
An Organisational, Psycho-Social Examination of the Post Academy Phase of Elite Level Football: Perspectives of the Development Coach

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Abstract

Successfully developing first team standard players from professional football academies is a current issue across elite level English football. Littlewood et al. (2011) revealed the English Premier League has the second lowest number of indigenous home grown players out of the 'big five' European Leagues (Premier League, Bundesliga, French Ligue 1, Serie A and La Liga). Spain's La Liga and the Italian Serie A had the largest presence of indigenous home grown players in their leagues. These findings suggest that, in contrast to English Football, both Italy's and Spain's culture and philosophy with regards to developing talented players is focussed internally (Richardson et al., 2013). Such concerns have prompted the English Premier League to introduce the 'Elite Player Performance Plan' (EPPP) which aims to increase the number and quality of home grown players "playing first team football at the highest level" (EPPP, 2011, p.12).

The newly Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) has highlighted the importance of developing young professional football players aged between 18 and 21 with the introduction of the new Barclays U-21 Premier League. This aligns with the recent work of Richardson et al. (2013) who have outlined a new phase of development labelled the "post academy phase" or "developing mastery phase". The post academy phase is a critical phase of development when a player receives a one or two year professional contract after making the transition from the youth academy. However, the player may not necessarily play for, or even belong to, the first team (Richardson et al., 2013). This stage of an elite young player's career appears to be an often difficult, lonely period for players who often struggle to come to terms with the brutal, macho culture that exists within the first team world (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Richardson et al., 2013).

In this study, we explored the experiences and perspectives of elite level

Under21 development coaches' with regards to the EPPP, the academy and first team environments and the progression of young players at the post academy phase of development within elite level football. Six elite level Under21 development coaches were interviewed. Data was analysed using content analysis principles with verbatim text aligned to the emerging themes. Results indicate an array of issues faced by coaches and players when at this stage of development, which influenced by the organisational structures and cultures at the clubs (Relvas et al., 2010).

Under21 Development Coaches faced a range of issues with regards to their role at the club. The coaches appeared to possess little role clarity and a lack of clear responsibilities with regards to the development of players within the 18-21 age range. Furthermore, coaches reported mixed relationships with other staff, in particular staff from the first team environment. There appeared to be a lack of 'formal' communication between the academy and first team staff. The EPPP brought about the new Barclays Under21 League which aimed to provide a more tangible link between the academy and the first team environments; however coaches highlighted a lack of trust between themselves and the first team environment with respect to the progression of high quality young, post academy phase, players. The Similar to Relvas et al. (2010) the development coaches reported a cultural and philosophical incongruence between the 'development of mastery' phase and the readiness of players for the heightened pressures of the first team environment (i.e., win at all costs). . The presence of the development coach at this 'development of mastery phase' appears to be a logical approach, however, the lack of role clarity and purpose to this post appears to hinder any meaningful impact that the development coach may have. Moreover, the poor communication and dysfunctional organisational issues present at these elite level clubs significantly hinder the development of players at this stage of their careers; with players appearing to stagnate rather than develop. Future studies within this area will attempt to explore this critical phase of development from the post academy players perspective and also a more longitudinal, ethnographical approach to fully understand the day-to-day existnces of under21 players and coaches alike at this final stage of development.

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