that identifies the post-academy development phase that exists in professional soccer. Termed additional phase as 'developing mastery' phase. recognise it as still a period of development.
Swainston et al. (2020)	Explore the evolving perspectives of young players experiences going through the junior to senior transition in professional football.	3 players at an English football league club. Followed between academy and professional contract. Experiences were explored in two phases. 1) whilst in academy and 2) in the first team setting.	Reflexive, group process (Mayan, 2009).		Academy phase: pressure to earn contract, all players spent limited time with the first team. First team phase: Demanding environment with a social change, players recognised importance of trying to fit in, all players were loaned out in this phase and felt distant from the club, frustrations came from not getting game time and feelings of no support.

4.11 Discussion

This scoping review sought to examine published academic studies that met the criteria and focused on U21 football. The results demonstrate that the area of study is limited and very much in its infancy. Given the paucity of research, drawing definitive conclusions and offering best practice guidelines has limited validity. Nevertheless, despite the scarcity of research in this field, a number of key observations and tentative conclusions can be derived from the available data. Notably, there is some insight into the role played by organisational structure and socio-cultural factors in influencing the development of players.

4.11.1 Talent Development

Three articles focused on the development of players; one investigated the developmental environment (Dowling et al., 2018), one provided an overview of player transitions (Richardson et al., 2013), and one examined youth to senior transitions (Swainston et al., 2020). The latter two sources differed in their approach. Richardson et al. (2013) reviewed the factors that shape talent development in football, highlighting this phase of football as a critical part of any talent development model. In contrast, Swainston et al. (2020) were concerned with understanding the perceptions of players transitioning out of an U18 academy environment into a first team. In this study, the players kept a video diary and were interviewed.

As previously highlighted in Part 1 of this review, the U21 phase of football has become an established stage in the structure of football in England. This is particularly evident in Category One and Two clubs, in which it distinguishes players between training squads and competitions. However, Richardson et al. (2013) identified some of the socio-cultural challenges that players in such a phase may encounter, in addition to the nature of the support required. In light of these insights, the article proposed a novel model of athletic development

that incorporated these factors, specifically tailored to this phase in a player's developmental journey (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2. Socio-cultural model of elite player development in professional football, academy, post-academy and first team level (Richardson et al, 2013).

<i>Athletic level</i>	<i>Academy (16-19s) Development</i>	<i>Post-Academy Developing Mastery</i>	<i>First team Mastery</i>
Psychological level	Adolescence	Social insecurity & comparison	(young) Adulthood Limelight stardom
Psycho-social level	Peers, parents, coach, sports psych, Ed & welfare	Partner New coach(es) Family	Manager New coach(es)
Environmental and cultural level	Process oriented Nurturing Caring Empathic	Uncompetitive Lonely Isolated Uncertain Stagnant	Outcome oriented Ruthless Masculine macho Heightened competition Team
Nature of support	Highly supportive	Bereft of social support	(Typically) crisis management, sophist

The transition phase appears to be more nuanced than described in traditional models. Richardson et al. (2013) highlight challenges that are specific to this period of development, sitting between the conclusion of a players academy scholarship and first-team level. This level of athletic development is deemed 'post academy, development mastery'. At this point, players receive a contract of professional employment but do not necessarily belong to, nor indeed play for, the first team. The duration of these contracts may vary depending on club policy and how the club perceives the likelihood of a player progressing into first team football.

The model shows an array of different challenges that players face across this stage of their career development. It is evident that a cultural difference exists between development mastery and first team mastery, a recognition shared by Relvas et al. (2010), suggesting that this cultural gap may potentially act as an additional barrier to a player's progression to the first team. This

further suggests that players would benefit from an understanding and awareness of the expectations and behaviours required for a successful transition out of this phase into a first team. This was reinforced by Røynesdal et al. (2018) when examining the role of context-related features that young players are expected to overcome, comply with or conform with when moving up to a first team level. Richardson et al. (2013) warn that if these elements are not integrated into their development, there is a possibility that a significant number of players may find themselves ill prepared for this transition, lacking (at least initially) the necessary skills and experience to navigate, adapt, and perform in a first team environment. Not surprisingly, it would be difficult to generalise across club contexts, the extent of integration between squads, early experience of first team football, and clubs' progression policies. Individual players will differ in their rate of progress from development mastery to the level of mastery considered appropriate for first team football. There is, therefore, a balance between environment and playing ability.

Swainson et al. (2020) provide the perspectives of three players going through the youth to senior transition in an English Football League club. Only those participants who received a full-time professional contract were involved, their experiences being explored over both phases. Their time in the academy was described as preparation and, following their move to the first team, orientation and adaptation (Stambulova et al., 2017).

The authors' findings are aligned with those cultural and social factors identified by Richardson et al. (2013) and Røynesdal et al. (2018). For example, players encountered a shift from a supporting to a demanding environment, but quickly recognised the importance of trying to 'fit in' with a willingness to mix in with the group. There was a palpable pressure to earn a contract, leading to stress and anxiety that could dissipate once a contract offer had materialised. During

the transition, each of the players experienced loan spells and/or periods with the U21 squad and had limited time spent with the first team. Although the study did not focus solely on the U21 phase, it shed light on those players in this adaptation stage who had the opportunity to train and participate in several games with the U21 squad. This exposure allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of a higher level of football and the associated social dynamics. It also provided context-specific learning opportunities as they mirrored first team style and tactics. Furthermore, it offered them the opportunity to impress first team staff (who coached the U21 squad) and more experienced first team players (who were often ‘drafted in’ to the U21 match-day squad).

In the instances in which players were loaned out to other clubs, they felt distant from their home club, perceiving a lack of focus on their personal development. Nevertheless, they did view such loan experiences as valuable playing opportunities. Generally, players expressed frustrations over lack of game time with their clubs and felt access to adequate support was a significant barrier. They desired more opportunities to discuss their feelings, which they believed were lacking when dealing with first team staff. An interesting outcome was the natural emergence of a support network within the U21 group. Players could seek support within this network, sharing similar stories with their peers and gaining advice from the U21 manager. This network potentially alleviated sociocultural barriers and managed players expectations by facilitating shared perceptions of the transition period, advocated by Richardson et al., (2013).

The findings from Swainson et al. (2020) and Richardson et al. (2013) highlight the significant changes in the environment that players encounter when entering this phase of football. There is some evidence that these players formed a ‘sub-culture’ within their club that offered some

mutual support. However, players were experiencing a lack of opportunity (i.e., game time with the first team) and isolation, which could potentially hinder their developmental progress. It is important to note that the small sample size and the focus on one club limits the generalizability of these findings. Nevertheless, it provides some evidence that the transition phase from post-academy to first-team football is very context (club) specific and that the differences in players' mastery levels and coaches' perceptions of readiness for first-team football make this a very individual journey. It seemed clear that there was an intention to support players but that the effectiveness of such support structures could be questioned.

One study (Dowling et al., 2018) interviewed six U21 development coaches, providing a perspective on their roles, approaches towards athletic development, and the challenges this phase posed. Coaches felt their U21 role had become more established within the club's performance structures, which, in turn, had created an improved link between the academy and the first team. Since the inception of the EPPP in 2011, this phase of football has seen a significant evolution, with the regulation of staffing structures and changes to the competition programme. Dowling and colleagues' findings highlight this progress, showing that clubs in the study had established 'bespoke' squads, creating a more fluid connection between academy and first team environments and influencing the management of player transitions.

However, the clubs differed in their approach to integrating the 'developing mastery phase' into their organizational structure. Coaches expressed varying views on coaching styles and philosophies about player development. Some coaches prioritised individual development, while others emphasised winning as the focus, and some had a combination of both approaches. More than half of the six coaches highlighted the importance of winning games. They considered losing as 'unacceptable' and placed an elevated focus on winning. This aligns with

the EPPP's vision for games programmes, which emphasises providing players with "opportunities to practise for the professional game". To achieve this, players need to "experience environments where they can learn how to win, occasionally facing hostile situations that challenge them to cope with stress and competitive pressure" (2011, p.59). However, Dowling's work highlights the dangers of this "win at all costs" approach, which can often be counterproductive and detrimental to the individual development of the athlete and even negatively impact team performance.

Furthermore, Richardson et al. (2013) suggest that many of the sociological and cultural factors they highlight as potentially debilitating for the development of talented players in this stage of football could be managed more appropriately by the practitioners and agencies involved. Creating the right environment was highlighted as a key theme. Some coaches acknowledged the importance of preparing players for the potential transition to the first team by creating a demanding environment that mirrors the first team and preparing them psychologically to cope with the demands and the mental toughness required. However, coaches also expressed feelings of being caught between two distinct cultures: the academy and the first team. This left them somewhat unsure about what the ideal environment should be, potentially necessitating the creation of a subculture that incorporated elements from both domains.

Another challenge reported by coaches was the continuous movement of players in and out of their groups. This meant they regularly worked with a diverse range of players, spanning U16 to first team players. This further complicated their coaching approach, team culture and overall environment, as they felt the need to accommodate players at different stages of development in terms of technical skills, tactics, and physical maturation.

The findings provide a valuable insight into an under-researched area. By offering perspective from coaches, they help us to understand the challenges faced, such as the balance between prioritising winning and player development, adapting to the needs of players at various levels and accommodating different expectations about appropriate skills development. The findings were based on a small sample of coaches and their club contexts, and limited detail was provided on the coaches' working practices.

4.11.2 Mental Wellbeing

Each of the papers in this section sought to examine the impact on mental wellbeing and mental fatigue of a number of factors associated with being in an U21 squad. The notion of wellbeing has been identified as a determining factor in creating quality talent development environments (Ivarsson et al., 2015).

The three studies explored players' perceptions using similar methodologies; adopting a quantitative data capture through the use of questionnaires. All of the participants were part of an U21 playing squad competing in the Premier League 2. The first study, conducted by Abbott et al. (2018), examined subjective wellbeing in 11 players using an in-house wellbeing questionnaire. This measured potential effects stemming from match location, match results and opposition quality. In the second study (Abbott et al., 2019), 25 players completed the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale to investigate the influence of injury, match selection and training load on mental wellbeing. The third study (Abbott et al., 2020) assessed the perceptions of mental fatigue in 10 players and examined the relationship between mental fatigue and other subjective measures of wellness. This assessment used the Brief Assessment of Mood questionnaire (BAM+; Shearer et al., 2017). Subjective wellbeing (Abbott et al., 2018) was assessed, following recommendations for identifying overtraining by Hooper and

Mackinnon (1995). These were: 1) level of muscle soreness, 2) level of fatigue, 3) quality of sleep, 4) mood, and 5) level of stress on a given day.

Findings suggest that irrespective of the physical demands of the matches (as measured by s-RPE), match location, match result, and the quality of the opposition significantly affected subjective wellbeing. Specifically, sleep quality, stress, and mood were impacted, with match results and location having most influence. Matches played away seemed to negatively impact sleep quality, mood, and stress with the authors citing non-performance-related demands as possible causes, such as travel, unfamiliar surroundings, habit disruption, changes in food provision, pressure from away supporters and sleep loss (Waters & Lovell, 2002). After losing a match, stress levels increased while sleep and mood quality decreased. This has also been observed in female football (Oliveira et al., 2009) and in hockey and football (Jones & Sheffield, 2007); studies that reported more negative states and higher levels of depression, anger and anxiety after losses. Negative impacts on stress and mood persisted for several days after a loss.

Similarly, Abbott et al. (2020) found that mental fatigue acutely increases following matches and was linked to match outcome, with lower ratings of mental fatigue observed following a win compared to a loss or draw. The subjective measure of mental fatigue was closely correlated with other subjective measures, including sleep, muscle soreness, fatigue, and motivation to train. This suggests that more sensitive measures may be required to assess mental fatigue accurately. In the study by Abbott et al. (2019), time out injured and not being selected to play games significantly affected mental well-being of under U21 players during the course of a season. Although the study did not provide specific details on how injury could impact players mental wellbeing, it implied that injuries hinder their ability to train and perform

daily tasks, potentially affecting a player's identity and leading to feelings of boredom, frustration, and anger.

Furthermore, if players are not functioning physically, emotionally, or socially, it may unsettle their overall state of wellbeing. Not being selected for the match squad had a moderate negative influence on players mental wellbeing. The study speculates that this can lead to a significant psychological distress, akin to the distress experienced when injured. This issue becomes more pertinent in an U21 squad, as the career trajectories of players in this phase remain uncertain. When players are injured or not selected, they are unable to make a strong impression on coaches who ultimately decide whether they will be promoted to the first team and/or offered another professional contract. The paper further suggests that the potential threat of players potentially being released by their club without the opportunity to prove themselves had a negative impact, and these (relatively young) players may lack the appropriate coping skills to manage the psychological stress associated with such uncertainty.

Although, yet again, the number of relevant papers is small, the findings provide initial insights into player wellbeing in the U21 phase of football. The work recognises several factors that impact wellbeing during this phase – selection, injury, match results, uncertainty - reinforcing the need to provide support to help players cope with these facets of pre-first team football. However, further work is still required as, the sample sizes and use of a limited number of clubs may not fully represent a comprehensive account of the stress factors impacting players in the U21 development phase.

4.11.3 Additions to the Scoping Review

It is important to note, that since the completion of the scoping review, which concluded in May 2021, a re-run of the search in November 2023 of the databases revealed two new papers that are deemed pertinent to include as additions. These papers met the eligibility criteria and focused on U21 football, however contained within this section for discussion only, and not included in the results section.

There are two additional articles for inclusion, one focused on the loan system as a crucial pathway for player development in U21/23 football, and how it may aid the transition into a first team (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). The other article by Filhi and Butterworth (2021) examined the stress and recovery of U21 players depending on their status within the team.

The first study conducted by Filhi and Butterworth (2021), examined the recovery and stress of 15 professional and 14 U21 players in a League One club in relation to their status e.g., whether they were regular starters or substitutes. They adopted a quantitative data capture through the use of the RESTQ-Sport-76 questionnaire (Kallus & Kellmann, 2016). This measured four dimensions: general stress (i.e., general stress, emotional stress, social stress, conflicts/pressure, fatigue, lack of energy, physical complaints); general recovery (i.e., success, social recovery, physical recovery, general well-being, sleep quality); sport-specific stress (i.e., disturbed breaks, emotional exhaustion, injury); and sport-specific recovery (i.e., being in shape, personal accomplishment, self-efficacy, self-regulation). Findings suggested that players who were regular starters showed higher levels of general well-being, being in shape, and self-efficacy, in comparisons to substitutes. Critical conclusions reported that this was due to those starters getting more game time and expressed more positive feelings as they felt they were achieving and progressing in line with their perceived goals. Conversely, those players

who were regularly substitutes, felt a lack of progression and feared not having their contract renewed. It was also suggested that these players may find it hard to cope with this pressure. These players also showed higher levels of lack of energy than U21 starters. This alluded to mental fatigue (e.g., I was unable to concentrate well, and put off making decisions) which may impact their ability to cope with not playing on a regular basis.

These findings relate to the wellbeing articles in this scoping review, in particularly Abbott et al. (2019) in relating to the impact of not being selected for games. This had a negative influence on players mental wellbeing and can lead to psychological distress. This may be pertinent in this group of players, due to their foreshortened future, and in this predicament, unable to make an impression and prove themselves to try and secure a contract. In light of these findings it may be plausible for practitioners to be aware of the impact of little game time for U21 players, and be conscious of this in match selection decisions, especially when first team players may drop down and/or younger players step up, taking their place.

Prendergast and Gibson (2022) interviewed six managers from either the EPL or EFL, and three professional footballers in the EFL, providing a retrospective perspective on the role of the loan system in U21/23 football in developing professional footballers.

Findings highlighted that a loan experience in a first team environment, can provide players with a better experience in preparing them for a transition, than that of the U21/23 environment, and that coaches were advocated of this as part of player development. It could provide these players with an opportunity for exposure to first team football, which has been highlighted as an issue in this phase of football (Swainson et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2013). The loan move was seen to provide a more realistic challenge to aid the transition by providing a higher

level of challenge in games and training, due the result orientation nature of the environment, something that was indicated by Dowling et al., (2013) as an issue in U21 football. The loan could be a contributing factor in players physical development and psycho-social development, such as resilience, commitment, courage, discipline, which were not being met in this phase, and stated as important skills when transitioning into a first team, or transition from youth to senior football (Gledhill et al., 2017). These skills were not being adequately met in this phase, due to limited exposure to first team. In agreement with Richardson et al., (2013), without this, they may be ill prepared to cope with the demands of a transition into the different environment. Positive performances whilst on loan were also perceived to be contributing factors in increased first team selection opportunities at the player's parent club. However, an emphasis was also placed on the need to provide consistent pastoral support to under 21/23s players during their loan period.

4.12 Overall Summary

This scoping review was founded on the premise that the U21 category had become an acknowledged phase in the development of a footballer's career trajectory, but that the scope, scale and characteristics of provision were unclear. Similarly, it had not appeared on cursory examination to have been the focus of academic research. The review, therefore, undertook to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the U21 provision in elite level football in England. The review process involved two distinct parts: first, a desk-based scoping exercise, and second, a review of the existing body of academic literature.

The data presented provide a picture of provision in all clubs that have category status, offering a clearer account of how U21 football is organised. It is evident that a distinctive domain exists, and since the inception of the EPPP, this phase of football has become firmly established with

a structured framework centred on specific competition. However, there is noteworthy variation in provision, primarily linked to the category status in which clubs find themselves. It is reasonable to assume that this variation is resource-dependant, impacting both the quality and nature of the provision offered.

The scoping review synthesized current research findings, offering an overview of relevant articles, while, at the same time, pinpointing a very limited number of papers. This finding is somewhat unexpected, given that this transition phase is understood to be a pivotal point in a player's career trajectory. In addition, the absence of attention to developmental issues has not yet provided a foundation with which to underpin appropriate practice. Nevertheless, in relation to this study, the desktop review did offer some insights into the landscape of U21 provision and a small number of papers raised issues about the factors that might impact players at this stage of their football journey.

The primary aim of this scoping review was to establish a context and baseline information that would underpin subsequent research. To this extent it fulfilled its purpose. However, the lack of specific attention to this phase was illustrated in clubs' website communication that related specifically to their U21 provision. The information about clubs' policies and ambitions for this phase was scarce. However, there was some indication that this phase was intended to facilitate player development (continuing the broader academy policy) and was considered to be instrumental in producing players for the first team or for a potential sale to another club. There was a modest recognition of holistic support as well as football development. However, these statements were brief and were only found across a limited number of clubs. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to consider such approaches as common practice. Although a matter of speculation at this stage, it is conceivable that clubs consider the U21 stage to be an

‘internal’ provision and related more to their ‘internal’ policies about the purpose and nature of this phase in relation to first team readiness, player retention, and development. This perspective may be in contrast to their academy provision in general, for which parental communication is typically considered of greater importance. In other words, by this stage, players are not ‘choosing a club’ but the club is ‘choosing them’. A more comprehensive understanding of the purpose and practice of clubs is necessary, particularly by exploring the perceptions and experiences of players and coaches.

There is some evidence of ‘firming up’ the establishment of this phase within the development pathway with the deployment of dedicated coaching roles, such as U21 development coaches. However, only one study to date has explored how these coaches operate, and only one further study has gathered insights from player experiences. Findings suggest a significant number of key complexities associated with this phase, including coaching practice philosophies, relationship to first team preparation, attitudes to competition, isolation through loan arrangements, sociocultural barriers, and player expectations.

There seems to be no doubt that creating the right environment is crucial for players (indeed all athletes) to thrive, yet there appears to be a lack of consensus as to what constitutes the ideal environment, or, more particularly, what the many prescriptions for sound practice might look like in context. In terms of the influence and impact of organisational culture, a better understanding of organisational culture as it impacts on the U21 phase of the game, whether facilitative or debilitating, and the values that contribute to player progression is needed. This includes clubs’ philosophies and working practices related to player development, as well as support systems for both players and coaches. There is a potential for a ‘clash’ of cultures with the U21 stage bridging the transition from academy football to first team football. Likewise,

the evident talent development phase of the academy structure differs from the more instrumental purpose of the first team squad. Given that the U21 phase is recognised to be ‘developmental’, the nature of the environment and the extent to which it can be considered to be developmental or an adequate preparation for first team football is worthy of investigation.

By its very nature, an age-related category will have a constant process of players moving in and out of the squad. Other factors to be considered are that the data from Premier League 2 team sheets show both players who are 17 or under and those who are over 21 years of age. The competition rules permit up to four over-age players in a team. Personal experience also suggests that training squad compositions can be flexible, depending on numbers, injuries, recent game time, and the content of the session. Taken together this suggests a potentially high level of instability of the U21 squad. In particular, this may lead to an impact on team selection and individual player’s game time, which was shown to be concern for players. If players are not provided with the opportunity to play consistently within their own squad or secure loan opportunities, and they lack prospects with the first team, it may lead to feelings of stagnation, isolation, and a diminished sense of belonging.

The review points to the scant literature available on mental health among professional football players in this development phase of the game. It could reasonably be assumed that there was a close relationship between the development environment and its impact on player wellbeing. This further reinforces the need to establish players’ perceptions of the talent development environment and the perceived impact of factors such as injuries, loan spells, match selection, training load, and psychological support. There are no obvious explanations for the dearth of academic literature on this stage within football career progression. It may be that its transition character and an associated sense of instability and mixed purpose may render it less attractive

to researchers. Nevertheless, the evidence from the scoping review suggests that there are both structural and policy matters that would bear further investigation.

The review has established the scope and, to a more limited extent, the character and goals of the U21 phase. It has, therefore, fulfilled its purpose of providing a rationale and content for further research. The stated purpose of ‘developmental progression’ and preparation for first team football needs to be examined critically. In particular, the perceptions of players in this phase should be at the centre of these investigations. Although a number of very talented footballers will already have made the journey into first team football by this age, there is a clear need to have a stepping stone between the U18 academy structure and first team football – both in developmental and structural terms.

The findings from this study raises pertinent questions, particularly around the profile of players’ ages, and whether, in the light of varied provision structures, they share similar or differing experiences. It also prompts consideration of whether the significant uptake in the U21 workforce impacts this experience, especially related to player support. In addition, the more nuanced context identified (i.e., transition into a more demanding environment, and issues around stability and competitiveness) may further impact player experiences and consequently, the integrity of the environment as a talent development process. Some evidence has been provided on the scale and scope of the U21 domain; these findings reinforce the strategic role and importance of this phase and provide a rationale for further research to create a clearer picture of U21 provision. Study Two will build upon these initial findings, expanding the scope of enquiry to a broad sample of players. It aims to examine critically the realities of U21 football and the nature/quality of its developmental ambitions, leading to an awareness of its strengths and those areas in need of improvement.

Chapter Five: Study Two

U21 Squad Player Perceptions of the Talent Development Environment in English Professional Football

5.1 Introduction

The scoping review described in Chapter Four was conducted to provide a degree of insight into the extent and nature of the U21 development phase of professional football, which to date has been inadequately delineated. Previously, the way in which clubs navigate this phase of the EPPP framework (Premier League, 2011) lacked clarity. The scoping review identified the various system components that constitute this phase of provision such as staffing structures, squad sizes, league origins, and players' ages. Furthermore, the review provided an insight into how clubs promote this phase of development through key messages and mission statements. While the scoping review provided a more-informed starting point and benchmark for this phase of football, the 'practice' that is characteristic of such provision remains unclear. For that reason, Study Two is designed to elicit a more participant focus, through gaining insight into the experience of being a player in this environment.

Although described in various ways, the U21 phase is characterised as a talent development phase that is at a transition point between youth academy football and membership of a club's first team squad. As already identified, there is a complete dearth of research into the current practice of U21 football. However, there is a body of work that has explored talent development within the broader football setting. For example, Mills et al.'s (2012) research identified that the development and success of young football players is influenced by a blend of innate, psychological and behavioural factors, and that these factors are shaped by environmental experiences (also, Reilly et al., 2003). Furthermore, they suggested that players should be offered a dynamic and stimulating environment to stimulate and acquire relevant characteristics for their development (Mills et al., 2012) and be provided with a suitable learning environment to achieve their potential (William & Reilly, 2000). Mills et al. (2014a), building upon their earlier research, recognised the need to cultivate appropriate development environments. They

refer to Gagne (2003) to underline this, contending that “*exceptional natural abilities can remain solely as gifted if not effectively nurtured via the development process into systematically developed talent*” (p.1458). This suggests that the environments created at a youth level in football are perhaps one of the most directly controllable factors in shaping the trajectory of a young player’s career. In essence, providing the relevant resources for an effective and successful talent development environment is paramount for athletes to experience positive transitions and progress into the next stage of their careers (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

Larson et al. (2013) suggested that effective development environments should adopt a holistic and highly individualized, context-specific approach. Their study echoes the observations made by Henriksen et al. (2010) and Martindale et al. (2005) that successful environments are characterized by a strong, open, and cohesive organizational culture based on integrated values concerned with the balance of the player’s daily lives in school and sport.

More recent studies have advanced the understanding of talent development environments within the context of a football setting by investigating younger academy players’ perceptions of their environment. Contributions by Gledhill and Harwood (2019), Mills et al. (2014b), and Mitchell et al. (2021) have reported that environments in this context endorse long-term development, offer good support networks, prioritise improvement rather than winning, and promote a sense of self-responsibility. Those who perceived their environments as supportive and orientated towards long-term development experience lower stress levels and higher wellbeing compared to their counterparts with less favourable perceptions (Ivarsson et al., 2015; Lilja, 2011). These findings resonate with the earlier work of Henriksen et al. (2010), which highlights the importance of the microenvironment, including coaches and peers, in

fostering well-being among youth academy players. In essence, these studies underline the importance of positive and negative perceptions about their environment in shaping the developmental journey of players, and they emphasise the multifaceted influence of positive environments on both talent development and overall wellbeing.

However, with the exception of a few studies in a football setting (see Ivarsson et al., 2015; Green et al., 2020), the impact of talent development environments and any relationship to perceived levels of wellbeing has been largely overlooked (Burgess & Naughton, 2010). It is reasonable to assume that players within a football academy environment, especially within the later phase of development, are part of a highly competitive environment, facing stresses connected to their career and life in general. Bergemon et al. (2015) highlighted concerns around the psycho-social aspects of youth sports in an expert statement, suggesting, an unhealthy sports environment can increase levels of stress and depression. The sports environment can also be a source of trauma, especially within a football academy environment (Green et al., 2020), and recent accounts of youth player experiences has reported a somewhat unsupportive and abusive environment (Calvin, 2017). This has specifically been related to youth athletes becoming increasingly exposed to excessive/unrealistic demands and expectations, such as, high intensity training (Tears et al., 2018), competition for places and striving for that professional or next contract in the face of high attrition rates (Kingston et al., 2018), injury (Gouttebarga, et al., 2015), and game time (Ivarsson, et al., 2015; Swainston, et al., 2020).

Perhaps of more relevance in a football setting, issues relating to the health and wellbeing of youth athletes has been linked to early specialisation (Bergeron et al., 2015). Subsequently, this can create a narrow sense of identity (Mitchell, et al., 2014) and a fear of the impact of

deselection (Blakelock et al., 2016), evoke feelings of loss and a void which can lead to issues surrounding their personality and mental health such as anxiety, fear, anger and humiliation (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Calvin, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014; Wilkinson, 2021). Consequently, negative outcomes experienced by young athletes (e.g., being deselected or overlooked, injury, overtraining, psychological overload from excessive demands) can contribute to a reduced sense of wellbeing and premature athlete dropout from sport (DiFiori et al., 2014) and detrimental effects on performance (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

It might also be the case that there are context-specific factors in the U21 phase that bear directly on the relationship between environment and players' developmental journey and, therefore, require attention, including the phase-specificity of training and matches, the 'proximity' to a first team contract, and the level of formal and informal interaction with first team players. The implication is that, just as with the younger academy players, there is a need to have a positive relationship between the characteristics of the environment and the goals of the players (also assuming but not taking for granted that there is some measure of alignment between the goals of the players and those of the club). Nevertheless, there are specific factors that might be assumed to be the focus of attention by coaches and other stakeholders in the U21 phase and embraced by players: understanding the journey from youth to senior progression, reflecting on and mapping out career advancement, coping strategies for interacting with first team squads. In their study with younger players Mitchell et al. (2021) found that while they receive good support from various practitioners within their environment for skill and competency development, they often struggle to understand how such work aligns with their personal expectations for progression.

Talent development environments that lack support or a focus on long-term development may lead to deficiencies in the psychological resilience necessary to sustain athletes' progression (Mitchell et al., 2021; Swainston et al., 2020). This may be relevant in U21 football in which the 'long-term horizon' is foreshortened. These assertions carry significant weight, particularly considering the persistent loss of talent within the system when transitioning from youth to senior levels (Poli et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2013), and the relatively small proportion of players who will be offered a contract in their parent clubs following the U21 phase. By its very nature and situation within the structure of the professional game, U21 football is a post-academy period but one in which (the majority of) players are not yet 'finished' physically, psychologically, technically or emotionally. This is a turning point in players' careers, with inevitable attention to selection and future employment, which, in turn, may create uncertainty and insecurity.

The intention in Study Two is to address the overall research question in the context of (a) the need for a greater insight into the U21 landscape, (b) an awareness of how little detailed insight into working practices in this domain is available, (c) potential questions raised about the developmental quality of the environment, and (d) the potential impact of the environment on players' wellbeing. The next logical step is to obtain the views of those who are most centrally concerned with the U21 experience – the players. There are two elements to this: first, a questionnaire-based survey, and in Study Three, interviews with players and coaches. In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives were established:

1. To survey a range of U21 players *in situ*, capturing their perceptions of their talent development environment and their general wellbeing.

2. To structure that survey such that differences between U21 players operating across clubs and categories within the English academy system could be subject to analysis.

5.2 Methodology

5.2.1 Initial Procedure

Following ethical approval, a sample of football clubs was contacted via email, informing them about the purpose and broad outline of the study. Clubs were initially selected through a well-established network of personal contacts belonging to the principal investigator to ensure potential access to players early on in the data collection process. Subsequently, the remainder of the clubs were recruited through a snowball sampling technique (Cohen, 2018). In total 10 clubs were recruited.

The initial email invited each club to express interest in being part of the study by providing ‘gatekeeper’ consent from relevant personnel at the football club. Following this, the gatekeeper at each club was asked to facilitate the promotion of the study by sending all potential participants (players) a pre-drafted email inviting them to take part in the study. The email contained detailed information about what their participation would entail and incorporated a link via Microsoft TEAMS to access the TDEQ-5 and GHQ-12 questionnaires, alongside other relevant documentation, such as a participant information letter and informed consent form. Where the players consented to take part, the consent forms were completed and returned as part of the questionnaire submission, facilitated through the same online link embedded within the email. Only once participants had read all information and agreed to take part would they then complete the questionnaires for data collection.

5.2.2 Participants

A total of 87 U21 football players aged 17-22 (mean 19.4, SD = 1.12) participated in this study. All participants held full-time professional contracts with their respective clubs, engaged in daily training and match activities as members of the U21 squad, and received coaching from dedicated U21 coaches. This ensured that reliable phase-specific perceptions of players in their development environment could be gathered. Of these players, 68 were from the UK, 3 from ROI, and 16 from various overseas countries, specifically Lebanon ($n=1$), France ($n=3$), Italy ($n=1$), Czech Republic ($n=1$), Spain ($n=2$), Poland ($n=2$), Germany ($n=1$), Caribbean ($n=1$), Jamaica ($n=1$), Australia ($n=1$), Hong Kong ($n=1$), and Gambia ($n=1$).

The players were recruited from a total of 10 clubs, representing different category status as assessed under the EPPP (Premier League, 2011). Specifically, 48 players were recruited from 5 Category One clubs, and 39 from 5 Category Two clubs. The original intention had been to obtain additional data from both Category Three and Four clubs. However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent financial instability, many Category Three clubs had disbanded their U21 development squads. There were, therefore, an insufficient number of players to constitute a proportionate sample size. Category Four clubs displayed too much structural diversity to be considered a homogenous sample population. For example, a number of clubs had opted for a highly-specialised and heavily-resourced late development model, more closely resembling higher category characteristics, thus not accurately representing Category Four in comparison to other clubs with more-limited resources.

The players recruited represented 2 Premier League clubs, 5 Championship clubs, and 3 League One clubs. Based on the data obtained from the scoping review, which indicated a total player count of approximately 784 players in Categories One and Two, this sample constitutes 11

percent of the population, with 9 percent from Category One and 14 percent from Category Two. Although not specifically recruited for this reason, there was a balanced geographical representation of clubs across England (i.e., North $n=5$, South $n=2$ and the Midlands $n=3$).

5.3 Instrumentation

The growing need to understand the process of effective talent development resulted in the development of the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ) (Martindale et al., 2010; 2013). The tool is framed specifically to measure the key holistic and generic processes involved in the effective development of “talented athletes” (Martindale et al., 2010). The resultant questionnaire is based on previous work that developed a set of generic talent development guidelines that provided a broad picture of what is known about the development of talent (Martindale et al., 2005; 2007). Four generic features were identified:

1. Long term aims and methods,
2. Wide ranging coherent messages and support,
3. Emphasis on development rather than early success,
4. Individual and ongoing development.

Martindale et al. (2010) argued that there is enough evidence to support a number of important generic features of effective talent development environments and that a tool could be developed to evaluate these across a wide range of applied settings. The original development of the questionnaire yielded a 59-item, seven factor structure (Martindale et al., 2010).

1. Long Term Development Focus (24 items),
2. Quality Preparation (five items),
3. Communication (seven items),
4. Understanding the Athlete (four items),

5. Support Network (eight items),
6. Challenging and Supportive Environment (three items),
7. Long Term Development Fundamentals (seven items).

Martindale et al. (2013) examined the ecological validity of the TDEQ, testing its real-world application across a range of higher and lower quality environments. Results indicated robust structural properties and sound ecological validity and that the questionnaire was predictive with 77.8% accuracy, which provides evidence that it could be used with confidence in an applied setting. Since its original development, the 59-item TDEQ has been used by a range of researcher across sports and contexts (Hall et al., 2019), particularly within a football setting, to capture player perceptions (Gledhill et al., 2019; Ivarsson et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2014b). Further work has developed a shortened version with improvements in its psychometric properties (Li et al., 2015). The revised version (TDEQ-5) is a 25-item questionnaire with 5 subscales:

1. Long Term Development Focus (five items),
2. Holistic Quality Preparation (seven items),
3. Support Network (four items),
4. Communication (four items),
5. Alignment of Expectations (five items).

Since this revision, two studies (Li et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020) tested the use of the TDEQ-5 in different contexts and specific athlete populations across individual and team sports and found that the re-specified TDEQ-5 instrument had acceptable global model fit. In addition, Gesbert et al. (2021) validated the TDEQ-5, with talented Swiss football players and again found the questionnaire had an acceptable global fit. Two further studies have used this 25-

item questionnaire in football (Mitchell et al., 2021; Gangsø et al., 2021) indicating that the TDEQ-5 (25 items) is the most structurally robust version available.

5.3.1 TDEQ-5

Developed by Li et al. (2015), the TDEQ-5 is designed to assess perceptions of the features of good practice experienced by athletes in their development environment. Specifically, the instrument comprises five factors:

- (1) Long-term development focus (5 items): The extent to which developmental programmes are specifically designed to facilitate athletes' long-term success (e.g., fundamental training and rounded development, ongoing opportunities, and de-emphasis on winning);
- (2) Holistic quality preparation (7 items): The extent to which intervention programmes are prepared both inside and outside of sports settings (e.g., caring coach, clear guidance, mental preparation, and balanced lifestyle);
- (3) Support network (4 items): The extent to which a coherent, approachable, and wide-ranging support network is available for the athlete in all areas (e.g., practitioners, parents, coaches, and schools);
- (4) Communication (4 items): The extent to which the coach communicates effectively with the athlete in both formal and informal settings (e.g., development path, rationale for training, and feedback); and
- (5) Alignment of expectations (5 items): The extent to which goals for sport development are coherently set and aligned (e.g., goal setting, goal review, and individualised goals).

The scale has acceptable internal reliability and convergent validity and is suitable for a range of stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, sport scientists) (Li et al., 2015). The items are measured using a 6-point Likert scale, labelled with "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6).

5.3.2 GHQ-12

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) was used to detect an individual's perception of their psychological distress and wellbeing (Goldberg et al., 1997). The questionnaire examines psychological distress in communities and nonpsychiatric settings (Blakelock et al., 2016) and incorporates dimensions indicative of positive well-being (e.g., have you recently been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing?) anxiety (e.g., have you recently lost much sleep over worry?), and loss of confidence (e.g., have you recently been losing confidence in yourself?) (Ivarsson et al., 2015). These items are measured on a four-point multiple choice with scaled options. In a recent systematic scoping review (Armino et al., 2021), the GHQ-12 was deemed to be a popular tool used to screen the presence of anxiety and depression symptoms amongst athletes and that it was a robust psychometric tool that can be administered quickly in an unobtrusive manner. One such study used the tool in a football talent development research setting (Ivarsson et al., 2015).

A higher score on the GHQ-12 represents greater psychological distress (Blakelock et al., 2016) and although there are several ways of scoring the GHQ-12 (e.g., modified Likert, simple Likert, GHQ scoring, CGHQ method), Armino et al. (2021) found that 72% of studies used the traditional GHQ scoring method (i.e. 0-0-1-1) which has also been found to have the lowest measurement error (Hankins, 2008). Therefore, a maximum score of 12 and a minimum of 0 could be achieved. A score of more than or equal to three was used to indicate clinical levels of psychological distress and a score of less than or equal to two was used to indicate the absence of psychological distress. These values were selected based on previous research and overall recommendations (Armino et al., 2021).

5.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using SPSS (version 28) at a number of levels, following a similar process to Gledhill and Harwood (2019), Mills et al., (2014b), and Mitchell et al., (2021). First, a descriptive analysis of the TDEQ-5 items and subscales was carried out. To assess the reliability (level of internal consistency) of subscales, Cronback alpha scores were calculated with a cut off $\alpha = .70$ (DeVellis, 2003). This is to identify areas of strength and areas for development for the TDEs for the whole group at item level and sub-scale level. Second, to further identify key strengths and areas for improvement, items were quintile ranked. Key strengths were identified as the top 20% of items and key areas for development were identified as the bottom 20% of items. Third, the study compared differences in the TDEQ-5 subscales between academy Categories One and Two using a multivariate analysis of variance with Pillai's trace. The level of significance was calculated at 0.05. Effect size of different variables was reported as a partial eta-squared with recommended levels (Richardson, 2011). Fourth, a correlation was undertaken to understand the relationship between players' perceptions of their talent development environment and wellbeing using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Finally, the study compared difference in the GHQ between academy Categories One and Two using an independent t-test.

5.5 Results

The results are structured in a way that corresponds to the presentation of similar data in other studies (Gledhill & Harwood, 2019; Mills et al, 2014b; Mitchell et al., 2021). First, to show the perception of players' development environment and general well-being at overall factor level, the mean subscale scores are displayed in Table 1. Second, players perceptions are presented in more detail at the item level across the whole group and academy categories to identify strengths and areas for development. These descriptive data for the 25 TDQE-5 items are

summarised in Table 2. Analysis of the top five and bottom five items is displayed in Figure 1 and depicts the most (20%) and least (20%) positively perceived items, indicating key strengths and areas for development.

5.5.1 Subscale-Level Analysis

Based on previous research in defining strengths and areas to develop with the use of the TDEQ (Gledhill & Harwood, 2019), it was decided that a subscale mean of four or above would indicate a strength and below four would indicate an area for improvement. Based on previous research and overall recommendations for use of the GHQ-12 (Armino et al., 2021) a score of more than or equal to three was used to indicate clinical levels of psychological distress and a scores of less than or equal to two was used to indicate the absence of psychological distress.

Table 5.1. TDEQ-5 and GHQ-12 mean scores for player perception of general health and quality of the development environment.

Subscale	Whole Group			CAT 1			CAT 2		
	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI
GHQ	1.14	1.82	[0.76, 1.52]	1.25	1.94	[0.70, 1.80]	1.10	1.71	[0.56, 1.64]
LTD	4.39	0.70	[4.24, 4.55]	4.40	0.81	[4.20, 4.61]	4.38	0.55	[4.14, 4.61]
AOE*	3.80	0.86	[3.59, 3.95]	4.02	0.87	[3.78, 4.27]	3.53	0.77	[3.24, 3.79]
COM	3.90	1.01	[3.68, 4.12]	4.08	1.08	[3.73, 4.37]	3.69	0.88	[3.39, 4.04]
HQP	3.86	0.99	[3.67, 4.10]	3.77	1.12	[3.48, 4.06]	3.69	0.79	[3.68, 4.33]
SN	4.60	0.88	[4.41, 4.80]	4.60	1.08	[4.35, 4.86]	4.58	0.55	[4.30, 4.89]

Note. TDEQ = TDE Questionnaire; GHQ = General Health Questionnaire; CAT = categorisation; CI = confidence interval; LTD = Long-Term Development; AOE = Alignment of Expectation; COM = Communication; HQP = Holistic Quality Preparation; SN = Support Network.

*Significant difference between levels ($p < .05$).

At this overall factor level, players reported most positively that their development environment exhibited a strong support network ($M=4.60$, $SD=0.88$, five items, $\alpha =.86$); followed by long-term development focus ($M=4.39$, $SD=0.70$, four items, $\alpha =.79$). However, features of their environment relating to Alignment of Expectations ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.86$, four items, $\alpha =.85$); Holistic Quality Preparation ($M=3.86$, $SD=0.99$, seven items, $\alpha =.90$); and communication ($M=3.90$, $SD=1.01$, five items, $\alpha =.90$) were not viewed as particularly strong. All Cronbach's alpha score show a high level of internal consistency, therefore considered a reliable measure. Player's perception of their overall general health and well-being was viewed as being good ($M=1.14$, $SD=1.82$).

Table 5.1 provides the descriptive data for the subscale analysis. A multivariate analysis using Pillai's trace reported difference in the TDEQ-5 between Category One and Two, $V=0.44$; $F=1.865$; $p < .026$; $\eta_p^2 = .441$. Tests of between subject effects showed significant differences for Alignment of Expectation, $F=7.76$; $p = .007$; $\eta_p^2 = .085$. No significant differences were shown between Category One and Two for Long-Term Development, Support Network, Holistic Quality Preparation, or Communication (each $p > 0.05$).

A two-sample t-test was performed to compare general health between Category One and Two club players. There was no significant difference in general health between Category One ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.94$) and Category Two ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 1.71$); $t(85) = .371$, $p = .711$.

A Pearson's correlation reported the relationship between players' perceptions of their talent development environment and general health showing a significant but weak negative relationship between general health and LTD [$r(87) = -.346$, $p = .001$], AOE [$r(87) = -.257$, $p = .016$], COM [$r(87) = -.212$, $p = .49$] and SN [$r(87) = -.350$, $p = .001$]. A non-significant negative relationship was found between general health and HQP [$r(87) = -.193$, $p = .73$].

5.5.2 Item-Level Analysis

The quintile analysis of the TDQE-5 results meant that the highest and lowest scoring 5 items were highlighted to indicate strengths ranging in scale by +1 as most positive to + 5, and areas for improvement ranging in scale by -1 as least positive to -5. (Figure 5.1). The five most positively perceived items (20%) consisted of items from Support Network ($n=2$) and Long-Term Development ($n=3$). The least positively perceived (20%) consisted of items from Alignment of Expectation ($n=1$), Holistic Quality Preparation ($n=3$) and Communication ($n=1$).

Key Strengths

Support Network

- +1. I can pop in to see my coach or other support staff whenever I need to (e.g., physiotherapist, psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, lifestyle advisor).
- +2. Currently, I have access to a variety of different types of professionals to help my sports development (e.g., physiotherapist, sport psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, lifestyle advisor).

Long-Term Development

- +3. My training is specifically designed to help me develop effectively in the long term.
- +4. I spend most of my time developing skills and attributes that my coach tells me I will need if I am to compete successfully at the top/professional level.
- +5. My coach allows me to learn through making my own mistakes.

Areas for Development
Alignment of Expectation
-1. My coaches make time to talk to my parents about me and what I am trying to achieve.
Holistic Quality Preparation
-2. My coach rarely talks to me about my well-being.
-3. My coach does not appear to be that interested in my life outside of sport.
-5. I am rarely encouraged to plan for how I would deal with things that might go wrong.
Communication
-4. My coach and I often try to identify what my next big test will be before it happens.

Figure 5.1. Player perceptions of key strengths (+) and areas for improvement (-)

Table 5.2. Item level analysis of whole group, Category One and Category Two.

Item	Whole		CAT1		CAT2	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. My training is specifically designed to help me develop effectively in the long term. (LTD1) +3	4.78	0.88	4.68	0.94	4.89	0.78
2. My coach emphasizes that what I do in training and competition is far more important than winning. (LTD2)	4.32	1.01	4.35	0.99	4.28	1.05
3. I spend most of my time developing skills and attributes that my coach tells me I will need if I am to compete successfully at the top/professional level. (LTD3) +4	4.62	0.68	4.54	0.74	4.71	0.60
4. My coach allows me to learn through making my own mistakes. (LTD4) +5	4.50	1.06	4.54	1.12	4.46	0.99
5. I would be given good opportunities even if I experienced a dip in performance. LTD5	3.75	1.05	3.91	1.08	3.56	0.99
6. My coaches make time to talk to my parents about me and what I am trying to achieve. (AOE1) -1	2.52	1.26	3	1.28	1.94	0.97
7. The advice my parents give me fits well with the advice I get from my coaches. (AOE2)	3.79	1.06	4.06	1.11	3.46	0.91
8. My progress and personal performance is reviewed regularly on an individual basis. I am involved in most decisions about my sport development. (AOE3)	4.20	1.09	4.31	1.01	4.07	1.19
9. I am involved about most decisions about my development. (AOE4)	4.32	0.97	4.37	0.98	4.25	0.96
10. I regularly set goals with my coach that are specific to my individual development. (AOE5)	4.18	1.02	4.39	0.98	3.92	1.03
11. My coach and I regularly talk about things I need to do to progress to the top level in my sport (e.g., training ethos,						

competition performances, physically, mentally, technically, tactically). (COM1)	4.02	1.17	4.16	1.19	3.84	1.13
12. My coach and I talk about what current and/or past world-class performers did to be successful. (COM2)	3.93	1.12	4.06	1.15	3.76	1.07
13. My coach and I often try to identify what my next big test will be before it happens. (COM3) -4	3.72	1.16	4.02	1.27	3.35	0.90
14. My coach explains how my training and competition programme work together to help me develop. (COM4)	3.97	1.09	4.08	1.14	3.84	1.03
15. My coach rarely talks to me about my well-being. (HQP1) -2	3.29	1.27	3.22	1.32	3.48	1.18
16. My coach doesn't appear to be that interested in my life outside of sport. (HQP2) -3	3.52	1.32	3.54	1.42	3.51	1.21
17. My coach rarely takes the time to talk to other coaches who work with me. (HQP3)	4.43	1.18	4.10	1.38	4.84	0.70
18. I don't get much help to develop my mental toughness in sport effectively. (HQP4)	4.04	1.11	4.04	1.30	4.05	0.85
19. I am rarely encouraged to plan for how I would deal with things that might go wrong. (HQP5) -5	3.73	1.25	3.64	1.40	3.84	1.03
20. The guidelines in my sport regarding what I need to do to progress are not very clear. (HQP6)	4.03	1.16	3.91	1.33	4.17	0.91
21. I am not taught that much about how to balance training, competing, and recovery. (HQP7)	3.98	1.30	3.93	1.46	4.05	1.09
22. Currently, I have access to a variety of different types of professionals to help my sports development (e.g. physiotherapist, sport psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, lifestyle advisor). (SN1) +2	4.88	1.02	4.95	1.16	4.79	0.83
23. I can pop in to see my coach or other support staff whenever I need to (e.g., physiotherapist, psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, lifestyle advisor). (SN2) +1	4.90	1.04	4.89	1.17	4.92	0.87
24. My coaches talk regularly to the other people who support me in my sport about what I am trying to achieve (e.g., physiotherapist, sport psychologist, nutritionist, strength and conditioning coach, lifestyle advisor). (SN3)	4.35	0.99	4.31	1.13	4.41	0.81
25. Those who help me in my sport seem to be on the same wavelength as each other when it comes to what is best for me (e.g., coaches, physiotherapists, sport psychologists, strength trainers, nutritionists, lifestyle advisors). (SN4)	4.25	1.14	4.27	1.41	4.23	0.70

5.6 Discussion

The aim of this study was to ascertain and present the views of U21 players about their talent development environment, how this compares across different categories within the English academy system, and any impact this may have on their perceptions of their wellbeing.

The results from the TDEQ-5 questionnaire revealed that the most positively perceived areas of the environment were the support network (SN) and long-term development (LTD). The

least positively perceived areas of the environment were alignment of expectations (AOE), holistic quality preparation (HQP) and communication (COM). There was one major difference between Category One and Two clubs in the area of AOE, where players in Category One reported a significantly more positive outlook for this particular subscale. There was no significant difference of player perceptions for all other subscales. All players perceived their general health to be at a 'good' level. There is a significant but weak negative relationship between general health and LTD, AOE, COM and SN. No relationship was found between general health and HQP.

At item level, the study examined the whole-group scores to provide a deeper understanding of specific questions that could be thought to be areas of strength or for improvement. The most positively perceived questions came from SN and LTD. Specifically, these questions related to accessibility towards various support staff, such as physiotherapist, psychologist and nutritionist, as well as the specific training methods aimed at facilitating a player's long-term skills and attributes development, preparing them to compete successfully at the top level. These findings align with previous work focusing on development environments among female (Gledhill & Harwood, 2019) and male football players (Mills et al., 2014b; Mitchell et al., 2021) in the 16-18 age category. As highlighted in Study One, advances in the conduct of the academy structure may have exerted some influence on these elements, with an amplified specification of hours to on-pitch coaching sessions (Premier League, 2011) and the notable presence of an extensive range of support staff (Premier League, 2022). Moreover, coaching standards have advanced to the point at which it is now a minimum requirement for the senior coach dedicated to this phase to have obtained the UEFA 'A' licence, and to receive support from a head of coaching who oversees the overall coaching programme for the academy. This suggests a strategy for a more-adequately resourced coaching programme that may, therefore,

align more closely to players' perceived long term development needs. The quality of coaching in fostering vibrant learning environments has been considered crucial (Cushion et al., 2012) with a focus on long-term athlete development rather than short-term progress or competition success being considered a key element in successful development environments in a sporting context (Henrikson et al., 2010; Henrikson & Stambulova, 2017), and specifically within football literature (Larson et al., 2013; Ryom et al., 2020).

LTD and SN were viewed equally positively by players in both Category One and Category Two clubs. This finding is, at least partly, likely to be a result of the similar structural aspects of these categories⁹. In both Category One and Two clubs, coaching hours (on-pitch) per week remain at 16 hours, and key performance indicators are identical, with regular player graduation into either the Premier League or wider professional game. Training facilities are of the same minimum requirements, as are staffing requirement for coaching and support staff (Premier League, 2011). While Category One clubs may exhibit some differences, such as an expanded workforce (Premier League, 2022), and superior levels of facilities, the minimum requirements established for both categories ensure good levels of support. These factors have been identified as crucial elements in establishing an effective player development environment (Larson et al., 2013; Mill et al., 2014a). It seems very likely that clubs will be aware of both the regulatory and practical benefits of longer-term development and providing adequate resources, particularly given the lowish mean age of players in this phase of development (i.e., immediately post-Academy). Nevertheless, this will be a matter to be pursued in subsequent interviews with coaches.

⁹ Following on from an adherence to the EPPP protocols established by the Football Association and Premier League.

All players¹⁰ reported a good level of general well-being across both Category One and Two Clubs. This could be attributed to the most positively perceived aspects of the environment, as the results indicated a significant relationship between LTD, SN and players' general health, albeit a weak one. This finding corresponds with research that suggests environments with a focus on LTD can positively impact upon the satisfaction of basic needs (Li et al., 2017, 2019) and aid athletes in managing levels of burnout (Li et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2020). Players who perceive their environments as having a focus on long-term development and robust support networks tend to experience higher well-being and less stress (Ivarsson et al., 2015). If players perceived they are supported well with access to an array of appropriate personnel within a support team, they may feel appropriately challenged and prepared for training and matches, sustain fewer injuries, and play and train regularly, which in turn can lead to good levels of psychological wellbeing (Swainson et al., 2020). Likewise, if the coaching provided is perceived to be of a high standard, players are more likely to perceive the environment as conducive to effective learning, aiding their overall development. This has been linked to enhanced psychological well-being (Gledhill et al., 2015) and intrinsic motivation and task-focused behaviours (Gledhill et al., 2017). A task-focused development climate can be related to positive well-being, whereas an emphasis on immediate performance outcomes can be related to negative well-being (Ntoumanis et al., 2012).

Although players generally reported good levels of overall health, it is worth noting that older players showed different results. Players in the 20-21 age bracket reported higher levels of psychological distress, indicating dissatisfaction among those who have moved beyond their

¹⁰ Although it is not possible to generalise across all of the playing population, it is a reasonable assumption that much the majority of the players are fit, young males, with a very active lifestyle and pursuing a career that they enjoy and within which they harbour ambitions for well-rewarded, long-term employment. Players, therefore, are not a random cross-section of the population. Nevertheless, it must be supposed that there is some potential for such singlemindedness and the evident prospect for many of not achieving their goals to bring psychological and emotion pressure. This will be explored in subsequent interviews with players.

first-year experience in this phase of football. Study One identifies the average player age as around 19 years. This suggests that, after this point, players may not be having a fully positive experience. This finding implies that not all players share the same experience, emphasising the need to understand these differences and how they may affect players' preparation and transition to the first team.

The least positively perceived responses were associated with AOE, HQP, and COM - specifically, the coaches' interest in the players well-being and interests beyond the realms of the sport, planning for all eventualities, and identifying big challenges, as displayed in Figure 5.1. These findings appear to convey a mixed message, indicating that while players do feel supported and are engaged in a high-level coaching programme that attends to their development needs, their perception¹¹ of how this development aligns with their overall career progression remains relatively weak.

When exploring the data in more detail, at item level, the two lowest scoring items within the AOE subscale were found to be related to coach interactions with parents. Interactions between coaches and parents in aligning intentions and expectations are said to play an important role in developmental outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2021). However, in a football setting, these findings reflect earlier research that highlight similar issues of inadequate communication with key stakeholders, specifically parents, in younger age-group squads (Gledhill & Harwood., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2021) as well as a lack of parental support for players in the post-academy phase (Richardson et al., 2013). Given that all of the players are contracted as professional players, with the majority over the age of 18, the limited interactions between coaches and

¹¹ What is not clear from the questionnaire responses, but can be pursued in interview, is whether the players are not aware of or do not understand how development activity is linked to their progress, or actually disagree with the substance of their technical, psychological, tactical, game play etc. preparation.

parents should not come as a surprise. These circumstances suggest that features of the environment that impact on the players (and how they would respond to the questionnaire) may differ at different phases of their footballing journeys. Thus, at this key transitional period for the players, interaction with the players' parents may not be considered as important as in younger age groups.¹² It could be argued, therefore, that these parent-oriented questions may not be entirely suitable for U21 players.

Communication from coaches relating to career progression and preparing for challenges (e.g., identifying what the next big steps are for players, what is required to be successful, how training and competition work together to help development, and the preparation and experiences a player needs to progress to the top level) was perceived as weak. These findings draw parallels with other research (Gledhill & Harwood, 2019; Mills et al., 2014b) and have been identified as important elements for players striving to progress into a first team environment (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Morris et al., 2016, 2017; Richardson et al., 2013). A general understanding of the expectations and standards required for progress in terms of behaviours and values across a spectrum of social dynamics (and perhaps a realisation by individuals about their current status in relation to these requirements) will provide a better awareness for players, equipping them with the necessary coping strategies when facing challenges during this transition period (Røynesdal et al., 2018). The presence of a specific U21 squad may result in a certain 'distance' from the first-team squad and a variable level of interaction – some players being required to train with the first team squad, mixed sessions, first-team players playing in U21 matches as over-age players, and so on. This distance is likely to extend to social interaction and occasions such as dining, seating arrangements, and

¹² This is not an opinion that interaction with parents is unimportant or should not take place, merely that coaches (about whom the questions are centred) may not perceive that parental involvement is necessary (or part of their role).

transport. The first team environment can be more shielded or isolated from academy development, leading to a noticeable lack of crossover and/or convergent communication (Aalberg & Saether, 2016)¹³. Players may not be given the opportunity to engage with senior professionals to gain a contextual understanding of future challenges and some of the key coping skills needed to transition into senior squads (Aalber & Saether, 2016; Larson et al., 2013; Relvas et al., 2010). This finding may also suggest that coaches specific to this phase are not constantly involving players in all aspects of the development process, including individual planning, goal setting, and communicating the demands and expectations necessary for progression into a first team. Such involvement has been identified as an essential factor for players to be able to self-regulate and take responsibility for their own development (Larson et al., 2013; 2020). It is important to note that these lower perceptions of AOE and COM were solely reported by players in Category Two clubs, in contrast to positive responses to these aspects from players in Category One clubs. AOE was significantly lower in Category Two clubs when compared with Category One.

Although players in Category Two clubs report a positive perception of their support networks, Category One clubs may have a more extensive staff team to cater to the needs of players (given the reference to specialist practitioners in the questions related to these subscales). Notably, the workforce in Category One clubs has seen a substantial increase over the last 10 years (Premier League, 2022), which may not be the case in Category Two clubs. Furthermore, professional football has been characterised by having a high level of staff turnover, uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecure employment (Gibson & Groom, 2019). These

¹³ There is a further level of discussion about whether the first team players create a deliberate 'wall' to isolate themselves from the younger players, within which there is a particular set of sub-cultural expectations about behaviour, values etc. This may be perceived as a protection mechanism by those who are wary of others taking their place. It may, of course, be largely a result of the logistics of separate training, transport, matches, briefings, and so on.

challenges often demand that U21 coaches and other support staff linked to this phase occasionally ‘step up’ or ‘fill in’, leading to some staff in transitory or short-term roles across different age groups, which may, in turn, impact their working practice, as they would be working with a wider population of players (Dowling et al., 2018). Although staff may still be able to support players from within their own specialist domain, role confusion, ambiguity or simply change, may impact on the coaches’ overall flexibility and time available to support the players outside of their core on-field duties. Consequently, there is some potential that this may result in ‘silo working’ within a club, which has been recognised as a challenge in aligning efforts of multidisciplinary teams in performance environments (Springham et al., 2018). Such challenges may also impact the organisational functioning of clubs in terms of effective communication, seen as a key element within development environments (Mills et al., 2014a). The findings identified a relationship between AOE, COM and general health, suggesting that a positive perception of these subscales is related to a generally positive response to questions about wellbeing. However, even with weaker responses to the subscales, there was no detrimental impact on players’ general health scores.

Similar to previous studies employing both earlier and newly-developed versions of the TDEQ in men’s football (Mills et al., 2014b; Mitchell et al., 2021), the provision of HQP emerged as an area, or quality of provision, that U21 programmes could enhance. The findings demonstrated generally the least positive responses by all players in this area, with the subscale achieving 3 of the lowest 5 scores across all categories, and representing the lowest scoring subscale among players in Category One clubs. This subscale is associated with holistic development and player welfare, signifying a caring approach encompassing physical, mental, and non-sports related aspects, thereby enabling athletes to achieve a balanced approach to their lives (Martindale et al., 2010).

Holistic development is commonly advocated in the talent development of athletes, with a rationale that this equips them with the necessary skills to meet the wide-ranging demands of performance sport and beyond this into other areas of their lives (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). It has been suggested that this feature of the talent development environment is key for optimal developmental progress in football (Premier League, 2011; Larson et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2014a). Moreover, understanding athletes' state of well-being and general interests is central to offering meaningful support (Martindale et al., 2013). However, the players in this sample did not feel that this was a strong element of their environment, which may lead to some doubt about whether or not academies (at least in this study) are conforming to one of the core visions of the EPPP, namely, *“developing educationally rounded people through a holistic approach”* (Premier League, 2011, p.12) with *“the life skills to be fully integrated and responsible members of society”* (Premier League, 2011, p.72).

We need to consider whether holistic development (understood to be personal qualities beyond football skills) is merely a generalised statement of ambitions, perhaps reflecting societal expectations) or a specific set of anticipated behaviours and opportunities. Since the introduction of the EPPP, exposure to training hours has increase significantly for players in Categories One and Two, representing a 126% increase, leading to a commitment of up to 16 hours per week (Tears et al., 2018) at the professional development phase, which incorporates U21 squads. This increase in time spent dedicated to football development and games may inadvertently shift the focus away from other developmental needs, such as life skills and psychosocial skills development (Green et al., 2020), potentially impacting well-being and resilience (Fletcher & Sarker, 2016). Similar lower perceptions of HQP were also reported in lower-ranked Academies, where the allocated time for training hours is much less (Mitchell et al., 2021). However, in these clubs, staffing requirements are also considerably less demanding,

which could similarly result in comparatively less support for these features of the environment among players. Although the findings in the study represent Category One and Two clubs only, interpretations point towards the noteworthy variation in provision, highlighted in Study One, across the landscape of the academy system. Lower-level clubs in Categories Three and Four showed greater level of disparity, and due to a lack of players' populating U21 (or equivalent) squads in these clubs, they were not suitable as a homogenous population for this study.

There is a growing recognition that holistic environments that support psychosocial development and promote wellbeing are needed to maximise performance of young players (Bergeron et al., 2015; Henrikson & Stambulova, 2017). Contrary to the results in this study, Rongen et al.'s (2021) findings suggest that it is possible for higher ranking academies to develop transferable life skills in their players, irrespective of the nature of their transition out of the academy phase. Players transitioning out of the academy setting, whether moving into a first team environment or exiting football, reported positive takeaway experiences. The integration of psychosocial skills within a Category One academy is also evident in Green et al.'s (2020) 'Academy Island' model of practice. This suggests that this broader notion of development can be promoted alongside performance related outcomes. There is no doubt that the development of these essential life skills should be considered a positive endeavour, perhaps, in particular, for those players failing to progress beyond an academy stage, in addition to equipping players to cope with entry and sustained involvement in post-academy football. Nevertheless, it will be important to ascertain the extent of, and attitudes to, the incorporation of holistic development elements into the U21 post-academy phase and the role and extent of the involvement of U21 domain-specific staff.

The role of the coach in promoting and fostering well-being is important within the microenvironment of talent development (Henriksen et al., 2010). Positive coach interactions can positively impact well-being and decrease athlete's ill-being (Aide et al., 2012). Interestingly, there was no relationship between HQP and the players' general health scores, indicating that a less-positive perception of provision in this domain did not detrimentally affect their overall wellbeing, and that players were able to maintain a positive outlook. The subscale questions all revolve around the role of coaches in providing HQP-appropriate support. Although the players' perception of the coaches' role indicated that they did not assess the coach's contribution highly, they nevertheless provided findings that indicated positive responses to their support networks. This suggests that relevant support from non-coaching practitioners, such as psychologists, career specialists or lifestyle coordinators in offering assistance in career planning and lifestyle management, may have been available.¹⁴ It may also be argued that HQP is not solely the role of the coaches and in well-staffed academies, this is adequately attended to by other support staff. In addition, players reported positive perceptions of their long-term development, which alongside good support networks can have an overarching positive impact on their experience (Ivarsson et al., 2015).

While the U21 post-academy phase is still described as developmental, there is an evident shift in culture and intention to replicate a more senior development model. This change in emphasis is intended to result in an environment which emulates the professional game, to the extent possible, emphasising the importance of winning (Premier League, 2011, p.59). Coaches may therefore become increasingly focused on a set of goals centred on winning, potentially viewing success as instrumental in maintaining the club's academy status (Prendergast &

¹⁴ It may be fruitful to amend a number of the HQP subscale items to incorporate support from non-coaching members of staff.

Gibson, 2022). The significance of winning has been identified as a key driver for U21 development coaches, with a substantial proportion of coaches stressing the need to prioritise winning at this stage (Dowling et al., 2018). This results-oriented¹⁵ approach to coaching attitudes and behaviours may result in limited attention being paid to personal development, reinforcing a narrow focus on a football identity (Ryon et al., 2020). Consequently, and understandably in relation to progress and future contracts, U21 players may feel pressure to constantly perform in a way that suggests a readiness (or what they perceive as the characteristics of readiness) for first-team football and impress their coaches; a striving for a ‘model performance’ that demonstrates their worth, but which could lead to additional stress (Taylor & Collins, 2022). Social support is deemed critical for players when facing stressors (Morris et al., 2017) and this ‘preparation for senior football’ approach may be further debilitating if Academies do not provide such support and generate and reinforce a culture that focuses too much on winning rather than longer-term development (Richardson et al., 2013).

Conversely, in order for players to transition successfully into a first team environment, they must experience an appropriate level of challenge, one that exposes them *“to hostile environments from time to time, for they need to learn how to deal with stress and the challenge of competition when fear of failure can be debilitating to performance.”* (Premier League, 2011, p.59). Those who have successfully navigated the developmental transitions and attained elite level have often benefited from significant challenges, thereby developing crucial coping skills in the process (Taylor & Collins, 2022). Furthermore, the role of the coach has been deemed critical in supporting player transitions and challenges, facilitating their pathway into senior football (Roynesdal et al., 2018). Nonetheless, coaches may feel that there is a tension

¹⁵ The meaning attached to being ‘results-oriented’ does not apply simply to the outcome of games. It also applies to selection procedures, positional/specialisation issues, specificity of preparation, the element of (or lack of) experimentation, and the playing of over-age players.

and a balance to be struck between preparing players for the potential transition into the first team environment and fostering longer-term personal development goals (Aalberg & Saether, 2016). It may be a reasonable speculation that in cases in which U21 players have not faced appropriate preparatory experiences during earlier transitions, encountering significant challenges¹⁶ for the first time may pose too great a step change, potentially leading to a decline in performance (Taylor & Collins, 2022) or issues of self-worth.

5.7 Applied Implications

Bridging the gap between research and applied practice is crucial in helping practitioners to meet the developmental needs of players in this final transitional phase of football. The findings of this study point to a number of practical implications for those practitioners involved and who have an influence on the development and ultimate progression of U21 players. The depth and breadth of the sample across 10 football academies, represents the only and largest sample of TDEs to date in this domain, enabling a more-informed contextual understanding of the U21 football landscape than has hitherto been unavailable.

First, the findings underline the importance of long-term development and support networks. Given that players responded positively to questions about this aspect of their environment, coaches and other relevant stakeholders should continue to leverage this strength. In particular, LTD has been considered an ‘accessible opportunity’ with which to enhance the environment (Megicks et al., 2022), and one that can be readily embedded in club practice in comparison to other resource-intensive factors such as staffing or facilities. Megicks et al. (2022) refer to

¹⁶ It may be assumed when speaking about ‘challenges’, difficulties to be overcome, or problem situations that there is an adequate level of support to help the player to cope with the situation. There is obviously another balance to be struck between deliberately allowing younger players to face a challenging experience with an attitude of the experience alone ‘will be good for him’ and being aware of the potential difficulty and following this up with a conversation that allows the player to reflect on the issue and how he should cope with it.

examples of good practice, such as the use of learning language (Ryom et al., 2020) and individual athlete development plans (Abraham & Collins, 2011).

Second, it is clear from the findings that club academies operating in this phase of football, and using the assumptions of the TDEQ-5 and the supporting literature as exemplars of and prescriptions for good practice, need to pay closer attention to developing the ‘whole player’ in the environment they create. For example, coaches should seek to support players holistically, attending to all elements in their sporting career, social and personal lives in striving for performance excellence, including personal support and psycho-social support, as well as technical, tactical and physical elements. In the context of talent development trajectories, few players will progress into the professional game (Kingston et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to prepare them for all possible outcomes, not simply football development, and assist them in developing a broader identity (Green et al., 2020) that will be beneficial for life beyond an academy setting (Rongen et al., 2021). This should better support players as and when they face the challenges and demands likely to arise in this critical transition period.

Third, it may be advantageous to involve players in all aspects of the development process, such as goal setting, development planning, and regular reviews. A number of the findings point to a lack of engagement by the players, particularly the lowest scoring items on the subscales. When allied to the absence of parental involvement and the importance of coming to terms with expectations, there would be considerable benefits in ensuring that players are involved in those matters that impact their development. This would give players a better understanding and a clearer perspective on their abilities and what they need to do to progress to the next level; for instance, the challenges they are likely to encounter and how to cope with

them (Mills et al., 2014b; Røynesdal et al., 2018). Including the players in these processes may improve coaches' decision-making, given that the players may perceive the quality of TDEs differently from the coaches (Megicks et al., 2022). This, in turn, is likely to facilitate better communication between coach and player, consequently forging a stronger relationship, in which players understand all elements of training and preparation and how these contribute to their overall progress (Gesbert et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2014b).

Although the findings from the GHQ indicated that players were very stable in terms of their health and wellbeing, there were a number of indicators, particularly related to HQP, that suggested the players wellbeing may be given less attention than their day-to-day football training. Football academies can actively nourish athletes' mental health (Ivarsson et al., 2015) and it follows that this should be considered as part of the development process and included in the process of player reviews. Support of this nature could be provided from a multidisciplinary perspective between the coaching team and other key support staff, e.g., sports psychologist, on a rolling basis. Additionally, mentoring by first team players who have had experience of playing U21 football, could be incorporated into support programmes to manage potential stress and anxieties related to transitions (Morris et al., 2017).

5.8 Strengths and Limitations

These findings extend the talent development literature that has focused on the quality of environments within football academies in England. Specifically, perceptions of Category One and Category Two U21 players about their experience of the U21 development phase have been captured, which hitherto have been absent from the research literature, and which, may in time, help to optimise academy development programmes. The data offer us a better insight into and understanding of the development context in this phase of football, which practitioners

and key stakeholders may reflect on and find helpful when designing and implementing development strategies. The study offers new insights into development environments in U21 football, which also bridges a gap in the knowledge base about this crucial ‘late-development’ stage of athletic development. In particular, it draws attention to (a) the necessary balance between sport-specific technical (playing) development and the holistic development of individuals’ personal attributes, and (b) the (in this phase) more evident link between player progress and key/crucial career management decisions.

Whilst there are clear findings and practical implications, as discussed above, there were also a number of limitations to the research. First, although the overall sample size of U21 players (approximately 11% of the available population) was deemed sufficient for the study to provide the first ever snapshot of players’ perceptions about their development environment, this was an opportunity sample and a more extensive and stratified sample across the full scope of the English academy system for this age group would generate a more robust player insight, representative of the whole industry. However, data were collected at a period in time in which many Category Three and Four clubs were impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in them making the decision to disband their U21 development programmes. Although the study was able to draw comparisons between the perceptions about Category One and Two clubs’ provision, it was not therefore possible to include Category Three and Four clubs in the study.¹⁷

Second, the TDEQ was originally designed as a more general tool to be applied to athlete perceptions in any sport (Li, et al., 2015) and, therefore, may not be sufficiently particularised

¹⁷ The initial scoping exercise (Study One) had shown that provision in Categories Three and Four was of a lesser extent. Although provision in Categories One and Two might be thought to provide exemplars of good practice, the smaller number in the less-well-resourced clubs might result in a greater level of interaction between U21 and first team players. While this is speculation, it points to a possible extension of the research.

to capture the context-specific issues that are apparent in football (Mitchell et al., 2021). As such, we should exercise some caution, both in assuming that the nuances of U21 football environments have been captured and in applying these findings to other contexts. It may be necessary that future developments of the TDEQ should consider a sport specific and/or stage specific version (Martindale et al., 2013). Particular mention was made of the ‘coach-centric’ nature of the questions in a football environment in which other support practitioners are also likely to be involved in player welfare. Despite this limitation, the TDEQ was chosen for its robust properties, sound ecological validity and ever-growing use within a football context, giving the findings of this study confidence in the insights generated.

The very nature of questionnaire-based research means that the players’ perceptions are not related to any specific context/club (other than the assumptions made about category provision). However, the review of provision captured in Study One indicated that there was significant diversity between and across categories. This suggests that further research is required that has the capacity to link perception and context and provides the rationale for Studies Three (interviews) and Four (case study). Qualitative research and observational methods would be of value for providing a more complete evaluation of the development environments in what is a very complex set of social contexts. In particular, this would provide a better insight from both players and coaches into their working practices, and the key processes and mechanisms, that underpin player development.

5.9 Conclusion

The study provides the first insight into the talent development environments of U21 players in England using the TDEQ-5, and how perceptions of their environment are related to their general health. Although the findings from the study demonstrate that academies are generally

viewed by players in a positive way, they also suggest that there are areas for improvement, if U21 provision is fully to meet the developmental needs of U21 players and achieve the ambitions set out in the EPPP (Premier League, 2011).

The study provides a valuable insight into areas of the development environment that could be considered strengths and weaknesses. Players provided positive responses to their perceptions of attention to long-term development and the support network. On the other hand, there were less-positive responses to their ‘holistic’ development – the balance of football and more general personal development. There was some evidence that optimal environments in this phase of football would benefit from attention to holistic development, managing expectations and improved communication. Given the importance of player wellbeing, whole person development and linking this development phase to progression to participation in first team football, it seems imperative that Academies focus more attention on these vital areas.

First introduced in Study One and reinforced in this study, the findings point to the varied experiences of players in the U21 phase. Initial findings suggest a change in responses for players beyond their first year, most likely due to limited exposure to competitive men’s first team football, potentially leading to frustration and a sense of stagnation. However, a more-comprehensive and richer understanding of the realities of the players’ environments is required; one that moves beyond survey methods to capture players’ opinion and reflections. The studies that follow will further explore these concepts, providing more-nuanced and contextual understanding of players’ experiences, contributing to an emerging perspective on the impact of the environment on a player’s career trajectory in U21 football and its status as a developmental vehicle.

Chapter Six: Study Three

Player and Practitioner Perspectives on the U21 Talent Development Environment in English Professional Football

6.1 Introduction

Study Two employed the TDEQ-5 and the GHQ-12 instruments to conduct a survey of the opinions of U21 players in English professional football in relation to the quality of their talent development environment. Using these tools for the first time in such an environment, presented novel insights and enabled the gap in the knowledge base about this crucial stage of development to begin to be redressed. Players reported that access to support services and the coaching programme was of a high level, and they reported good general well-being. Even with weaker responses to the subscales, there was no detrimental impact on players' general health scores. The earlier literature review had also identified potential challenges associated with the adjustment from an academy experience into senior football; for example, the additional pressure players face from coaches, teammate, parents, fans and the media (Morris et al., 2015; 2017) stemming from greater public exposure and career-changing decisions. This final phase before entering a first team is recognised as pivotal in a player's developmental journey, marked by a significant shift in cultural expectations and working environments.

Nevertheless, as already identified in the earlier scoping review, the scale and scope of the academic literature relevant to U21 football was shown to be very limited, and, as a consequence, its capacity to provide an agenda with which to investigate this football domain. Despite the dearth of literature, one study conducted by Dowling et al. (2018) has provided some specific insight into this domain. The study offered perspectives from U21 coaches, shedding some light on the challenges they face and how they could adapt their practice for such an environment. However, the study concluded that there was a lack of consensus on what constituted an ideal environment for U21 players and how this should be manifest in practice.

In redressing the general lack of research literature and the partial evidence provided in Studies One and Two, further exploration was required to understand fully the more context-specific factors associated with the U21 environmental conditions, and how these contribute to and/or influence the progressions and development of players. Existing research in talent development and transitions in football has predominantly focused on either academy player perceptions (e.g., Mills et al., 2014b; Mitchell et al., 2021) or insights from practitioners (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2020). There is a need to move beyond the generality of the questionnaire findings to triangulate more in-depth perceptions of both players and coaches. Further exploration was required to gain a deeper and richer account of the personal experience of those who create and live within the U21 environment - coaches who organise daily practices and manage daily/weekly and season long schedules, and players who live and breathe the 'every day'.

By conducting such research, a much-richer picture and, therefore, more comprehensive understanding of the realities of the U21 phase can be obtained, in particular the extent to which the developmental ambitions set out in the EPPP guidelines are being achieved. Study Two provided a useful indicator of the strengths and potential issues within this phase of professional football. However, relying solely on responses from players in questionnaire-based research does not fully capture the specific context of the U21 phase. For that reason, Study Three is designed to elicit a more context-specific understanding of player experiences. Perspectives, not only from players, but also key stakeholders such as coaches, about both day-to-day experiences and longer-term implications for football careers will advance our understanding of the influence of the realities of the development environment. The intention is to 'bring the U21 phase to life', to probe issues arising from the questionnaire survey, and to explore the working practices, relationships, dynamics and nuances that cannot be captured from questionnaire responses alone.

The next step in the research, therefore, was to conduct an interview-based study focused on U21 players, U21 coaches, and coaches who have transitioned from U21 roles to coaching roles in a first team, either as head or assistant head coach. In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives were established:

1. Conduct a series of interviews to explore the views of elite level coaches on their experience of managing/conducting the U21 phase and the factors that they perceive to influence (or impact) player development and progression in U21 football.
2. Conduct a series of interviews that explores the views of U21 players on their experience of the U21 phase and how their environment is perceived to impact on their general satisfaction, football development and career progression.
3. Analyse the findings from the interviews to identify key themes that might lead to formulating an evaluation of the research questions guiding the research, and potential remedies for any perceived shortcomings in the effectiveness of the U21 development environment.

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Paradigm: Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research focuses on collecting and analysing non-numerical data; it is appropriate for addressing questions about why something has been observed (Busetto et al., 2020). One of the most common methods of data collection, and an effective way of gaining insights into beliefs, experiences and relationships, are semi-structured interviews – that is, relatively open questions that prompt responses, but within a loosely-determined thematic structure (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). This was the most appropriate choice to achieve the objectives of the study. The subjective experiences, deeper meanings and social interactions that shape the behaviours

of U21 players and coaches who are currently employed in this phase of football, or who have some direct influence on the progression and development of U21 players, could be most effectively explored with such an approach.

6.2.2 Initial Procedure

Following ethical approval, a sample of football clubs was contacted, via email, informing them about the purpose and broad outline of the study. Access to participants was obtained through two avenues labelled below as A and B.

A - Football clubs' leaders, e.g., the Academy Manager, were contacted directly via email and invited to take part in the study. If they accepted the invitation, they would then act as gatekeeper at each club and promote the study to all potential participants.

B - Through a well-established network and personal contacts of the researcher, and/or supervisory team. These contacts were directly informed about the research and provided with the participant information sheet.

Recruitment of participants initially yielded an adequate number of coaching participants but only a small number of players. As it was envisaged that the study might, therefore, recruit only a small number of individual players who had the characteristics that met the inclusion criteria, a snowball sampling technique was introduced during the data collection phase. This method involved leveraging participants already recruited to identify or connect the researcher with other potential participants, and in turn, these players may subsequently identify further potential participants (Cohen, 2018). This method was particularly useful in this study as access to participants in a football environment is typically 'closed' and they are suspicious of

outsiders (Parker, 1995; Law, 2019). This may be heightened when more than one club is involved in the research, given a perception of non-sharing rivalry (Relvas et al., 2010).

As a result of my existing experience and prior work in a football setting, I already had established connections and contacts within this small, relatively tightly-knit network. This made building trust and rapport with clubs and key stakeholders much easier to establish (Browne, 2005). This had a positive effect on recruiting participants and made snowball sampling a much more effective method in this particular instance.

After participants initially agreed to the interview, they were sent consent forms and information sheets providing detailed information about the study, what their participation would entail, and emphasising that the study was entirely voluntary. It was also confirmed to the participants that the research was not intended to elicit sensitive or controversial information, and their answers would be anonymised, and, if they wished, they could withdraw at any time.

6.2.3 Participants

A total of 20 male participants, including players and coaches, took part in the study.

The sample was divided into three sub-groups and consisted of (a) Group 1, U21 players, (b) Group 2, U21 Coaches, and (c) Group 3, Head Coaches and Assistant Head Coaches. Each participant was given a unique code to be displayed in the presentation of data, and anonymity was preserved throughout. Table 6.1 illustrates each participants role, club status and data reference.

Table 6.1. Data representing the 20 participants included in the study.

Club	Participant	Role	League	Academy League	CAT	Reference
Group 1						
5	1	Player (1 st Year)	Premier League	B Team	4	P1
5	2	Player (2 nd Year)	Premier League	B Team	4	P2
10	3	Player (1 st Year)	Championship	B Team	4	P3
10	4	Player (1 st Year)	Championship	B Team	4	P4
10	5	Player (2 nd Year)	Championship	B Team	4	P5
9	6	Player (1 st Year)	Championship	Pro Dev (N)	2	P6
9	7	Player (1 st Year)	Championship	Pro Dev (N)	2	P7
11	8	Player (2 nd Year)	League One	Pro Dev (N)	2	P8
11	9	Player (2 nd Year)	League One	Pro Dev (N)	2	P9
Group 2						
1	10	U21s Coach	Premier League	PL 2 (D1)	1	UC1
2	11	U21s Coach	Premier League	PL 2 (D2)	1	UC2
5	12	U21s Coach	Premier League	B Team	4	UC3
8	13	U21s Coach	Championship	Pro Dev (N)	2	UC4
7	14	U21s Coach	Championship	Pro Dev (N)	2	UC5
9	15	U21s Coach	Championship	Pro Dev (N)	2	UC6
10	16	U21s Coach	Championship	B Team	4	UC7
Group 3						
3	17	Head Coach	Premier League	PL 2 (D2)	1	HC1
6	18	Head Coach	Championship	PL 2 (D2)	1	HC2
4	19	Assistant Head Coach	Premier League	PL 2 (D2)	1	AHC1
6	20	Assistant Head Coach	Championship	PL 2 (D2)	1	AHC2

Group 1 consisted of nine U21 players from elite level clubs (that is, the four top Divisions in English professional football), aged 18-20 (mean 19, SD = 0.70). Group 2 consisted of seven U21 coaches from elite level clubs operating across the UK aged 30-58 (mean 40.28, SD = 8.90). Group 3 consisted of two head coaches and two assistant head coaches aged 41-61 (mean 49.5, SD = 8.39).

For the study to capture an authentic portrayal of practice within this phase of football, it was essential to recruit participants who could be considered experts and were sufficiently emerged in the game to provide a rich insight into and knowledge of the context, behaviours and practices within the target U21 phase. To this end, the inclusion of participants was based on a number of specific criteria, in line with previous research (e.g., Dowling et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2014a).

1. Group 1's criteria for inclusion were that they must have been contracted to their club on a full-time basis and embedded in the U21 squad of players, predominantly training, and playing matches for this squad. The number of years individual players had been at their parent club ranged from 1-10 years (mean, 3.3 years). All players had come through the English youth academy system.
2. Groups 2's criteria for inclusion were that they must have been employed by their respective clubs on a full-time basis in a clearly defined role as U21 coach, and had at least two years' experience at this elite level. They must also have been engaging with player development, e.g., predominantly training and matches at their club for a period longer than 12 months. The years of experience of participants in this group ranged from 2-6 years in their current roles.
3. Group 3's criteria for inclusion were that they must have been employed by their respective clubs on a full-time basis in a clearly defined role as First Team coach and had at least five years' experience at the elite level. They must have previously engaged with U21 players directly for a period longer than 12 months and been in their current role as first team coach for a period of at least 12 months. The years of experience of participants in this group ranged from 6-7 years in their current roles.

Participants were recruited from a total of 11 different clubs, representing a range of league affiliation and category statuses. The total sample of football clubs are displayed in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2. Clubs from which participants were recruited, and their demographic.

Number	Academy League	Club League	CAT
1	PL2 (D1)	Premier League	1
2	PL2 (D2)	Premier League	1
3	PL2 (D2)	Premier League	1
4	PL2 (D2)	Premier League	1
5	N/A	Premier League	4

6	PL2 (D2)	Championship	1
7	Pro Dev N	Championship	2
8	Pro Dev N	Championship	2
9	Pro Dev N	Championship	2
10	N/A	Championship	4
11	Pro Dev S	League One	2

Table 6.2 summarises the details of the 11 clubs from which participants were recruited. In summary, this represented 5 Premier League clubs, 5 Championship clubs, and 1 League One club. Clubs academy category status was represented by 5 Category One clubs, 4 Category Two clubs and 2 Category Four clubs.

The majority of club's academies within this study belong to Category One or Two, and maintain an U21 squad operating in an affiliated league and cup structure. Two clubs follow a late development system, which places them in Category Four. However, it is important to note that these clubs, in practice, operate at a Category One or Two level when the structures they have in place are taken into account. These clubs employ a distinctive structure, known as a B team, which deviates from the structures operated by other clubs, and, unlike these other clubs, these B teams are not affiliated to any league structure, instead only playing friendly games. However, they do complete in the same cup competitions.

As an individual participant group, such as players or coaches, the number of participants recruited in this study is comparable to or exceeds that of research with a similar focus (e.g., Dowling et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2012, 2014a; Roynesdal et al., 2018). The cumulative total of participants ensured a triangulated synthesis of opinion and experience, that spanned across the category levels.

6.2.4 Interviews

Interviewing is the most widely used method to collect qualitative data in sport and exercise sciences (Smith & Sparks, 2016). It has been extensively discussed in the literature and often described as the ‘foundational’ method of qualitative research (Nathen et al., 2019), and can provide detailed and contextual understanding into people's decisions, values, beliefs, motivations, perceptions, and feelings (Smith & Sparks, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data (Smith & Sparks, 2016). They are reported to be an excellent way of garnering in-depth accounts of personal experience (see McArdle et al., 2012) and allows participants the freedom to explain clearly their perspectives and experiences (Jones, 2022).

An interview guide was developed based on findings and issues already obtained through previous work in Studies One and Two, relevant literature investigating environments in football (e.g., Dowling et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2012, 2014a; Richardson et al., 2013; Roynesdal et al., 2018), in addition to the researchers and supervisors’ personal knowledge of elite professional football. The questions were designed to be as open ended as possible, in order to allow each participant to share his own experience (Dean, 2022) and to enable a natural flowing conversation in which the interviewer felt free to explore with supplemental, follow-up questions and probes to ensure further insights (Hoepfl, 1997; Wachsmith, 2022).

To ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness of the interview process, a pilot interview guide was tested with a 47-year-old coach, currently serving as an assistant head coach in a Category One club, possessing over 2 years’ experience of working in youth football. The purpose of the pilot interview was to help refine and develop the interview guide, and to practise analysing the data (Smith & Sparkes 2016). A reflection of the interview and associated transcript was discussed with the supervisory team, and changes were made to the interview guide to better

capture the objectives of the study e.g., the structural challenges of the U21 phase. This triangulation allowed the interview guide to be refined further until a final version was ready to be employed (Biddle et al., 2001).

6.2.5 Interview guide

Interview schedules for each group (Appendix 1) differed marginally to reflect participants' roles. The interview frameworks contained between 16-18 questions across four sections. This design is similar to data collection in recent research (Henriksen et al 2019; Wachsmith, 2022).

Interviews began with a brief introduction from the interviewer, with the purpose of making the participant feel comfortable and relaxed; at this point, some small talk was useful and the interviewer described how the participants had come to be recruited. The purpose of the study was then explained, highlighting some pertinent elements from the information sheet they had already received; for example, ethical issue such as anonymity, confidentiality and data storage. At this point they were invited to ask any questions about this or the study in general (Smith & Sparks 2016).

The first section of the interview focused on familiarisation and the background of participants. This involved some simple questions that participants would feel familiar with; for example; their current role, how long they've held the position and the background to their career pathway. The second part of the interview focused on organisational structure, exploring their daily working practices and common patterns such as training structures and match programmes within the U21 phase. The third part of the interview focused on organisational culture, exploring relationships and key values and behaviours.

The final part of the interview focused on the participants' opinions on what they considered to be key factors that underpinned an optimal player development environment, focusing on the challenges they faced in the U21 phase, how this may impact or influence player progression and development, and how players were supported through this period. Throughout the interviews, questions were initially phrased to elicit the participants' experiences and were followed by invitations to provide evaluative comment or opinions.

Interviews were carried out either in person at the club at which participants worked, or conducted online via the Microsoft Teams application. All interviews were recorded using the Video and dictate function on Microsoft Teams. Different interview arrangements can be used for different reasons. Face-to-face interviews are deemed the most common and are more likely to help establish rapport (Bryman, 2016), but phone and video interviews are also options to consider if participants are geographically spread (Irvine, 2011). Interviews that took place over Microsoft Teams were carried out where there was a significant geographical distance between the interviewer and participant. The length of interviews ranged from 40-74 minutes in total across all participants. Head coach and assistant head coach interviews ranged from 55-60 minutes (mean 57 minutes), U21 coaches 51-74 minutes (mean 59 minutes), and U21 players 40-52 minutes (mean 46 minutes).

6.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to carry out an analysis of participants' views on the U21 football environment and relevant issues and practices that might impact on its effectiveness in relation to a developmental purpose (Braun et al., 2016). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data and has been used extensively since the publication of Braun and Clark's (2006) original article. The analysis

process followed the approach detailed by Braun et al. (2016) - all interviews were listened to and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word files. The interviews yielded 349 pages of text which totalled 54,662 words after transcription was complete.

These transcriptions were then subjected to abductive content analysis (combination of both inductive and deductive content analysis) to highlight emergent themes (Braun & Clark, 2019). First, a deductive approach was taken, reflecting the semi-structured nature of the interview guide. This was based on the assumptions that some issues had already been shown to be relevant from the previous findings in Study Two and relevant literature. Nevertheless, the procedure was to explore ‘within’ these themes and be open to any new ideas or responses that had not previously been identified. Second, an inductive approach from participant statements in the data involved, initially, semantic and latent coding of the data and in addition the researcher making reflective notes to help aid understanding of any potential further exploration of the data. Initial codes from raw data were identified which formed connections between the different participants and in turn identified shared concepts and patterns within the data set, which produced lower order themes, such as group composition, individual development, competitiveness and first team expectations. In turn, the lower order themes combined patterns in the data into larger concepts, such as U21 provision structure.

At this stage, an initial thematic map was produced, which encapsulated the essence of each theme. The process of forming themes underwent multiple iterations in which transcriptions were revisited and further reviewed (Braun & Clark, 2019) in order to contextualise and cross-check participants accounts. It is important to note that the themes emerging from the data were being devised and interpreted to provide meaningful knowledge and in the context of the study’s research questions. This part of the process also involved triangulation, in which critical

discussion took place with the supervisory team (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). This resulted in further refinement of the thematic map. A final review of the transcripts also took place, in order to identify any novel issues or seemingly ‘outlying’ comments or issues that may not have been captured with the analysis. Final decisions were then made around terminology, definition, and relevant and significant illustrative quotations as part of this ongoing critical reflection. This allowed for strengthening of the analysis of the data and the findings, with the intention to minimise potential bias.

6.3.1 Trustworthiness

The primary researcher and supervisory team had extensive experience in professional football either from a playing or practitioner perspective. This provided a good understanding of context and any associated jargon used, which in turn facilitated good rapport with participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). In turn, being somewhat of an ‘insider’ could facilitate trust from the participant and aid effective communication and honest communication (Burawoy, 1998).

After data collection and transcriptions were produced, they were sent back to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy (Patton, 2002). Participants were encouraged to reflect on my interpretations of the text and discuss any changes if they felt anything was misinterpreted or there were gaps in the results (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Reflecting on assumptions and personal beliefs from the primary researchers own experiences in elite English football, could result in potential bias (Berger, 2015). To account for this, each stage of the analysis and interpretations were shared and discussed with the supervisory team who acted as critical friends (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

6.4 Results and Discussion

The study focused on describing and understanding the previously less-explored perspectives of stakeholders within the U21 development environment, including players, their coaches, and coaches who had transitioned from youth development to first team roles. By adopting a comprehensive approach, encompassing a wide range of stakeholder views, the findings offered a triangulation of experiences, perceptions and opinions about the factors that influence and/or impact player development and progression within the U21 environment. Player experiences and ultimate outcomes were adequately captured and the data analysis process led to the creation of a thematic map which helps to visualise four contextual themes (Figure 6.1) that emerged from the interviews: namely, U21 provision structure, strategies to help development and progression, barriers to development and progression, and player support and characteristics. Additionally, Appendix 2 displays the key themes across all participant views. The contextual themes provide a framework for the presentation of results and associated discussion.

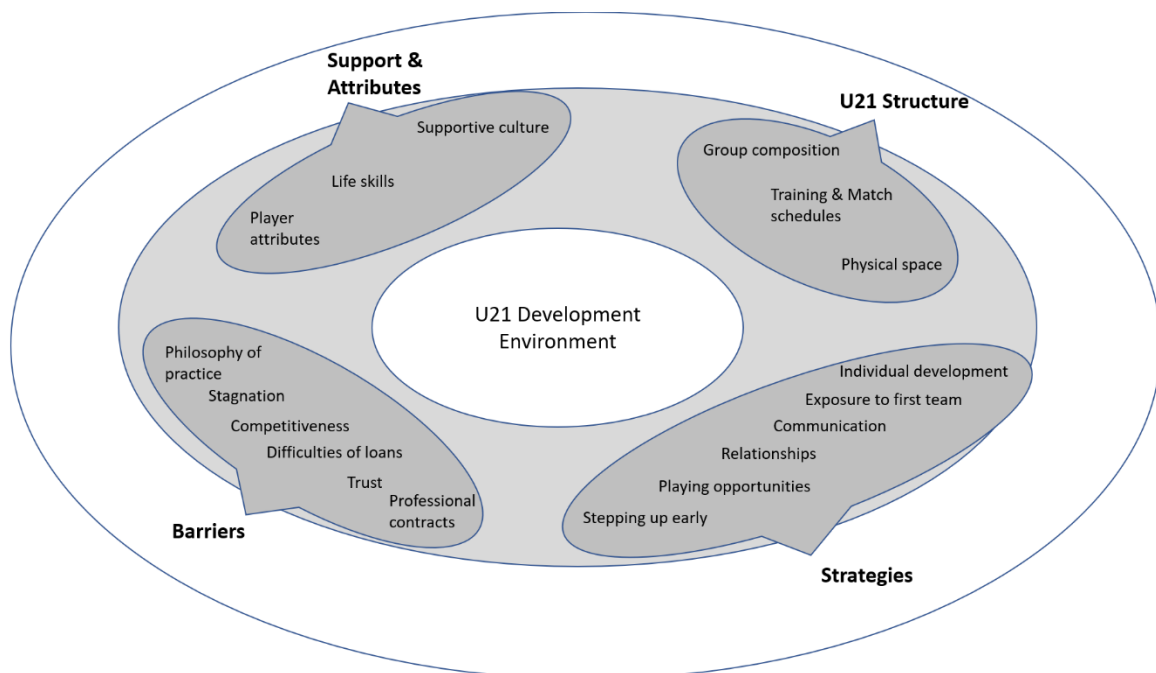


Figure 6.1. Player and practitioner perspectives on the U21 talent development environment in English professional football

6.4.1 U21 Provision Structure

This theme captured the circumstances and issues related to the way that football clubs structured their U21 squads and the associated factors that influence this on a daily basis. There are structural inconsistencies across clubs, such as in group composition and coaching hours, showing a diverse pattern of operations. The following sub-sections illustrate these issues and describe the ways in which players and coaches deal with the ever-changing nature of their daily practice.

Composition of the group

The composition of the U21 group/squad was ever changing, primarily as a result of players regularly interchanging between squads across the Professional Development Phase (i.e., both U18 and U21) and the first team. This change in group composition was linked to the unique demands of the coaches in each squad, and further affected by other factors such as players leaving and re-joining the club through the loan system, as well as players temporarily being treated for injuries. The frequent movement of players left all U21 coaches uncertain about the specific ‘make up’ of their squad from one day to the next:

The last recollection was 20. Well, I think so, it's little bit grey because the first team kinda take players here, there and everywhere, so it's, you know, it's that argument, are they under our practice or the first team practice? You've also got some of the players that have come up from the under eighteens. You've got players that potentially coming down from the first team that have, you know, kind of been discarded in that group. (UC2)

Similarly, several players who operated predominantly within the U21 squad reported this constant variation, describing this process as “happening on a daily basis” (P6), or “sometimes we are not sure on who’s training with us, or the numbers” (P5).

In line with previous research exploring U21 coaches' perceptions (Dowling et al., 2018) and supported by Mitchell et al.'s (2020) findings from practitioners involved in youth development, coaches interpreted the dynamic/ever changing nature of U21 squads as a very challenging element of their environment. Several coaches expressed a view that this led to a lack of continuity and uncertainty in planning. To accommodate any changes or demands from the first team, contingency plans were needed and had to be easily adjusted in order to react quickly:

I don't think it's ever a stable group. I can start a morning session with 16 players, and by the end there might be 9, as 7 went up (to first team) at different stages of the session and didn't all go up at once. You've got to think on your feet and be ready to change your sessions at the drop of a hat. We just have to make do with what we then have as a group, and you know generally we kind of plan that potentially it might happen. And so, you've always got a secondary session just ready and waiting. (UC2)

One U21 coach reflected how these demands resulted in his own plans appearing to be less effective than he would have wished:

The U21s is by far the hardest for so many different reasons. Your week's different and as we play mainly mid-week we are caught in between the 18s and first team weekend games which can impact our sessions. For example, today we wanted to do an intensive session, but we've had to go up with the first team and work on shape with them which breaks our routine slightly. This obviously impacts on our training, so we have to kind of work around them and we're almost constantly sandwiching in our work around different little bits and so I'd say that's one of the main challenges. (UC4)

Several players were aware of the unstable routine around training. They were used to it and understood that you have to be ready to take the moment when it happens:

You never know your schedule, it all depends on the first team, they could want you, so you always have to be ready. I don't feel insecure about it, I'm never scared, it's more like you are waiting for that moment. You have to be prepared. (P3)

However, several players echoed the coaches' views, highlighting the impact on training quality and team dynamics:

It can be a mixed squad on a regular basis, some U18s, some first team players and 3rd year scholars coming down. It can disrupt us at times in training. It's good for the younger players to step up, but if we had a more consistent team, I think it would be more competitive in training and we would get better results. (P6)

Furthermore, first team players dropping down into the U21 squad for training, followed by their participation in U21 matches, could impact valuable game time for some players. One player explains the repercussions of this on his own experience:

When first team players sometimes drop down, that can vary the squad up, and that can impact me. I mean, if a first team player in my position comes down, that could see me not starting the game. I understand it, first team manager wants him to get minutes, so it's understandable, but it does affect me. It affects my development and obviously it's disappointing. (P5)

This experience may mirror that of a first-team player, as a lack of playing time can be demotivating and, in more serious cases, lead to feelings of despair, as reported in previous research by Nesti (2013). However, the findings reported here suggest that some players have become accustomed to this situation, as it occurs so frequently. This repeated exposure to such challenges to their routine may have contributed to developing resilience or, at the very least, has helped players better cope with their circumstances (Taylor & Collins, 2022). Nevertheless, players express clear dissatisfaction with this inconsistent practice. Previous research has

suggested that this inconsistency can lead to a loss of motivation or self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Depending on the scale of this disruption, the instability appears to compromise the integrity of the U21 phase itself.

Training and match schedules

Match scheduling posed a challenge for U21 squads. Although there was a schedule of fixtures published at the beginning of the season, the dynamic nature of the fixture lists across the groups brought about frequent changes to the pattern of training and playing. These changes were mainly influenced by the U21 teams or first teams rescheduling of league games as a result of progression in a cup competition. This made the U21 playing schedule more fluid in nature across the season. Several coaches described how this could impact the training schedule and preparation for matches. One U21 coach whose team played in the PL 2 spoke about the fluidity of games during a typical season and how they needed to be flexible:

The 21s league is more a fluent programme because the games might be on Friday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, whatever day a week. I think, over the course of the season we've literally played on every day of the week. So obviously that causes issues with trying to put out a, you know, a fixed structure of a programme and when the lads are in or off (Referring to training schedules). (UC2)

Several players acknowledged the fluidity of the games programme and how their schedule was different from week to week. "Normally it's one game a week but sometimes you'll get the double game week, then the next week we might not have a game" (P9). Training days would vary depending on when the game was played, "we are in most days, to be fair, but our day off can differ, and what we do on each day also, depending on when the game is" (P3).

Several U21 coaches confirmed this irregular pattern of training and playing but confirmed that it also mirrored the dynamic nature of first team football. It was deemed a positive change in their otherwise consistent weekly schedule in earlier development stages:

The dynamic nature of U21s football is no different to first team football, so the inconsistent routine can actually help them if they ever make that transition to first team. Whatever our schedule is though, we always try and be in the building when they (first team) are, just in case anybody is needed, so we can adapt to any plans. This means we will also try to mirror their schedule. (UC4)

In contrast, another U21 coach whose team operated outside of any U21 league structure had a different take on scheduling games for their players, suggesting that not being in a league structure could be a positive:

We are not impacted as we have control over matches in the main. It is a collaborative process of how we do things. We don't place an importance on league fixtures so there is quite a lot of scope to manipulate the training with players and decide who's gonna play and who's not gonna play and make sure that we get in the training that we feel is important for the players. (UC7)

Mirroring a first team environment has been suggested to help players prepare for a potential transition (Premier League, 2011). However, these inconsistent structural elements posed a significant challenge to medium- and longer-term player development, being perceived to affect competitiveness in training, preparation for matches and ultimately outcomes, e.g., results of matches. Consistent and stable practice has been highlighted as crucial in youth development (Megicks et al., 2022), and coaching staff acknowledged and worked to ameliorate the impact of such unstable and inconsistent practice. These findings, in alignment with Study Two, demonstrate a facet of high-level coaching that has been considered crucial in fostering vibrant learning environments (Cushion et al., 2012). However, if coaches were

unable to adapt and be flexible in their approach, it may impact their ability to deliver meaningful sessions that are competitive, purposeful and tailored to player needs. Good communication around the movement of players is also crucial, and if this is ineffective it may impact the organisational functioning of clubs, seen as a key element within development environments (Mills et al., 2014a).

Physical Space

Respondents in the study agreed that housing all training groups, including academy and first team squads, on one site can help facilitate greater coherence and, potentially, a smoother transition for players as also suggested in other research (Lundqvist et al., 2024). Of the 11 clubs to which the interviewees were attached, 10 had their academy provision and first team situated on the same site, which was their sole training facility. Physical space dedicated to U21 squads typically differed between clubs, depending on their financial resources. Some coaches whose physical space was limited for the U21 squad described the challenges this posed to player development:

We train two days a week on-site and the rest off-site. We're just limited at our training ground as we've only got two grass pitches. Our boys, U18s and U21s never train on grass. This can definitely impact their development and some of the lads can be a bit disappointed with the facilities here. I don't think they mind Astroturf too much, but it's a higher impact and can lead to more injuries. And of course, we'll play matches on grass, so should train on grass, really. (UC5)

Another club whose U21s were situated on the same site as the first team, had similar space issues. One coach explained that even though the general facilities were good, challenges still remained:

We are not blessed with amazing facilities. It's probably one of them facilities that has everything we need without overstepping the mark into too much luxury. We can be limited for space at times, for example, we are training on 3G right now, we get on the grass sparing because we're restricted due to the first team. (UC4)

First class training facilities have been stated to be vital for optimal player development (Larson et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2014a), and insufficient facilities can lead to player dissatisfaction, which may affect well-being as players and staff within this squad may feel like they don't have a shared identity or a diminished sense of belonging (Eastwood, 2021). The responses from the stakeholder groups suggested a passive acceptance of the situation. Clubs with a greater array of facilities and access to grass pitches for their academy squads were perceived to be greatly advantaged by having their own facilities for use at their discretion. However, other more cultural challenges still remained:

We have great facilities here. The academy has their own building and pitches and so do the first team. We're basically 500 yards away from each other but it feels like you are on two separate sites. There's a path in between the two that kind of splits the groups. We can easily connect with first team staff and easily provide them with players at a moment's notice either within the morning meeting or during the day by mobile. The first team do need their privacy, but it does feel like there's a disconnect between the two groups at times. (UC2)

These perceptions (perhaps, to some extent, understandable) indicate that the U21 squad was treated less favourably. Even though space was shared (to a lesser or greater extent) cultural difference were reported - potentially hindering positive interactions (Relvas et al., 2010). A shared space was deemed crucial for creating an environment in which interaction could provide opportunities for players to understand first team standards and expectations

(Røynesdal et al., 2018). One club had recently moved into its new facility and the U21 coach describes the impact this has had on team togetherness:

It's how we connect people, So, we've put the canteen at the heart of it, and produced two wings, one for the first team side, and the other side is the Academy. Off the heart of the building there is physical space to relax and connect people from across the club, there is a café, meeting spaces and our welfare space. Our physical environment now has been designed to create opportunities for people to come together and our academy players get the chance to see and converse with first team players, learn from them, and pick up ideas and thoughts. (UC3)

One head coach and several first team coaches underscored the value of players and staff all working within close proximity. One head coaching stating “it's great for younger players to have role models and senior mentors around them” (HC2). First team coaches welcomed a shared environment as it provided opportunities for younger players to better understand the expectations and desired behaviours required in the first team. In turn this could provide motivation and a greater belief in their ability to ‘make it’. One assistant head coach summed up his own experiences of a closer, more culturally fluid environment. “I think when everyone's on site you can see best practice from pros, how they conduct themselves in the right way, and learn from that. Those interactions aid learning and knowledge and give confidence” (AHC1).

All players who had regular interactions with their senior counterparts viewed it as a positive. “It gives me a lift when they showed interest in how they were getting on and can take advice from them”, “we have the chance to build good relationships” (P8). Furthermore, this provided a culture where potential observations can take place, allowing younger players to be present and observe first team staff and players. These positive interactions were seen as important to help young players so they feel connected to the club and see a pathway for them into the first team (Morris et al., 2015). This would foster a greater sense of belonging and contribute to the

U21 purpose of preparing players for first team football. If not implemented, such a transition could be more challenging (Drew et al., 2019) as the younger athletes have less opportunity to learn from their more senior counterparts (Morris et al., 2015).

6.4.2 Strategies to Help Player Development and Transitions

Unsurprisingly, matters relating to the development and progression of players emerged as a higher-order theme. To capture this theme adequately, it is relevant to reiterate the aims of U21 football. The scoping review in Chapter Four was unable to particularise this to many individual clubs, as few of them published online accounts of their development policies. However, from those clubs that did describe their U21 policies, and taking into account the Football Association's EPPP guidelines, the main purpose of this phase can be described as 'to prepare players for first-team football, and more broadly to prepare them for a future either in football or in another career'.

Several U21 coaches confirmed that the main aim of the phase was to develop players for their club's first team. One coach spoke about how he perceived his role at the club:

Your jobs to try to get them into the first team. Yes, that's not going to be every player that walks through the door. I mean, we currently have 167 players in the academy from U9s through to the 21s and not all of them are gonna get into the first team, the job is to try and give the opportunity for them. (UC2)

A particular feature of this, is understanding the diverse developmental trajectories of players. The remainder of this section will now describe the strategies used to help the development of players and maximise their opportunities to progress.

Individual development

Several coaches were aware of recognising individual needs and therefore tailoring the programme for individual development. This is evident in the 18-21 years career phase, in which some players may already be established first team players and others will be in the first, second or third year of participation in an U21 group, each with different exposure to first-team football and with different 'labels' of readiness or potential. Coaches stated that the player's individual career pathway must be understood and finely tuned to maximise their journey. "You have to create the most effective pathway. This may not always be a grouped pathway; it could be also an individual one. You have to understand the needs of each player" (UC3). Similarly, another U21 coach provided an example of how they consider this for their players:

It can be very individual to the player. Some of the first-year pros are a good 2 to 3, maybe even 4 years away from getting anywhere near a championship first team. There are other players that you're working with that are probably right there and might be ready for a first team environment. (UC7)

Several clubs were keen to embed a long-term process into their planning and part of this approach was to create an environment where players felt they had ownership of their own development and were part of this planning process. In turn, this would create a stronger sense of connection and belonging to the club:

It's important to give players autonomy so that they realise their development is in their hands. We can give them ownership, for example, to run coaching or analysis session, and that then links back to that connection and belonging. We can't do it all for them, as this doesn't prepare them properly. They have to do it themselves, things like prepare their own meals and turn up to places on time. (UC3)

Contributions by Gledhill and Harwood (2019), Mills et al. (2014b), and Mitchell et al. (2021) have reported positive responses in environments that endorse long-term development, and that this is a key element in successful development environments in a sporting context (Henrikson et al., 2010; Henrikson & Stambulova, 2017), and specifically within football literature (Larson et al., 2013, 2020; Ryom et al., 2020). Individual development plans (IDP) were a way of supporting players' long-term development. These plans were live documents that reviewed the players' progress and set goals and target to which they could aim. One U21 coach explains how they use them, "We do two IDP sessions every week now. IDP isn't always football based, might be gym work or working on some physical attribute or it could be a meal plan. So, you know there's different ways that we look at the IDP. It's not always football based" (UC2). The principles of these plans are similar across clubs. However, they can vary in the period over which they are reviewed. Across the board they are very much player driven, as one U21 coach explains:

We sit down with the players every eight weeks. There's a document that they've got to fill out and it's got sections on career goals, process goals around lifestyle, psychosocial, physical, technical, tactical. It's up to them to identify goals and how they're gonna achieve them and those process goals are very much driven by the player. (UC7)

Contrary to some of the perceptions of participants in Study Two, all players in this study were involved in their own development, in the form of these individual plans. These plans helped to give players "a focus, there's always something to work on" (P3), and helped them to understand their progression, "It helps because you know what they want from you and what they want you to develop and what you need to do to progress" (P7). This has been highlighted as a key element of optimal talent development environments (Mills et al., 2014b; Røynesdal et al., 2018). These findings are similar to previous research in suggesting that such educational

support has been shown to help provide a focus and clear and transparent objectives to support players as they try to make a transition from youth to senior football (Larson et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2015). The individual nature of these plans can complement the diverse goals of each player, nurturing individual talent rather than adopting a ‘one size fits all’ approach. To some extent, the positional nature of player performance assists the specialised intervention. Also, as will be discussed later, it was apparent that players’ ambitions changed over time, as their career possibilities became more evident. By engaging with these plans, players are actively involved in their own development, perhaps ensuring a sense of autonomy that may foster a greater degree of trust between player and staff member and also a stronger commitment to the club. Consequently, this process may help to forge a stronger relationship between player and coach, in which players understand all elements of training and preparation and how these contribute to their overall progress (Gesbert et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2014b).

To support the development and progression of players into a club’s first team, a new role known as ‘first team development coach’ had recently emerged at a number of the clubs (TGU, 2022). The role is designed to work with individuals and/or small groups of players who have been identified as potential ‘talents’ and who could integrate with the first team squad in the near future. The coach acts as a crucial link in the player development chain between U21s and first team to ensure a smoother transition of these players. One coach who had recently been given this specific role explains what it entails:

The role bridges that gap between U21s and first team and really allows for me to dig deep into the individual development plans, doing SWAT analysis to really understand their strengths and needs. Then work with them individually or as a small group giving them extra time that they may not get. Everyone

needs an opportunity like that. Not all players are good enough to do it, but I bet there's some that would have made it if they had that little bit extra coming from a staff member rather than not. (UC1)

The role can provide a more stable and objective perspective that encompasses all elements of performance:

I present back to the manager and the director of football every 10 weeks on how these players I identified are doing. I can provide a more objective point of view. It seems to be working as last season got more debuts than they've ever had before. We've also got more trust between the age groups and first team, because I'm a conduit between the teams (18-21s and first team). The importance of that role for those players is probably bigger than I realized when I first started it. (UC1)

This role was also recognised by several players. One player expresses how crucial this coach was for his development: "He can really help you nail down various elements of your game. I think it's a really critical role now for us players to be able to make that final step into the first team" (P1). Another player emphasises the importance of this individual one-to-one development, which attends more to his specific needs: "The individual stuff has been great for me this season, really worked with me on those little bits that are important for my game" (P9).

This was seen to be a positive development in offering players regular mentoring from the more-informed and nuanced perspective of someone who understands the challenges and expectations from their club's first team provision. Reciprocal communication between academy and first team staff was reported by Røynesdal et al. (2018) to aid the alignment of the expectations, beliefs and values of transitioning players, and consequently has been perceived as a factor in reducing the sub-cultural gap between squads (Larson et al., 2013; Relvas et al., 2010).

Clarity about expectations of the first team environment was seen as crucial for successful player progression. First team head coaches stressed the importance of knowing ‘what it means to be a first team footballer’, and understanding ‘what the head coach is looking for’. Clubs that had a first team development coach were seen as pivotal in providing players with this knowledge, and in managing those communications relating to career progression and preparing for challenges, identified as important elements for players striving to progress into a first team environment (Røynesdal et al., 2018). However, similar to other studies in the field (Larson et al., 2013), there was no obvious support for this within most clubs. It was likely to happen on a more ad hoc basis if and when players were exposed to first team training and/or other interactions with first team staff and players. This meant that players would need to rely upon any coping skills they had in order to deal with first team demands. As Gould and Carson (2008) put it, coping skills they have ‘caught’ instead of being ‘taught’. Furthermore, for this role to be successful in helping to drive the talent development process as stated above, it would require a high level of coach expertise across the holistic landscape who could effectively communicate with all key stakeholders (Megicks et al., 2022).

Exposure to first team

Opportunities for exposure to a first team environment have been reported to be beneficial in aiding a player’s youth to senior transition (Morris et al., 2017), and a way of easing player transitions by familiarising players with the change of environment (Henriksen et al., 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2024). This study’s findings confirmed the significance of opportunities for training (and playing) with the first team. Similar to other studies (Christensen et al., 2011), U21 coaches were keen to provide this opportunity to their players. In contrast to previous literature such as Aalber & Saether, 2016; Larson et al., 2013; Relvas et al., 2010), coaches

noted that this could happen on a regular basis, especially with players who were viewed as potential recruits to the first team in the near future, or had shown appropriate potential:

Most players get exposed at least once every two weeks to 1st team training so the players get a taste of the different things, such as intensity of training, level of professionalism, increased demands and a slightly more ruthless coaching style. We use it as a bit of a carrot as well. Those that are performing well in training and games will be the ones that we select to move up and train with the first team. (UC7)

Similar views were reiterated by several other U21 another coach, who indicated that opportunities for U21 players to train with the first team happened on a regular basis:

Our gaffer gives opportunities to fringe players, but also young players that they see potential in. They call players up from the 21s on a regular basis. (UC5)

For this opportunity to be maximised it was crucial to have a good connection between squads (U21 and first team). This meant constant communication between coaches to allow this to happen. One coach who was in the role of first team development coach, gave an example of how he acted as the conduit between the two squads:

Having a common thread and common goal between me as first team development coach and the first team is essential. I have the responsibility of training the under 21s players in alignment with the first team for exactly what they want. So, if they were ready to go into that first team environment, they knew what was expected of them. A shared model, style of play, shared vocabulary. It can be very powerful when everybody is involved (Coaches, players, support staff) which breeds a rapport between staff and players. (UC1)

Taylor and Collins (2020; 2021) reported that creating an environment with a shared understanding across stakeholders—such as shared values and objectives—is crucial for a successful talent development environment.

Several players provided examples of their own experiences when training with the first team. Collectively, they embraced this opportunity and saw it as good for their development as it really challenged them, “There’s more pressure because the gaffer needs you to perform so the sessions can be good. And we need to be on it, so the first team players can get the best out of it” (P7); “You go from being comfortable in your surroundings, within your group to go in there and being someone new” (P8); and there is an obvious step up in levels, “They expect a lot of you, you challenge yourself. I think it brings you on more. It is a high level of training from a technical, tactical and physical perspective. It’s a shift in mentality, you know win at all cost, kind of mentality” (P5); “It gives you a clear picture of how hard football is and what you need to do to be successful, to have good career” (P4). These findings emphasise the importance of player awareness of first-team expectations, which can help them prepare for the challenging transition (McCutcheon, 2022) and provide them with a broader skill set, such as the ability to perform under pressure (Till & Baker, 2022).

Maximising opportunities where training environments are pressurized rather than simply greater amounts of training, can help athletes adjust to pressure (Low et al., 2020), build one’s resilience and in turn be a protector for mental health (Madsen et al., 2021). Assertiveness and recognising the need to fit in and respect the first team group could influence how senior professionals perceived younger players, and could give those players some credibility (Røynesdal et al. 2018; Swainson et al., 2020). Furthermore, Røynesdal et al. (2018) support this view, “To integrate as a transitioning player in the first team environment, understanding

what is wanted and not wanted in terms of behaviours and values by key stakeholders and presenting yourself in such a way that you stay within these intangible lines of conduct appears helpful” (2018, p34).

Communication

To mobilise this in a more consistent fashion, and in agreement with other research (Lundqvist et al., 2024), it was thought that the nature of the connection between the U21 squad and the first team was crucial with communication more ‘open’. Regular meetings were part of this, ensuring a smooth operation. Several U21 coaches described how this is organised within the club:

We've got quite an organised structure, everyone knows what the programme is. We meet two mornings a week with the head of performance and heads of department where we will go through the week in detail in terms of exactly what each session's gonna look like, who's gonna facilitate each session. Who's fit and who's injured. We will also review at the end of the day and plan for the next day. (UC7)

Information is shared across departments and several coaches noted how this provides a clear understanding of individual player development. One U21 coach shared that the club has a mentor programme which includes U21 players, a platform “to talk about what’s happening holistically, how they're doing at home, their relationship, how things are in their digs etc. We find that useful as well” (UC5). This was perceived to foster a positive working environment and connect staff across the club, “I think we've got a strong staff based in the sense of there's a lot [who] feel comfortable challenging each other without ever overstepping the mark. The challenge is then healthy because not personal and it will benefit the player” (UC4).

Fostering more cooperative and sharing working relationships, have been shown to be a key element to maximising player development within an academy environment (Larson et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2014a). Approaches to discuss player development (including U21 players) mirror the approach described in Green et al. (2020), allowing for coherent holistic discussions about the wellbeing and performance of players, informed by open, honest dialogue and constructive conflict (Taylor & Collins, 2022).

Forging positive relationships

Forging positive relationships with players was also seen to help the transition process. Spending time with players, getting to know them, even the younger players who are not within the coach's direct remit, could foster future positive relationships. One coach explains how he approaches this:

If you build a relationship with the players, they're more receptive when you give them a little bit of a, you know, challenge. Or tell them, 'that's not good enough'. Also getting around other younger players is key for that, so they know you when they transition up. It can be watching them play and engaging with them around the club and having a general chat. (UC4)

This depends on the individual player, "Some are quite young and unsure. You need to be proactive and engage the players, rather than expect the players to approach or engage with staff at times. My own mantra is to be positive, be nice and support and help them. I find this gets the best out of people". (UC5). Several players expressed how they perceived their relationships with their coaches. Players generally felt at ease with their coaches, "they make you feel welcome, if I need to chat to them I can go at any time really" (P6), and "it's always a two-way conversation, so you can be open and honest" (P8). Players felt like this with all staff members, "I feel within the environment, everyone's very friendly and respectful. I've

never been scared of asking questions or talking to any member of staff. I like the relationships with most staff members. They don't make me feel uncomfortable or ever feel like I'm under pressure” (P3). However, when asked about support for them with matters ‘outside’ football, all players suggested that this would mainly come from non-coaching staff:

I wouldn't really talk to my coach about other things apart from football stuff. We have a player care person who helps us with our digs and education. We also have a sports psychologist. He's always in one of our meetings and stuff like that. But he also does his little meetings as well. He always reminds us if we ever need to speak to someone, he's there. (P8)

One player reflects on his relationships with different staff at the club. There was a clear distinction in their roles:

My relationships are really good with the coaches. They have really helped me develop as a footballer. We have other staff (sport psychologist) who really help me too. When I came in as a first year I was just quiet, just kept myself to myself. He helped me to develop my confidence around the place, so as the years went by, obviously started to open up more and get closer to all the staff. (P4)

In alignment with Study Two, players reported strong relationships with coaches and support staff. They also had access to additional resources, such as psychologists and player care officers, when needed. These resources provided players with skill development to help them manage various demands—an essential component for those aiming to transition to a first-team environment (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Morris et al., 2016, 2017; Richardson et al., 2013). However, the findings once again underscore the critical role of the coach in facilitating a holistic environment that allows sufficient time and space for players to access this support. Previous research has highlighted the importance of coaches in supporting player wellbeing (Henriksen et al., 2010) and creating an environment that aligns with a primary aim of the

EPPP: “developing well-rounded, educationally prepared individuals who can adapt beyond and outside of football” (Premier League, 2011, p. 72). This approach also strengthens players’ ability to cope with ‘bumps in the road’, a key factor in building resilience (Collins et al., 2016).

Playing opportunities

The various forms of playing opportunities were perceived to create different challenges for players. Premier League 2 was seen as a comprehensive structure which allows teams to compete against other clubs of the same category within a certain geographical area. There are two divisions and teams can get promoted, relegated or become champions. This may provide incentives and a competitiveness for players. Several U21 coaches expressed their views on this, for example:

The PL 2 is the best of what clubs can make of it. It can give players that competitiveness. They (the PL) have structured it between Division One and Division Two, I think that gives a little bit more emphasis on the competitive side of things. It's a goal of ours at some point to try and get into Division One. And yeah, it's a good competition. (UC2)

Some clubs operate a different model of development, termed a B team. These teams are not affiliated to any leagues, but will play in all cup competitions. They organise friendlies against a range of other clubs. The lead B team coach provides an example of how they approach this and the benefits he thinks this has in providing a competitive environment:

As we aren't in an affiliated league as such, we arrange a mixture of friendlies. Some games we play top championship clubs and most of their first team players will play and the level of challenge is extremely high and we'll get beat convincing. And then there's games in between, playing league two sides and they might be quite even games, but a really good level of challenge. The good thing is, we can organise

any games we want and that's normally against first teams or first team fringe players playing the older pros. (UC7)

Several younger U21 players also suggested that the level of competitiveness was high. "We are always playing against older players, it's certainly a physical challenge" (P7). One player provides an example of how his coach would encourage a winning mentality, but suggests that this may not apply to all players:

We always set up with a winning mentality going to games. We treat all PL 2 games the same. The manager is all about development, but he loves winning. I think at the minute everyone's got that competitive edge and it's really good. You have to have that mindset going into games. (P9)

Cup competitions were also part of the competitive process in U21 football. Several coaches felt that these games could provide more competition for the players, as they were knock-out games and therefore the result meant more: "We place a lot of emphasis on the Premier League cup games. We go to a more, we must win this game approach where we'll often mirror the first team training model" (UC7).

Other cup competitions such as the FA trophy were seen as a competitive challenge and good exposure for U21 players to support further their development and future transition into a first team environment. This competition mirrored a first team environment and allowed for multiple games against either lower level first team squads or other same level U21 squads, with an eventual knock-out format. All coaches who had teams in this competition expressed the view that it was an excellent challenge for them:

It's great for us as it really challenges the staff and players. It's real, the players are getting involved with experienced pros, and the results matter in front of fans. We played Sunderland with 23,000 fans and

suddenly it's all a bit different, it's a great experience and the lads liked it and the staff loved it. So, I do think there's value in that. I really do. Maybe the punters and the League 2 clubs don't see it, but if we're talking developmental, I think it's been a positive. (UC1)

The findings align with previous studies on the competitiveness of matches at this stage of football development (see Dowling et al., 2018; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Failing to replicate a first-team level of competitiveness could ultimately affect players' readiness for the transition to the first team. The findings indicate that opportunities to play competitive football in an environment more similar to first-team play would better prepare players, supporting earlier research on younger players in football (e.g., Morris et al., 2017).

The loans system within academy football has been viewed as a potential option on a player's pathway that will support their development. Going 'out on loan' gives players an opportunity to play in a first team for an agreed period of time. This means that players will experience results-based men's football. There are a growing number of players within professional football who are experiencing a loan transition (Kent et al., 2022) – understood as a player being temporarily transferred to play for another club but still registered as a contracted player with their 'parent' club (Football Association, 2020). This pathway for players seemed to be a common approach by most clubs:

The best way to bridge the gap (between U21 and first team) is to get as many out on loan as soon as possible, so they'll get that experience and understanding of men's football to prepare them better into full transition in first team football. I don't think there's a player that's broke into the first team that's not had any loan, don't matter what level it's at. (UC6)

One club had a specific approach to loans within their player develop model, as this U21 coach explains: “By 19 they (the club) really want them out on loan. So, the U21 team is mainly made up of 2nd year U18s. So, we are playing up an age all the time, which the club wanted” (UC1). Several head coaches expressed the view that a loan move was essential to help players understand the reality of men’s football and what this brings in terms of pressure. One head coach had very strong views about such an experience and the impact this could have:

It's just about making them grow up a bit. They go from being a kid, and all of a sudden, it's a bit more real. It doesn't matter if he fails or succeeds, It's about an experience. Learn how they play, how their manager speaks to the players, what tactics they have, feeling that environment. In the umbrella [football structure], they all need to get at least one loan in every year they're pro for like I don't know, one to three months and it doesn't matter what level it is, how far they drop, they just need to get out and play. It's about him feeling everything in that dressing room, the disappointment of defeat, the joy of victory. And if you don't, if you're not turned on by the victory and you're not mortified by the defeat, I just don't think professional sport is for you. It will just eat you up. (HC2)

Several players interviewed had experienced going out on loan and all perceived it to be a positive experience. In fact, all these players would rather be experiencing men’s football on loan if they were not in their parent club’s first team. One player provides an example of his time out on loan at a lower level club:

It's real competition because every game there is a decent crowd, so at home games they get nearly 2000. Every game I'd have the other teams' fans behind my goal. Just giving me shit. So, I think that's added pressure. It will help me to help deal with bigger crowds and the pressures of playing in the first team. You need this, because if you've had 12 years in an academy, and haven't had any first team experience of fans or anything, you know, getting abused, you won't know how to handle it. If you can't play in front of 2000 fans, you'll not be able to play under 30,000 fans. (P2)

It has been suggested that to mitigate against the potential stagnation of players (meaning remaining in an U21 squad but with little prospect of progression and with consequent impact on attitudes and behaviour) making effective use of the loan system can provide a more positive opportunity for players in this development phase to experience competitive football, and potentially be a contributing factor in increasing the likelihood of subsequent first team selection with their parent club (Mitchell et al., 2020; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). It was particularly apparent that players in the study who were beyond their first year in U21 football, actively explored more loan opportunities to play men's competitive football. The loan transition can give players exposure to first team football, albeit potentially at a lower level, which has been suggested to enhance the opportunities for players in their progression as a professional footballer (Morris et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020) and to provide the development opportunities needed to appropriately challenge them in their transition into a first team (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). In turn, this may benefit the lower-level clubs, as Richardson et al. (2013) states, helping them to maintain “the continual delivery of a team that can perform, remain financially stable, avoid relegation and possibly even progress through the leagues” (p. 139). This exposure to ‘accountable’ football may help prepare players better for their next step by having experiences that mirror, more closely, a first team environment and can create learning opportunities not necessarily available in U21 football, such as coping with deselection or substitution in a key fixture. It can also replicate the physical demands that first team football poses, such as the turnover of competitive games (normally every three days), thus helping players to adjust to that physical transition (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). The loan experience can also help players cope better with a range of playing styles and how to adapt to change, providing autonomy to manage themselves and increase their intra-personal skills (e.g., confidence) (Swainston et al., 2020). The findings make it clear that, for the majority of players, the U21 phase, being in and around first team environments (players and

staff) can help players recognise and understand the key behaviours and values needed to integrate socially, to understand expectations that are key to successful transitions (Røynesdal et al., 2018) and to develop their psycho-social skills and ultimately add to a player's value (Kent et al., 2022).

Stepping up early

Players 'stepping up' early into the next developmental phase, e.g., into 16-18s or 18-21s seemed a common occurrence and could be deemed as good preparation for that transition into the next phase. However, there were some reservations. It was only appropriate if players were ready and were considered to be able to cope with any demands this next phase of development would pose. Several players had experience stepping up to the U21 squad early in their developmental journey and all said that this help them subsequently transition better into this squad:

In my second year towards the back end of the season, I was stepping up, so like I got used to it at that point, and towards end of the season, I started pretty much a majority of games for the 21s so it's sort of like been more gradual instead of just finishing the 18s straight into the 21s. So yeah, I'd say I had an easier transition. (P6)

Another player recalls how he was treated differently when stepping into the U21 squad:

I think when you were a scholar, I feel it is very much like school. Like everything they tell you to do, you do. You have like, every day it's the same as like that. I feel like now this team (U21) you're treated more like the first team, more like adults like they give you the responsibility. More professional. There is more pressure, but it's a good pressure, makes you work harder. There's a vast difference in the standard of training. It's more intense and the quality is higher. (P9)

This provided younger players with exposure to first team coaches, who were either coaching within the U21 set up or had regular communication with U21 coaches, and also with more experienced first team players (who were often ‘drafted in’ to the U21 match-day squad) (Swainston et al., 2020). As with the transition from U21 to first team, coaches suggested, and players felt, that this early exposure to a higher level proved beneficial in helping players adjust to the demands of the U21 phase and the associated dynamics. Furthermore, effective communication and shared understanding of the demands attributed to each level by coaches and other key stakeholders allowed for rational decision making about those players considered most likely to cope with an early transition and also about providing relevant support (Morris et al., 2015).

6.4.3 Barriers Associated with Player Development and Progression

The previous theme provided a better understanding of the aim of the U21 phase of professional football, which is to help develop players for club’s first team. However, the interviews with participants also identified barriers that coaches and players felt could pose a threat to achieving this aim. This theme captures interviewee comments that could be grouped around the philosophy of practice, stagnation, competitiveness, difficulties with loans, trust, and professional contracts. These were often more about the ‘system’ or context within the club, rather than aspects of the relationship between coaches and players.

Philosophy of practice

In the U21 phase of player development, there seemed to be a continual challenge of striking the right balance between the pursuit of winning matches and the broader objective of developing and nurturing players over a longer period. Several U21 coaches expressed the view that U21 football was predominantly still a ‘development stage’ and that the majority of players

in this group were not yet ‘ready’ for that first team transition. There were challenges in navigating the delicate balance between nurturing a long-term development environment and preparing players for the demanding, results driven, win at all cost first team environment:

I think we have a joke in football, that when you win, it's about winning and when you lose, it's about development. I don't think it's about winning at this age, because there is a demand for us to support the first team, there's not a big push towards you winning every game. You gotta try and win because we're preparing those lads for that first team experience, and essentially there needs to be some measured outcomes to keep our job. (UC4)

All coaches promoted a philosophy of practice that attempted to strike a positive balance between developing players over the longer-term and winning matches (perhaps, ‘being seen to be effective’) in the short term. This aligns with the development model of sport participation (Côté et al., 2007) and work within a football setting (Aalberg & Saether, 2016; Larson et al., 2013). Although developing players was the main priority, U21 coaches also recognised that there was an inherent desire to win in all sectors of the game:

The aim is to develop these players, develop all elements of their potential, and that comes first before anything else. It's about them being the best they can be, but no one wants to be bottom of the league, even the schoolboy coaches wanna win, it's just in their nature. You can take the pressures off a little bit because it is about development, but the long-term thing is about producing winners. (UC5)

However, this can result in differing views about philosophies of practice and how coaches perceived the ultimate goal of success. One U21 coach shared an example of why this might be the case:

If my team is winning all the time, and you're top the Premier League 2, you know, does the first team look at that and think, this guy's doing a good job? Prob not, they wanna know who's close to moving

up, can be trusted in their first team. So, you find that disparity between some of your coaches as well. This sort of development versus winning. What we're trying to do is create people who can win. That's not about winning in this moment. (UC3)

Furthermore, several coaches reflected upon the varied approaches of U21 teams to game situations. One coach summed up his experiences of these differing approaches in U21 games. He stressed that a significant imbalance in ability levels within games led him to question the fundamental aims of the U21 phase:

I think up until U18s it's development and everyone calls it that. At 21s, different clubs use it for different reasons. Some coaches will just focus on development, and some may go all out to win. Some teams really want to try and beat us, and would play older players and you think, right, what are we doing here? What's the purpose of this? Here [his club] it's purely to develop the players to go on loan or move to another club for money. Possibly the odd one or two will get in and around the first team. (UC1)

Findings clearly state a range of intentions for U21 football, and these divergent philosophies of practice, also evident in Dowling et al. (2018), subsequently impacted on the games programme. U21 coaches highlighted as a pivotal consideration that there might be a threshold at which player development has been exhausted and the player's development trajectory starts to plateau. This is when a player has been in the U21 squad for over 2 years and/or is having regular experience as part of the first team environment:

It's still the developmental age, just purely because we have under nineteens that are in the group and who are first year professionals. Where it becomes messy is when you have first team players coming down into that bracket and are now part of that group, you know what? What is the group then? I think once you get to a certain age bracket of over 21s, it's beyond the developmental age, you're now, you know, a first team footballer in my eyes. (UC2)

This notion was confirmed by two players who were now in their 3rd year of a professional contract and had been in and around the first team. One player identified the difference in mentality between U21 and first team, and that being around the first team had cemented a winning mentality in him. However, going ‘back down’ the developmental continuum posed a challenge for him. “When I was playing for the first team, the mentality is you're there to win. Then it's hard to then go back to the 21s mentality of it's OK to lose. So, I don't really care about the way you went about it. I just wanna win” (P8). One other player was conscious about his age, and where he was on the developmental continuum, knowing he was nearing the final stages of his developmental journey. “I think that my age now [20] it's definitely a little bit of both. Yeah, I mean, two years ago I had a saying it's about development, but I'm getting to that that age now where it's make or break. I've got to perform every day” (P5).

The majority of U21 players felt they were still very much in a period of development. “Here they are not bothered if we lose, it's about development and really try and push us to get in and around the first team, even if it's just for training” (P6). Although there was not so much pressure to win as would be experienced in a first team environment, players still wanted to win and coaches certainly took each game seriously. “They try to instil that winning mentality into everyone and they wanna win themselves [coaches] and we do go into games wanting to win. But if you lose it's not the end of the world I guess. Managers aren't gunna lose their jobs over it” (P9).

Several coaches felt a responsibility and a pressure to win, but they were able to contextualise this and define what a good outcome was:

As a coach you can feel that pressure to win, but the most important thing is players coming through, that's the positive focus. We still need to prepare them for the first team so understanding how to win is

important. This is a tough environment for the lads and the best will come through and you want them to push each other. I suppose we're constantly moving up and down the spectrum and trying to find balance. (UC4)

Another coach agreed that the main focus was to help players transition for the first team environment and ultimately that was how he would be judged: “There's pressure on the coaches, but our job isn't gonna be defined on where we finish in the league, it's gonna be defined on how many players we get through to the first team” (UC2). The pressure to win matches in this phase may be related to a goal of maintaining the club's academy status (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Given the evident recognition that the players' development should not be focused solely on on-field performance, there is clearly a concern that too much of a focus on outcomes in this phase may result in a limited focus on other more personal development goals (Ryon et al., 2020).

Stagnation

The ideal development pathway, in which players smoothly transition from their first year into their second year and then onto the first team, seemed to be something of a rarity. In the absence of this, players were reported to find themselves with few alternatives that would advance their development and career pathway. This step away from their perception of an ideal progression can lead to a sense of stagnation among players. One player had been in the U21 set up for a couple of years. He said that he had felt stagnated at various points:

I think sometimes you just feel a little bit stuck in the 21s. I felt that towards the back end of last year anyway when people were saying my chance has probably gone, and you start to feel a little bit lost I think. I'm now 19 and I look at people who are 19 and already doing big things. I think at the age I'm at now, I feel like I need to be playing some sort of first team level. So, like when I feel like I'm playing in

the 21s and I'm not getting enough first team exposure, that's when I feel like I need to go on loan or I won't improve. (P9)

Several coaches referred to this notion where players can become frustrated and 'fed up':

Now I think once you get past the first year as a professional, I think it becomes really difficult to be a part of an U21 squad if you're not near the first team. At that point they can feel lost and not challenged enough, then motivation has gone, and that sense of belonging has gone. Especially when they see younger players accelerate ahead of them into the first team. You start to see this shift in mentality when they're not getting an opportunity, when their dreams are diminished. (UC1)

There was a sense from several U21 coaches that players can extend their time in this phase beyond a point at which progress into the first team is unlikely. At this point, there is a concern about giving the player an opportunity to further their career progression elsewhere. One coach provides a bleak example of the situation when players get caught in this predicament:

I think there's too many get caught in the system for too long and it becomes detrimental whereby, they're almost too old for somebody to take the plunge on them because they've got no experience of first team football. And so, they're stagnant and getting frustrated and they're the ones that become the hardest to manage because they start to get lazy and disinterested. (UC4)

Conversely, one U21 coach took a different perspective and argued that players are given every opportunity to develop and progress their career and they should be self-motivated to improve no matter their situation:

If a player feels stagnated, why isn't he got the self-motivation to improve, what is he doing about it? Because being on this side of the fence there is a hell of a lot of work goes into the players in terms of giving them the opportunity to develop. So why aren't they helping themselves? (UC2)

This stagnation could be further manifested as a sense of isolation which has been reported in other transitional literature (Mitchell et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2013), with players at this point experiencing a lack of challenge and sense of connection, coupled with the realisation that progression into the first team was unlikely. In addition, players who had experienced ‘moving up’ into a first team environment and then returning to the U21 squad had difficulties managing the adjustment of mentalities between the two. The winning mentality of the first team contrasted with the acceptance of losing (or rather the absence of accountability for results) in the U21 squad, thus posing a psychological challenge for players in maintaining their motivation. It may reasonably be conjectured and consistent with findings reported in Study Two, that if players do not feel that the environment is conducive to their effective learning and a contribution to their overall development, it may negatively impact their well-being and intrinsic motivation (Gledhill et al., 2015; Gledhill et al., 2017).

Competitiveness

In the previous theme (strategies to help player development), the competition structure was generally viewed in a positive light. However, several participants raised concerns about the adequacy of the ‘level’ of competition in matches. These assertions revolve around observations that league matches often fall short of providing a sufficiently competitive environment for older players. In turn, this impacted their behaviours, showing a different level of engagement than their younger counterparts:

The league structure is probably not enough challenge for the older players. They turn up and probably not too interested in the game because they don't see it as an appropriate level of challenge and almost switch off in those games. Lose focus, lose concentration on what they're doing because It's almost just like a training session rather than a competitive game. (UC7)

This notion was reiterated by several ‘older’ players: “At my age (19), I just don't think you get out of it what you should. I need to move on now” (P8); “As much as these 18-year olds are brilliant, at my age [20] these games are not enough for my level and to be challenging myself in every game. I feel like it could be a little bit more competitive sometimes and more focus on winning. That’s the reality of football” (P5). Another player shared his observations of how attitudes of players can differ:

Different players have different attitudes towards it [matches]. You have some people that think they're too good to play 21s and that’s their mindset, like they're just stuck in the 21s. You'll see players that like don't really bother, don't really care if they have a bad game for 21s. You do see some second years, third years, even some fourth years, if they're still around the 21s, some do start to get a little bit fed up and you can see that in the way they carry themselves. (P9)

One U21 coach reflected on how the competitiveness in games for older players doesn’t replicate the realities of first team football: “It’s like you're watching a friendly sometimes. Players don't fly into tackles, and when they score a goal they can't even be bothered to celebrate. It's like how well is it preparing them for the first team?” (UC5). Players wanted to play in competitions that “meant something” (P1), and league games did not replicate the competitiveness of a first team environment, or certainly not a winning environment (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Hodges and Lohse (2022) suggested that adequate challenge is needed for effective learning. This involved practice when there is an optimal level of challenge, incorporating new information and/or a degree of uncertainty, dependant on individual ability. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that if players are not experiencing an appropriate level of challenge through their respective competitive structure, as suggest by the EPPP (2011, p.59), they may not develop the crucial coping skills in the process (Taylor &

Collins, 2022) and will be ill prepared if and when exposed to a first team environment (Richardson et al., 2013).

Difficulties of loans

The previous theme highlighted player loans as a credible pathway for achieving competitive football and thus gaining valuable experience. However, several coaches suggested that there were also challenges associated with this. One coach drew attention to rules governing loans and how this impacted decisions around whether U21 players will be selected for games that are classed at first team games, such as the Papa John's cup competition (FA Trophy):

So, if we've ear marked players potentially for loan, we like to send them out for a season long loan with a break clause in January. If they're hopefully doing well then potentially they're gonna go to a higher level or we re-call them for our first team. Now playing in the Papa John's (FA Trophy) counts as a first team game, and you obviously have the two-club rule where you can only play for two clubs in a season. So, we didn't play two of our main U21 players against Doncaster because of that rule. So, this does impact selection for the Papa Johns. (UC2)

One of the challenges for players is what's ahead of them in relation to successfully transitioning to the first team, which can lead to "worry and anxiety" (UC2). The challenge is what to do next, and the loan option can be a good one, but the process can also be a challenge. One coach suggested that if players are sent out to the wrong club environment, it could impact them negatively:

It's getting the level of loan right that provides a player with appropriate level of challenge, but also that they probably can succeed and generate a bit of interest in them, as clubs don't see them as first team players and want to sell them. Failure might be quite public, and that almost certainly reduces confidence in the player and so could kill the players potential and value. (UC4)

Another challenge cited by several U21 coaches was managing the players expectations on potential loans:

For some players the loan expectation is unrealistic. They want League One and League Two club loans. No chance. They don't understand how big these levels are. It's very hard to get an academy player from 18-20, a Conference team, even a Conference North team. You have to sometimes start lower, because there's a stigma around academy players now being soft and can they go and compete against men? (UC6)

Some U21 players at clubs with large financial recourses can be paid high wages, and when trying to loan these players out, it can be an obstacle to be negotiated. “Players wages have been an issue at times. There might be interest around players, but they're actually on more money as a U21 player” (UC7). This view was reiterated by an assistant head coach:

Some clubs are paying their U21 players more money than what championship clubs can pay. This means that those players then stay at their parent clubs and don't go out on loan and don't get the results-based football experience. This is a massive stumbling block. They should be willing to take a financial sacrifice so these clubs can give them a chance. (AHC1)

This contributes to a deeper understanding of the demands associated with the loan system and extends findings from previous studies (e.g., Bond et al., 2020). While these findings align with prior research (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022), caution is necessary to carefully manage the loan process to ensure it ultimately benefits the player. Players on loan experience a transition and associated challenges similar to the shift from youth to senior football (see Morris et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2012). Interestingly, head coaches in the study emphasised that players should take any loan opportunities available to gain experience, even if the loan period is later deemed unsuccessful.

Trust

It is clear from all of the views of interviewees that first team head coaches operate in a high-level, pressurised win at all cost environment. This short-term approach in professional sport may lead coaches to select players with experience, in whom they have established trust. All U21 coaches viewed this as a barrier to U21 players' progression and/or selection, restricting their chances to participate in first team football:

I mean pick any football club and you look at the average age of the group and you go well, they're not gonna bring players up. Why? because the manager's on a short-term contract. Why? He's been told he's gotta win the league in the next 12 months. So, he's gonna go get that 29-year-old centre back. He's not gonna play a 19-year-old. (UC3)

Players who had not been exposed to men's¹⁸ football quickly risked being labelled solely as a U21 player.

I think one of the biggest difficulties is they are quickly labelled as having only played U21 football, because of that, the coaching staff feel like they can't trust them because they've not played enough competitive football. They've not had enough exposure to a win at all cost mentality and high-pressure games where mistakes are gonna cost people's jobs. (UC7)

This is supported in the literature, where coaches were inclined to select more-proven experienced players (Nesti et al., 2012) rather than younger players, still considered 'in development' as a result of the pressure placed upon them to achieve instant results (Roderick, 2006a). This further hinders opportunities for U21 players to acquire game time with first teams. There was a prevailing perception that U21 players needed to prove themselves in some

¹⁸ Men's football is used here, and by interviewees in the study, to refer to first-team football in the top tiers of professional football.

form of men's football before any significant transition could take place. In Røynesdal et al.'s (2018) study, first team managers had a view that young players should come 'ready-made' to fit in at first team level. This would, of course, be a conundrum – how to be 'ready' for first team football without having had sufficient exposure to it.

Continual labelling that U21 players are not trusted or 'ready' affected self-confidence, belief in abilities and mental well-being. This was further supported by a number of coaches who voiced concerns about a perceived lack of value placed on U21 football by first teams: "I've been in some environments where, particularly for the U21s, they are a complete afterthought. They're not really on the first teams' radar and if they train with them (first team) they are just training bodies for the first team. Then there's not really much effort put into their development, no individual development" (UC7). One player reiterated this view from his own experience when training with the first team:

Sometimes say you do go up there [first team training] and it is like me, and another player sent up for an 11 be 11 or something and then you, you are just stood there and like you could be manikins, you're not really learning anything or working on anything for you personally. (P6)

These assertions raise significant concerns about the development of U21 players, and in practice, this reality is in stark contrast to the objectives of the EPPP in its pursuit of producing 'better and more' home grown players. There is also a danger, that in these moments, players may go through a process of dis-identification, becoming cynical of the values and norms of the organisational culture, which they have accepted throughout their career (Roderick, 2014).

Professional contracts

When players sign a professional contract, the period of the contract can vary in length. All U21 coaches stated that generally, players will sign a one- to two-year contract which is in line with previous suggestions of contract lengths within this phase of football (Richardson et al., 2013): “We try and go with one year deals, minimal money to start with to keep them hungry. So, very similar to scholarship (16-18)” (UC6); “Typically, they’ll get a one year with the option of the second year, so it is in the club's hands”. (UC5)

Given that contracts are typically one to two years, and in line with previous research on players experiencing this transition (Swainson et al., 2020), players were reported to grapple with feelings of anxiety and insecurity about their future with their club: “I think the majority of players will think about their contracts, there will be a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty”. (UC3). Another coach reiterates this view and outlines that some players may feel a level of desperation to secure another contract:

There's a lot of anxiety for players when they're in the final year of the contract. This can lead to bad decisions, for example, around loans, as players feel forced to go out and impress, so will take any loan offered. (UC7)

Developing players over longer periods of time has been viewed as a positive element of developing talent. However, the challenge for clubs is to provide this long-term development opportunities while maintaining within players a level of drive and determination to succeed. Several U21 coaches expressed this view, emphasising the challenge of finding a balance: “You don't want them anxious, stressed or worried about contracts, but if you give them too long a contract and too early, they can naturally sit back a bit. It’s a constant balance and depending on the player, can be a battle” (UC5).

There were exceptions to this general rule of only offering one or two year contracts. In a case where a player had shown potential early in his developmental journey and gathered interest from other clubs, clubs may offer a longer-term contract:

There'll be the odd player that every top club's after, so we've had to financially reward, but I've been comfortable with that because I know their character and they'll be hungry still. (UC6)

From a financial standpoint, this strategy may be justified. By securing the player over a longer period of time, the club aims to place itself into a strong position in the event of significant interest from a larger club with the financial capabilities to pay the market value. Failing to adopt this approach will allow other clubs to acquire these players for a much smaller compensation fee, potentially losing out on a lucrative transfer fee:

We've just signed a player on a three-year deal and he's a second-year apprentice because Premier League clubs have been sniffing and we wanna tie him down to protect us and keeps him with us for a while developing him. (UC5)

Nevertheless, it remains crucial to approach contractual agreements with careful consideration. If the balance between player development and determination to succeed isn't achieved, it may result in players getting 'caught up' in the system:

We've got a player who is 20, can't get a loan, but he's in his comfort zone because he's got two years left on his contract. His original contract was about four years. Sometime we hand out contracts, just in case. This can become detrimental to the player because they get caught up in the system and then by the time, they're 21-22 with no Football League experience, nobody touches them. (UC4)

6.4.4 Player Support and Attributes

This theme described interviewee opinions about how players might be supported to make a successful transition into a first team environment. These comments and responses were associated with the steps that clubs might take and the values and behaviours that U21 players should demonstrate in their everyday lives.

Supportive culture

Several coaches emphasised the importance of taking care of players and trying to create an environment in which players can thrive:

The players are the centre of everything, and we need to show them care and love. Foster a real belonging to the club, all the way through and that makes the transitions easier. It's hard to keep that when they get into that 2nd and 3rd year but we have to keep finding ways to reignited their hunger for it. It's so individualized. (UC1)

Several players cited examples of how they felt the club helped to strengthen their connection to the club and the team. One player discusses how his club tried to bring players together by providing a platform to forge a better understanding of each other's backgrounds:

We have done sessions together where we chat about our background, and our pathway to the club. It's good as we have a lot of players from London and the Midlands and are very different and can fall out. Sometimes they're very easily misread just by how they are. But I feel like getting to know people's backgrounds kind of makes them understand them a bit more. It was a bit of a cultural shock for me coming up here from London. So, it's really helped. (P3)

A supportive environment has been shown to be an important part of the talent development environment (Henrickson et al., 2010; Henrickson & Stambulova, 2017; Larson et al., 2013;

Swainston et al., 2020; Rongen et al., 2021). This type of environment provides a more holistic experience and can contribute to the overall wellbeing and development of players (Ivarsson et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). Coaches were advocates of such an environment and stressed that club practices should be player-centred. It has been reported that the role of the coach in promoting and fostering well-being is important within the micro-environment of talent development (Henriksen et al., 2010), and that encouraging interactions can positively impact well-being (Aide et al., 2012). Players felt that they were supported holistically, and had positive relationships with a range of staff within their clubs. Coaches would generally attend to all the football related matters and non-coaching staff such as player care and psychology practitioners would attend to other lifestyle and psycho-social matters.

Although this approach may generate a positive environment, the harsh realities of the competitive nature of the game will often contradict such aspirations, as expressed by the same U21 coach:

Players can be discarded even when they might have a year left on their contract, the manager can just draw a line under them, it can be really damaging. They are human beings at the end of day, and you see players that are lost. If that was my son and I could see it, I'd probably be disappointed with the club.
(UC1)

Coaches fully understood that competition for first team places was fierce and that players who were seen as not having the 'potential' to transition into the first team plans could be easily discarded whilst still under contract. Therefore, they found it difficult for academies at this level to incorporate holistic development activities into the everyday programme. This is despite incorporating more holistic approaches having been reported as becoming the norm, even in youth development (Camiré & Santos, 2019).

Although some clubs did employ dedicated psychologists to support players, either on a full- or part-time basis, several coaches highlighted the need for more support in the game from a psychological perspective, but were hindered by limited finances to be able to provide this:

Supporting these players psychologically is the one side that I think is the most important for any athlete and it's probably the most neglected in football. You look at other sports, they seem to invest a lot more on psychology. We would love to have more support here, but it's all to do with finances. (UC6)

Other such roles in supporting players were recognised. Several players acknowledged the player care role and the extent to which they had been supported more holistically by player-care staff:

Yeah, he's the guy that helps us out with everything really. Our living arrangement, and any thing we need. So, we speak every day, just chatting, seeing how everyone is. (P9)

One assistant head coach reflected back on his own time as a player, detailing his approach to getting support and how the players presently may face challenges with this:

If I felt I was in a difficult situation I tried to get help, tried to take control of the situation. I would go to the club doctor, or went to seek external help with a psychologist. I still think there is definitely work to be done because I think the perception of getting help in house [the club] can be quite negative. If you're seen going to see somebody in the club, will that affect my place in the team and affect my contract? Some lads don't want anyone to know they've been seeing that person. It's such a ruthless, cutthroat world that some of the young lads would not be willing to open up on any sort of platform at a young age, when they're making their way in the game. (AHC1)

Coaches reported that an increase in psychological support for U21 players would be beneficial, but reported that financial constraints limited this. They also posed concerns about

the stigma of players seeking such support, also recognised by Feddersen et al. (2023), and that improved mechanisms were required to ensure that in-house support could be fully appreciated and utilised. This raises questions about the prioritisation of resources within football clubs at this stage of development, and the consequences of neglecting the psychosocial dimensions of player development, also reported in earlier research (Gledhill et al., 2017).

Supporting players with life skills

Life skills were seen as an important aspect of the developmental environment. All coaches agreed that clubs should actively facilitate the development of these skills, and could help players in their daily lives, not only while in football but also beyond - after a career in football. However, they also recognised that clubs could go further in providing this support:

Living away from home is something they need to deal with. Being an adult for the first time, learning how to cook, learning to pay bills and all the other things they need to do in life. The dropout rate is massive. By the age of 21, they need to be able to go back into the real world. What are they going to do once the football stops? It frustrates me that there isn't better education for these players. (AHC2)

It seems that in the U21 phase the increase in the time dedicated to football/performance development and games may inadvertently shift the focus away from other developmental needs, such as life skills, psycho-social skills development, and career mentoring. A holistic programme supporting life skills has been shown to have a positive effect in football (Green et al., 2020), and that elite level academy clubs do have the capacity to provide high quality sporting environments for developing life skills that can transfer into everyday life (Green et al., 2020; Rongen et al., 2021). Coaches also recognised that developing life skills was seen as crucial in helping players prepare for life after football:

You need to be prepared for after [football]. I think it's showing an interest in different things, hobbies, things outside of football so that when that moment does come, it does give you another option, another interest. You're not relying solely on football. And actually, I think that can improve your football as well. It can improve the mental health aspects of it. If you get released at 22 years old, just thrown straight into life, it can be a real struggle. Ex-players coming in and talking to them can really help. Giving them a bit of the reality of what it looks like. (AHC1)

Several coaches also acknowledge that supporting players should be extended beyond their time in football. Aftercare was cited as something most coaches thought the club has a responsibility to provide once a player effectively concludes their journey as a professional footballer:

It's also about the aftercare because they go from being in here every day, having everything done for them and all of a sudden, they get released. And then like, wow. And you gotta make sure that certainly for a year or two until they find their feet, you stay in touch. So, the club's conscious of that. (UC4)

Transition out of football can cause players to feel depressed (Blakelock et al., 2016) as they are ill-prepared for life away from football (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Champ et al., 2020a), and may struggle with their identity (Mitchell et al., 2014). However, although funding is now more likely to be allocated to clubs to provide such support (Austin, 2022), even up to U21 level, results in this study indicated that was not necessarily happening to the required level. It should also be noted that much of the research in this area has been conducted on younger academy groups, e.g., U18 players, and that the U21 phase may be perceived as a 'grown up' stage, in which personal development and well-being is consciously or unconsciously given less importance as part of the development environment.

Player attributes: personal characteristics and first team expectations

Several coaches felt that there were crucial attributes that players must exhibit for them to have a chance at transition into the first team. It was a common consensus that players needed to work hard and be consistent in all elements of their life. “The lads have gotta be on it every day and that is tough. It can end up being a grind. It is tough motivating yourself for that every day. They need to eat right, sleep right, live right, and if not, then they’re not gonna achieve their potential” (UC5). The importance of consistency was emphasised by one U21 coach, who provided a contextual example:

I think one of the key things for me is just professionalism and consistency. It's not about being super motivated every day and doing everything perfectly. Motivation and drive can be a bit fleeting at times. It's there one day, next day you don't really fancy it, so for me it's them understanding that you still need to go out there and train to a high level, you still need to turn up on time and do your gym work to high level. That's how you improve. That's consistency. (UC7)

Several players gave their own perceptions on the attributes they thought were important to them in making it as a professional footballer. One player explained his approach to life in the U21 squad:

Off the pitch I always try and be professional. Eating and sleeping well, holding yourself as a good person around the building. And then on the pitch, it's hitting your objectives. It's scoring goals for me, it's your assist, it's your numbers. You've got to believe you can do it, and if I didn't believe I could, I may as well just stop now. (P5)

Attitude and hard work constantly came up as key attribute for players. One player thought that these characteristics were more important than talent:

For me, it's always been attitude and hard work. I've always said that over talent, that's always been my mentality. I think no matter what level you play like, you gotta show that. The staff are always gonna be monitoring you and looking at your attitude. I think it's actually massive. (P9)

In the U21 phase of development coaches and players have already stated that the level of competition can vary, and at times, may not be sufficient, particularly for older players in the later stages of the developmental journey. If these players feel they are not meeting the progress goals and/or are not appropriately challenge in the U21 squad, it can impact their attitude towards their development:

The values that we preach refer to hard work. But they need to be motivated from within. I think some players like being here too much instead of wanting to really have that desire to go and get in the first team, think they are quite comfortable in the 21s team because there's no real pressure on them. (UC6)

A variety of personal characteristics, coping strategies, and social support are indicated in the literature as important to support transitions into senior sports environments (Drew et al., 2019). Furthermore, attributes such as having a high work ethic, a passion for the sport, a high level of personal responsibility, and motivation for the transition, in addition to support from peers, friends, family, and coaches were found to be essential factors in previous research (Holt and Dunn 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Rongen et al 2021). Working hard, even with less talent was deemed more important for player selection than the players who had talent and didn't work hard (Larson et al., 2013). The study findings support these assertions with a general consensus that players must exhibit a strong work ethic and consistency in all areas of life to have a chance of transition into a first team. Players themselves viewed this attitude as more important than talent (perhaps taking into account that all of the contracted players in this phase would be considered talented footballers).

Players' understanding of first team expectations may contribute to positive transitional experiences. One head coach emphasised the importance of youth players knowing what it means to be a first team player and understanding what the head coach is looking for in a player:

Knowing what the coach of the first team wants, know what he's looking for will help the players understand what is needed. They need to work hard on a day-to-day basis, making sure that done. When they come to work, they are ready to train and to give their best on any given day and do the best they can. Be mentally and physically prepared. (HC1)

Several players had experienced training with the first team and highlighted a range of expected behaviour: "They just want you to turn up and play, don't be nervous, play with controlled aggression and show respect to the staff and players" (P6); "Don't be shy and obviously don't hide away" (P7). One player who had been in and around the first team for a while and played some games for them described how he'd come to understand expectations better, but also knew that the difference in level between him and first team players was still vast;

I've had the odd exposure, played in a couple of games with them [first team]. Once you start being in and around the squad a lot more, you pick up other things that you didn't know already. You can see what they do, how much it takes to try and stay fit and be robust. (P9)

There was a general consensus from U21 coaches that, despite the attempt at 'transition' within this phase of football, there remained a cultural distance between the academy and first team. "There is still a gap that needs to be bridged from academy to first team, and I'm not sure U21s football does that. I think its psychological pressure, I'm not sure they've got enough resilience to cope and deal with the challenge of first team football" (UC6). Another coach held similar views but recognised it was part of his job to try and reduce this gap as much as possible within the development environment:

Going from U21s to a first team environment can be a massive cultural shock and we know we need to try and bridge that gap. That's why we try to mirror the first team as much as possible in terms of developing a winning mentality and the pressures that comes with a first team, but you can only take that so far in developmental football. (UC4)

Expanding on this perspective, another assistant head coach shared insight from his time working in a lower level Category Three Academy. Typically, in these clubs a bespoke U21 development squad does not exist and is generally composed of U18s and first team squad players:

The jump is far too big for players in Category Three to go from U18s or their development as a first-year pro to the first team. There's nothing enough in between to get them to the level. All the training is geared up for the first team squad and those first-year pros are not in that squad, so they're not involved in any of the prep or games, they're not on the bench, so what do they do? Where do they fit in? (AHC2)

It is clear there remained a sizable gap in levels (of performance and preparation) between academy and first team environments (Nesti et al., 2012). The findings support the notion that there were significant challenges that prevented the practice of U21 football successfully mirroring that of a first team environment (Dowling et al., 2018; Finn and McKenna 2010; Morris et al., 2017; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022; Røynesdal et al., 2018). Therefore, this raises a more general question of whether this phase of football could fully provide and adequately prepare players for a successful transition into a first team environment (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022; Richardson et al., 2013).

6.5 Applied Implications

The study's findings suggest several applied implications for practitioners involved in or who have influence on the development process of U21 players. The research as a whole has shown that the journey for U21 players is complex and multifaceted and that there is no failsafe system. However, it is possible to make a number of recommendations, arising from the study, that may support the developmental experience of U21 players. It is important to note, however, that the general tenor of the findings is that, in relation to the career development and welfare of the players, there are good intentions on the part of the coaches, but a number of significant limitations to the stated intention of the U21 phase. These have been noted to be, variously, structural, resource-constrained, and/or limited by a conflict between pragmatism and intention. Any recommendations, therefore, need to be understood as addressing perceived shortcomings but thereafter subject to pragmatic or resource considerations. It also seemed clear from the study findings that there was a hierarchy of purposes: the ambition of preparing players for first team football had to wrestle with attention to individual development needs and the day-to-day demands of the first team. There may be an unresolvable tension between the needs of the club and the best interests of individual players.

In order to minimise the impact of the inherent instability within the U21 group, it is suggested that coaches should find solutions to managing variations in players' technical and tactical abilities, as well as their differing levels of physical, psychological and social maturation. This could be through differentiated practice, small group sessions, and individual work that would provide adequate challenge to all players based on their abilities (Hodges & Lohse, 2022). However, it seems likely that minimising frequent player movement in and out of the group would contribute most significantly to the overall consistency of practice. Such strategies

would help to maintain a more uniform set of goals, create a competitive environment, and foster motivation by attending to the individual needs of such a diverse group.

Achieving ‘first team preparation’ requires coaches to provide an environment that closely aligns to the dynamics of a first team, to the extent that this is possible in a development environment. This involves implementing training schedules and match preparations that emulate first team conditions, and maximising opportunities that ensure the environment stays competitive, so that players are fully invested. Furthermore, coaches need to negotiate the delicate balance of merging long-term development with the need to learn ‘how to win’, which is an evident culture in first-team football (Roderick, 2006a). Emphasis should be placed on producing players for the first team, rather than prioritising U21 results and league position. However, there was a very clear message that the competitive nature of the U21 programme, both in training and in matches, needed to be strengthened.

An emerging role within this domain was the individual development coach (or perhaps termed a first team development coach) and this was acknowledged to be crucial in facilitating the transition of U21 players into a first team. Individual coaches in such a role can provide bespoke and individualised player mentoring, which attends to both football and non-football related matters, and can help align standards, beliefs and values, and expectations of the first team (TGG, 2022). If such a specialised (and supported) role is implemented, it may help bridge the gap between U21 and first team and its impact of individual player wellbeing – in addition to acting as an acknowledgement of the importance of the transition stage.

Exposure to a first team training environment can further aid this transition by helping players prepare for the demands they may face when moving to a first team. However, this should be

a meaningful training experience that contributes to its intended purpose and managed appropriately as it may induce an element of stress and pressure on players. Nevertheless, maximising opportunities where training environments are pressurized rather than simply greater amounts of training, can help athletes adjust to pressure (Low et al., 2020), build one's resilience and in turn be a protector for mental health (Madsen et al., 2021). Furthermore, clubs should seek to maximise playing opportunities that replicate first team football, especially results-orientated opportunities such as developmental league cups, and local cup competitions. Leveraging the loan system is particularly beneficial, providing players with exposure to first team football at a lower level. This can appropriately challenge them, and enhance their prospects for progression as a professional footballer (Morris et al., 2017; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022; Webb et al., 2020). Such an approach may help to counter any potential 'labelling' of U21 players as not ready for 'proper' men's football, and go some way to cementing better trust in the contribution of U21 players among first team coaches. However, the loan transition period and, specifically, the demands players may experience whilst out on loan are not yet fully understood (Bond et al., 2020). Caution is needed to carefully consider this process, making sure it will ultimately benefit the player. Players have reported that whilst out on loan they have experienced negative emotions, such as feeling distant from their club, believing that the club lacked a focus on their development (Swainson et al., 2020), or a sense of rejection on finding out they were going out on loan (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Players can experience similar demands to those of the junior to senior transition or migration literature, e.g., obtaining game time, new teammates, lifestyle changes, location, playing style (Morris et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2012). If the loan period is not managed appropriately, players may be unable to cope effectively, they may experience unsuccessful, or crisis-transition outcomes (Stambulova, 2003).

To help clubs provide a more player-centred approach, U21 coaches should support players holistically, attending to all element of performance including non-football related matters. This includes leading on individual development planning meetings with players and involvement in multi-disciplinary team meetings. Such collaboration facilitates the triangulation of player well-being and performance, involving all relevant staff such as coaches, performance staff, and their support staff, e.g., player care and safeguarding practitioners. This would attend to all elements of a player's sporting career, social and personal life while striving for performance excellence. Moreover, coaches and clubs should be encouraged to support the implementation of life skills into the coaching programme, ensuring transparency in the process. To successfully implement these initiatives, it is crucial to allocate dedicated resources and time to staff such as player care officers and psychologists. This approach is an integral part of the development process, helping to prepare players for the demands of any transitions, but also preparing them for life beyond football. This approach could be extended to provide some form of aftercare once players have left the club (which was acknowledged by interviewees as a responsibility/obligation of the club).

Coaches and clubs can also work towards creating an environment that can help to facilitate interactions and positive relationships between U21 and first team players. This could be through a mentorship programme, featuring workshops and one to ones from senior players and the opportunity for younger players to observe senior players in training. This can help the younger players to learn from the more-experienced first team players. Such strategies have been advocated as good practice in helping athletes' transitions (Henrikson et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2015). To further facilitate this integration, clubs should consider optimising their physical space. For clubs in this study, it was common practice to house all players on the same site. Where possible developing training spaces dedicated to the U21 squad would help to boost

the credibility of this phase of development. This has been reported as critical in creating positive interactions across the club from academy to first team (Røynesdal et al., 2018). Daily interactions, such as shared spaces like the canteen or by the coffee machine, also contribute to a smoother transition (Lundqvist et al., 2024). This could enhance player image, a sense of belonging and diminish any feelings of isolation. However, it is also important to allow senior players personal space and freedom.

6.6 Strengths and Limitations

These findings further extend the talent development literature that has focused on the factors impacting player development and progression into senior teams. Specifically, the views of a range of stakeholder have been captured, which to date, has mainly been absent from the research literature related to U21 football.

In particular, the data provide a deeper understanding of the contextual challenges and necessary adaptations within this phase of football that impact on its stated intention of developing players for first teams and producing well-rounded individuals. It offers new insights, which further helps to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice in this crucial late-development phase. In particular, it draws attention to the structural complexities and the inherent instability and inconsistent practice within such groups and offers a number of recommendations for how this transition phase may be more-appropriately managed.

Whilst there are clear findings and practical implications from the study, as discussed above, it is important to acknowledge some of the constraints relevant to the study. It may be advantageous to widen the scope of the clubs involved in the study, particularly those in the football pyramid represented in academy Categories Three and Four in order to represent a

more diverse perspective from the U21 player population. This may allow for a fuller understanding of the potentially different practices in more resource-constrained clubs and/or those with smaller number of U21 players. However, as qualitative research aims to examine meaning or the thoughts, opinions, beliefs and behaviours that individuals derive from their social situations, and the focus is on flexibility and depth with a small number of individuals (Liamputtong 2019), the concern shifted to quality, not quantity. The question was whether the sample could provide meaningful data that would allow the study's aims to be completely addressed. In this case, all participants were targeted with an understanding that (a) they were not intended to be fully representative of all individuals in the roles they inhabit, and (b) were assumed to possess extensive knowledge about their social, occupational and/or cultural setting and could provide something of value to the field.

Therefore, the study offers a sizable number of participants with an array of key stakeholder views across a range of clubs that are predominantly Category One and Two clubs. In addition, these clubs represent much the majority of the U21 player population. Nevertheless, there may be particular issues in the more resource-constrained clubs with smaller numbers within their U21 squads, and that would need a separate study.

There may have been a risk of social desirability bias, which is the tendency to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others. This can be true of participants from within a setting where they fear the repercussions of their views becoming known to others. However, the study provided anonymity for all participants, and no interviewees raised the issue of disclosure during the interviews. In addition, the study's findings included responses from a range of stakeholders whose views and experiences were reported fairly consistent across the groups. It was also clear from the interviews that participants were willing

to identify negative as well as positive experiences, emotions, perceptions and opinions. Although there may be some general recommendations for talent development environments, the findings of this study relate specifically to the U21 football developmental phase. This is a very culturally and occupationally specific domain. The extent to which the findings can be extrapolated into development implications in other sports, may, in itself, be a subject for further research.

6.7 Conclusion

The study provides a comprehensive insight into the practice of the U21 talent development environment. For the first time, it triangulates the views and experiences of the key stakeholder that are embedded within this phase of professional football. The findings provide a comprehensive awareness and understanding into the extent to which the main purpose of the developmental pathway is being achieved. It highlights the strategies and limitations that impact and/or influence the development agenda of meeting the needs of U21 players and achieving the intended outcomes set out in the EPPP (Premier League, 2011).

The study provides valuable insights into the structural complexities of the phase, highlighting the inherent instability within the group, the inconsistency in practice, the distance in levels between U21 and first teams and the limitations in preparing players for a potential transition. On the other hand, there was a strong awareness from all participants of these challenges and an understanding of some of the strategies that might create a more optimal performance environment. There was evidence that the U21 environment would benefit from providing opportunities to increase competitiveness, focusing on results-based competition, and utilising the loan system, especially for players beyond their first years, whilst maintaining a balance between long-term development and learning to win.

The emergent first team development coach was seen as crucial in establishing better connections and interactions between U21 and first teams, which are needed to aid a smoother transition. Additionally, they could better attend to individual development needs including holistic development, understanding of standards and behaviours, and ultimately help triangulate well-being and performance.

The study has built upon the questions raised in Studies One and Two, and provided a clearer picture of the contextual realities of player experiences in U21 football. This building of knowledge has provided valuable insights into the major challenges faced by both players and practitioners and opened the door for evaluation of and subsequent modification to practice deemed essential for high performing talent development environments. However, the very nature of interviews, while providing a deeper and richer contextual understanding than a survey can provide, must be acknowledged to offer only a ‘temporal snap shot’ of institutions and organisations (in this case, clubs and cohorts of players). Nevertheless, findings indicate that transitions are much more complicated, emotive, and prone to questions about their effectiveness than the youth to senior transitional literature, or the assumptions built into the football phased structure may assume. This suggests that further research is required - research that has the capacity to capture context from a more longitudinal perspective, and from within this particular environment – in addition, capturing players’, coaches’ and other stakeholders’ more-informal opinions and interactions on a daily basis. In a simple sense, making the issues real and relevant to individuals. This provides the rationale for an extension to Study Three, observing practice from an ethnographic perspective, which is described in Study Four.

Chapter Seven: Study Four

An Ethnographic Exploration of the U21 Development Environment in an English Category One Football Club

7.1 Introduction

The overall purpose of this research is to evaluate the extent to which the U21 professional development phase of the English football academy system meets its stated aim of further preparing players in order that they can become senior first-team footballers. Study Three was based on interviews with coaches and players across a range of clubs. This provided rich insights into their experiences in this domain, and a deeper contextual understanding of the way in which the environment impacted on their perceptions of the success of this phase. The findings highlighted the challenges, structures and strategies that influenced player development. However, to some extent, attempting to identify significant threads across the semi-structured interviews, although useful for highlighting themes, ‘lost’ the individual’s more-holistic story and was limited in its capacity to describe how the many contributory factors in the player’s career journey coalesced.

This study is, therefore, an extension of Study Three, in that the overall aim of attending to the contextual factors in the development environment remains, but it is designed to provide a much more detailed and nuanced ‘feel’ for the experience through an ethnographic perspective. Through observations of practice, and with a freedom to ‘notice’ and follow up on informal working practices that semi-structured interviews are unable to capture, the study is designed to portray the workings of the development context through a first-hand account of the experiences of a small number of players, who are members of an U21 squad in a Category One football club. The observations of the participant-researcher were gathered over a protracted period of time. This extended period of time allowed for a full immersion in the day to day experiences of players and key stakeholders and their surrounding environment, and offered an opportunity to see individual examples of players’ experiences as they emerged. Documenting such experiences will complement and extend the findings from Study Three,

and thereby provide a fuller picture of the complex and multifaceted reality of the U21 development environment.

In order to achieve this, the following objectives will be addressed:

Objectives:

1. To extend and contextualise the findings of Study Three, by observing and documenting the lived experiences of players and key stakeholders from within the U21 environment.
2. To document the findings from Study Four by means of a number of case studies, based on themes to have emerged from Study Three, that reflect the lived experiences and challenges of players in the U21 professional development phase.

7.2 Method

In recent years, ethnography has been deemed an appropriate approach for investigating first-hand the experiences of individuals within a sport, exercise, and health context, as it enables researchers to immerse themselves within a particular setting (Maitland, 2012). Within academic research in this field, it has gained some popularity amongst qualitative researchers as they look for ways to broaden the methodological landscape (Champ et al., 2020a; Cushion, 2006; Devaney et al., 2018). Put simply, ethnography is a means to ‘observe people in their own environment to understand their experiences, perspectives and everyday practices’ (Maitland, 2012).

Although the mixed methods approach of this research thus far has reflected the ‘broad to narrow’ perspective necessary to develop an understanding of U21 professional football

environments, this study now explores the lived experiences of players and staff in their everyday lives within a club's U21 squad, which will allow for an exploration of potential explanations for such experiences (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). This method provides a more particularised and contextualised alternative to the traditional methods already explored, and one which attends to the call for a greater methodological diversity (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Like many research methods, ethnographic research aims to understand human actions, thoughts and behaviours, but can provide a deeper level of understanding to research methods such as surveys and interviews (Pang, 2019). In turn, and of relevance to this study, it allows a greater understanding of social and cultural contexts and phenomena – such as the U21 football domain - and enables the development of new knowledge and understanding (Krane & Baird, 2005).

Research of this nature can be conducted over a prolonged period of time, which could be months (in the case of this study) or years (Krane & Baird, 2005). I was embedded within a Category One academy football club on a full-time basis¹⁹. This meant that I was present in the club environment for four days per week, with at least one additional day per week observing matches. This allowed me to build and establish relationships, and subsequently gather information through a variety of different methods. This took place over a period of 7 months, which embraced an 'end of season' point, during which selection/progression issues were of significant interest/concern.

¹⁹ From this point in Study Four, the use of the first person reflects the participant nature of the researcher's relationship to the method employed.

7.2.1 Gaining Access

During the data collection phase of previous studies in this research, I was presented with the opportunity to take on the role of senior sports psychologist within a football academy. From a practitioner perspective, I would carry out my role across the whole academy, but predominantly observe, converse and generally ‘be around’ players and staff across the professional development phase on a daily basis. Part of the role was an agreement that, upon appointment, I would also conduct data collection for this study. Prior to starting the role, the nature of the research, and any potential impact on the players and club was discussed with the club’s Academy Director, who also acted as the main gatekeeper to ensure that he and the club were comfortable with the research objectives. Thereafter, the gatekeeper provided consent on behalf of the club for me to conduct the research. Once agreed, I was then able to embed myself within the domain/phase practice and its associated sub-culture and relationships over a protracted period of time. This has otherwise been reported difficult to achieve (Champ et al., 2020a; Cough, 2016) with access issued to people to conduct research within the world of football proving difficult due to it being “hostile to outsiders.” Outsiders here are defined as those who have never played, or otherwise been involved in the professional game at a high level (Waddington, 2014, p. 15). As such, research providing accounts of the daily experiences of footballers and key stakeholders is limited.

7.2.2 Entering the Setting

Champ et al. (2020b) highlighted the challenges of gaining access to participants in this type of role. Developing relationships, and establishing trust were barriers and something I was conscious about. To mitigate against this careful ethical and practical consideration were taken. The initial first two weeks of my tenure at the club involved meeting all academy and first team staff and senior leaders such as the Chief Executive and the Director of Human Resources. In

my first week these two senior leaders invited me to the club's stadium to discuss my research and the wider strategy for the club. They fully supported my research and were interested in my potential findings. The research would then need to be announced to all potential participants. It was thought that a good way to announce the research to staff, would be at one of the daily 'bird table' meetings. This is a 10-20-minute pulse meeting where all staff meet together in the open plan office that accommodated the U9-U16 coaches, and is scheduled each morning at 9am. On this particular morning, my research was the final agenda point, in which the Academy Director introduced the research with a brief overview. I followed up with details of the study and answered any further questions. This was then further followed up by an email to all staff with a participant information sheets and informed consent which they could read and sign online. This same approach was taken with all relevant potential player participants (U21 players) in one of their pre-training meetings.

Only participants that consented were included in the study. Therefore, observations, research related conversations or informal interviews only captured data from participants specifically and not others in the same context.

Due to the nature of the performance environment within the club, there was sometimes a crossover with the U21 and first team staff and players as both are situated at the same training complex. This led to some observations directly involving first team staff and/or players. If the context of these observations were used for the study any individuals were made aware and asked to sign informed consent forms and be given the opportunity to remove their data if necessary. The identities of all participants were concealed to provide them with anonymity throughout the study. Participant names used within the study were replaced with pseudonyms (false names) to protect the identity of each participant.

Announcing the research was the first step, to obtain consent from potential participants I had to become familiar with the setting and the people within it to conduct the research (Tedlock, 2000), and build rapport with them to become an established member of the team (Angrosino, 2007). The majority of my time was spent with players and staff operating within the professional development phase (U18 and U21 squads). These players would typically cross over and move between the two groups on a regular basis with the odd player moving up to, or down from the first team squad. Typically, my days in the club would consist of training sessions, lunch, educational sessions, one-to-one sessions, meetings, and matches. This level of presence during the working day, allowed me to quickly gain trust from players and staff across the club including first team players and staff (Mellalieu et al., 2017). The players increasingly became more comfortable engaging with me, developing positive relationships, and were happy to consent to research which allowed for access to their perspectives and practice of participants within the study (Tedlock, 2000).

7.2.3 Practitioner-Researcher Role

Not only did I have to establish myself as a practitioner to be accepted into the environment, but be aware of how I navigated the shift between this and conducting the research. Champ et al. (2020b) reported that there is no simple way of conducting ethnography. Experiences will vary depending on the context, and approaches may need to be adapted to that particular setting. An ethnographer might operate as either an insider where they are situated within the setting sharing experiences with participants (Atkinson, 2016), or an outsider, not positioned within the setting (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013), from this perspective, not always understanding of participants experiences. My role within the club meant I was fully embedded into the setting, -therefore took the position of an insider practitioner-researcher.

Practitioner-researcher approaches became more accepted within social sciences around the mid-2000s (Krane & Baird, 2005). Most recently it has been used within the sports psychology domain and has increased our understanding from within the field, for example the coach-athlete relationships (Devaney et al., 2018) and the influence of organisational culture on athlete development (Champ et al., 2020a). However, to date, there is still a dearth of literature from practitioner-researcher ethnographers operating in sport, especially from the perspective within elite football environments (Champ et al., 2020b). This method is perhaps the most effective way in bridging the gap between the reality of applied practice and academic literature.

The practitioner-researcher role is a key feature of the study, and put me at the heart of the research environment. This enabled me to ‘hear the voices’ of players and other key stakeholders with a greater insight into their concerns, and more accurately describe and understand their experiences (Krane & Baird, 2005). However, it was important to recognise and be aware of the challenges and potential practical issues that could arise from this approach. I needed to distinguish between the two roles by understanding the professional responsibilities as both a practitioner and a researcher separately (Fraser, 1997), and prepare for what can be done if these conflicted with one another. I was open and honest about the obligations of the study and research process, my role with participants and in partnership had open discussions around any findings and how this might therefore translate into the writing of the study (member reflections with participants) (Champ et al., 2020b). Clear boundaries were communicated and participants were assured that anything of a confidential nature would not be published in the data to respect individual participants and the potential implications on the organisation. I consulted with participants as to ensure they were happy with my interpretations of any conversations or observations (member reflections). At times, I had to operate as both a

practitioner and/or a researcher in the same conversation, for example, whilst undertaking one-one sessions with players, in these moments, they were seeking my help as a practitioner and I had to provide that in the most professional manner, whilst also being aware of how those conversations could formulated parts of the data. Although the participant may not have been aware of this whilst in the moment, I had to continually reflect upon these moments to ensure separation between what is essential knowledge as a practitioner and what can and cannot be used for data in the study. This is a common dilemma within ethnographic work (Coombs et al., 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Ultimately, this approach ensured participants understood how the dual roles worked alongside each other and for them to see the value of the research.

7.3 Data Collection

Due to the nature of data collection the research was carried out overtly, implying an implicit and explicit understanding of the exercise and its purpose by staff working in the club.

Multiple methods are common within ethnographic research to record the meaning that these individuals attach to their everyday activities (Krane & Baird, 2005; Pang, 2019). The multiple methods used for data collection included participant observations, and informal interviewing (both individual and group). Observations were used primarily to describe the setting and culture and followed similar work by Champ et al. (2020a), Cushion (2001) and Devaney et al. (2018) - observing interactions and activities that took place within the setting, through peoples “patterns of behaviour” (Pang, 2019), and the meaning of what was observed from the perspectives of those who are being observed. Observations within these situations, plus the actions of players and staff and a variety of conversations between myself and players or staff were recorded in a field diary that reflected my perception of the context and any feelings and emotions associated to the experience (Pang, 2019). These field notes and reflections were

combined in the field diary and not separated, in order to facilitate critical reflections (Champ et al., 2020b). This meant the field diary was both descriptive (dated, key events) and reflective (daily experiences, context, and thought descriptions) (Sparkes, 2002). Entry into the field diary were completed after each day spent within the club recording anything of potential interest to the objectives of the study. Caution was taken to understand the ongoing meanings and significance and how these notes were interpreted (Pang, 2019). I did not want to be seen as just a researcher in my dual role so did not use a Dictaphone or write specific notes during discussions. This can be perceived as awkward and impact relationship building (Parker, 1996). Conversations with individuals in the moments were captured afterwards whilst alone, and written in the field diary.

7.4 Data Analysis and Representation

It is important to note that this study explored my basic assumptions generated from previous studies and findings, and that during data collection I had established an emerging sense of the environment and what was happening. This should not be neglected as my thoughts beliefs and experiences of being in the club are important to offer further context and understanding to the data and links to research (Tierney, 2002). This study acted as a means to sense check my acquired knowledge and the data represented exemplifies this through case studies and links to and/or adds to the current research within this topic area. Therefore, the intention was to allow the data to develop and emerge from my exploration and through my observations, interactions and any further inquiry. However, I was fully aware that I knew the field and context I was going in to, and had a good understanding of the various challenges in the U21 developmental environment. I understood that from my position as the ethnographer, I was not entirely neutral, and in order for data not to be influenced, I attempted to remove my subjective views wherever necessary.

There are contrasting views around the process taken for qualitative work, and how systematic it should be. Sinkovics and Alfodi (2012) acknowledges that the qualitative research process cannot be sanitised, linear and deliberate at each stage and advocated that it is a ‘messy’ process, one in which a more non-linear process should take place. Ethnographic research analysis should be a more informal and interpretive process, one in which data collection and analysis are very much linked together and is within a cycle of continuous collecting, analysing and reflection on the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This process allows for all lines of inquiry that are linked to the study objectives to be investigated, but also revisited to add any existing information to the meaning of the data (Atkinson, 2016).

Data analysis followed recommendations by Brewer (2000) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019). This consisted of ordering, collating and managing the data and helped to better organise extensive field notes. First, this involved reading and re-reading the field notes I had created which included all notes from observations and interactions with players and staff. I then needed to reduce the data, but ensure that the participants perspectives were still captured to represent their beliefs (Maxwell, 2016), and identified any data based on what were deemed critical (e.g., key events, critical moments, behaviours and conversations) and had reoccurred across participants. I then grouped this information into a categorised timeline for each month of data collection which created a visual representation of the data to better view any patterns and search for themes. Subsequently this was put into a mind map which led to outlining key themes that emerged across the full period of data collection.

This analysis followed a more dynamic, progressive and non-linear process drawing upon the work of Sinkocis and Alfodi (2012) which follows a progressive focusing method and enables a flexible and fluid analysis which they deem a strength for this type of data analysis. The final

step was to create a series of vignettes which informed the key themes and illustrated the key issues in relation to the academy environment and how this may influence the behaviours and practice of players and key stakeholders, and the impact this has on player development and progression.

The research findings were represented in a series of stories through a creative non-fiction (CNF) process (Cheney, 2001), and chosen to ensure that the data represented the volume and detail to be expressed, without it being too consuming or complicated for the reader, and best representing the themes that emerged from the data.

Prior to engaging in this research, there were no formal training courses available to support me in preparation for data collection as a practitioner-researcher. However, prior to my immersion into the football club, a small pocket of emerging literature was available that helped me understand how to approach this type of research in the field (See Champ et al., 2020a; Devaney et al., 2018). These accounts highlighted some of the challenges involved, such as gaining access to participants, establishing relationships and conducting data collection and analysis. These works provided an essential depth of understanding and a baseline to work from, and good exemplars that I could build on. However, prominent researchers in the field have stressed that in order for this type of research to grow as credible work, it is important not to repeat content in the same form. If we do, there is a risk of producing predictable and sterile research (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2015).

CNF is popular with ethnographers and a number of recent research papers have opted for the use of it as a way of representing findings (Champ et al., 2020b; Meredith et al., 2023). This method tells the story in an authentic way (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005; Champ et al., 2020b),

it does not just repeat facts, it delivers the facts in ways that move the reader towards a deeper understanding (Cherney, 2001). It is more accessible to all and can have a wider reach to people beyond the academic world to be able to enhance knowledge transfer. It is grounded in real events and lived experiences and can capture vivid emotions in readers (Atkinson, 2019; Smith et al., 2015). However, my experience with CNF was limited to background reading on the subject. As a result, I initially found it difficult to understand how to represent the data and capture this across themes, and how to interpret data into coherent and creative vignettes that provide an illustration of the key issues facing talent development environments in football. The flexibility and freedom inherent in the CNF approach initially posed a challenge. However, a series of recommendations from key literature (see Smith et al., 2015) helped me craft any sort of compelling stories from the data.

As a first stage, individuals acting as critical friends, such as my supervisors, provided valuable feedback by challenging my interpretations. Their input helped to shape my views and look at alternative ways to understand the stories (Smith, 2017). It was also important as a reflexive tool so any prejudgements and prior experiences I had in football did not unduly influence the narratives. This is also an example of the importance of a particular epistemology and ontology to inform the stories (Smith et al., 2015). Second, in order to be as accurate and authentic as possible, initial drafts were scrutinised to evaluate a number of characteristics; for example, providing truthful narratives from participants using the technique of fictional writing e.g., composite characters to create interesting text (Champ et al., 2020a), and using direct quotes to invoke meaning and emotions (Smith et al., 2015). Third, there was an element of judgement involved in telling the stories, focusing on quality over quantity while highlighting points that were both engaging and insightful for the reader. For example, setting the scene with key locations, such as the dining room or dressing room, enhanced narrative impact. Fourth, in

order to produce quality qualitative work, e.g., a worthy topic that makes contributions to knowledge or challenges or extends theory, I attempted to bring the culture to life in a way that could make a practical difference (Smith et al., 2015). Finally, when crafting the stories, I revisited and edited them numerous times over a period of time. This entailed re-writes that used a clearer selection of words to produce conciseness in each story, with the goal of keeping the reader engaged while offering a credible account of participants lived experiences. Each narrative was edited and revised following reflexive support from the supervisory team and member reflections. This iterative process ensured that final narratives were a fair representation of participants' experiences and aligned with the themes identified in the data (Orr et al., 2020; Smith, 2013).

Before introducing the narrative themes, I feel it important to provide further context of the club and academy environment. The academy environment will be referred to throughout the results as Bakerfield FC.

Bakerfield FC is well established and one of the oldest clubs in the English Football League. The academy was granted Category One status at the very first round of the EPPPs academy classification reviews. Within the academy they have circa 150 players ranging from U8s through to U21s. The U21 team plays in the competitive league structure of the Premier League 2 (division 2) and are part of the academy structure within the club. The academy is overseen by the Academy Director who has overall responsibility for the running of all teams within it. Each team has at least one dedicated coach, the U18 and U21 teams have a head coach and assistant head coach. Both of these teams are supported by other support staff.

The following narratives aim to inform you, as the reader, of my observations during my time as a practitioner – researcher at Bakerfield FC. These depict the complex and multifaceted reality of the U21 development environment across each narrative and additionally my own reactions to add depth from a wider perspective of the situations and events that took place.

7.5 Results and Discussion

7.5.1 “It’s a black hole”

I walked in the canteen to grab breakfast before the day ahead. It was pretty empty this early in the morning, a couple of U18 players were sat over in the corner and Mike a sports scientist was sat at the other end of the room on his own. I shout over *“Mike, drink mate”* as I walked over to the coffee machine. *“Yeah, Cappuccino, no sugar, cheers Winnie.”* I’d known Mike for only two weeks now, however he’d been at the club two year. The U21 team currently was in the process of recruiting a full -time dedicated sports scientist as the previous one had just left, so Mike was asked to step up from the U18s in the interim. *“So, how’s it going, all set for the day”* I asked him, as I sat down at his table. *“Well, I’m not sure to be honest, I’ll get that info later hopefully.”* *“Is that the norm then?”* I replied. *“Well it is for 21s, it’s a bit all over the place at the minute, don’t seem to have a proper structure in place. It’s no faults of the coaches, it’s the club. We don’t have that many players as we had to sell a few, got a few on loan but we never know how many will be training or how many we have from the first team. I never know what I’m dealing with. Be glad when I go back down to U18s where it’s a solid and stable group”.*

Mike had been honest with me and there was a clear uncertainty about his reaction, he was somewhat anxious about the situation. He also knew about my research and what I was

investigating and just before he stood up to go about his day, his fleeting comments were *“Winnie, you’ve prob got a lot to analyse with this group (U21), good luck!”*

From what I had seen so far and my own experiences working within other clubs U21 teams, these comments were not a surprise to me, especially from someone like Mike who was new to working in the U21 environment and the challenges it posed. Nevertheless, the concern he showed stuck me and I wondered if others working with this group felt the same. What were their thoughts on the structure, some of the challenges of developing players and the reality of players potentially moving into a first team?

Each morning all academy staff (who could attend) would gather in one of the bigger offices for a pulse meeting called the ‘bird table’. Here the Academy Director would provide updates, then would go around the room individually for all other staff to do the same. This set the day up so all knew what was happening and any issues we needed to be aware of e.g., injured players, training schedules, or other activities such as teams going off or coming onto site. Paul, head coach of the U21 team spoke about the previous evening game which was in the semi-final of the local cup which we won 4-2. He praised the lads for their effort, especially in such an important competitive game that now saw us into the final. He also mentioned that the post-match analysis would take place at 10:30am that morning. At this point in my tenure, I was still figuring out my daily routine and general day to day working practice. There was no expectation that I would need to attend such events, it was down to me to instigate this. After the meeting I asked Paul if I could attend the post-match meeting. I attended the game the previous night as part of the staff team which allowed me access to the players dressing room and the dugout with the rest of the staff. However, I still felt it was courteous to ask Paul for permission to attend events and activities as and when needed until I was more established and had developed a trust from him. *“Of course, Craig, no need to ask, you’re part of this now”*.

This made me feel very welcomed, so I followed that up with some general chat as we walked towards Paul's office. *"How do you think the game went last night?"* I asked Paul. *"Really good, the lads fought hard to hold onto that lead, they were a good team who play in a good league"*. The opposing team played in the seventh tier of English football. *"proper men's football that, just what the lads need, and we had our team."* *"What do you mean, our team"* I replied. *"U21 lads, no first team players. They could actually play together for once."* I understood what Paul meant by this and knew it was on his mind, but at this point I left any further questions knowing that this would arise in the near future.

At 10:30am the U21 players started to roll into the analysis room and sit down in preparation for the post-match analysis of their victory. Sat at the back of the room was Mike the sports scientist and Peter the analyst who was operating his laptop hooked up to the big screen. The assistant U21 coach Dave took the stage first. *"Firstly, brilliant performance that lads, you fought hard and deserved it!"* he subsequently went through a series of clips analysing the good areas of play and areas where they could make improvements. Then Paul stood up and reiterated the praise for the lads and gave a brief description of the two potential teams we would face in the final. He ended the session with an outline of the training session ahead for that morning.

After the session finished, all the players left the room, however the coaches held one player back. This player in question was Luke, the captain of the U21 team, and they went through a few more analysis bits with him alone. Once the player in question had left the room, I asked the coaches why they had held him back in particular and discussed the analysis with him in further detail? Paul explained, *"He doesn't train with us, he trains with the first team, so we rarely see him to provide that post match or other information, so when we do we have to give him a bit extra."* *"So, you don't get to work with him on the training pitch?"* I replied curiously. *"No, so he misses out on what we do each day, prep for games, shape etc. It's a difficult one,*

we call it the black hole” said Paul. “Black hole, what do you mean?” I replied, even more curiously. “Players like Luke who are up and down with us and the first team, or same with player coming up and down from U18, they miss out on a lot of what we are doing and they would only play in matches for us, that’s why we call it the Black hole” Paul replied with an unsatisfied look on his face.

This reiterated what Mike the sports scientist was referring to, or at least part of it. The black hole alluded to the movement of players in and out of the squad, but more so the disconnect between training and matches and how that impacted working practice for staff. Moreover, how would this impact a player in this situation and how would they feel? I was keen to find out.

“A black hole is a metaphorical concept that represents a subjective interpretation and metaphorical framework rather than a scientifically defined phenomenon within academic literature. However, in the context of life, the phrase has been used to describe situations or experiences that are categorised by feelings of emptiness, isolation, or a sense of being trapped. It can refer to periods in life where one feels overwhelmed, stuck, or devoid of motivation and purpose. Just like a gravitational black hole, these metaphorical black holes can exert a powerful influence on a person’s emotions and well-being, making it difficult for them to see a way forward or find fulfilment. Additionally, it can cause emotional or psychological distress.” (Healthy sense of self, 2024).

Although I had briefly met Luke before, we had not spoken in-depth about his experiences in the U21 and first teams. The following week I bumped into him whilst grabbing a drink from the canteen and we arranged to have a one-one later that week. The player was released from a top four Premier League team at the age of 16 and then signed for the club on a scholarship. By the start of his second-year scholarship, he had been promoted up to the U21 team aged 17.

He started the current season as captain of the U21 team playing in their matches, however only training with the first team. He had played one game for the first team in the FA Trophy.

At 9:15am on the Thursday morning I heard the knock on my office door, it was Luke right on time. *“Come in Luke take a seat”* I said. Luke seemed relaxed and happy to be here. We had some time before he would go and train with the first team at 11am.

“So, how’s it going, how’s things with the first team?” I asked, curious as to what response Luke would give:

“It’s good, I like to push myself and that is the case with them. I’ve definitely progressed this year, developed my skill and understanding of the game.” [Luke]

“That’s great, so how does that work with you training with them and playing matches for the U21 team?”

“Well, I feel a bit all over the place to be honest. I feel part of both teams really but mainly the U21 team as I play matches for them and I’m the captain. It’s a bit weird as I’m not sure where I belong, I’m in the dressing room with the first team players every day, but they don’t interact with me much, then I just turn up to U21 matches, so I miss out on a lot of what they are doing as well. It would be nice to have better interactions with the first team but they see me as an U21 player just here for training. So, I don’t really get the full picture of what it’s like to be a first team player. Don’t get me wrong it’s good to be in training and what that’s like, more intense, better payers, but I don’t really see all them or involved in conversations with them.” [Luke]

“And when you come back down and play for the U21 team in their matches how do you manage this?”

“To be honest I feel a bit of pressure, cos the lads look at me as the better player since I’m training with the first team. I think there’s an expectation on me to perform, the coaches never say anything like that, but I do feel it. And also, I feel like the first team coaches have the same expectation of me when I play in the U21 team”. [Luke]

Luke paused, and I nudge him on this point *“What do you mean by that?”*

“Well, if we don’t win, I think the first team coaches might think that I’m not good enough to perform at their level. But, I do find it hard as the games are so different in the league. One week it’s a good game, quite even and the next we get battered as they’ve got loads of first team players out. So, it’s a bit frustrating when that happens as it’s not really a true reflection.”
[Luke]

“So, you think these results influence the first team coaches’ views on you as a player?”

“Yeah, they won’t trust me if they see results like that and that’s not good for my development and chances of getting in the first team. Also, when I train with the first team after a loss, the players might not respect me as a player or think I’m good enough to train with them. They’re all great guys and to be fair they let you know if you’re not training well. It’s hard for me to go from the U21 matches to first team training as the levels are massively different. This is also why I think I just need to get out on loan”. [Luke]

This conversation with Luke highlighted the difficulties for him going between the U21 and first team. It was clear he was struggling with his own sense of belonging. Even when he trained with the first team he wore his U21 training kit, which was different to the first team training kit. He wanted more interaction with first team players and to build connections so he could have a more engaging learning experience. Outside of training he was not part of the first team group and would sit with his U21 team mates for meals and general social interactions. Even though he was playing regularly in the U21 matches, he still felt he wasn't fully part of a stable group. This manifested in a sense of isolation and ultimately feelings of stagnation and that his development was being compromised. He had a strong notion that to further his progress he would need to go out on loan and be fully emerge in a first team environment.

The above narrative further highlights some of the challenges reported in Study Three. There are reported structural elements that impact the stability of the group through the constant movement of players and casts an uneasy feeling of uncertainty throughout the staff and players.

In the case of Luke, coaches do their best to support him, but at the same time they are unsure of the best approach to help aid a smoother transition for him into the first team. Richardson et al. (2013) and Røynesdal et al. (2018) have highlighted some of the additional challenge's players within this phase of football and transitioning into a first team will face (e.g., isolation and understanding first team expectations). From Luke's own reflections, it is evident that he's experiencing feelings of isolations and/or loneliness (Franck et al., 2018; Parker, 1995; Richardson et al., 2013; Rodrick, 2006a), which have started to manifest into a sense of stagnation for him (Larson et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012).

Luke expressed that he does not fully belong to either the first team or the U21 group. In Owen Eastwood's book *Belonging* (2021), he details that a sense of belonging is to feel safe and respected with shared values. A sense of community, continuity, stability and identity with those around us. It involves dimensions such as solidarity, trust, identification or commitment (Aggerholm, 2021), ultimately feeling accepted, and included in the group, with a belief you fit in. The opposite of this is to feel isolated and/or excluded, which can impact basic needs essential for optimal functioning and personal wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2001). Belonging may be difficult to achieve in football, as the notion 'to belong' is never permanent (Eastwood, 2021) and football is inherently unstable. However, the lack of consistency in Luke's environment and potentially messages of ambiguity or mixed signalling from key stakeholder i.e. first team coaches, and players were a cause of anxiety (Gibson & Groom, 2018). Furthermore, If Luke feels he does not belong to a particular group or is not stable within one group, he may be experiencing a loss of motivation or self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) or a threat to his identity (Erickson, 1968). This may be intensified as the environment and culture especially within football can influence identity development (Gearing, 1999, Mitchell et al., 2014) shaping it in the form of a strong athletic identity over many years. Mitchell et al. (2014) suggested that forming a particular identity such as something unique as an athletic identity in a football setting, could cause problems when players face a crisis. For example, they may see themselves as footballers and nothing else. Luke's football pathway had been relatively smooth and he had been part of stable squads until his transition into the U21 squad. Now, his experience is disruptive, and could be deemed as a threat, or sudden change to his existence which may place him into an identity crisis Erikson (1968). These findings support previous research (e.g., Champ et al., 2020a). If these 'critical moments' Luke is experiencing are adequately supported so he can bring a certain 'skill set' to particular challenges, then these are opportunities for positive growth (Collins et al., 2016).

Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1963) suggests that identity is inherently linked to meaning, or a lack of it in a person's life. This has been identified as a major issue in the existence of elite level athletes (Balague, 1999) asserting that one's identity or a disruption of it can lead to psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Steger, 2007). Meaning has been referred to as how we make sense of life and our roles in it (Ivtzan et al., 2016) and a "mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus, meaning connects things" (Baumeister, 1991, p.15). Frankl (1963) believed that life has meaning under all conditions, even those suffering. However, if a person's search for meaning is blocked, existential frustrations can occur. This comes in the form of believing that one's life is meaningless, with experiences of isolation from self and society. He termed this 'existential vacuum' where someone or a group or society has a lack of goals and/or purpose. Coaches must recognise these challenges and the psychological impact on players such as Luke, and help forge better interactions to foster a stronger shared identity.

7.5.2 "It's a bit like fake football with real consequences"

"I'll be off then Winnie" said Matt the Head of performance who was sat next to me whilst watching the U21 team play at home against ***** in a Premier League 2 match. It was half time, so I replied *"Not staying around for the whole game?"* *"Nah, I've just come to watch ***** and ***** (two first team players coming back from injury and getting in some minutes to ease them back into the first team squad), they're not playing second half, so I'm off."* The score was 0-0 at half time, and the first team players, a defender and at central midfielder dominated and controlled the pace of the game. ***** had a relatively young team out made up predominantly of U21 and some U18 players. *"Ok mate, see you tomorrow"* I said as Matt left the stadium.

At this point I headed down to the dressing room to catch the half time team talk. As I walked in Paul (U21 head coach) was just starting his talk. *“Well done lads, solid that, should be in the lead, created some good changes. We need to make some changes though as Sam and Carl are not playing the second half, so Mark and Tom are coming on.”* The two substitutes had joined the U21 squad this season on loan. A defender and a striker, so Paul made changes to the formation to accommodate, and went from a 4-4-2 to a 4-3-3. Paul gave further instructions about the new formation and the main emphasis was go and attack the game. It was clear that the coaches wanted to win.

On the way back up to the stand I grabbed myself a coffee and settled down for the second half. *“Chuffin hell”* said Andy, the U18 head coach, who I was now sat next to. *“You ok?”* I replied, rather startled. *“Look at their side now, that’s one, two, three...six first team players they’ve got out, including their first team captain! It’s gunna be a massacre”*. Andy wasn’t wrong, it was, we lost 6-1. *“Jesus Christ”* said Andy as the final whistle blew. *“Come on Winnie, let go down and see what’s going on.”* We headed down to the dressing room, and we were the first in. As the players walked in it was deadly silent. They sat down ready and waiting for the U21 coaches to come in. Both Paul and Dave followed shortly after, their facial expression told me, they were frustrated to say the least. They went on to praise the lads for their efforts, against a quality team. Positive comments, *“great effort” “good test”*. However, the lads were downhearted by the result. I hung around until the coaches had said their final bit and proceeded to walk out of the changing room in toe with them and the U18 coach. As we neared the end of the corridor, Steve the Academy Director was there. *“Jesus, what were they thinking putting that team out, how’s that supposed to develop those players. How are they?” “If they’re anything like me, they’ll be gutted! We can’t compete against that week in week out”*, said Paul. Dave, jumped in quite frustrated *“It’s demoralising for them players and us, in the end their team didn’t even need to try.”*

There were clear frustrations in the air from all involved. Although there may be reasons for this defeat, they were six games into the season and only had one point so show for it. Staff were already showing signs of emotional fatigue (i.e., feeling powerless, and a lack of energy). At this point, there wasn't much else to say and I didn't want to ask any further questions. I had a feeling there would be plenty of opportunity to discuss this further once the dust had settled.

The next morning, I was the first one into the canteen, got my breakfast and sat down. Moments later Dave walked in. *"Winnie, Winnie, Winnie"* he offered as he walked to get his breakfast. *"Morning, mate"* I replied. Dave then joined me at the table and before I had the chance to say anything else, he offloaded. *"Fucking distraught, mate, getting battered like that, it's understandable against a team like that, but it's a killer if we are getting beat every week. Looks bad on us (coaches), looks bad on the club mate. Players need help, need some better players around them, squads not there."* At this point Paul walked into the canteen alongside Sam the head of coaching responsible for the U8-U16 provision. *"Morning"* we all said as Paul and Sam went to get their breakfast and join us at the table. *"I was just telling Winnie, we need help"* said Dave. *"Where's the strategy from the club? We are killing them players, killing their confidence. It seems to me that the club don't really care about U21s"* Paul replied with a dejected look on his face. *"Agree, loads in place for the academy (8-18s), stable squads, but then get to 21s and where's the investment, feel for you boys"* said the head of coaching. Paul interjected *"Where's the pathway for these players? Where the pathway for us coaches? You're not working with your own players regularly, you're in a league where you never know what you're gunna come up against and we have no real control or say in it. So, It's a bit like fake football with real consequences."*

Breakfast was a quick affair, we cleared our plates away, grabbed a coffee from the machine and walked back to the offices ready for the 'birds nest' meeting at 9am. On the walk back, I asked Paul if I could discuss his thoughts around the previous night's game. *"Of course, Winnie, we'll go straight into my office after 'birds nest',"*

I was keen to understand more about what Paul had said at breakfast about this phase being a bit fake but with real consequences. I didn't have too much time to think about it as 20 minutes later me, Paul and Dave were in their office. They both seemed keen to air their frustrations, Dave was still visibly frustrated, Paul was more measured but got straight into the detail with me... *"Small squad, which makes it difficult to compete against any teams in the Premier League 2."* *"Why is the squad so small though, especially compared to other clubs"* I replied. *"No investment mate, sold our better players, some out on loan and had to get a couple in on loan. However, we've only got 16 U21 players, with injuries we have to rely on U18 players. To be fair some of the U18 players are better than some U21 players. We try and be fair but this is competitive so we give better players more game time. This can cause conflict if an U18 is playing above an U21 player."* [Dave]

"So how are the players feeling about all of this, dealing with getting beat most weeks?"

"Devastated, they're low. They probably dread playing in matches, we dread them! We can't wait for the season to come to an end!" [Paul]

Although there were clear issues within this squad of players, the coaches expressed strong views around investment in U21 football, and were adamant a significant change was needed. Furthermore, the impact of these issues was really affecting them both. They were worried about the future of the U21 team, they felt there was no real strategy or investment into the

team, therefore worried about how they could develop players for the first team. Will the club invest in players so they could be more competitive, or would it be much the same next season?

Two days later I walked with Dave to the canteen to get a coffee in the morning. *“What’s your schedule for the day”* I asked. *“Session with the U21 on the grass this morning, then watching the U18s train this afternoon.”* *“Ok, is there a particular reason you’re watching the U18s today”* I inquisitively replied. *“There’s a couple of players (trialists) I wanna see, need to bulk the squad out for the next couple of weeks, if you’re not busy, come with me.”* *“Yeah, I will”* I said, thinking this could be a good opportunity to further explore the challenges he had already mentioned.

After lunch, I walked up to the top pitch where the U18s train. I saw Dave at the far side of the pitch, stood on his own, so I walked over. *“Now then Winnie”* said Dave. *“Hey, so who are you looking at today?”* Dave pointed them out. He then preceded to start a more general conversation asking questions about my background and getting to know me better. I thought it was a good opportunity to do the same, so I ask him about his own career, where he’d been and how he came to be at the club. He told me about his background, playing semi-pro football and his time studying for his degree in sports coaching and attending to his coaching badges. What he said next, really took me by surprise.

“I’ll be lucky to be here next season mate, be lucky to be in this job with the way things are going, they’ll prob sack me.” *“Are you serious”* I replied. *“100 percent, club will be looking at results and that there are no players near the first team.”* *“But is that all down to you and Paul? You’ve already told me about some of the issues, surely there’s not a great expectation at the minute for you to achieve that?”* I said. *“Yeah maybe but I do feel the pressure. Not so much about winning, but we are losing bad. Its more about the development of players for the*

first team and that connection between us both. It's not really there, and I know there is challenges here right now, I suppose I'm just feeling it, maybe over thinking."

Bakerfield FC academy had seen successes in recent years, with several players transitioning through into the first team and establishing themselves as regular first team players. However, for two years financial constraints had forced the academy to sell some of their better players, impacting the U21 team's overall quality and reduced the size of the squad. New players that had been brought into the squad had been acquired from other Category One academies through the loan system or had been released by their parent club, incurring minimal costs. Due to the smaller squad size of approximately 16 players, which was significantly lower than the average for Category One U21 squads, additional players often had to be brought into the squad from the U18s when required for either training or matches.

Study Three highlighted concerns around competitiveness and inconsistencies in matches and training, especially with players beyond their first years. The above narrative outlines further the inconsistencies in PL2 matches, indicating an open age bracket and alternating between very young teams and more experienced senior professionals. This is very much driven by first team needs, but the changes to team selection significantly affected the competitive balance of games.

Facing a team full of experienced first team senior players might seem a good challenge for younger players, and may replicate the professional game more, as stated as an aim by the EPPP (2011). However, in this example, the focus of the game was on the first team players and their need for game time rather than the development of younger players. On this occasion the levels of competitiveness were imbalanced, and the challenge for Bakerfield U21 team

proved too much and too little for their opponents. Additionally, younger players miss out on game time when replaced by senior players which is a barrier to their development (Mitchell et al., 2020). This further emphasises the organisational challenges within this phase and that the introduction of the EPPP (2011) and the subsequent evolution of this phase of football, raising doubts about the development of U21 players.

The objective of the U21 team was to develop players for the first team and prioritise support for them over winning matches. However, coaches felt pressure to deliver results, fearing poor results would look bad on them. Similar notions have been seen in first team football (Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a). Moreover, the pipeline of players from within the academy had slowed in the last two years, leaving coaches feeling vulnerable about their jobs which may also negatively impact their mental wellbeing. Additionally, they felt they had little or no control over any changes they would like to make to the current situation. In particular, the pressures of the role were affecting Dave, who had previously been in a much more stable role as U18s head coach. Coaches in academy football have expressed a lack of job security due to the pressure of the performance environment (Higham et al., 2022). This change in environment coupled with no clear communication from the club around the strategy or vision for the U21 team was causing Dave distress. This has been reported in other research as common in an academy setting (Gibson & Groom, 2018).

Organisational stresses on coaches such as decision making, lack of support, high expectations within a football culture and ambiguity are prevalent in sport and can have a detrimental effect on coach's private life's (Simpson et al., 2021). Furthermore, if coaches are feeling like their employment is threatened and/or they are constricted in their professional progression, it can impact their drive and motivation for the role (Gibson & Groom, 2019). The reaction from

coaches to these organisational stresses can manifest in the form of anger, anxiety, dejection, frustration, resentment and can lead to psychological and physical ill-health (Simpson, et al., 2021).

7.5.3 “They really need to go and play proper men’s football”

I head over to the U21 coach’s office, its 10:45am, pop my head and say *“morning chaps, I’ll meet you out there”*. *“No worries Winnie”*, replied Dave. I go to the coaches changing room, put my boots and big coat on then start to make my way out to the pitch where the U21s train. This was my first time out observing the team and being with the coaches in this environment. As I walk down the long corridor towards the training pitches, players started to emerge for their training session ahead. As the players gathered Paul introduced me again to the group. I already knew most of them from previous introductions, one-one meetings or generally being around the club facilities. However, there were a few unfamiliar faces who I’d not yet come across.

Paul and Dave went about their session starting with an intense warm up and small sided passing game. The group then split into two, Dave taking the strikers and attacking midfielders and Paul working on shape with the defensive players. After this, there was a 10-minute break before a game at the end. This was my opportunity to ask Paul who the player was in the first team training kit.

“That’s George he’s with the first team but trains with us”, said Paul. *“Oh, really, why’s that”* I replied. *“They don’t want him training with them, so he’s been with us now for a few weeks”*. *“Ok”*, I reply, *“so he’s part of the U21s now, part of your squad?”*. Paul then went on to describe the situation and his thoughts in more detail:

“Well, I’m not really sure to be honest, he’s still part of the first team, he travels with them, in their dressing room, on first team wages, but yeah as it stands he’s with us now. Only problem is he doesn’t wanna be here, not bothered about playing with us, so it’s a difficult one, as him coming down impact’s other players in his position and they can see he’s not that bothered about playing for us. To top it off, he’s also playing semi-pro on a Saturday afternoon, which means if we have a game on a Friday, he can’t play anyway. To be honest Winnie, I don’t blame him, whilst he’s here, he’s happy to stay here and get paid. We are happy to have him as he’s a decent player, but he needs to wanna be here. There’s a few like that to be honest, prob gone past the point where this environment is not good for them. Jacks another one. They really need to go and play proper men’s football now.”

George clearly stood out in training, not because he was showing an outstanding level of performance, but because he was wearing a first team training kit, which is different to all the other players. Jack was in his second year of his professional contract with the U21 squad. These were further example of the instability within the group and how this impacted training, matches, players and coaches. I was interested to know more and how George and Jack viewed their current predicament.

Paul walks past my office the next morning in search of the safeguarding officer. *“He’s not in Paul, he’s out on visits most of the day”*, I say. *“No worries, Craig, you ok?”* *“All good, come in if you’ve got five, I’d like to follow up with you on those two players you mentioned in training earlier this week.”* *“George and Jack?”* said Paul. *“Yeah”*, I reply. *“Well, George, has gone now, signed for **** which is the best move for him, but Jack would be a good one to chat to, he’s been here since he was about 8 years old.”* Paul started to move into the room, and sat down. I took this as a sign that he wanted to chat more. *“But we need a better structure*

Craig, for the PDP phase, I'd rip it up and start again. Go with an U17 and an U19s. If they're not in the first team by the age of 20 then they are likely not to make it. When they get into their 2nd and 3rd year they get a bit stale. It's not explicitly said to them, but they probably aren't going to get a contract with the first team. They're past that development stage and although we try to challenge them, for those better players at this stage in their development, being in the U21s is not right for them."

Paul had proposed a significant structural change to the PDP phase. I could see his point and this came from 8-years of experience working in the U21 phase. I'd already heard the views of one of the players (Luke) who was training with the first team but playing for the U21, therefore somewhat closer to the first team. However, I now wanted to hear the views of Jack who wasn't close to the first team. How did he feel about his predicament?

As with most encounters, the best place to connect with a player or a member of staff, was always in the canteen, this was the central meeting and social space at the training ground.

As I walked into the canteen one lunch time Jack was there hovering over the salad bar. We had already spoken in passing and I had completed his initial profile, so I was confident enough that if I approached him and asked for a chat, he would oblige. *"Hi Jack, how are you"* I ask, as I loaded my empty plate with an array of salad. *"Hi Craig, all good thanks, and you?"* *"Very, well thanks. I was wondering Jack if we could have a catch up, see how you're getting on."* *"yeah course, no probs."* I wanted to strike while I had his attention, I knew he had some down time until his training session later that afternoon. *"How are you fixed for after lunch?"* I advantageously proceeded. *"Yeah can do, your office ok"* he replied. *"Yep, let's say 1pm, see you then."*

Jack arrived on the dot at 1pm coffee in hand. He took a seat and we discussed his journey in football and how he made it into the U21 squad at the club. He expressed that his transitions through the academy had been quite smooth. He started to play up with the U21 team whilst in his 2nd year scholarship. This was a common occurrence amongst the majority of players in their 16-18 scholarship. He spoke about how he felt he had developed technically within the last year, but then preceded to open up about some of the challenges.

“I think it’s a difficult group because players are coming in and out all the time. For example, when a first team pro drops down due to not getting in the first team squad or recovering from injury, there’s a good chance he’ll take my place. This has happened to me quite a few times now, and the last time it happened I didn’t play for five games. So, I feel I’m missing out on key game time which is definitely impacting my progression here.”

He knew the reality of progressing into the first team was not immediate and was willing to go on loan at any level to get game time in men’s football and learn from that experience. He thought it more realistic for him to try and make a career in football at the lower levels.

“My plan now is to try and get a loan within the next few weeks, I don’t really mind where I go, I just need more game time and hope I can pick a club up and sign for them.” [Jack]

“That sounds sensible, Jack, you sound like you have your head screwed on right and a logical plan of action. But tell me, whilst you’re still here with the U21s, how are you finding the training and the level of competition in matches?”

“To be honest, it’s a good standard, I like it, but most second years may not think that. Some think it’s a bit fake and sometimes not competitive enough for them or it doesn’t really matter because the team is always changing and doesn’t always seem to be a focus on winning. That

is true to be fair, and when we play in the cups it's more competitive, against proper teams and there's a bigger crowd and the results matters. In these games you feel more pressure to win. In 21 matches you don't really feel that." [Jack]

Jacks comments echoed my experiences from other player views and he also had a desire to play men's football as he felt this would be more beneficial for his progression into a lower league team either out on loan or if he moved to a lower league club on a more permanent deal.

"Problem is though, Craig. First team managers in lower leagues see the style of play in Premier League 2 as a negative and therefore don't trust players to be able to adapt to their style of play". [Jack]

Jack referred to the style of play in the U21 team as not realistic to lower league football where he thought the game was more aggressive and a lot quicker. He knew he would need to drop to a low level and then build himself up to play at a higher level. Generally, from this brief encounter, Jack seemed to show a good level of self-awareness and was mature enough to understand the reality of his current situation and had a clear plan to continue on his pathway of being a first team professional footballer. Therefore, when an incident occurred the following Monday evening on match day, I was surprised to hear it involved Jack.

I arrived at the stadium approximately 30 minutes before kick-off, I would normally get there earlier but had other meetings that ran later than expected at the training ground. I parked the car and went up to the room where we normally got a drink and a bite to eat. As I walked into the room Geoff, the safeguarding officer is the only person in there. He's on his phone, with a concerned expression on his face. I didn't want to disturb him so I grab myself coffee and a

biscuit knowing I'd catch up with him later in the evening. As I'm slightly later than normal, I missed the pre-match meeting so I start to head down to the changing room. *"Craig!"* I hear from behind me. Geoff, shouts, *"hang on."* *"Everything ok Geoff?"*, I reply. *"Well, it's always fun and games! Jacks walked out the pre-match and just left."* *"Really, why?"*, I ask. *"When Dave presented the team, he was on the bench and Harry (U18 player) was picked instead."* *"Right, so where is he now"*, I responded. *"That was him on the phone, he's ok, he's at home now"* said Geoff. *"Ok, so he's upset, but surely you can't just storm off like that"*, I replied. *"Agree Craig, but it's that time of year isn't it, lads are already on edge."*

Geoff was referring to the time of year where decisions were being made about players and whether they would get new contracts with the club or released. Jack had clearly not taken the decision to leave him on the bench well. After our conversation a few days earlier, I knew I had to follow up with him as soon as possible.

The very next day, I go and see Geoff for an update on the situation. *"He's back in Craig"*, said Geoff. *"I've had a quick chat with him and he's ok, think he just didn't handle it well, maybe it was a reality check for him, knowing that he might not get a contract. Be good if you could speak to him."*

By 9:15am I had a knock on my door, it was Jack. *"Have you got five Craig?"* Jack nervously said peering his head around the door. *"Yes of course"*, I reply. *"I was going to come and find you anyway this morning, I heard about what happened last night, Geoff told me, are you ok?"* *"Yeah I'm not bad, to be honest Craig, I just didn't deal with it well and I know I shouldn't have left like that, but I just needed to get away."* *"I was a bit surprised Jack, especially after our chat, you seemed to be aware of your situation and had a plan"*, I replied. *"Yeah I am, I do, but it was just in that moment when Dave announced the team, just hit me hard."*

The reality of the moment had gotten to Jack, a younger player had replaced him and he felt an overwhelming sense of rejection. He was angry and panicked. His behaviour was unexpected, but the realisation of his future at the club had come. All players in the final year of their contracts were on edge as “decision day” was looming the following week and this weighed heavy on them. Jack knew it in his own mind that this was the end of his time at the club and that he needed time to process it. He knew the coaches were more likely looking to the future with younger players to bring into the fold next season and that was the reason he was replaced in the match.

Ewen Eastwood’s book *Belonging* (2021) proposed that we are terrified of being judged or not worthy of belonging to a group, not being good enough and ultimately being rejected. Within football, it is a limited few players that will make it through the academy system and into a first team, sustaining a career as a professional footballer (Premier League, 2022). This is of course true of any elite performance environment, however in football the reported statistics over recent years emphasises the stark reality of making it. Only 1-10% of young players who embark on a career in professional football actually go on to sign a professional contract at the age of 18 (Green, 2009; Anderson & Miller, 2011). More recently it has been reported that in Category One academies 97% of former academy players now aged 21-26 failed to make a single appearance in the Premier League, 70% did not secure a professional contract and only 10% made at least 20 appearances in the English Football League. More than half of all players within the academy system had left their clubs by the age of 16 (Cunningham, 2022).

Deselection from the U21 team and the potential threat of no further contract at the club is a real possibility for Jack. His deselection can cause psychological distress, especially in players who are nearing the “decision time” which has been reported as an outcome of athletes in this

predicament (Blakelock et al., 2016; Brown & Potrac, 2009). In addition, when Jack found out he was not in the starting team, he reacted by walking out and leaving the ground, therefore trying to remove himself from the stress of the situation. Roderick (2014) brings the view that in these moments' athletes go through a process of dis-identification, becoming cynical of the values and norms of the organisational culture of which they have accepted throughout their career. In turn they may behave different to the perceived norm in the environment. Furthermore, athletes who tend to use avoidance coping strategies, as shown by Jack, can produce higher levels of psychological distress following deselection (Blakelock et al., 2019). Although Jack had not been given the "decision" yet about his future at the club, the situation of non-selection for the game had left Jack feeling rejection which subsequently leads to feelings of anxiety, depression, loss of confidence and social dysfunction (Blakelock et al., 2016; Eastwood, 2021). Not getting in the team, or de-selection is an occurrence that footballers face frequently. Jack's desire to, and realistic approach of wanting to go elsewhere may be because he feels he is not done as a footballer and has more to give (physically and mentally), which support previous findings of athletes who have experienced deselection (e.g., Agnew et al., 2018).

7.6 Summary

The study sought to extend the understanding of the U21 development environment and the extent to which the main purpose of the developmental pathway is being achieved. Furthermore, it provides a greater insight into working practices and organisational culture, and their impacts on players and key stakeholder thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The issues depicted are found to have a detrimental effect on the well-being of individuals involved.

These insights offer a crucial understanding of the journey undertaken by youth players as they make their way towards the first team. Players frequently encounter challenges along a long and complex journey that, paradoxically, remains in a constant state of flux, yet their situation [their perceived progression toward the first team] often remains unchanged, resulting in feelings of stagnation and fear of rejection.

Without this context it would be difficult to determine the player journey from youth to senior football. Other studies have attempted to do so, for example Morris et al. (2017) who provides a 'snap shot' of players perceptions two weeks before their transition into a first team and thereafter their immediate experience of the transition entering a first team environment, highlighting a range of themes such as their motivation to succeed, anxieties around the transition and how social support can both hinder and help in this short period of time. However, these challenges are not isolated events and may persist over a lengthy period of time, which players may need to deal with on daily basis. Nesti and Littlewood, (2011) termed these critical moments, or boundary situations from an existential psychological perspective where players are consistently facing psychological challenges throughout their career pathway which can be traumatic. Consequently, a player's role and identity, which is often strongly shaped by their time and culture within the context of a football, may come under attack (Mitchell et al., 2014). This will evoke feelings of loss and a void which can lead to issues surrounding their personality and mental health such as anxiety, fear, anger and humiliation (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Calvin, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014; Wilkinson, 2021). If their career ends through deselection, they can find it difficult to adjust and regain a sense of who they are in a different world (Webb et al., 1998; Wilkinson, 2021) and will impact their life as they transition out of the sport (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Additional studies of this nature conducted from within football clubs would further contribute to the findings, and determine whether they represent general practice or unique to the specific context of this study. Such studies would build upon these findings to offer a more common/collective understanding of the challenges clubs and participants face during this phase of football, ultimately contributing to best practice and may have the potential to impact structural changes within the PDP phase.

Chapter Eight: Discussion, Conclusions and Implications

8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to address the key issue of whether or not the research has appropriately answered the central research question and to evaluate the evidence presented in support of the final conclusion. The research began from a concern that the U23/U21 phase of the Football Association's and English Premier League's player development pathway (Premier League, 2011) had been inadequately researched. As has already been demonstrated, the emphasis within development-related research had been focused on the younger age groups within professional clubs' academies. Nevertheless, the EPPP blueprint placed considerable significance on the post-18 phase, describing its purpose as a developmental transition and preparation for players to be 'ready' for first-team football. There was also an element of 'self-interest' in clubs being in a position to produce 'home-grown' players - with potential financial benefits 'down the line'.

The question to be addressed was the extent to which post-18 provision in professional football clubs' academies in England was fulfilling its developmental purpose. Not surprisingly, the conclusions will not be couched in a black and white, yes or no, nor is it susceptible to a quantifiable answer. However, this resumé of study findings will cast considerable doubt about U21 provision - in particular, its structural integrity, its capacity to 'reach' all players, and the quality of competition as a precursor to the intensity and results-oriented nature of the first-team experience.

This chapter of the thesis provides an overview of the research findings that have been presented and discussed from each of the four studies that constitute the research strategy, and, at the same time, identifies the key common threads/themes to have emerged. In drawing together these findings, the chapter is able to identify and discuss the findings holistically, in

relation to key findings about the structure of U21 football and accompanying environmental influences on player development and progression. In addition, applied and theoretical implications are presented, focusing on recommendations for practitioners and future research considerations/directions.

8.2 Aims and Structure of the Thesis

The constituent studies' findings have to be evaluated in the context of the overall purpose of this research – to provide a more-informed and detailed understanding of the extent to which the primary purpose of the elite English academy system in professional football, i.e., providing a talent development environment, is being met, with a specific focus on the U21 professional development phase.

In order to operationalise the research question, a series of inter-connected research aims were addressed:

Aim One - To scope, describe and analyse the provision – structure, extent, composition, organisation, development policies – of the U21 professional development phase in English professional football. (This was addressed in Study One.)

Aim Two (a) - To evaluate players' perceptions of the quality of the talent development environment and their wellbeing as it applies to their experience of U21 professional football in England. (This was addressed in Study Two.)

Aim Two (b) - To extend, through more-detailed first-hand accounts, the evaluation of players' perceptions and experience of their environment and perceived wellbeing. (This was addressed in Study Three.)

Aim Three - To critically explore, identify and illustrate the context-specific factors associated with practice within the U21 environment, and how this contributes to and/or influences the progression and development of players. (This was addressed in Study Four.)

Although there is an emerging foundation of research literature on talent development environments in general and transitions in football in particular (see Taylor & Collins 2020; 2021) and (Morris et al., 2015; 2016; 2017), relatively little is known about the U21 stage of the professional football player's career journey. More specifically, there is little research that has focused on the daily experiences of players and the reality of living in such an environment - the organisational culture and daily working practices that impact and/or influence the career pathway for these players. In order to provide an appropriate foundation for further exploration of this development phase, Study One was designed to identify the structure, extent and organisation of U21 football in English professional senior league clubs, and to determine the profile of the various components that constitute this domain (e.g., squad sizes, player origins, staffing structures). In addition, the study investigated each club's development policies, as they are relevant to U21 football and informed by an extensive review of publicly-available information on all professional league clubs' websites. Study One also conducted a review of the research literature specifically focused on U21 football, in order to understand the strengths and limitations of the current state of knowledge relevant to developmental issues within this domain.

The findings show significant variation in provision across the four academy categories. The average age (19.4 years) was notable, with, not surprisingly, 77% of players originating from the UK. The scale of provision appeared to be associated with (assumed) resource disparities across the categories. There is limited web-based public information about club objectives and policies for the professional development phase, although, where this was available, the emphasis was on individual player development and producing players for the club's first team. Although the desk study provided a necessary and novel insight into the scale of provision and elements of its 'make up', the study concluded that to understand the environment and the extent to which it can be considered to be developmental or an adequate preparation for first team football, further investigation was needed.

The next step in the research strategy was to obtain a detailed perspective on the players' opinions about their experience of the U21 stage in their career journey. Study Two used an exploratory approach to understand the quality of the relevant talent development environment. Players' perceptions of their lived environments were surveyed by two validated tools in the form of the Talent Development Questionnaire (TDEQ-5) (Li et al., 2015) and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg et al., 1997), in addition to capturing demographic data such as age, nationality, club category status, years at the club, and length of contract. The study findings captured players' perceptions about their development and wellbeing status from a representative sample of players across categories within the Football Association-recognised system; the players ($n=87$) were recruited from Category One and Two clubs. Once again, the research provided novel findings about the U21 phase of the development continuum. The most positively perceived elements of the players' environments were a recognition of long-term development and the availability of support networks; the least positive were the absence of

holistic quality preparation, communication and alignment of expectations. However, players perceived their general health to be good.

In line with a strategy of gradually narrowing the scope of the investigations, the next step was to explore in greater detail the individual ‘stories’ from relevant stakeholders. Therefore, Study Three explored in more depth the views of both players and coaches about their direct experience of the U21 phase of professional football. Through semi-structured interviews, the study explored its organisational structure, the value of competition, relationships, attitudes, and the role of coaches in managing and conducting the U21 phase, and the perceived impact of these factors on players’ satisfaction with their football development and progression. Players’ evaluation of their experiences and ultimate outcomes were highly dependent on factors associated with four contextual themes that emerged from the interviewees’ narratives: the integrity of the U21 structure/composition, strategies to help development and progression, barriers to development and progression, and player support and attributes.

As a final stage, and with an objective of providing a much richer picture of the lived experience of an U21 player, Study Four built upon the semi-structured interviews obtained in Study Three to offer a deeper, more contextualised, insight through an ethnographical lens. This focused on the U21 squad practice of a Category One football club. This study extended the findings of Study Three by bringing to light, not only the daily experiences of U21 players and key stakeholders and the socio-cultural challenges they face operating in this phase of football at the elite level, but also their awareness of the implications of such experiences on their potential career options. Utilising participant observation and informal interviews and conversations, a detailed ‘insider’ insight into the day-to-day workings of the U21 squad was obtained, documenting these experiences over an extended period of time. The findings were presented

in the form of three case studies that centred on the key themes of uncertainty, instability, isolation, stagnation and rejection.

8.3 Key Findings

The following section presents a number of key findings and subsequent recommendations that have emerged from the research. They are discussed, and need to be understood, in relation to the stated purpose of the professional development phase, i.e., preparation for first team football and (from the club's perspective) throughput/feeder into the first team. The findings from the research extend our existing, but limited, understanding of talent development as it relates to U21 football, offering novel and original insights into an important stepping stone in a professional footballer's career trajectory. For the first time, the full scope of the U21 landscape across all professional clubs and their associated academy categories is revealed; a survey of players' perceptions of their talent development environment identifies potential areas for further development; and more-in-depth insights into players' and coaches' (including first team coaches) views and experiences across different clubs and categories and critical real world reporting of their lived experiences on a day-by-day basis from a practitioner-researcher perspective provide a 'reality check' on professional development phase practice. It is intended that the output from the research can help to influence appropriate policy and practice for those involved in elite level football, including the implications of the conclusions reached in shaping future proposed developmental structures by the English Premier League and the Football Association.

The findings from each of the studies have already been discussed. However, as the research has progressed, these have coalesced into a number of significant themes. The key findings

from the research begin to ‘paint a picture’ about U21 provision and its developmental ambitions. They indicate that:

(a) There is some considerable doubt about the integrity of the U21 development environment. Its place within the EPPPs development continuum model would appear to give it a ‘stage’ or ‘stepping stone’ that is much less evident in practice.

(b) There is significant variation in the extent to which players within U21 squads are considered to be central to a club’s objectives. This is evident in opportunities to train with or play for the first team and in the number of post-21 contracts offered to players.

(c) There are contextual/environmental elements that make it difficult to achieve these developmental ambitions/objectives. These include competition structures and the impact of first team coaches’ priorities. The phase is characterised by constant change, variety across categories and clubs, and instability in terms of composition and working practices.

(d) Goal ambiguity is evident in the club’s approach to the U21 squad and phase. This includes potential conflicts between individual development and a ‘sifting/selection’ purpose; individual development over the medium term but immediate needs of first team preparation; and individual development versus the need to provide opportunities for first team squad players to receive additional playing time or recovery from injury.

(e) The stated purpose of providing a level of competitive challenge and intensity, as a preparation for first team football, can be impacted negatively by the approach taken to U21 matches – in terms of the style of play and team selection.

(e) Feedback from players suggests that (an almost constant) uncertainty about their progression opportunities impacts on their general wellbeing.

Overall, the major findings from the research cast doubt about the very ‘existence’ of the U21 environment – perhaps better expressed as appearing to “have little structural identity”. The

18-21 phase is clearly well-intentioned and has a solid developmental ‘rationale’ as a necessary ‘transition’ phase between age-group football and the demands of the professional game. Nevertheless, there are structural, social and cultural constraints that make it challenging for U21 coaches to focus on the individual player’s development. One of the key features of the U21 squad environment, and one that is rarely given attention in the literature, is the ‘cyclical’ nature of squad composition. The continual influx of younger players who become eligible for post-18 contracts, the progression of 18-21-aged players into first team squads, and the continual appraisal, renewal and management of contracts (including loan arrangements) creates an ever-changing, season-by-season sense of impermanence.

The U21 phase is commonly described as developmental, which is unsurprising given that players typically experience an intensive preparation and competition programme centred on technical, tactical and physical skills. While complementary elements of psycho-social support are incorporated, it has been reported in this study and in other work that its provision is often much more limited and has a lower priority (Gledhill et al., 2017). The phase is also characterised as preparatory, representing a phase of talent readiness, aimed at preparing players for the high pressure, win at all cost, result based, and high expectations typical of a first-team culture (Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a; Røynesdal et al., 2018). However, there are doubts about its comprehensiveness and individual impact, an awareness of which was recognised by players in interview. For some players it is clearly an effective and meaningful experience - particularly those who are earmarked as potential first team prospects and who are given greater levels of exposure to the training and competition demands of first team football. For others, who may not be so obviously on the ‘escalator’ towards the first team (a distinction that may become apparent early in their development) the exposure to fewer opportunities not only limits their development but impacts on their expectations about their future prospects.

Consequently, their experience differs, with readiness being less pronounced or effective. Furthermore, as described above, the nature of the performance environment in this phase is cyclical, with new players from the younger age group (U18s) regularly entering the squad. This cycle creates further pressure for U21 players, who may fear being ‘pushed further down the pecking order’, or, ultimately, replaced.

Studies One and Two were necessary foundations for addressing the research question. However, Studies Three and Four, in particular, added further knowledge about the reality of both players’ and coaches’ experiences in this domain, identifying as they did a range of barriers which they associated with the developmental agenda. The findings emanating from the research participants coalesce into common threads that highlight the challenges encountered and the strategies employed across a number of different clubs. Coaches were acutely aware of the structural challenges inherent in U21 football, and endeavoured to adapt and navigate them as best they could. Players and coaches faced these issues on a daily bases, resulting in a constant state of flux. However, somewhat paradoxically, there seems to have been little change in these circumstances over time. The discussion that follows examines the development environment in greater detail and provides a commentary on the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

8.3.1 Decoding U21 Provision

Study One provided a descriptive account of U21 squad provision, offering a novel account of how U21 football is organised in clubs in the senior leagues in England. Since the inception of the EPPP in 2011, this phase of football (albeit with some changes in its age limits) has become an acknowledge and structured framework of provision, with its U21-specific competition framework. However, there is noteworthy variation in provision across the landscape of the

academy system. This is primarily linked to the category status of each of the clubs, which is decided through a critical appraisal of provision against a set of hierarchical criteria, and is very much based on the resources afforded by clubs. This ultimately impacts the nature and quality of the provision that can be offered, with implications for such features as facilities, staffing and number of players that populate a squad. Much the majority of this provision is populated by Category One and Two clubs, with lower level clubs in Categories Three and Four showing a greater level of disparity/variation. For example, a number of these lower-level clubs do not operate bespoke U21 teams and take part in associated competitions, i.e., leagues and cups, with younger U18 players. Others opt for an entirely different model of development, e.g., a ‘later development model’ that more closely resembles the former ‘reserve team’ provision and is less-dependent on age-group academy provision.

Whatever the nuances of provision, this transition or preparatory phase can be considered a ‘feeder’ process in which players are readied for first team football or, in some cases, creates a group of players that supports the first team, through training and competition opportunities. However, the roles, responsibilities, working practices, goals and ambitions of clubs will show considerable variation, which makes it difficult to provide a collective understanding of U21 football – and, as a consequence, of its effectiveness in terms of a developmental stage in the player progression continuum. Provision may be better understood in relation to the particularity of individual clubs. This scope of the U21 phase clearly presents a ‘messy’ landscape, which is further reflected in the scarce information publicly available about clubs’ policies, objectives and practices.

From a competitive perspective, The FA and the EPL have regularly reviewed the structure of the post-18/transition stage within the professional game since the inception of the EPPP in

2011. Structural elements of the provision have changed, in particular around the age limit and how the competition framework associated with this age group is structured. Chapter Two provides further details of the evolution of this phase. (It is noteworthy that some of this change has taken place during the period of this research.) Data from Study One showed that the average age of players in the U21 professional development phase across the whole sample is 19.4 years of age. This mirrors the average of players in the Premier League 2 (the U21 league competition), which is 18.97 (Premier League, 2022). As a result of the reality of the age ranges, for the 2022/23 season, the age limit reverted back to a maximum age of U21 from U23 - notwithstanding the rules stipulating the participation of any additional over-age players. The Premier League stated that the rule change would “reflect the reality of the players in the competition”, and that this will provide “opportunities for the best young players to play alongside and against older and more experienced players.” (Premier League, 2022). However, these rule changes, specifically about player ages first introduced in 2016 and then again for the 2022/23 season, do not appear to have impacted positively on the experiences of players or overcome some of the challenges identified in this research and other work investigating the domain (e.g., Dowling et al., 2018). Players and coaches have expressed the importance of “*getting out on loan*” and “*playing proper men’s football*”, with one head U21 coach in Study Four advocating a re-structuring of the phase, suggesting it needs “*ripping up and starting again*”, and proposing an age cap of around the age of 19, saying “*If they’re not in the first team by the age of 20 then they are likely not to make it*”.

In recent years there have been calls for a re-think of how the U21 phase can better meet its intended purpose of developing and preparing players for a transition into a first team (Austin, 2020). The idea of a ‘B’ team has been floated by leading figures in the game. This describes a situation in which a club’s ‘B’ team enter into the lower levels of a professional league, e.g.,

League One or League Two The suggestion is that this would better develop players by playing regularly against senior professionals (Austin, 2020). However, this proposal has been resisted due to the disruption it would cause, necessitating a complete restructuring of the EFL to accommodate these clubs. The work of Plumley et al. (2018) suggested that the structure of the three leagues in the EFL requires no fundamental change, as across these leagues there is a strong competitive balance. The introduction of 'B' teams would be likely to negatively impact the competitive balance within the EFL as Premier League Teams with less resource may not be able to provide a 'B' team that can compete on the required level as League One or Two senior teams. It would also impact significantly on clubs that would be replaced in the EFL structure, with a potential lowering of market value in terms of broadcasting deals or fan/crowd interest. More particularly, the 'B' team proposal may not address the 'intensity of competition' and smoothness of transition issues raised in this research. The work of Relvas (2010) found that that in European countries/clubs that had 'B' teams in their leagues still had issues around communication and a disconnect in operational practices between youth and senior teams, which provided a barrier for player transitions.

A significant thread running through the players' and coaches' narratives has been the perceived lack of 'competitive edge' in U21 matches, and, it can be argued, a consequent diminution of its contribution to player development and readiness for first team football. Since the completion of data collection for this research, there has been a further review of the competitive structure of Premier League 2, as a result of concerns about the effectiveness of the competition programme in preparing players for the senior game. Voted for by Premier League clubs, and implemented for the start of the 2023/24 season, the PL 2 league competition moved to a 'Swiss style' structure, which incorporates all 25 Category One clubs into one single league. Each team is seeded, based on previous performances over the last three years,

and put into one of five ‘pots’, with teams playing each other in their own group. The top 16 teams across all groups will go into a play-off, which replicates a Champions League knock out style format (Youth Hawk, 2023).

There is no evidence at this stage whether or not the new competition format will result in a more intensive preparation for younger players and address, at least partially, one of the barriers to development identified by the research. The seeding of teams and therefore teams of a similar level playing each other on a regular basis may help to provide better competitive balance and an incentive to raise accountability for results - if teams actively pursue matches with the new format’s intended purpose. Furthermore, the removal of promotion and relegation in this new structure may help to provide a greater focus on long-term development of players rather than a desire to maintain league status. Conversely, the removal of promotion and relegation may reduce the level of jeopardy and meaningful competition and may be moving away from teaching players “how to win” (Premier League, 2001, p.59) and ultimately preparing them for the results-based, win at all cost competitive nature of first team football. Similarly, the presence of ‘over-age’ players in U21 competition (often to provide ‘game time’ for first team squad players) can be a double-edge sword. These players will replace U21 squad players, thus reducing opportunities, but potentially bringing an element of first-team style play. However, the players’ narratives suggest that players who are ‘playing down’ do not always approach these games with an intensity of purpose.

Practical recommendations

Developmental ambitions/goals and expectations. Although the EPPP ‘model’ describes a required framework for clubs’ academy status and identifies a generic transition stage between

pre-18 academy participation and first team football, there would be merit in each club aligning these expectations to their own developmental ambitions/goals and based on their available resources. To some extent this would merely reflect the variation in provision that already exists. While it may appear to reduce the integrity of the U21 phase across the English network, it may lead to a more effective and successful experience for players.

U21 competition structure. The competition structure for U21 provision should be continually evaluated to ensure an adequate level of developmental challenge for all players. This would include incentives to create more intensive match preparation, and consideration as to how a similar level of challenge could be created for lower level category clubs (who, within the research, had expressed the need for more ‘adult’ games experience for their players). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the challenge of increasing match intensity and accountability without overemphasising results to the extent that players’ development is compromised. One proposal to provide a better level of competitive balance, would be to narrow the age range within the U21 league structure across the system, capping the maximum age at 20. This would better reflect the average age of U21 players and address the trend of players beyond their first and/or second year becoming increasingly isolated and stagnated. Additionally, to accommodate a pool of first team players who require practice and recovery matches, a complementary ‘B League’ could be introduced. This structure would allow first team and fringe players to participate, effectively creating two levels of competition to adequately challenge all players within this phase.

8.3.2 Understanding the U21 Player Journey: Player Development or Player Readiness?

A major finding of the research is the impact of a lack of progression that players perceive they are making against their own expectations/ambitions. This was evidenced in Studies Three and Four from players, coaches and other support staff. Players appeared to make continuous assessments of their progress in terms of exposure to first team training and match-day squads, and playing (what is perceived as ‘proper’) men’s football, whether on loan or training with the first team.

This phase of football is intended to provide a transitional pathway to first team football. The EPL has witnessed an increase in home-grown players making this transition; there are also more academy graduates across the leagues progressing through to professional contracts, a figure that has steadily risen since 2012 (Premier League, 2022). It could be said that this meets the ambition of the EPPP to increase the number of home-grown players gaining contracts. However, year on year from 2012-2022, this has not grown significantly and it is “not an absolute measure of success – the number of high-quality players was the focus of the EPPP and a professional contract does not necessarily represent ‘breakthrough’ to a career in the professional game” (Premier League, 2022, p.7).

The career trajectory of players has been reported to be a linear process and somewhat regular and straightforward (if players have the talent) during their journeys from a young age until they reach their scholarship years (16-18) (e.g., Wylleman et al., 2013). However, the findings from this research show a more complex journey for players with a change of environment into the U21 phase, and one which poses new challenges (Richardson et al., 2013). The players’ and coaches’ narratives identify nuanced experiences that can bring about challenge (or transition) or critical moments, as defined by Nesti and Littlewood (2011), on almost a daily

basis. This certainly is not a linear or ‘smooth’ experience, as players can move frequently across squads including U21, U18, first team or on loan to another club, all within a period of one season. These findings appear to align with the Premier League’s Insights report (2022) - a review of the EPPP, 10 years on from its inception. It also suggests that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach for transitions into a first team, and that player journeys can be categorised into at least broad ‘archetypes’. Its analysis from Category One players suggests three main groups: (1) fast-tracked: early breakthrough in the Premier League following an expedited experience in the professional development phase (PDP) games programme, (2) focused development: targeted loan(s) to complement experience in the PDP games programmes, and (3) tiered progression: extensive game time in the EFL, plus loan(s) and/or PDP experience before breakthrough.

Study Four provides an insightful example of this as Luke faces a change in ‘location’ from the U21 to first team and back to U21 on a weekly basis. Although Luke is getting exposure to first team training, this constant state of flux for him brings about other issues that leaves him, at times feeling isolated and dealing with his identity as a footballer. The research provides a contextual understanding that goes beyond the acontextual traditional models of athletic development (Wylleman et al., 2013) and further extends the limited research in this area from Richardson et al. (2013) and Dowling et al. (2018) but adds further critical real-world insights, views and experience from those embedded within the phase, and across a wider scope of the English academy system. In particular, the notion of talent development for players who are in the 18-21 age range and who are clearly already very far advanced in their skill development in absolute terms (but in EPPP terms still thought to be in a development phase) would benefit from being considered a ‘late development phase’. As will be discussed later, this late

development phase might be more appropriately categorised as a ‘readiness phase’, with relevant attention to factors other than skill development itself.

This complexity of experiences and career trajectories that leads to doubts about the integrity of the U21 experience was illustrated in Studies Three and Four, in which players’ reported a gradually-emerging ‘positioning’ that could be conceptualised into a progression continuum (Figure 8.1). Players in their first year in an U21 squad enjoy the new challenge of ‘stepping up’, the increase in levels of intensity and quality, and felt adequately challenged. However, players beyond their first year who were not progressing in line with their own desired outcomes or appearing to near a position in the first team, experienced feelings of frustration and disheartenment. This state of stagnation could further manifest into a sense of isolation, with players at this point experiencing a lack of challenge and connection, coupled with the realisation that progression into the first team in their current club was unlikely. Appropriate challenge has been reported as crucial to the player development environment to instil coping skills and resilience (Megicks et al., 2022). These players in particular reported a lack of challenge in training and in competition, i.e., in league matches, and therefore the experience was not appropriate for their development or readiness into a first team (Dowling et al., 2018) and impacted their overall sense of wellbeing. In Study Two, which captured players’ perceptions of the quality of their environment across a range of clubs and categories, reported good levels of well-being on average across the sample. This was most likely the result of perceived excellent support networks around them and a high standard of coaching. However, when digging a little deeper into the sample of players, those who scored higher on the GHQ-12, indicating levels of psychological distress, had an average age close to 20 with a good majority of those players in the age bracket 20-21, possibly indicating dissatisfaction in players beyond their first year of U21 football.

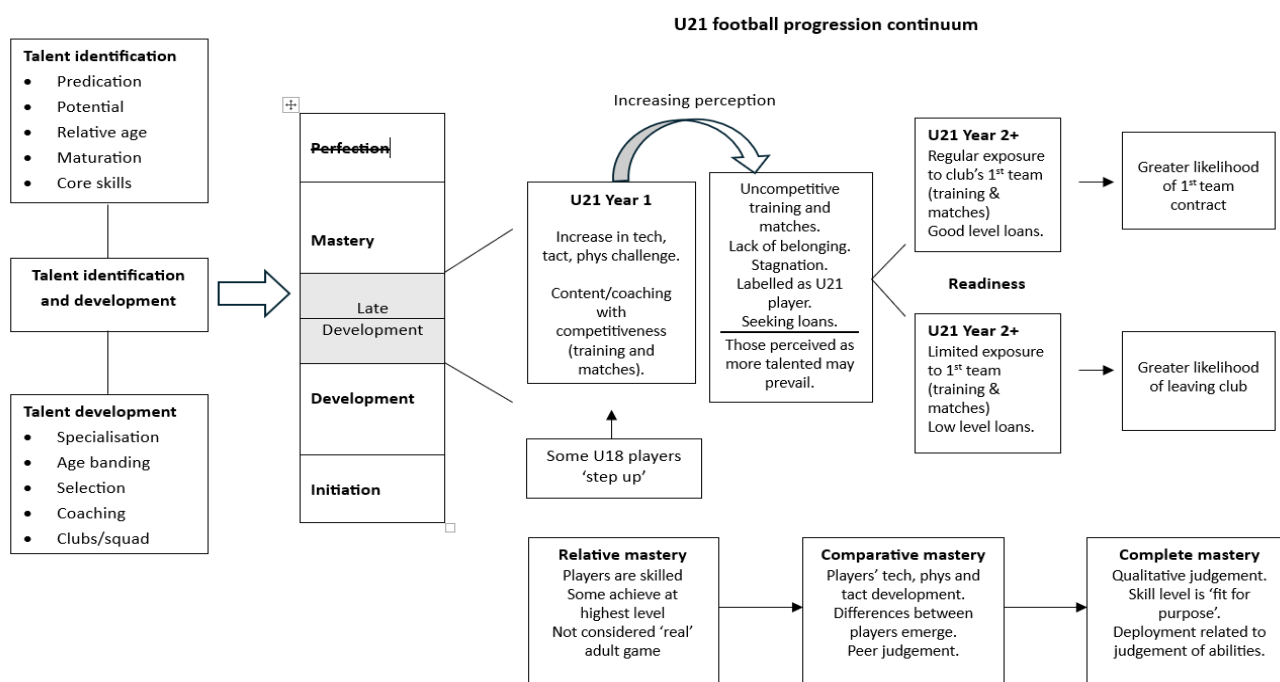
The EPPP blueprint emphasises that players in the professional development phase should operate in an environment that prepares them for first team football, for the pressures and expectation associated with which, they are then able to cope. However, the findings from this research suggest that the majority of players are not adequately prepared or readied for the first team as a result of their experience in an U21 squad. Of course, many players will become first team footballers but it can reasonably be argued from these findings that this may be ‘despite’ their experiences at U21 rather than because of it.

Recent publications have confirmed that greater attention is given to talent identification than to talent development, although the terms/processes are often conflated (Leite et al., 2021). This has further reinforced attention to age-group talent-search research. One of the corollaries of this is that the ‘pre-mastery’ stage is emphasised and ‘mastery’ treated as an end point. However, there are a number of both sport-specific and more generic factors that should be taken into account:

- (a) In the case of a professional footballer, the ‘mastery’ phase may be expected to last for 15-20 years. It is unreasonable to assume that this will be an unchanging quality of performance. (An example might be the balance between physical, psychological and tactical abilities [experience].)
- (b) It is not reasonable to consider ‘perfection’ as an attainable expression of sporting talent, particularly in interactive, team sports. Players can be expected to have strengths and weaknesses and there is an additional issue of positional specialisation. Overall, the issue appears to be one of ‘relative mastery’, i.e., a judgement of sporting ability in relation to others.

- (c) Not all players/athletes can succeed; opportunities are limited by relative abilities in relation to the needs/demands of the club. Again, it is unreasonable to talk of ‘perfection’ as a measure of success. It is a much more complex set of circumstances in which a player’s abilities are maximised within a time and context-bound process and in relation to the ‘performance’ (and implied contribution) of other players.
- (d) It is difficult to do in situ empirical research on talent development (i.e., implying comparative treatment of matched groups). Throughput as a measurement of ‘effectiveness’ is meaningless if the opportunities for advancement are constrained by the ‘places’ available.
- (e) This research into the U21 Professional Development Phase has illustrated the difficulties of ‘capturing’ the development process but also pointed out ways in which this stage can be better conceptualised.

What is offered here is a tentative conceptualisation of the U21 Professional Development Phase (Figure 8.1).



Speculative conceptualisation of a 'late development model'

Figure 8.1 Speculative Conceptualisation of a 'late development model'

This model adopts the concept of development as a continuous and continuing process and highlights the multifaceted journey and contributory influences such as innate talent e.g., biological, cognitive, physical and psychological capacities, the impacts of the environment over time, and social-cultural factors similar to (Baker et al., 2019; Megicks et al., 2022; Taylor & Collins, 2020; 2021). However, implements principles from a context specific perspective in football. Perfection may be unattainable or at the very least, the stage of perfection, identified by earlier talent development models (e.g., Bloom, 1985), and re-affirms that the nuances displayed here extend the thinking of athlete transitional models (e.g., Wylleman et al., 2013) and talent development models in a football context (e.g., Richardson et al., 2013).

The complexities of this late development phase undoubtedly muddies the quality of working practices and thus may impact the ability to incorporate a long term planning view with

coherent messages and therefore creating an environment with a shared understanding across stakeholders, suggested as crucial for a successful talent development environments (Taylor & Collins, 2020; 2021). Without this in place players may not experience a period of readiness, therefore lack the ability to cope with the daily transitions and/or critical moments (McCutcheon's, 2022) and/or wider skills such as the ability to perform under pressure (Till and Baker, 2022).

There is clearly a need to incorporate the late specialisation stage in models of talent development; a factor that should be recognised by both academics and practitioners. However, as illustrated in this tentative model of football-specific late development there are inherent risks for those participating in this stage. The U21 phase represents a critical juncture in which players may face de-selection, leading, potentially, to further disruption of their self-esteem and self-identity. This challenge is compounded by the players' long-term investment in their ambition of becoming professional footballers and the potential for their developmental needs or ambitions not being met – such as being provided with exposure to first team football. In simple terms, this is a late specialisation phase in terms of technical expertise and readiness, along with socialisation into the first-team culture, but it may also prove to be a difficult, often painful experience, in which players can face significant setbacks.

Practical recommendations

First team exposure. Club academies should endeavour to create more and adequate opportunities for players to play competitive football in an environment more akin to first team football (Morris et al., 2017). Players would also benefit from a more diverse range of playing opportunities, providing them with adequate playing time and challenge at an appropriate level. This would help to better prepare them for a potential transition into the club's first team, as a

contribution to them coping with a change of environment (Henriksen et al., 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2024). Coaches in Studies Three and Four were advocates of results-based competition, e.g., cup competitions organised through the league or through the local football pyramid; these would be particularly beneficial for older players. The FA trophy and the re-introduction of the Premier League International Cup in 2022 were perceived to be excellent opportunities for Premier League clubs. However, these types of competitions are not currently available to clubs in lower academy categories.

Effective use of the loans system. Loans, and especially those that provide meaningful game time, are thought to play an important role in helping players transition to Premier League football (Premier League, 2022; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Rules should remain flexible for loans but more importantly the development of players would benefit from clubs working together to ensure that the players' best interests are at the forefront of decision making. For example, participation by the player in the first team environment of the borrowing club should take precedence and be adhered to by the loan club (The FA, 2022: rule 6.6.4). Studies Three and Four reported strong views from both players and coaches that this was an integral part of player development at this stage. It was particularly apparent that players who were beyond their first year in U21 football, actively explored more loan opportunities to play men's competitive football.

Individual development. Tailored coaching programmes for players' individual needs and using individual development plans to set challenging targets and specific objectives should be continued in this phase. Given the players' differing progression trajectories (and potential longevity or otherwise in the game), and that players' ambitions change over time, as their career possibilities became more evident, their personal development should be subject to an

on-going to assessment of needs. In supporting this process more effectively, clubs and governing bodies such as the FA and EPL should look to fund coaching roles that specifically attend to individual development. Study Three identified three clubs that employed coaches in such a role - termed the 'individual first team development coach'. The role was seen as pivotal in bridging the gap between U21 and first team squads, thus contributing to a smoother transition for players. This role would reinforce a clear objective to drive the talent development process. It would, however, require a high level of coaching expertise across the holistic landscape, including effective communication with all key stakeholders (Megicks et al., 2022).

8.3.3 The Impact of First Team Decision Making on U21 Daily Practice

Findings from the research identified issues about communication and decision-making processes in relation to the movement of players in and out of the U21 squad. This impacted coaching practice on a daily basis, hindering the U21 coach's ability to deliver meaningful sessions that were competitive, purposeful and tailored to the needs of players similar to previous studies (Dowling et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020). Study Three specifically highlighted concerns about the lateness of decisions about which U21 players would train with the first team, often made on the morning of the session. Despite the potential benefits of both squads being based on the same site, in terms of fostering good communication (Drew et al., 2019; Lundqvist et al., 2024), this did not mitigate late and/or ineffective communication. Consequently, coaches frequently had to adjust coaching/training plans at the last moment to accommodate first team needs, sometimes resulting in a depleted number of U21 players for the training session. Moreover, the developmental aspects of the experience were also called into question by issues raised by coaches about the purpose of players participating in first team

training sessions; suggesting that players were “merely used as bodies to make up the numbers” or used as part of an exercise to help the first team work on shape.

Studies Three and Four provided a critical insight from players about the movement of players in and out the U21 squad, and their own experiences of moving ‘up to’ and ‘down from’ the first team. I refer again to the case of Luke (U21 team captain), who simultaneously played for the U21 team while training with the first team, highlighting the nuanced challenges he faced, whilst coaches felt a sense of powerlessness and a lack of autonomy in supporting Luke, describing this particular situation as a “black hole” devoid of control or influence.

Practical recommendations

Managing player movement. The approach to managing players’ short-term movement between the academy and first team needs to be carefully considered. It would be advantageous for the developmental purposes of the U21 squad if the key decision makers in this process, i.e., first team coaches and heads of performance, would work more closely with the U21 staff to acknowledge and work to ameliorate the impact of such unstable and inconsistent practice (e.g., players being withdrawn at short notice for inclusion in first-team training). This has been highlighted as a crucial factor in developing successful environments in elite level sport (Megicks et al., 2022). This will then allow for implementation of support mechanisms and formal communication such as regular Multi-Disciplinary Team meetings (MDTs) (Green et al., 2020) that include U21 and first team staff. This would provide a forum for more holistic discussions about player development and provide first team staff with a better understanding of any issues relevant to players’ developmental needs. The effect would be a shared mental model between members of the coaching staff within the club (Taylor & Collins, 2021).

Approach to players' experience. A more systematic approach to players' experience with first team squads could be taken. Study Three revealed that coaches looked to expose U21 players to first team training when possible. However, this was dictated by the first team's specific needs. Clubs may benefit from a more strategic approach that forges regular opportunities for players who are ready and able to be involved in first team training; an experience that will create a more adequate development experience and help players better prepare for the first team. Principles can be put in place, e.g., notice given and a specified time period a player would train with the first team, to minimise disruption to the U21 squad. Additionally, to facilitate a sense of identity, players should wear first team training kit and positive interactions with first team players should be encouraged. In addition, 'involvement' should constitute purposeful practice, rather than 'making up the numbers'. Stress exposure training should be considered as an effective practice to develop resilience (Low et al., 2020) and thereby be beneficial in helping players adjust to the pressures associated with the demands of first team football, with potential benefits to players' mental health (Madson et al., 2021).

The first team development coach role. To aid the above and as suggested previously, there is also an opportunity to bridge the gap between academy and first team football by appointing a first team development coach (TGU, 2022). This emerging role, which is detailed in Study Three, played a crucial role in acting as a successful conduit between academy and first team environments. This role helps prepare players for the transition by acting as a 'sounding board', describing the first-team sub-culture, analysing performance, setting individual targets, and providing information to first team coaches.

Creating shared space to foster connections. Studies Three and Four also highlights the importance of physical space in aiding connections, interactions and positive communication

between squads. Shared space for the academy and first team was viewed as a crucial factor in helping foster these connections and should be considered when developing new space or re-imagining existing space. Nonetheless, enabling a culture where reciprocal observations can take place, allowing younger players to be present and observe first team staff and players (Morris et al., 2015), and for first team staff to have easy access to observe the younger players will also help to bridge the gap between youth football and the first team. This can be organised to happen on a regular basis. This recent example from the assistant head coach of Liverpool FC, Pepijn Lijnder, explains that once a week, the first team environment becomes the home to their best 15-21year olds.

“We brought the best talents together in all the age groups to show him (the head coach). We (the first team) train at four in the afternoon; at two o’clock is the Talent Group. They are already coming with us on pre-season and when the season starts they train here one time a week. Not only can Klopp then see these players up close, but they can observe him too: how he talks, how he coaches and how he operates. And, perhaps most importantly of all, they can also see how a first-team player conducts himself. They can watch Mo Salah up close - the way he prepares in the physio room, the way he prepares before the session, how he treats his boots, everything. All these small things, these unwritten things - for young players to learn from their models is so important.” (Austin, 2023).

The quote above is an example of the way in which a club can help to make an effective transition for players – we should also note that it is part of the ‘sifting’ process for identifying players with the greatest potential. Creating a strong identity within clubs, which includes a vision for developing players for their first team, can create a stronger shared identity and forge

a better working environment. ‘Awaydays’ (Eastwood, 2021; Nesti, 2010) are just one example of creative ways to create a shared identity.

8.3.4 Understanding the Environment: Are Players Getting the Right Level of Support?

Key findings from this research have demonstrated a number of the additional personal and social-cultural demands evident in this phase of football (Richardson et al., 2013), and the need to address the means of helping players to cope with any consequent stress. Across Studies Three and Four, players, coaches and support staff discussed the notions of uncertainty, isolation, frustration, and rejection. This late development phase has been categorised as unstable and inconsistent, and referred to by coaches in Study Four as a ‘black hole’.

It is a statistical certainty that the vast majority of academy players will not make it to the highest level, highlighting the need for acknowledgement, transparency and holistic outcomes for all players (Premier League, 2022, Green et al., 2020). The findings from Study Three recognised that creating a holistic environment is essential to the developmental process, as recognised in the talent development literature (Larson et al., 2013, 2020; Mills et al., 2014a), and should continue in this stage as part of an education programme (Premier League, p.52). This can provide a focus on developing life skills and psycho-social skills that will help players cope with the challenges and demand of their current environment, potential transitions into the first team, and life beyond football (whether sooner or later) as found in earlier research (Rongen et al., 2021).

However, the findings from Study Two demonstrated that this element of their environment was perceived by players to be the least positive. Although players reported that they were generally well supported across a network of staff such as nutritionists, safeguarding, and

player care officers, there were reported difficulties for academies at this level in incorporating more-holistic development activities into the everyday programme, due to limited time. Coaching schedules were intensive, with a major focus on technical and tactical skill and other elements of performance, e.g., performance analysis and strength and conditioning. This raised questions about the prioritisation of resources within football academies and the consequences of neglecting the psycho-social dimensions of player development (Gledhill et al., 2017). This raises further doubts about the integrity of the professional development phase, specifically relating to holistic development, by providing an environment that develops well rounded educationally ready people that can move beyond and adapt outside of football (Premier League, 2011, p. 72), and in turn players ability to cope with ‘bumps in the road’, essential for developing resilience (Collins et al. 2016)

Practical recommendations

Additional funding to support holistic development across whole academy system. Support for players at clubs has become better in recent years, as evidenced by the increase in the non-coaching workforce reported by the Premier League in its Insights report on Category One clubs (Premier League, 2022). This includes mandatory full-time roles for player care officers and sport psychologists in Category One academies. In 2022 The Premier League also committed to investing £2m in order that all Category One-Three clubs could employ full-time player care officers, and asked clubs to give a three-year “commitment of support” to released academy players (Austin, 2022). The investment into player care is welcomed. However, taking into account the potential psychological impact on players reported in this research and other studies such as an attack on their identity (Mitchell et al., 2014), this funding could be extended to support the full-time employment of sport psychologist roles within academies across the whole of league provision.

A focus on an effective learning environment. The U21 phase is intended to acknowledge both transitioning into challenging first team environments and the possibility of transitioning either out of football or to clubs of a lesser status. It is clear, therefore, that a personal development agenda, in addition to football skills, is intended. Staff with such responsibilities should seek to work in tandem with other support staff, such as safeguarding officers, to develop a multidisciplinary programme of holistic support providing an appropriate learning environment, with a balance of physical, psychological and social development, placing player wellbeing at the centre of development (Till & Baker, 2022). Such a programme would also benefit from wider support such as counselling and clinical expertise, given the nature of the psychological distress that can occur, such as identity crisis (Erikson, 1968) and issues with belonging, meaning and purpose (Frankl, 1963). Clubs would benefit from more guidance on such provision from the EPPP, in particular from a psychological support perspective, in order to increase the level of understanding and standardisation suggested in earlier studies (e.g., Dean et al., 2022; Feddersen et al., 2023).

Consistent monitoring of wellbeing. Additionally, there is benefit in establishing wellbeing groups across the academy structure as part of the support network. Staff across the academy structure, including U21 staff and coaches, should meet once per week to discuss individual needs and ensure players are supported at the right time. Panel members, such as safeguarding officers, psychologists and player care offers should devise a clear and transparent referral pathway for players to seek support, with clear guidance for staff. The pathway should identify concerns relating to player wellbeing, behaviour and performance and allow for the sharing of key information to arrive at a collective understanding of these concerns in order that action plans can be developed to manage concerns. This should also include the continued support for players after their release from the club. Furthermore, the U21 squad of players should be

incorporated into a screening programme for mental wellbeing on at least a twelve weekly cycle to ascertain how individuals are coping in the environment.

8.4 Limitations and Challenges

The following section details some of the potential limitations across each study and challenges I faced during the process of data collection for this thesis. This section is presented in the ‘first person’.

Initial plans for the first part of data collection were delayed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the resultant ‘closing down’ to external communication whilst they focused on putting their own safer protocols in place. Once the world slowly opened up again, there were initial difficulties in gaining access to players for Study Two and participants generally across the studies for the reasons noted by (Waddington, 2014). Fortunately, post pandemic, online platforms and processes became more widely used as a source of communication and working practice and aided the task of surveying players nationally.

Nevertheless, I still needed to make connections with clubs to recruit participants. Fortunately, over the last ten years I had built up a good network of contacts within the game and was able to approach key stakeholders in clubs to promote the study. This resulted in an adequate sample size of 11% of the available population, and provided the first ever substantial cross-group survey of player perceptions within the U21 talent development environment in England. Although, the study captured a good sample size relative to the population, this was an opportunity sample limited by access and willingness to participate, and a more extensive and stratified sample across the full scope of the English academy system for this age group would generate a more robust set of player insights. Some caution also needs to be exercised as

quantitative measurements and the very nature of questionnaire-based research means that the players' perceptions were not necessarily related to any specific context (which provided the rationale for narrowing subsequent studies to context-specific enquiry). It was also found that the TDEQ-5 instrument has limitations as a tool for measurement in this specific population of players, as questions are very 'coach centric', and in more-recent (at least Category One and Two) academies, other support practitioners are also likely to be involved in player welfare.

The semi-structured interviews used in Study Three provide a deeper and richer contextual understanding than can be obtained through survey questionnaires. Nevertheless, they also constitute a 'temporal snap shot' of organisations and individuals' experiences (in this case, clubs and cohorts of players). Therefore, without a greater level of stratified sampling, the interviews may have been less effective in capturing the longitudinal aspects of the players' experiences, although this may have been ameliorated somewhat by the more-extended participant observation in Study Four.

The aim of the research was to shed light on the under-researched area, which could both add to the body of knowledge available, and be of help to practitioners and policy makers impacting on the U21 domain. There is no substantial claim, therefore, to any generalisation of findings (beyond the scoping and survey data), but the relatively modest scale of the professional football domain and the width of experience of coaches and other practitioners who took part lends some credibility to the veracity of the findings.

It may have been advantageous to widen the scope of the clubs involved in the study, particularly those involved in Categories Three and Four in order to represent a more diverse perspective from the U21 population. The study represented a sample predominantly from

Categories One and Two. Nevertheless, there may be particular issues in the more resource-constrained clubs, with smaller numbers within their U21 squads, and that would suggest a further separate study.

Another potential limitation of the research stems from my own personal experience working within professional football for several years prior to starting this PhD research. These previous experiences posed a risk of a biased perspective on U21 provision, which could have potentially influenced my approach to data collection, analysis and interpretations, shaped by pre-existing insights. I attempted to acknowledge this in my reflections as the work progressed. Nevertheless, this familiarity within football, at both youth and first team level, also proved to be an advantage on a number of levels. It helped to facilitate the access to participants and accelerated the process of gaining trust from participants, which was particularly valuable for Studies Three and Four. Being able to connect with participants through my experiences and also on a professional level and being readily perceived as a peer fostered a sense of openness and an accommodating attitude towards me. This has been seen as a positive in ethnographic work (Burawoy, 1998). Moreover, my previous work in football enabled me to leverage my understanding of the working practices within football academies and enabled me to easily transition into my practitioner role, allowing for smoother connections and maximum productivity of my time within the club and data collection for Study Four. Having previously worked with key personnel such as directors, CEOs, heads of coaching, and support staff in both academies and first teams, I possessed a nuanced understanding of their roles and responsibilities. This familiarity afforded me a greater level of trust compared to someone new to a role in football, or indeed a researcher, and granted me privileged access to areas such as dressing rooms, staff offices, training pitch, first team meetings, which may have been “off-limits” to other.

8.5 Future Research

The findings from this research present a range of opportunities for further exploration. This includes future studies using the concept of talent development (in particular, the concept of ‘late stage development’) and its related measurement tool TDEQ-5, and perhaps an amended version of the instrument. The current findings point to the necessity for future studies that capture player responses from a much larger sample size and across a wider range of clubs and categories. There is an opportunity for researchers to understand perceptions from U21 players about the quality of their environment across key points in their journey, such as from year one to year two and beyond in the U21 development phase. This would have the potential to shed further light on critical moments across their journeys and how these may be related to psychological distress. However, the validity of the questionnaire for use in this context requires further exploration, acknowledging its limitations, particularly concerning questions about parental support, and the inclusions of questions more focused on capturing the support from non-coaching staff. Furthermore, it is strongly recommended that TDEQ-5 is used with caution when interpreting these dimensions, and should be used in conjunction with more qualitative methods such as one to one interviews or ethnographic perspectives to get at true contextualised insight into a particular environment.

These findings add to a paucity of available information in this phase of football. To date, only the work of a few researchers, e.g., Dowling et al. (2018), have offered some depth of exploration, but have not extensively explored the daily lives of those that operate within this phase. Overall, there is a dearth of literature that has explored the experiences of players within football and can be used as a foundation to such research. To date there are few accounts available on this domain. Works by Nesti et al. (2012; 2013), Champ et al. (2020a; 2020b) and Wixey et al. (2021) are exceptions. More ethnographic studies, including auto-ethnographic

accounts, would offer further crucial insights into the challenges faced, and strategies used to enhance the developmental experience. Moreover, longitudinal qualitative ethnography should be adopted in order to provide a comprehensive insight into the lived experiences of players over time, and again help to identify key transitional moments, while illuminating support structures. The longitudinal perspective would help us to understand how players' identify forms over time through these different transitions and how they cope with these critical moments. Work similar to this research, therefore, can be extended to span a wider range of age groups which will allow for inter-phase comparisons. Although *in-situ* interviews provided us with crucial insights across a range of practitioners, observations of practice provided a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience. This work would be particularly effective if undertaken by practitioners from within the field.

One other avenue to explore are the perceptions of first team players and further exploration of first team coaches' perceptions about U21 provision. As highlighted in this research, U21 players' perceptions about first team players is that they are generally positive and supportive, but on the first team training ground the activity and relationships can be more intense. Further research may investigate the extent to which first team players feel threatened by promising U21 players. This research also reported that first team coaches can quickly 'label' U21 players because they haven't yet 'proved' themselves in a first team environment. It would therefore be valuable to ascertain first team coaches' opinions about the process of assimilating U21 players into first team environments.

8.6 Conclusions

The issue underlying this research was the quality of developmental practice in the U21 professional development phase of English professional football. Contextual features were (a) the aims of the U21 phase as set out in the Premier Leagues and the Football Association's development continuum, (b) the absence of a substantial body of supportive research literature, (c) some doubts about the 'developmental profile' at this stage of a player's footballing expertise, and (d) [partly from the changes made to the age profile of this phase and partly from my personal experience in professional football] an uncertainty about the coherence or practical integrity of this stage in a player's career progression. The research, therefore, explored the context of U21 football within the English academy system, whilst investigating the extent to which the practical realisation of the talent development environment influences and/or impacts its main objectives of developing well-rounded individuals and providing a pathway for players to transition into first team football.

The research as a whole provided a novel insight into the U21 domain in professional football. First, it offered a comprehensive overview of this phase of football across the English academy system, describing a profile of the various elements that constitute this phase. This initial scoping of the domain identified noteworthy variations in provision, driven by individual clubs' resources, ambitions and coaching philosophies, providing an initial picture of a club-dependent and 'messy' environment.

Second, a survey of players from the U21 domain provided insights into their perceptions of the quality of the U21 talent development environment from the perspectives of players using the TDEQ-5 and how this impacts wellbeing by using the GHQ-12. Findings demonstrated that players perceived their general wellbeing to be good and that LTD and SN were the most

positive elements of their environment. However, AOE, COMS and HQP were perceived as areas where improvements could be made.

Third, the research closely examined the reality of practice within the environment through semi-structured interviews and the researcher's observations as a practitioner. This broad then narrowing mixed methods approach allowed for an in-depth scoping and nuanced critical understanding in this under-researched area, highlighting the challenges faced by those who operate within it. The findings demonstrate that squad composition is often unstable, making the player journey challenging as they navigate through this constant state of flux, with the added complication of intermittent exposure to first team football, whether with their parent club or out on loan. This results in additional psychological challenges beyond those that players have previously experienced in the academy system.

Fourth, findings identify the limitations of the phase as a talent development environment. It seems clear from both the concept of the U21 phase and from these accounts of practice that (a) its developmental ambitions might be better termed a 'late development model' and (b) that another more apt descriptor would be 'talent readiness' phase (both in preparing for first team football and a sifting/selecting process by clubs). Therefore, while the intended purpose seems commendable, there are concerns about the nature of the phase and its limited opportunities for some players to progress into men's football, leading to feelings of stagnation and frustration, which can impact a player's identity and wellbeing. The integrity of the environment has been called into question, and cast some doubt on whether it fully aligns with the development agenda set out by the EPPP.

Fifth, the findings suggest the need for a continuous review of the U21 provision with more development-oriented collaboration among key stakeholders in clubs across the academy spectrum, the Premier League and the Football Association. This is essential to enhance the developmental experience of all players during their time within the U21 phase, particularly ensuring meaningful competition and exposure to the demands of first team football in order to aid the players' transition from age-group academy to first team football. In addition, the players' narratives indicate that there is a need to provide more-holistic support, which may extend to counselling and clinical support. More broadly, there is further work to be done in creating (and making space for) meaningful educational and psychological programmes with the objective of addressing current challenges, aiding players coping strategies and preparing them for life beyond football.

In summary, this research contributes a unique and novel perspective on U21 football across the English academy system. As currently constituted, there are clear limitations in the extent to which it provides an adequate developmental experience for players and to ready them for first team football. It presents opportunities for the Premier League and the Football Association to re-evaluate the phase to better meet its intended purpose. This might usefully be centred on the quality of competition, integration of squads and structured incorporation of first team exposure. Some amendments to the age limits of this post-transition stage may help to reduce the feeling of stagnation. Moreover, it stresses the importance of understanding these challenges, in order to provide adequate support for players with a greater emphasis on their individual needs. Psychologist and player care officers have an opportunity to challenge the environment to offer support and develop the necessary skills for players to navigate transitional outcomes. Additionally, clubs may need to provide boarder support, such as clinical counselling and assistance with dual careers, as part of any aftercare initiatives.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Interview Guide – Coaches (U21)

<i>Introduction</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and welcome 		
<i>Explain Purpose</i>		
<p>The purpose of this interview guide is to gain a critical understanding of your perceptions of optimal environments for player experience/development and progression in the U21 phase of professional football. The influence (or impact) of the environmental factors that contribute to this and cultural challenges.</p> <p>Any questions?</p>		
<i>Introduction, familiarisation, background</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old are you? • What is your current role (Time in role)? • How long have you held this position? • How have you arrived in your current role (previous roles, playing career, clubs, coaching qualifications)? 		
<i>Organisational structure</i>		
Main Question	Prompt	Probes
Which group of players do you predominantly work with?	<p>How many are in the group? Is this a stable group?</p> <p>Are there players outside of these you work with?</p> <p>Are these players the same for training and games?</p>	<p>(If so) Why does the group change?</p> <p>Who/How often?</p>
Are you happy with this arrangement?	<p>What level of control do you have over the composition of the group?</p> <p>What could be different?</p> <p>Reasons?</p>	<p>If not, why not?</p> <p>What impact does this have on you?</p>

How many days a week are you in the club training and playing matches?	Specific pattern, elements of working practice with U21s.	Is this an appropriate pattern of activity for the players' development? Do you find this beneficial to you as a person and for development/performance of players?
How would you define the U21s purpose and structure generally?	Development or Performance? General aims/aspirations for the group?	Is this understood throughout the club? Can you give examples? Can you provide suggestions for change/clarity?
Do you have any direct involvement in defining the purpose and structure of this provision at the club?	Training structure, working practice of U21s?	If yes, how? Can you explain your role in this?
Do you think the structure is conducive to player development?	What is the influencing/debilitating structural factors that help or hinder player development/progression? e.g., player contracts, when players enter a clubs academy structure from another club?	Why? Can you give examples? Who are the main stakeholders involved in this process? Do length of contracts and when players enter make a difference? Why? Impact?
Organisational Culture (Richardson <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Dowling <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Roynesdal <i>et al.</i> , 2018)		
What is your relationship with staff members involved in the U21s?	How do you interact with them? How do you facilitate this relationship? How do you look to get the best out of them?	Can you give examples? Can you give examples? Can you give examples?

How would you describe your coaching style/philosophy of practice?	What has shaped this? Is this easily facilitated?	Can you tell me more about your approach? How/why/impacts?
What is your relationship like with the players?	How do you interact with them? How do you facilitate this relationship? How do you look to get the best out of them?	Can you give examples? Can you give examples? Can you give examples?
What behaviours and values do you think players need to display to be successful in this phase of the game?	Further develop themselves and progress in their football career e.g., into a first team?	Why? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples?
<i>Environments: How do you look to create an effective player development environment? (Mills et al., 2012, 2014; Richardson et al., 2013; Dowling et al., 2018; Roynesdal et al., 2018)</i>		
What do you think are the key factors that underpin an optimal player development environment?	[Follow up factors identified] What methods and strategies do you believe help create an optimal environment? (Psycho-social, operational, physical environment, organisational)	What is the contribution of these factors? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples?
From your experience, do you think the U21s environment in general is conducive to developing players? Is this the case at your current club?	Players can further their football career and potentially progress in a first team. What stands out as a good or poor feature of the environment?	Impact of this on performance and progression? Impact of this on wellbeing?
Is this the same or different to other clubs you have worked at?	How has this worked at other clubs (differences)?	Impact of this on performance and progression?

Can you identify any differences in environment between the U18s and this phase (U21s)?	Culture, expectations, support?	Can you give examples?
In your experience, what are some of the difficulties players are facing in this phase of football that impacts their progression and development?	Level of training/matches, development opportunities, Politics, game time, loans, understanding, uncertainty, insecurity, expectations, life outside football, social life, other commitments, staff/teammates (relationships?)	What might be the cause of these difficulties? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples?
How are players in this group supported by the club? What processes are in place to help them?	Support structures (people, who plays a significant role?) Your approach to this to help them develop and potentially progress into the first team?	What impacts do these have/examples? If so, does this help with maximising player progression and development?
How do you think the club could best attend to enhancing player experience to optimise the environment for player development?	Environmental (consistent playing time, coaching, staffing, level of coaching, learning environment), resources (facilities, access to top-level coaching, accommodation, sports sci support) structures (consistent squad etc.)	What difference would this make? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples (development/progression)?
What would you like to see different/change – both in the club and more generally in football at this stage?	What would be your main priorities?	Why, what would the impact be? Can you give examples?
End statement		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I believe that covers the things I wanted to talk to you about. Is there anything you would like to add?” 		
Closure		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thank you very much for taking part and for giving your time to the project. 		

Interview Guide – Coaches (First Team)

Introduction		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and welcome 		
Explain Purpose		
<p>The purpose of this interview guide is to gain a critical understanding of your perceptions of optimal environments for player experience/development and progression in the U23s phase of professional football. The influence (or impact) of the environmental factors that contribute to this and cultural challenges.</p> <p>Any questions?</p>		
Introduction, familiarisation, background		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old are you? • What is your current role? (Time in role)? • How long have you held this position? • How have you arrived in your current role (previous roles, playing career, clubs, coaching qualifications)? 		
Organisational structure		
Principal Question	Prompt	Probes
Which group of players do you predominantly work with in your role?	<p>How many are in the group? Is this a stable group?</p> <p>Are there players outside of these you work with?</p> <p>Are these players the same for training and games?</p>	<p>(If so) Why does the group change?</p> <p>Who/How often?</p>
Are you happy with this arrangement?	<p>What level of control do you have over the composition of the group?</p> <p>What could be different?</p> <p>Reasons?</p>	<p>If not, why not?</p> <p>What impact does this have on you?</p>

How many days a week are you in the club training and playing matches?	Specific pattern, any elements of working practice with U21s?	Is this an appropriate pattern of activity for the players' development? Do you find this beneficial to you as a person and for development/performance of players?
How would you define the U21s purpose and objectives generally?	Development or Performance? General aims/aspirations for the group?	Is this understood throughout the club? Can you give examples? Can you provide suggestions for change/clarity?
Do you have any direct involvement in defining the purpose and structure of this provision at the club?	Training structure, working practice of U23s?	If yes, how? Can you explain your role in this?
Do you think the structure is conducive to player development?	What is the influencing/debilitating structural factors that help or hinder player development/progression? e.g., player contracts, when players enter a clubs academy structure from another club?	Why? Can you give examples? Who are the main stakeholders involved in this process? Do length of contracts and when players enter make a difference? Why? Impact?
Organisational Culture (Richardson <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Dowling <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Roynesdal <i>et al.</i> , 2018)		
Do you have interactions with staff involved in the U21s	In what circumstances? For what purpose? How do you interact with them? How do you look to get the best out of them?	Can you give examples? Can you give examples? Can you give examples?
Do you interact with U21s players?	In what circumstances? For what purpose?	Can you give examples?

	How do you interact with them? What is your relationship with these players?	Can you give examples? Can you give examples?
What behaviours and values do you think players need to display at the U21 stage?	To further develop themselves and progress in their football career, e.g., into a first team?	Why? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples?
<i>Environments: How do you look to create an effective player development environment? (Mills et al., 2012, 2014; Richardson et al., 2013; Dowling et al., 2018; Roynesdal et al., 2018)</i>		
What do you think are the key factors that underpin an optimal player development environment?	[Follow up factors identified] What methods and strategies do you believe help create an optimal environment? (Psycho-social, operational, physical environment, organisational)	What is the contribution of these factors? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have on players?
From your experience, do you think the U21s environment in general is conducive to developing players? Is this the case at your current club?	Players can further their football career and potentially progress in a first team. What stands out as a good or poor feature of the environment?	Impact of this on performance and progression? Impact of this on wellbeing?
Is this the same or different to other clubs you have worked at?	How has this worked at other clubs (differences)?	Examples of impact of this on performance and progression?
Are there any differences in environment between the U21s phase and a first team?	Culture, expectations, support?	Can you give examples?
In your experience, what are some of the difficulties players are facing in this phase of	Level of training/matches, development opportunities, politics, game time, loans, understanding, uncertainty,	What might the cause of these difficulties?

football that impacts their progression and development?	insecurity, expectations, life outside football, social life, other commitments, staff/teammates (relationships?)	Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples?
How are players in this group supported by the club? What processes are in place to help them?	Support structures (people, who plays a significant role?) Your approach to this to help them develop and potentially progress into the first team?	What impacts do these have/examples? If so, does this help with maximising player progression and development?
How do you think the club could best attend to enhancing player experience to optimise the environment for player development?	Environmental (consistent playing time, coaching, staffing, level of coaching, learning environment), resources (facilities, access to top-level coaching, accommodation, sports sci support) structures (consistent squad etc.)	What difference would this make? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples (development/progression)?
What would you like to see different/change – both in the club and more generally in football at this stage?	What would be your main priorities?	Why, what would the impact be? Can you give examples?
End statement		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I believe that covers the things I wanted to talk to you about. Is there anything you would like to add?” 		
Closure		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thank you very much for taking part and for giving your time to the project. 		

Interview Guide – Players (U21s)

Introduction		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and welcome 		
Explain Purpose		
<p>The purpose of this interview guide is to gain a critical understanding of your perceptions of your football environment and how this impacts you in terms of general experiences and your progression in professional football.</p> <p>Any questions?</p>		
Introduction, familiarisation, background		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old are you? • Can you tell me about your background in football (how long at the club, previous clubs)? • What is your playing position? • How did you get involved in football and what are your ambitions in football? 		
Organisational structure		
Main Question	Prompt	Probes
How many players in total are regularly in your squad?	<p>Is this a stable group of players?</p> <p>Do you work with players outside of those in your U21 group?</p> <p>Is this the same squad for training and games?</p> <p>Do you have a regular set of players you work with?</p>	<p>Why (if it does) does the group composition change?</p> <p>Who/How often?</p> <p>Impact on day-to-day practice?</p>
Are you happy (do you feel comfortable) with this arrangement?	<p>Reasons?</p> <p>Opportunities to progress</p>	What impact does this have on you?

How many days a week are you generally in the club training and playing matches?	Specific pattern, elements of working practice with U21s.	Do you find this beneficial to you as a person and for your development/performance?
How would you describe the purpose and aims of U21s structure generally?	Development or Performance? General aims?	Can you give examples? Do you feel that everyone in the club shares this view?
What key members of staff do you mostly work with?	Same coaches/people throughout the season? Is it clear what is expected of you each day? What roles do key members of staff play	If there is change, why is this? Can you give examples? Can you give examples?
Do you think the U21s provision is conducive to your development?	What are the positive/negative factors that help or hinder your development/progression? e.g., your contract, when you entered the club's academy structure from another club?	What is your main concern?? Can you give examples? Who are the main stakeholders involved in this process? Does the length of your contract and when you entered the club make a difference? Why? Impact?
Organisational Culture (Richardson et al., 2013; Dowling et al., 2018; Roynesdal et al., 2018)		
How would you describe your relationship with these key members of staff?	How do you interact with them? How do you facilitate this relationship? What do you talk to them about?	Can you give examples? Can you give examples?
What is your relationship like with your teammates?	How do you interact with them? Do you think that you share a common purpose? Are you rivals?	Can you give examples? Can you give examples?

Do you know what you need to do to progress?	<p>What behaviours and values do you think you need to display to progress further?</p> <p>To further develop yourself and progress in your football career e.g., into a first team?</p> <p>Do you get sufficient feedback on your progress?</p>	<p>Why are these important?</p> <p>Can you give examples?</p> <p>What impacts do these have/examples?</p>
<i>Environments: what does an effective player development environment look like? (Mills et al., 2012, 2014; Richardson et al., 2013; Dowling et al., 2018; Roynesdal et al., 2018)</i>		
What differences are you experiencing compared to being within the U18s structure?	<p>Culture, expectations, support?</p> <p>Do you feel you have settled into this development phase?</p>	<p>Why do you think there are differences?</p> <p>Can you give examples?</p> <p>Do you feel comfortable in this environment?</p>
What are some of the key demands/challenges put upon you?	<p>Training, competition, relationships with staff/players, lifestyle (What/who) (Good/Bad), development, expectations, communication, holistic, support?</p>	<p>Do you think of these as necessary??</p> <p>Can you give examples?</p> <p>Impact of this on performance and progression?</p> <p>Impact of this on wellbeing?</p>
What/who has helped you to deal with these key demands/challenges??	<p>Staff (support), teammates (support)</p> <p>Who is playing a significant role in your development?</p>	<p>Why these people?</p> <p>Can you give examples?</p> <p>Impact of this on performance and progression?</p> <p>Impact of this on wellbeing?</p>
What/who has hindered you in your experience/development/progression?	<p>Life outside of football, other commitments, social life, staff/teammates (relationships), game time, injuries?</p>	<p>Why do you think this is?</p> <p>Can you give examples?</p>

		Impact of this on performance and progression? Impact of this on wellbeing?
Do you think the environment you are in is conducive to your development as a player?	Do you feel you are developing/progressing? Factors influencing/impacting: Playing time, competitiveness, have you ever been loan out? If so, where to, how was that experience? What is the impact of this?	What are the key issues that you're concerned about? How do you feel? (Uncertain, stagnant, supported, insecure?) Impact of this on performance and progression? Impact of this on wellbeing?
How do you think the club could best attend to enhancing your experience and development? Can you think of any changes that would help?	Environmental (consistent playing time, coaching, staffing, level of coaching, learning environment), resources (facilities, access to top-level coaching, accommodation, sports sci support) structures (consistent squad etc.)	Why have you identified these? Can you give examples? What impacts do these have/examples?
Are you happy with your experience of the U21 squad to this point? Do you feel that you are making progress?	Have you established any personal developmental goals? Do you get feedback about these?	Can you give examples?
End statement		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I believe that covers the things I wanted to talk to you about. Is there anything you would like to add?” 		
Closure		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thank you very much for taking part and for giving your time to the project. 		

Appendix 2.

Key themes across all participant views on their experience of the U21 phase of football.

U21 Players	U21 Coaches	Head and Assistant Head Coaches	Key Themes
Group composition Training and match schedules	Group composition Training and match schedules Physical/shared space	 Physical/shared space	U21 Structure
Individual development Exposure to first team Communication Forging positive relationships Playing opportunities Stepping up early	Individual development Exposure to first team Communication Forging positive relationships Playing opportunities Stepping up early	 Playing opportunities	Strategies to Help Player Development and Progression
Philosophy of practice Stagnation Competitiveness Difficulties of loans Trust	Philosophy of practice Stagnation Competitiveness Difficulties of loans Trust Professional contracts	Philosophy of practice Stagnation Difficulties of loans Professional contracts	Barriers to Player Development and Progressions
Supportive culture Personal characteristics First team expectations	Supportive culture Supporting life skills Personal characteristics First team expectations	Supportive culture Supporting life skills First team expectations	Player Support and Attributes