

EXAMINING PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN  
AN ELITE ENGLISH FOOTBALL ACADEMY: A  
HOLISTIC ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **ABSTRACT**

This PhD employed the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010a) to analyse the impact of an elite academy environment on the psychosocial needs and development of youth footballers. Psychosocial skills are necessary to cope with the challenges of the critical and demanding scholarship phase and to successfully progress in elite football; however, this aspect of academy life has been inadequately addressed relative to other aspects of performance (e.g. Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2012). A qualitative case study was conducted over nine months using multiple methods (observation, field notes, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis), which allowed for in-depth insights into players' and staff experiences. Character was identified as key to players' success and the concept was used to represent a number of psychosocial skills including commitment, discipline, resilience, responsibility and awareness. Findings showed that while the importance of these psychosocial skills was actively acknowledged within the environment, there was limited emphasis on embedding them within the daily life of the academy creating an intention-action gap. Key aspects of the environment were shown to impact this gap including the organisational culture, a lack of clear and open communication, the wider English youth football culture and a lack of consistent and shared understanding as to how sport psychology (SP) may best be implemented within the academy. The thesis concludes that academies need to give more attention to the psychosocial environments they create for developing players and that sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) within elite academy football must address environmental factors that can impact individual development. The HEA (Henriksen et al, 2010a) offers a valuable framework to assess the complex English football academy environment and emphasise the central role of the environment in player psychosocial development.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>LIST OF APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Eye opening exposure</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 The academy system in England</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.3 Aim of the thesis</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1.4 Structure of the thesis</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2.2 The role of the environment in talent development</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.2.1 The ecological approach .....	10
2.2.2 The holistic ecological approach to talent development in sport.....	12
2.2.3 The holistic ecological approach to talent development in football .....	22
2.2.4 The environment in English elite youth football .....	27
2.2.5 Summary .....	32
<b>2.3 Section B: Psychosocial skills in elite youth football</b> .....	<b>33</b>
2.3.1 Psychosocial skills definition and introduction to the research in football .....	33
2.3.2 Resilience .....	36
2.3.3 Commitment .....	44
2.3.4 Discipline .....	50
2.3.5 Self-regulation.....	53
2.3.6 Development of psychosocial skills.....	61
2.3.7 Summary .....	67
<b>2.4 Summary of the literature review</b> .....	<b>68</b>

<b>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>3.1 Rationale for the methodology .....</b>	<b>70</b>
3.1.1 Research paradigms in sport psychology .....	70
3.1.2 The social constructionist approach .....	74
<b>3.2 Research methodology .....</b>	<b>75</b>
3.2.1 The qualitative case study as a research strategy .....	75
3.2.2 Case study design and implementation .....	77
3.2.3 Determining and binding the case .....	77
3.2.4 Determining the type of case study .....	77
3.2.5 Conceptual framework .....	79
<b>3.3 Research methods .....</b>	<b>80</b>
3.3.1 Access .....	80
3.3.2 Setting and participants .....	80
3.3.3 Data collection .....	81
3.3.4 Data analysis and representation .....	88
<b>3.4 Methodological reflections .....</b>	<b>90</b>
3.4.1 Researcher role .....	91
3.4.2 Research quality .....	95
3.4.3 Ethical considerations .....	99
<b>3.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4 HOLGATE FC AS A TALENT DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT..</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>4.1 Daily life as a scholar at Holgate FC .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>4.2 The ATDE model for Holgate FC .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>4.3 Analysis of the microenvironment .....</b>	<b>117</b>
4.3.1 Stepping up to the scholarship phase .....	118
4.3.2 The paradox of professionalism .....	127
4.3.3 Communication .....	138
<b>4.4 Summary .....</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5 PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS AND DEVELOPMENT AT HFC .....</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>5.1 Expectation to show the right character .....</b>	<b>148</b>

5.1.1	Resilience .....	151
5.1.2	Hard work .....	159
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Responsibility for driving development .....</b>	<b>186</b>
5.2.1	Awareness .....	186
5.2.2	The responsibility paradox.....	191
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Summary of psychosocial needs and development at Holgate FC .....</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6 A HOLISTIC ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT .....</b>		<b>201</b>
<b>6.1</b>	<b>The ESF model for Holgate FC .....</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Impact of the environment on players' psychosocial development.....</b>	<b>219</b>
6.2.1	Competing organisational priorities.....	220
6.2.2	Limited understanding of the implementation of sport psychology .....	223
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS .....</b>		<b>226</b>
<b>7.1</b>	<b>Extending understanding .....</b>	<b>226</b>
7.1.1	Applying the models to an English ATDE .....	228
7.1.2	The intention-action gap .....	229
7.1.3	Case Study methodology .....	231
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Applied recommendations.....</b>	<b>233</b>
7.2.1	Recommendations for Holgate FC.....	233
7.2.2	Wider recommendations .....	235
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Limitations and future directions.....</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>7.4</b>	<b>Final Remarks .....</b>	<b>238</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>		<b>239</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>		<b>263</b>

## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

Appendix A: Participant information sheet .....	263
Appendix B: Player interview schedule.....	267
Appendix C: Staff interview schedule .....	269
Appendix D: Player interview transcript (sample) .....	271
Appendix E: Staff interview transcript (sample) .....	275
Appendix F: Illustration of theme development .....	279
Appendix G: Weekly timetable (example) .....	281
Appendix H: Life plan schedule .....	282

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**ATDE:** Athletic Talent Development Environment

**EPPP:** Elite Player Performance Plan

**ESF:** Environmental Success Factors

**FA:** Football Association

**HFC:** Holgate Football Club

**HEA:** Holistic Ecological Approach

**MDT:** Multi-disciplinary Team

**SP:** Sport Psychology

**SPP:** Sport Psychology Practitioner

**TDE:** Talent Development Environment

# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

*Don't find fault, find a remedy; anybody can complain (Henry Ford)*

## 1.1 Eye opening exposure

Following my master's degree in sport psychology (SP) I was afforded the opportunity to gain an internship as a Mental Skills Coach at a category one football academy. A trainee peer and I were given the task to deliver SP to the scholarship phase. Like a number of golden entry level opportunities at elite sporting establishments, compensation was in the form of a foot in the door not money in the bank which impacted the time I could dedicate to the role. I was at the club for one day a week, this included delivering 'mental skills' workshops alongside irregular one to one sessions with the scholarship squad. In comparison there were full-time staff and departments dedicated to the young players' technical, tactical and physiological development. Exposure to elite academy football was eye opening, the young boys stepping up to the competitive full time scholarship programme were subject to a number of psychosocial challenges including deselection for the first time. I felt the impact I could have as a trainee introducing isolated mental skills in workshop format to the young players was substantially limited given that a number of challenges were at an environmental and organisational level. It was clear that more attention needed to be given to the integration of psychosocial development into the environment created for developing players. So, I started my quest to conduct an in-depth examination of this unique environment to enhance understanding of how this high-performance environment might better meet young players' developmental needs.

## 1.2 The academy system in England

*Out of all the unimportant things, football is the most important (Pope John Paul II)*

Association Football known as 'the beautiful game' is watched, played and enjoyed by millions worldwide (Conn, 2019). Football is big business; professional clubs are commercial enterprises immersed in the business of performance, entertainment and financial profit (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne & Richardson, 2010). In the United Kingdom (UK), football dominates the sporting world receiving more global reach and media interest than any other sport (Herbert, 2019). Professional football offers huge financial rewards for

success and professional players are often revered with celebrity status (Nesti, 2010). The Premier League is the highest paying football league in the world, at approximately £3.2m per player per season in 2018/19, with an average weekly pay of £61,024 per player (Herbert, 2019). Over 1.5 million young boys are involved in organised youth football in England alone (Calvin, 2018), many of whom are seduced by the dream of a career as a professional footballer (McGill, 2001). In 1998, football academies were set up by the Football Association (FA) (the National Governing Body for football in England) to scout and sign players as young as five years old to pursue professional status. Since their introduction, academy growth has coincided with the vast commercialization of the football industry. The Premier League's income continues to grow at an exceptional rate with top flight clubs reporting multimillion-pound annual turnovers; Manchester United were reported to have made £590m in 2017-18 (Conn, 2019). Although only a small proportion of football's turnover is spent on talent development this still equates to clubs spending millions of pounds annually on detecting and developing the stars of the future.

In 2012, the FA highlighted their commitment to the development process by investing £320m in the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP); a player development system aimed at creating the optimal talent development environment (TDE) for youth footballers with the long term aim to improve the quality and quantity of home-grown players produced by top English clubs (Horrocks, McKenna, Whitehead, Taylor & Morley, 2016). The EPPP used research on talent identification and development (TID) in elite sport (Cote, 1999) to produce their own 'Long Term Player Development' (LTPD) plan based on a four-corner model consisting of technical/tactical, psychological, physiological, and social components (The Premier League, 2011). The aim of the EPPP was to provide a more holistic support program with an increased focus on welfare, safeguarding, education, and mentoring to facilitate all aspects of development. A tiered category system was introduced where clubs were assessed on key areas including productivity rates, training facilities, coaching, education and welfare provisions and given a status between one and four. Category one is deemed to be the optimum development model with the highest quality of coaching and the expectation to regularly generate players from the academy into Premier League players. The EPPP included the mandatory requirement for category one academies to formalise the delivery of SP support (Nesti & Sulley, 2014). Alongside the EPPP the coach education programme which was introduced in 2002 continued, with the aim to improve coaching and playing standards. This included a 'Psychology for Football' strategy with the

objective to increase the awareness and application of SP within professional football and professional youth academies based on the 5C concept (confidence, control, concentration, communication, commitment). This involved education for coaches, players, and support staff, including sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) through a range of courses (Harwood, 2008).

Whilst huge investment that has gone into England's youth development schemes, the EPPP and the delivery of SP support within academies has not been assessed formally, which makes it challenging to determine whether the strategy is successful in providing players within the optimal environment that facilitates success (Champ, 2018). Furthermore, it has been recognised that little is known about the players' developmental lived experience during the critical scholarship phase, partly due to the FA failing to significantly address what the players who have been through the system felt about it (Green, 2009; Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014b). There is a need for research to build a clearer picture of the elite youth development environment as seen through the players' perspectives (Mills et al., 2014b). This signifies the importance of this research as it looks to bridge the gap and understand the development environment from those inside it.

English football academies are currently split into 3 development stages. The Foundation Phase (FP) consists of the U9-U12 age groups, within which players receive up to 5 hours of coaching per week. In addition, players are exposed to aspects of sports science and medicine, with the aim to create a solid foundation for successful players to transition onto the next stage of development, the Youth Development Phase (YDP). This phase spans the U13-U16 age groups and sees a large rise in involvement with the academy. Boys in this phase receive up to 12 hours of direct coaching per week as well as an increase in sport science, medicine and education support.

Those considered most promising progress onto the Professional Development Phase (PDP) and are signed to undertake an academy scholarship. This is a crucial stage in the elite player development pathway in England (i.e., 16–18) and involves a 2-year agreement between the club and the academy player which provides a full-time football development and education programme (The English Football League, 2018). This juncture characterises the transition from elite junior to full time elite senior and provides young footballers with a finite window of opportunity to fulfil their aspirations of becoming a professional (Mills et al., 2014b). The boys in the PDP are contracted to the club on a full-time basis, and receive a weekly wage.

The academies play in a competitive league against other academies as well as a competitive cup competition, the FA Youth Cup. Players in this phase receive 16 hours of direct coaching a week alongside an extensive sports science and medicine program. In addition, the PDP players are enrolled on a further education course which is either carried out at the club or a local college. Non-local players often live with host families close to the training ground known as ‘digs’. This is a critical and demanding transition in a young boy’s career with athletes frequently describing it as the most challenging stage in the journey to becoming a professional (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014a). Upon the end of this scholarship phase, or once a scholar turns 17, successful players are offered their first professional contract with the U23 age group whilst those who don’t make the cut have their contracts terminated. As soon as players sign their first professional contract their wages increase significantly, the EPL pay more on average to young players under the age of 21 than any of the other big five European leagues (Deloitte, 2017).

The talent development practices in English football have received widespread criticism for their productivity given that almost 98% of boys given a scholarship at 16 are no longer in the top 5 tiers of the domestic game at 18 (Calvin, 2018) and only 10% of those who receive an academy scholarship will go on to receive a professional contract (Anderson & Miller, 2011). As such, whilst academy players aspire to make it as professional footballers, in reality only a small number will actually achieve this (Green et al., 2020). The majority of academy players will not have a career at the top level which emphasises the need for the holistic support identified in the EPPP.

One explanation for the lack of player progression is the wider football culture, the results-focused and short-term culture existent in the Premier League has been recognised as a major challenge for elite youth player progression to the first team (Bullough & Mills, 2014). The extent to which academy players are given opportunities to break into the first team within a club often depends on the philosophy of the club and the perceived stability of the first team manager; if the manager feels they have full support of the chairman, and the board of directors, they might be more likely to give players that have come through the system an opportunity and feel less pressure to select only players who are already established (Bullough & Mills, 2014). Based on the small number of English academy graduates that progress to a club's senior team (Gledhill, Harwood, & Forsdyke, 2017) it is imperative that focus is given to the player’s holistic psychosocial skill development throughout the academy

process to enhance the young player alongside equipping the young person with internal assets transferable to other life domains (Martindale & Mortimer, 2011).

The FA's use of a 'four-corner' model of player development highlights their intention to cultivate a multifaceted and holistic picture of developing young scholars. The EPPP is also in line with this holistic approach, their guidelines report "Academies will develop programmes which reflect the social and holistic development programme of players and introduce a programme of staff CPD to support this" (The Premier League, 2011, p. 74). Although this demonstrates an intention from the FA and Premier League to develop well-rounded individuals as well as high quality players, research examining how this is being implemented is scarce and available research suggests more needs to be done (Champ, Nesti, Ronkainen, Tod & Littlewood, 2020a; Mills et al., 2014a). Mills et al. (2014a) found that whilst elite youth coaches strongly referred to whole- person development as an important principle of an optimal environment, an academy is nevertheless undoubtedly concerned with being successful at football. Given the competitive, success-driven culture of professional football, a high percentage of time is dedicated to training and competition and it has been suggested that prioritising football may come at the expense of education and general life skill development (Mills et al., 2014a).

English academies are notorious for supporting a 'live, breathe and eat football' culture (Mitchell et al., 2014) and these environments may "sow the seed" for young boys to develop a strong athletic identity in their desire to "make it". Whilst a strong athletic identity can be a resource and have psychological benefits such as more positive athletic experiences and increased motivation (Mitchell et al., 2014), it can also be problematic. As Mitchell et al. (2014) discuss, in elite youth football, exposure to formalised training and competition from a young age involves a risk of one-sided development and identity foreclosure when individuals prematurely make a commitment to an occupation or ideology (e.g., a career in football) at the expense of other social roles. This has been associated with athletes experiencing psychological or behavioural problems when unable to play due to injury or deselection (e.g. Horton & Mack, 2000) as well as a lack of post-career planning and problems adjusting to life after sport. As such, the career development literature advocates a holistic view to supporting the development of multiple identities (e.g. Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

Furthermore, the highly competitive and masculine culture of professional football has been emphasised in the literature (e.g., Champ et al., 2020a; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Nesti, 2010; Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006) together with the potential of these environmental characteristics to detrimentally impact the healthy psychological development and identity formation of young players (e.g., Champ, 2020a; Mitchell et al., 2014). Champ et al's., (2020a) recent ethnography within a Category 2 academy highlighted that despite the introduction of the EPPP and the holistic intentions discussed above, there were limited identity-related resources offered at both club and cultural level, and youth players were encouraged to have a single-minded dedication to professional football which had consequences for psychosocial development and wellbeing. This finding, alongside the research discussed so far demonstrates a complex dual attention (Green et al., 2020) within English football academies between the recognised need for holistic psychosocial development and the primary aim to create professional football players (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). This points to the need for research to deepen understanding of the experiential realities of those embedded in the environment to understand how the EPPP remit to develop players holistically may be better addressed.

### **1.3 Aim of the thesis**

Psychosocial skills are essential to cope with the various challenges (e.g. de-selection, training with first team) that young players face during the inherently challenging transition to the scholarship phase (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010a). Psychosocial skill development can not only enhance players chances of progression within football but prepare them for life outside of the academy environment (Larsen, Alfermann, & Christensen, 2012) which is imperative given the precarious nature of elite academy football and the small percentage of scholars that progress to a club's senior team (Gledhill, Harwood & Forsdyke, 2017). The process of psychosocial development is influenced by a number of environmental factors (Larsen et al., 2012) and this research seeks to contribute to the research by considering the interaction between the TDE and player psychosocial development by building a clearer picture of the elite youth development environment as seen through the perspective of those within the environment.

The aim of this study was to examine how an in-depth understanding of one environment, Holgate FC (HFC) Academy, gained through the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA), may

help to extend understanding of the psychosocial needs and development of elite youth footballers and how environmental factors impacted this. The objectives were to: (i) investigate an elite football academy TDE to provide a holistic description of the elite academy environment and create an empirical Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) model for HFC; (ii) evaluate the players' holistic psychosocial needs and development during the first year of the full-time youth training program (academy scholarship phase, ages 16–18); (iii) create an empirical Environmental Success Factors (ESF) model for HFC to use as a framework to critically analyse the interplay between the TDE factors (including the organisational culture) and player psychosocial development.

## **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is structured into a further six chapters. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth review of the relevant literature in relation to the objectives of the study with the aim to increase understanding of the existing literature base as well as expose gaps and establish the need for this research. Literature addressing the role of the environment in talent development is discussed with a detailed examination of the theoretical perspective, the HEA. Following this, the research examining psychosocial factors associated with talent development in football and the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development are presented and critically discussed. Chapter 3 presents the rationale for the single case study and qualitative design used to address the objectives of the research. A detailed explanation of the specific research methods and analysis follows, as well as the researcher's methodological reflections. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present and discuss the findings; Chapter 4 presents 'a day in the life' of vignette for the academy, the ATDE model adapted for HFC and discusses HFC as a TDE. Chapter 5 addresses players' psychosocial needs and development at HFC. Chapter 6 presents the ESF model adapted for HFC and uses this to structure the discussion around the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development. Chapter 7 concludes by summarising the overall findings of the thesis before discussing the contribution and applied implications of the research as well as its limitations and suggestions for the future direction of research in this area.

# CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the literature review is to introduce and comprehensively review the role of psychosocial skills in talent development in football and the importance of the TDE in psychosocial development as areas of academic and applied interest. To structure the examination of the existent literature the chapter is organised into two main sections; the role of the environment in talent development and the psychosocial skills underpinning successful development in sport (and more specifically football). Section A explores the growing body of research focusing specifically on the sporting organisation as a context for impacting psychosocial development. First, there will be an in depth examination of the broader ecological approach and how it has been adapted into the HEA, a framework and methodology for talent development in sport (Henriksen et al., 2010a). The literature on successful TDEs will be discussed, with a focus on young athlete's psychosocial development. Section B examines the knowledge that exists around the key psychosocial skills that impact progression in elite football, presenting the main psychosocial skills identified from previous studies and discussing the complexity of their role in the talent development process. Overall, the literature review will highlight gaps in the existing literature and show that there is a need for an in depth study of the social cultural environment in an elite football academy in England (Sarmiento, Anguera, Pereira & Arau, 2018), specifically in relation to the psychosocial development of young athletes from a HEA (Henriksen et al., 2010a).

## 2.2 The role of the environment in talent development

The importance of gaining an understanding of the demands that young athletes face during transitions and equipping them with resources that will enhance their ability to cope as they progress along the challenging path to professional level is well established (e.g. MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010b). Coping resources include both sport-specific skills as well as the holistic skills that not only help the athlete's progression within the sport but also develop as a person (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013; Martindale & Mortimer, 2011). Since the turn of the century, there has been growing recognition that these

resources develop through an individual's embeddedness in the TDE (Araujo & Davids, 2009) and that SP as a field needs to better understand organisational influences on athletic performance. Subsequently, research began to address this (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012, Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Martindale, Collins and Daubney, (2005) coined the term Talent Development Environment (TDE) to encompass all aspects of the coaching situation. In acknowledging a shortage of research to guide the optimisation of talented young athletes they reviewed a broad range of relevant literature and found five key themes that research had consistently identified as relevant to effective talent development: 1) Long-term aims and methods; 2) Wide-ranging coherent messages and support; 3) Emphasis on appropriate development not early success; 4) Individualised and ongoing development; and 5) Integrated, holistic and systematic development. This informed research by Martindale, Collins and Abraham, (2007) who interviewed sixteen experienced British development coaches and found further support for the five key features of effective TDEs. These studies were seminal in acknowledging the complexity of talent development and highlighting the importance of taking an ecological approach to talent development.

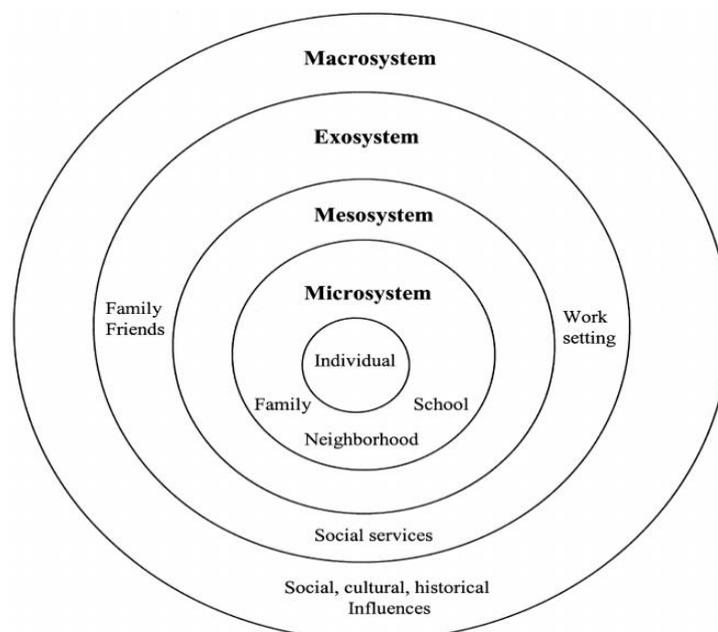
There has been increasing belief in recent years that a holistic approach to the support of athletes is needed (E.g. Douglas & Carless, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2010). The holistic approach addresses the on and off the field aspects of athlete welfare to ensure not only continual performance excellence of athletes but also the psychosocial and personal development of the athlete as a human being. Miller and Kerr (2002) highlighted this view by asserting that "performance excellence is attained only through optimal personal development" (p. 141). This whole-person approach thus considers a reciprocal interaction between development in the athletic domain and development in other domains including the academic, vocational, psychological and psychosocial domains (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). It can be argued that this approach whilst holistic is still individual in that it focuses on the individual athlete and the demands faced in relation to life as an athlete (Henriksen et al., 2010a).

Addressing the importance of both a holistic and ecological approach, Henriksen and colleagues (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011) conducted several in depth case studies examining successful TDEs to significantly extend understanding on high performance and TDEs in sport (Wagstaff, & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Given the significant contribution the HEA has made to the talent development research through redirecting the focus beyond the

individual to consider the impact of the environment on talent development it will be central to this thesis. The following section of the literature review will provide an understanding of how this approach has been applied to an elite sporting environment and then more specifically to an elite football environment. First the broader ecological literature will be introduced to provide an understanding of how this approach has been developed.

### 2.2.1 The ecological approach

Unlike traditional psychological approaches that focus primarily on the individual, ecological approaches highlight the power of the environmental context on human behaviour (Araujo & Davids, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1975) acknowledged an absence of ecological theory that took seriously the contexts in which human beings live and went on to devote his career to this issue, firstly by introducing the influential ‘Ecological Theory of Human Development’ (1979). This early theory placed the main focus on context and split the environment into four levels of context (micro, meso, exo and macro) that are progressively distal to the individual (Figure 1). These interacting ‘systems’ are said to exert influence on the development of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).



**Figure 1:** *The Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*

The micro-environment is where the person spends the majority of time interacting with others in day-to-day activity and is most proximal to the individual at the centre of the model. The model acknowledges that as well as each of these environments playing an important role in their own right, the relationships between them is also significant, this leads onto the next layer, the meso-environment, this surrounds the micro-environment and comprises “interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (Krebs, 2009, p.118). The exo-environment is the next layer surrounding the meso-environment, this includes contexts that impact the quality of an individual’s developmental environment indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macro-environment is the outer-layer of the model and the most distal from the individual, this comprises the values, traditions and laws in the surrounding community or the overall cultural layers which exert influence on all the other relevant systems in the model (Larsen et al., 2013).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979) evolved significantly from its inception, moving from an ecological to a bio-ecological approach. Bronfenbrenner (2001) acknowledged this, defining the theory as “an evolving theoretical system for the scientific study of human development over time” (pp. 6963–6964). As it evolved, increasing attention was given to the impact of time, proximal processes and the role of the individual in his/her own development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield & Karnik, 2009). Bronfenbrenner suggested that development (and thus the display of competences) occurred via “proximal processes” or progressively complex reciprocal interactions between a person and his or her environment (including objects, people, or symbols), which “must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). Although proximal processes were given priority in the development process, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) described three broad types of personal characteristics that were proposed to interact and influence the proximal processes (demand, resource, and force characteristics) (Tudge et al., 2016). The model also stresses the influence of time on development by describing events as micro, meso and macro classes depending on the length of time over which they occur. The model thus emphasises that development is affected by the complex interrelationship between process, person, context and time (PPCT model) (Larsen et al., 2013). This is summarised in Bronfenbrenner’s description of human development as “The scientific study of progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives,

as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger context in which the settings are embedded” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 107). For the purposes of this thesis Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory offers a conceptual insight into how personal and environmental factors might impact the development of the elite football player and furthermore how the immediate settings where an individual operates are also influenced by factors in the broader environmental context (Figure 1).

Two significant theoretical reviews of the research based on Bronfenbrenner’s theory have been carried out in the last decade. The first revealed that very few articles represented the most recent bio-ecological version of the theory incorporating and applying the PPCT model to research (Tudge et al., 2009). Furthermore, researchers who stated that their work was based on Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory rarely used it appropriately. A recent review of the research since (Tudge et al., 2016) found that despite a positive increase in the proportion of work that had explicitly stated that it was using the recent bio-ecological theory the majority of work neither accurately described the theory in its most recent form nor attempted to test it. It is important to note as the review authors have, that many authors use the model names interchangeably, even Bronfenbrenner himself was inconsistent in his use of terms, although he most frequently termed the newer version the bioecological model (see Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) or bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993), he also once called it the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Given the size of the changes between the original ecological model and the later bio-ecological model and to avoid theoretical confusion, Rosa and Tudge, (2013) recognised that “scholars should be cautious about stating that their research is based on Bronfenbrenner's theory without specifying which version they are using” (Rosa & Tudge, 2013, p. 243). Although Bronfenbrenner did not write a specific methodological text for how to conduct ecological or bioecological research, his work on the PPCT model demonstrated how it could be applied (see, e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006).

### **2.2.2 The holistic ecological approach to talent development in sport**

As introduced at the start of the chapter, the shortage of literature at the start of the century examining the importance of the cultural sporting environment on the development of young athletes prompted authors in the field of SP to call for a more ecological perspective (Araujo

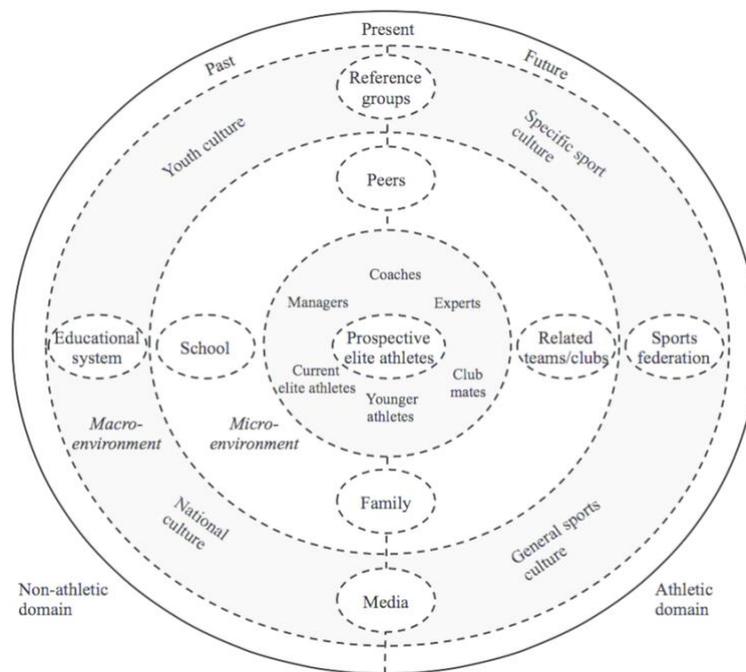
& Davids, 2009; Bengoechea, 2002; Krebs, 2009). This led to an emergence of literature attempting to understand the impact of the sporting environment. Henriksen and colleagues (2010a; 2010b; 2011) developed Bronfenbrenner's ideas to test the holistic approach to examining ATDEs by qualitatively investigating three 'successful' ATDEs in Scandinavia, each with an established history of creating elite senior athletes. Their seminal work was the first to transform the ecological perspective into a manageable framework for talent development in sport. The approach, which focuses on the whole athletic talent environment (ATDE) rather than on the individual athlete, defines the ATDE as:

. . . a dynamic system comprising a) an athlete's immediate surroundings at the micro-level where athletic and personal development take place, b) the interrelations between these surroundings, c) at the macro-level, the larger context in which these surroundings are embedded, and d) the organisational culture of the sports club or team, which is an integrative factor of the ATDE's effectiveness in helping young talented athletes to develop into senior elite athletes. (Henriksen et al., 2011 p. 343)

The authors developed two working models of a successful ATDE (presented in Henriksen et al., 2010a) to accommodate the large amounts of data expected and to enable a comparison of three successful ATDEs in the larger project. As well as developing the early work of by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the working models were inspired by systems theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and organisational psychology. Systems theory is embedded in constructionism and constructivism, both of which emphasise social processes as a crucial part of meaning and understanding in human activity. Systems theory recognises that constituent parts interact to form a whole system which is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts, as such the whole is never entirely understandable. The models draw on systems theory (Patton & McMahon, 2006) by examining the interactions and the role of the environment for talent development. The ATDE and the ESF working models together represent the holistic ecological perspective in talent development in that the ATDE provides a framework to describe the environment and the ESF allows for a summary of the factors influencing the environment's effectiveness.

The ATDE working model (Figure 2) is a framework for describing the environment's components and structure and the role of these components and relations within the environment and the talent development process. The athletes themselves are at the centre of the model, directly surrounded by the club environment which includes coaches, managers,

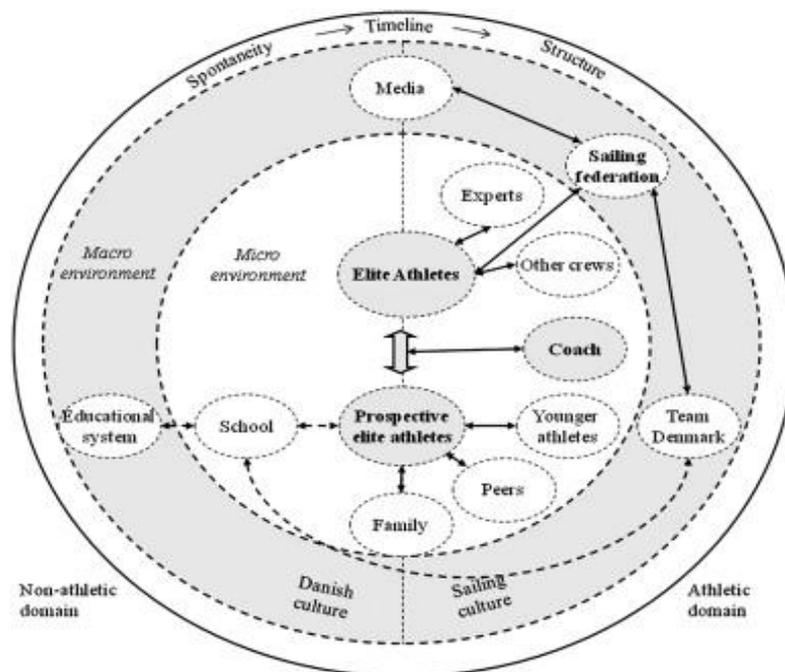
the other athletes and staff across the club. The other components are then structured into two levels; the micro-level which signifies the environment where the athletes spend most of their daily life (such as school, family, peers and related teams / clubs) and the macro-level which signifies the social settings which influence but do not fully contain the athletes, as well as the values and customs of the cultures to which the athletes belong (such as sports federations, the media, reference groups and the educational system). This highlights the influence of cross-cultural psychology which depicts culture as a multi-level and complex phenomenon that has an important impact on human experience and behaviour.



**Figure 2:** *The ATDE working model (Henriksen et al., 2010a)*

Recent cross-cultural studies have highlighted the impact national culture and the national sports systems have on athletes' transitions (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Järphag, 2007) and encouraged a holistic approach to the study of athletic potential. In this way the work progresses the talent development literature which up until this point generally focused only on the micro-environment (for example, coaches, parents and peers) (Côté et al., 2007; Wylleman, De Knop, Verdet, & Cecic-Erpic,

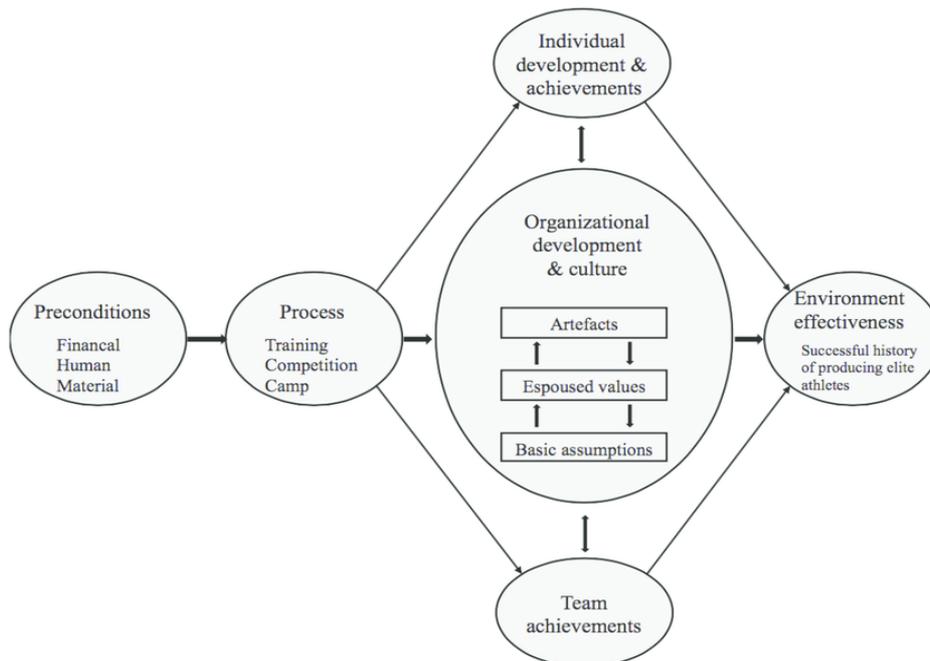
2007). These levels of the model are then further structured into athletic or non-athletic domains. Although some components unmistakably fit into one level and domain (e.g., school), others (e.g., the family) may transcend levels or domains. Each layer of the model is represented by dotted lines, to highlight the permeability and interdependence of the different components. Finally, the outermost layer of the model is labelled the past, present and future, this is to stress the dynamic nature of the ATDE and how athletes and their contexts are continually changing and influencing each other reciprocally. The two working models were first applied to the Danish national 49er sailing team as a guide to collect data and to create empirical versions of the working models that reflect the unique characteristics of the sailing environment (Henriksen et al., 2010). This led to the first empirical ATDE model, describing the Danish 49er sailing team (Figure 3). The empirical model emphasises the relationship between elite and youth prospects as the centre of the environment at the micro-level and the sailing federation as the most influential factor at the macro-level.



**Figure 3:** *The ATDE empirical model of the Danish 49er sailing team (Henriksen et al., 2010a)*

Based on Bronfenbrenner’s early ecological theory (1979), the authors “adopted the idea of seeing the environment as a series of nested structures, which includes, but is not restricted to, the settings in which the talented athletes are active” (Henriksen et al., 2010a, pp. 213). Like Bronfenbrenner’s work the ATDE model is ecological as it considers the context as an influential factor in the athlete development process. It is holistic in that it includes both the micro and the macro-level; the athletic and the non-athletic domain; as well as time through considering the development of the environment itself (past, present and future). The models represented the ATDEs as systems (i.e., organised wholes) which are qualitatively different from the sum of their parts, highlighting the influence of systems theory (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Further in line with systems theory these systems are considered self-regulating with certain functions, components, structure and development.

The second working model, the ESF working model incorporates and structures the factors that contribute to an environment's success. This model is thus an advancement on the ATDE model in that it has explanatory potential and goes beyond mere description of what makes an environment successful (Figure 4).



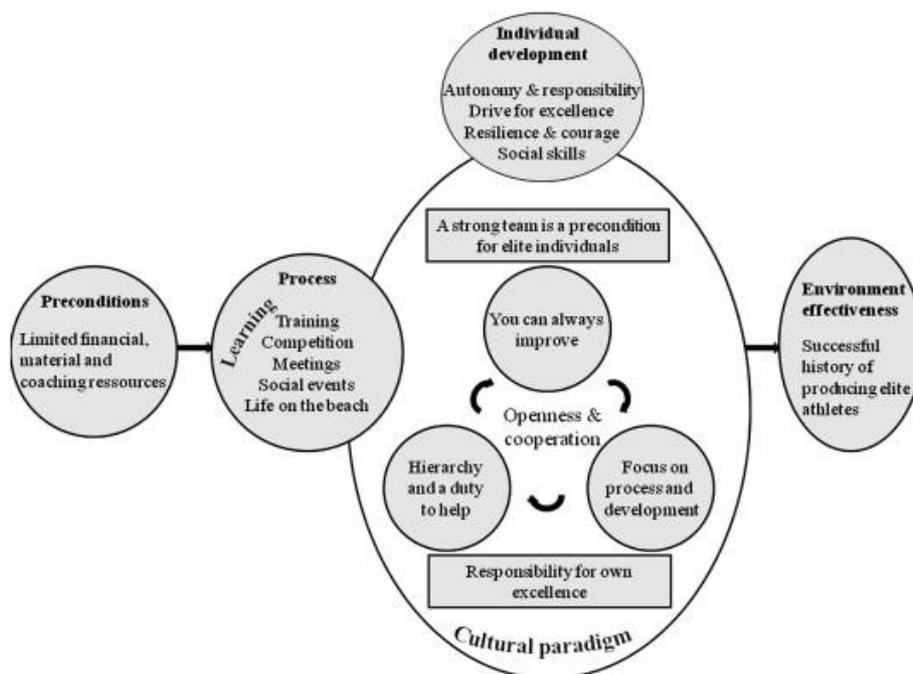
**Figure 4:** *The ESF working model (Henriksen et al., 2010a)*

The environment's preconditions are the basis of the ESF model which include components such as human, financial and material resources that support but do not guarantee success. The model demonstrates how the daily routines or processes the athlete engages in such as training and competitions have three highly interrelated outcomes that impact the environment's success: the athletes' individual development and achievements (including acquisition of psychosocial competencies), team achievements, and organisational development and culture.

The ESF model is based on the organisational psychology of Edgar Schein (1990) and places a central emphasis on "Organisational culture" which consists of three levels which correspond with Schein's (1990, 1992) three levels of organisational culture: artifacts, values and underlying assumptions. Like Schein (1990, 1992) the first or surface level is composed of the cultural artifacts that an organisation makes visible such as stories and myths told in the environment, vision statements, clothing, buildings and organisation charts as well as customs and traditions. Whilst these artifacts are easy to observe they are harder to interpret and a deeper understanding of the culture is required. The social principles, norms, goals and standards that the organisation shows to the world make up the next level of "Espoused values"; i.e., what the members say they do, this may include concepts such as honesty and integrity. Although these are present in the minds of the members and act as visible motivations for actions they will not always correspond to the enacted values (e.g. what people say they do may be different to what they actually do). The third level is the deepest level of organisational culture, this consists of "Basic assumptions" or the underlying reasons for actions. These are taken for granted in an organisation and exist at a level below that of the members' consciousness. Thus, they are not questioned but strongly affect what the members actually do. Fundamental basic assumptions are integrated into a cultural paradigm which acts to guide the socialisation of new members, provide stability as well as allowing the organisation to adapt to a constantly changing environment. The unconscious cultural components closer to the core get increasingly challenging to observe, measure, and change however all three levels of culture must be addressed by the researcher to understand the culture. Schein's influence is also evident through the consideration of issues of external adaptation (e.g., a national culture that supports the rights of individual development) and internal integration (i.e., how the club will resolve the issue of developing its athletes in light of macro- environmental influences). The ESF model thus advances Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979, 2005) by integrating an organisational psychology perspective inspired by Schein

(1990) and placing the role of organisational culture at the centre of the model and drawing attention to how values are espoused and/or enacted in talent development. These concepts are not evident in Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979, 2005) but have been established as important for understanding the TDE. A strong and coherent organisation culture, demonstrated by consistency between the artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions is a central factor in explaining the success of a TDE (Henriksen et al., 2010a). The cultural perspective also influenced the models by inspiring the authors to explore the uniqueness of each environment’s specific organisational culture.

In summary, the ESF working model considers the interactions between preconditions, process, individual and team development and achievements and how the organisational culture works to integrate these different elements. Henriksen et al. (2010a) claimed that the model can be used to predict environmental effectiveness, specifically the success of a particular ATDE in producing senior elite athletes. This model was used to develop the second empirical model summarising the factors behind the 49er sailing environment's effectiveness (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5:** The ESF empirical model of the Danish 49er sailing team (Henriksen et al., 2010a)

A case study using a range of data collection methods including document analysis, interviews and participant observations of daily life in the environment was used to gain an in-depth understanding and analysis of the overall ATDE of a Danish national sailing team and highlight the key factors behind the team's success. The study found that the environment was highly cohesive and placed the relationship between current and prospective elite athletes at its core. Furthermore, the ESF empirical model highlights a strong organisational culture as a major factor in the sailing team's success, demonstrated by values of openness, individual responsibility and a focus on performance process which compensated for limited preconditions including financial and coaching resources. This culture encompasses every aspect of the environment to support the athletic and personal development of each member. Artifacts, values and basic assumptions are centered around the elite athletes openly sharing their knowledge through meetings and training and athletes' taking individual responsibility and autonomy for their own excellence, for example by being proactive in seeking any help needed.

The working models (Henriksen et al., 2010a) made a huge contribution to developing a HEA in sport and highlighting the central role of the holistic athletic environment in talent development, considering beyond the athletes direct interaction with the core club environment. The subsequent case studies (Henriksen et al., 2010b; Henriksen et al., 2011; Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014) which have tested and implemented the working models resulted in a number of empirical models which describe and explain the unique characteristics of a specific TDE. Following their initial paper Henriksen and colleagues continued to explore the complex interaction between athletes and their environments by addressing the organisational culture in track and field (Henriksen et al., 2010b) and kayaking teams (Henriksen et al., 2011). This overall project concluded that it is the interaction between different elements of the environment, the organisational culture, and the athlete's ability to make the best use of their own resources that influence talent development.

The three studies that formed the basis for the working models (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011), found that a number of common characteristics are shared by successful ATDEs which may help to explain the environment's success in developing talented athletes. By applying this approach to environments that were considered successful TDEs they provided a context specific 'blueprint' for the support of athletic development. The features that emerged are similar to earlier work exploring effective TDEs in a British context

(Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2005; Martindale et al., 2007). Henriksen, (2010) identified eight common characteristics of successful ATDEs and their descriptors (pp. 157–158): (1) training groups with supportive relationships, (2) proximal role models, (3) support of sporting goals by the wider environment, (4) support for the development of psychosocial skills, (5) training that allows for diversification, (6) focus on long- term development, (7) strong and coherent organisational culture, and (8) integrations of efforts (Larsen et al., 2013). Despite these common characteristics, collectively the research recognised that each individual club is different in terms of how it interacts with the broader socio-cultural context and recommended that a more holistic approach to talent development, beyond the focus on the individual is needed. The authors elaborated that the support for the development of psychosocial skills includes opportunities to develop skills that are useful outside the sporting domain (such as autonomy, responsibility and commitment) and that successful ATDEs are holistic in that they consider the athletes as ‘whole human beings’. For example, this was evident in the track and field club in way coaches helped the athletes understand that in order to become elite athletes they have to be mindful and responsible in managing their sleep, rest and food (Henriksen et al, 2010b). Further support for the common characteristics of successful ATDEs was provided in a subsequent study (Henriksen et al., 2014) which applied the HEA to a struggling ATDE. A case study design was again adopted, this time to a golf academy which had limited success in producing senior elite athletes and results found that the environment was characterised by features that were in opposition to those common to successful environments; e.g.: a lack of supportive training groups and role models; little understanding from the non-sport environment; no integration of efforts among different parts of the environment; and an incoherent organisational culture.

Several parallels can be made with the findings of the HEA case studies and prior research, for example, three of the five principles for success outlined by coaches in Martindale et al’s (2007) work on TDEs are supported, as are the findings from the career development literature that demonstrates the importance of considering the holistic picture given that the transition from junior to senior level sport poses challenges covering various domains of the young person’s life (Stambulova et al., 2007; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté, 2009). This formative body of work has potential applied implications for SPPs, providing a framework to guide them to be more attentive to the athletes’ context and structuring interventions to improve an ATDE as a whole. The qualitative case-study methodology used allows the research to examine the real-time functioning or “a real-life phenomenon within its

real-life context” (Yin, 1989, p. 23). This addresses the issue of recall bias which is problematic for much of the prior research conducted on psychological aspects of athletic talent development which used retrospective methods of data collection.

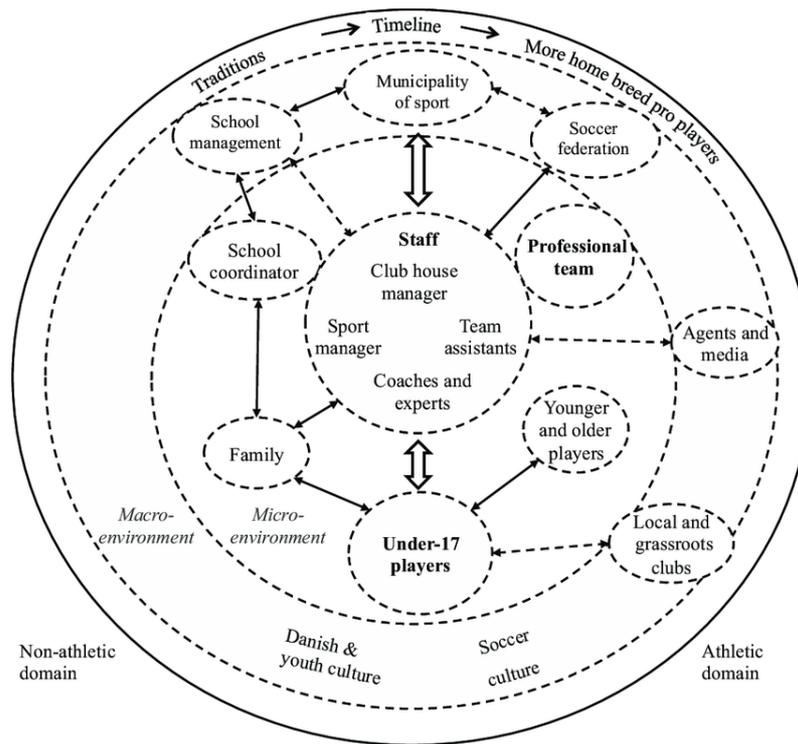
A potential criticism of Henriksen’s methods is that the interviewees for the initial study (Henriksen et al., 2010a) were selected on the basis of informal talks and advice from people inside and outside the environment. Two elite athletes, and three prospective elite athletes were selected as interview participants within the sailing study and whilst the follow up studies do not specifically state how the interview participants were selected they may have also been chosen by the club. Those inside the environment having input on those athletes selected for interview may result in a biased view of the environment. The number of athletes interviewed is also quite small and subsequently may not fully reflect the experiences of different athletes in the club. The use of participant observations alongside the interviews likely mitigated this issue; however, it would have been useful for this to be addressed in the research.

Henriksen et al. (2010a) based these models on early ecological theory without specifically acknowledging the evolution in Bronfenbrenner’s work; however, aspects of the PCT model offered in Bronfenbrenner’s later work are considered somewhat indirectly. For example, the ATDE model includes the development (past, present and future) of the environment. At the surface level the HEA working models could also be criticised for failing to integrate elements of the meso and exo levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005) in the development of talented athletes. Although the role of the meso and exo levels are not explicitly stated in the ATDE model the interactions between the different agents in the environment are considered a key factor in the success of the environment in the empirical versions of the model (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2011). The ESF is an advancement from the ATDE model and links the process and athlete as essential for success (individual achievement and development). Thus Henriksen and colleagues (2010a; 2010b; 2011) indirectly integrate the meso and exo notions in the description of their empirical models (Larsen, 2013). The ESF model develops Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model by including a team achievement and development component, which the PPCT model omitted. However, all three of the initial studies by Henriksen et al. (2010a; 2010b; 2011) focused on the TDE in three individual sports and therefore this team component was not explained fully.

### **2.2.3 The holistic ecological approach to talent development in football**

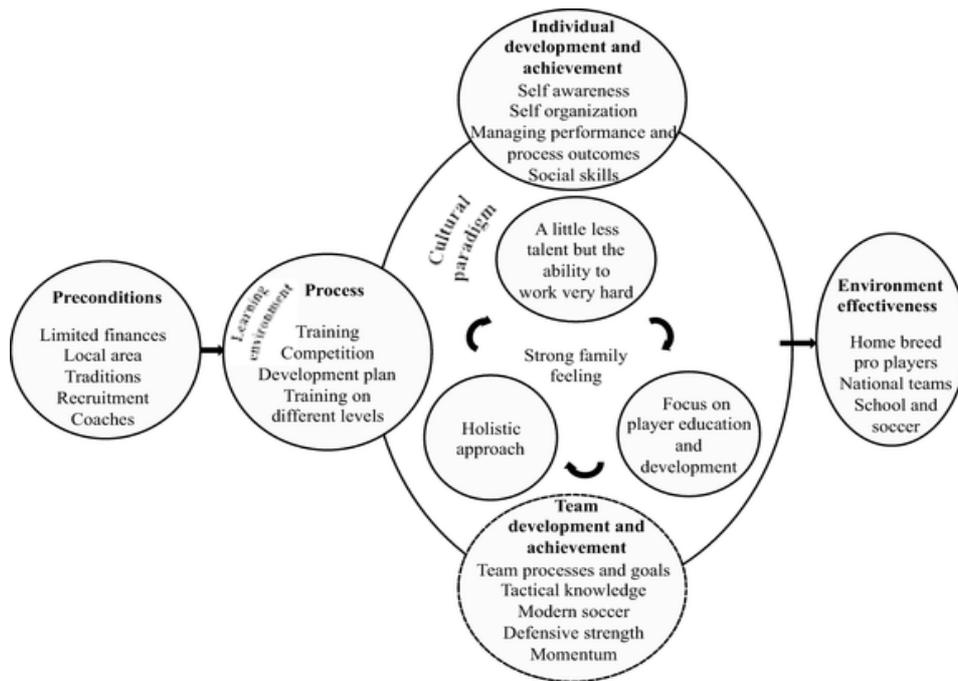
Larsen et al. (2013) acknowledged the gap in the literature of applying a HEA to team sport and used this approach to examine talent development among male under-17 soccer players in a ‘successful’ Danish soccer club. As well as providing a holistic description of a successful ATDE in a team sport, the study used the aforementioned working models (Henriksen et al., 2010a) as a theoretical base to explore the factors that influenced the environment’s success and to develop empirical versions of both the ATDE and ESF models based on AGF soccer club. Similar to Henriksen et al. (2010a; 2010b; 2011) the club was considered a successful TDE due to its history of developing several young players into future professionals as well as effectively combining school and sport. Their work made a significant contribution to the literature by being the first study to apply a HEA to a team sport.

In line with the HEA framework, Larsen et al. (2013) took a case study approach and used document analysis, interviews and participant observations of daily life in the environment as their primary data collection methods. The analysis produced their empirical version of the ATDE model (Figure 6) which illustrates “the most important components and relationships as well as the structure of the environment” (Larsen et al., 2013, p. 7). As in Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Henriksen et al’s., (2010a; 2010b; 2011) work the close and most significant relationships between the players and the staff sit at the centre of the model. The thickness of the arrows represents the closeness of the relationship between components in the model.



**Figure 6:** *The ATDE empirical model of the AGF soccer club (Larsen et al., 2013)*

As shown in Figure 7 and in Henriksen's (2010a; 2010b; 2011) work the empirical version of the ESF model depicts the factors that influence the success of the club. The model highlights the key factors that impact the pre-conditions, process, and organisational culture of the club and how they link to both the players' individual development and the club's success. The findings revealed that a successful TDE in soccer shared several factors with the individual sports examined in earlier research. More specifically the relationships between players and staff were central to the environment and the club had a strong, open, and cohesive organisational culture.



**Figure 7:** *The ESF empirical model of the AGF soccer club (Larsen et al., 2013)*

The culture was built on integrated values concerned with the balance of the players’ daily lives both in school and sport, developing the ability to work hard, and being self-aware and responsible for their own training. The culture of the club and players consisted of four interconnected basic assumptions (Figure 7); a strong family feeling, a little less talent but the ability to work very hard, a long-term focus on player education and development and a holistic approach. The environment developed players that recognised the need for a holistic lifestyle and development of psychosocial skills for life in general rather than simply sport-specific skills. This approach was evident in the way the staff worked with the players, for example the office was literally always open and the coaches met with the players every day for informal chats.

Although the soccer club was a successful environment in many regards, the study found there was a shortage of communication and proximity including a lack of role models between the youth and professional departments (this is highlighted in Figure 1). This finding differed to the research on individual sports (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011). The authors acknowledged the lack of proximity and communication may hinder the transition to the first team implying that players may be expected to implicitly ‘catch’ relevant coping

skills rather than being made explicitly aware of what is needed to succeed at the top level. As Larsen et al. (2013) highlighted there was a lack of explicit support from the environment (i.e., coaches, managers, elite athletes) to help athletes cope with the transition, this is significant given support has been shown as a crucial factor in coping with the transition from youth to professional and may help to prevent a “cultural shock” when reaching the professional level (Henriksen et al., 2011).

The issue of the youth and professional teams running as two distinct departments is common to the soccer environment in general across Europe. Relvas et al. (2010) explored the organisational structures in 26 elite soccer clubs across five European countries and found that generally professional and youth soccer are two distinct departments, either physically (i.e., distinct training facilities), culturally (i.e. distinct operational practices) or in some cases both. Relvas et al. (2010) found that the distance between the first team and youth environment was linked with a subsequent shortage of communication and proximity which impacted the coherent progression of young players into the professional environment and led to staff dissatisfaction. Findings suggested that predominantly this was to “protect” the first team players and to motivate the youth players to “fight” to make it to the professional environment (Relvas et al., 2010), Larsen et al. (2013) similarly found that the professional department assumed the priority role. This may be problematic given successful environments in other sports have advocated the importance of role models and prior studies in successful environments have demonstrated that coaches encouraged players to experience training up with groups at a higher level (Christensen, Larsen, & Sørensen, 2011) to facilitate the transition. Larsen et al. (2013) suggest the strong family feeling within the club may lead to the assumption that youth players could simply glide from youth to first team. The authors make it clear that this assumption is far from reality and the absence of explicit communication around expectations and demands due to the physical distance between youth and first team departments makes it more challenging for youth players to make the transition. Furthermore, having clear and open channels of communication throughout an organisation (i.e. all the members of that organisation striving towards a common goal) has been shown to be important as it directly links with the efficiency of an elite sporting organisation (Woodman & Hardy, 2001).

In terms of individual development, Larsen et al. (2013) found that the players developed several psychosocial skills that were helpful for both sport and life (self-awareness, self-

organisation, goal setting, managing performance and process outcomes, and social skills). Whilst these skills were often underlined as very important for the transition to the professional level, they were only indirectly practiced and talked about and were not taught as part of the training. Thus whilst the club had a strong organisational culture which developed technical, tactical and physical skills, the club had no culture for SP and did not recognise their responsibility to develop the players' psychosocial characteristics. These findings regarding the environmental barriers for successful transition from youth to professional players inspired a follow up intervention study (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen & Christensen, 2014) aimed at emphasising the culture of psychosocial development in the daily practice of the academy, equipping players with the skills needed to succeed at the professional level and creating greater relationships between the youth and professional departments. This work will be discussed further in Section B of this chapter which addresses psychosocial skill development.

Larsen et al.'s. (2013) work offers an invaluable insight into an elite soccer TDE, and reveals the importance of an awareness of preconditions and constraints before developing strategies and interventions in professional football. These preconditions and constraints are relevant for, and may inform, SP services in professional football. The findings provide some clear implications for clubs in relation to proximity and communication with the first team as well as integrating psychosocial development into the culture. Larsen et al. (2013) provide support for Henriksen et al.'s (2010a; 2010b; 2011) aforementioned findings as well as for the applicability of the HEA in researching and working in and with the environment in soccer.

Since this work, Aalberg and Sæther (2016) conducted a case study in a Norwegian football club, using the holistic ecological framework to examine a Norwegian ATDE. Findings supported the environmental factors highlighted in the earlier HEA work (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). Like Larsen et al. (2013) they found a weak relationship between the youth department and the senior team, in addition there was competition between the two departments and a need for short-term success. Whilst providing insight into a successful ATDE in Norway this work only included one individual player interview and one focus group interview with 6 players, so players' perspectives on the development environment were limited.

Together these studies suggest that both applied practitioners and talent development research in football can benefit from taking a HEA and considering not only the individual player's

athletic development but also the overall organisational settings in the TDE. The finding that successful environments possess common features which less successful ones lack (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2014) has important implications for SPPs looking to strengthen the environment. The holistic ecological models reflect the approach that an organisation's culture is shared, created and maintained by its members, which provides the potential to distinguish between more or less functional cultures in relation to the task of the organisation (Larsen, 2013).

To date, all research applying the HEA to sport (and football) has been carried out in a Scandinavian context, there are clearly differences between a Scandinavian and English context. For example, the club under investigation in Denmark in Larsen et al.'s. (2013) work was part of an institutional partnership model in which local elite sport clubs, local educational institutions, and the national sport federations provide young talented athletes across a number of sports with the opportunity to combine an educational career with an elite sports career. Logistically this set up is different from the academy set up in England. In addition, the young players in the Danish club lived at home and were transported to the club each day by a club coach, in the English system non local players typically reside in digs next to the academy and therefore are arguably more involved in the system. These differences alongside cross-cultural studies which have highlighted the impact national culture and the national sports systems have on athletes' (Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova et al, 2007) points to the need for further research examining the approach outside of Scandinavia. An in-depth exploration of an English elite youth football environment is necessary given research has identified there are dominant cultural features that are generalizable within an English football context (e.g. Champ et al., 2020a; Cushion & Jones, 2006).

#### **2.2.4 The environment in English elite youth football**

Work by Mills and colleagues (2012; 2014a; 2014b) has been pivotal in advancing understanding of the English elite football academy environment. Their earlier work (Mills et al., 2012) analysed interviews with elite youth scholarship coaches to determine the factors perceived to influence the development of elite youth players. They found that coaches identified a number of factors relating to the culture and structure of the unique elite football academy context that impacted the developmental process. Environmental sources perceived to influence player development included significant others (e.g. coaches, parents, and

friends), providing the ‘optimal learning environment’ (which was largely contingent on the culture of the academy) and the ‘limited application of SP’. Although the coaches clearly considered the mental aspect of development fundamental at scholarship stage, there seemed to be a major disconnect between its perceived importance and its systematic application within existing development programmes. This was attributed to a lack of coach understanding. These findings suggested a strong awareness from coaches that creating an optimal environment for players to develop was central to effective development however there were gaps in implementing this. This work led to recognition that there was a need for additional research to address the specific environments elite academies create to nurture young players and develop the psychological characteristics deemed crucial for success.

Mills and colleagues conducted two further studies examining the English elite football academy environment both from a coach (Mills et al., 2014a) and player (Mills et al., 2014b) perspective. The first (Mills et al., 2014a) specifically examined the factors perceived by elite coaches to underpin optimal development environments within elite English soccer academies. The findings were used to develop a conceptual framework to explain how a number of factors interacted and contributed to an optimal performance environment, this consisted of the core components: psychosocial architecture (e.g. player welfare, key stakeholder relationships), organisational functioning (e.g. adaptability, effective communication), physical environment (e.g. material provisions), and operating system (e.g. organisational core). Mills et al. (2014a) emphasised the importance of creating strong, dynamic, organisational cultures at elite youth soccer academies and they discuss the significance of fostering a supportive, engaged, and positive development environment. Similar to the findings of Larsen et al. (2013) the coaches felt that a successful TDE requires: (a) a coherent philosophy and clear values; (b) promoting whole person development; (c) empowering key stakeholders; (d) forming positive relationships; (e) prioritising player wellbeing; (f) maintaining well integrated personnel with clear links to senior progression; (g) having clear communication; (h) being adaptable and committed to innovation; and (i) constructing an achievement focused climate with explicit opportunities to progress (Gledhill et al., 2017). These findings suggest that the characteristics of successful TDEs in English football are largely consistent with those established from a HEA in Denmark (Larsen et al., 2013). The coaches recognised the importance of holistic development which is unsurprising given the EPPP remit to develop players holistically. The authors discussed however that academies are clearly oriented to being successful at football and as such there is a need for

sport practitioners to adopt a holistic view of the performance environment and work at an environmental level to shape cultural change and ensure this balanced approach is embedded into an academy's psychosocial architecture (Mills et al., 2014a).

Whilst this research gained valuable coach insights, Mills et al., (2014b) recognised it only represented one part of the equation and player-driven insights were needed to generate a more comprehensive understanding of elite youth academy environments. Accordingly, Mills et al. (2014b) used the TDE Questionnaire (TDEQ) survey with U16-18 level players from the academies of Premier League and Championship clubs in England to explore players' perceptions of the quality of their development environment. Although the players reported some positive elements of the elite football environment, particularly in relation to coaching practice (e.g., technical instruction, training plans) the results also revealed that TDEs failed to demonstrate a number of the perceived qualities of successful TDEs discussed above. Players' perceptions of emotional support were low and despite reporting they had good coach-athlete relationships, they did not feel as understood at a holistic level with coaches rarely showing any interest in their lives outside of football. The authors concluded that these high-performance environments might not be fully meeting young players' developmental needs.

Collectively the findings (Mills et al., 2012; 2014a; 2014b) emphasise that academies need to give more attention to the psychosocial environments they create for developing players, however there is a lack of research that examines these environmental qualities against measurable outcomes of a successful TDE in English football (e.g., player progression from academy to senior teams). In addition, more research is needed to examine how these ideas regarding the creation of optimal environments may be implemented in practice in an English academy. Whilst valuable for providing initial insights into the unique football environment, there are limitations to the methods used. Only ten academy coaches were interviewed in the first study (Mills et al., 2014a), whilst this increased to 50 players who completed the TDEQ (Mills et al., 2014b), there are concerns over the psychometric properties of the TDEQ and its sensitivity to football environments (Gledhill et al., 2017). Furthermore, questionnaires and interviews often rely on retrospective recall and responses may be constrained by the questions asked. As such, these methods provide a limited contextual understanding of the lived experiences of players and coaches in comparison to that gained by Larsen et al's. (2013) case study (and the HEA in general), given the researchers were not embedded within

the academy environment themselves. It has been recognised that more in depth studies in elite youth football may be limited given that professional football clubs are often closed to ‘outsiders’ and sceptical of academic researchers (Champ et al., 2020a).

Recognising the limitations of the methods predominantly used to explore the elite academy environment discussed above, Champ et al. (2020a; 2020b; 2020c) conducted an ethnography of a category 2 academy to explore the experiences of players and staff within the organisation as well as her experiences as a SPP. Champ was not the first to carry out an ethnography of a football club; Cushion for example, conducted research during one full season working as a coach to explore coaching behaviours (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Champ et al.’s. (2020a; 2020b; 2020c) research, however, makes an original contribution to current knowledge regarding a professional academy environment as she was fully immersed in the club as a full-time SP practitioner-researcher over a three-year period. This offered the opportunity to gain a more in-depth contextual understanding of the lived experiences of players and their support staff over a longitudinal period to create new forms of knowledge and understanding (Krane & Baird, 2005) in English football. The work added a female perspective to a field which to date has been saturated with male perspectives (e.g., Nesti, 2010; Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006). This adds value to the research base given there is limited research examining the experiences of a female SPPs operating in a British football context despite 75% of students studying psychology being female (Champ, 2018). The work was the first longitudinal study to explore the impact of the EPPP as a youth development framework and concludes by arguing that the EPPP did not appear to have addressed what it set out to. Findings suggested that the SP section of the EPPP did not consider some of the significant psychological challenges that youth footballers meet especially at an environmental and organisational level. Champ et al. (2020a) used a range of data collection techniques including observation, interviews, focus groups and feedback from players, parents and staff. The study found that an authoritarian management style, demonstration of power, dominance, and control, and punishments for not adhering to orders were demonstrated by coaches in the club. Champ et al. (2020a) concluded that the significant changes in professional football over recent years, including the introduction of the EPPP, had little impact on changing the beliefs and behaviours of individuals within the professional club under study and a traditional masculine culture remained evident in the organisation.

The author discusses several potential reasons to explain why the EPPP did not appear to have addressed what it set out to do, firstly by recognising that a number of the coaches at the club under study had been involved in professional football for a large proportion of their lives which may have led to hegemonic beliefs that align with those dominant in the organisation and are reluctant to change. This is discussed in the context of Gearing's work (1999) and the assertion that professional football clubs are total institutions (closed social systems) (Goffman, 1957) which members are socialised into and then in turn act as key socialising agents. Embodiment of the cultural norms may also be linked to coaches wanting to survive within the competitive social context which commands performance outcomes. The prevailing aspects of the organisational culture found in Champ et al's. work (2020a) support the findings from previous work exploring the professional football culture in England (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Roderick 2006). These recent findings are important for the current research as they suggest there may be all encompassing cultural features of the English football culture that can pose challenges to the identity development of young footballers and the culture may be debilitating to the psychological development of academy players. For example, the dominance of power and control may result in players who have a narrow sense of self, based on the need to conform to a tough identity as opposed to exploring the self for personal growth. Champ et al. (2020a) found that youth players were encouraged to develop a single-minded dedication to professional football. This finding is in line with Mills et al. (2014b) as players reported they did not feel understood at a holistic level by coaches. Champ's (2018) work also highlights how organisational constraints within the football academy culture can limit the SP's role and working practices, for example the areas in which a SP is granted access, or the time that is assigned for SP sessions. Champ et al. (2020b) suggested that coaches may be reluctant to incorporate SP due to a lack of understanding of SP and its value in youth player development. This suggests that Mills et al's. (2014a) recommendation that SPPs work at an environmental level to shape cultural change and embed psychosocial development into an academy's culture may be somewhat idealistic and the traditional and authoritarian management style that is still evident in a number English clubs may not make it easy to achieve.

Together, this research (Mills et al., 2014b, Champ et al., 2020a; 2020b) has identified that elite English academy environments might not be fully meeting young players' holistic developmental needs, despite the importance of the psychological aspect of development being recognised by the EPPP and some existing development programmes (Mills et al.,

2014b). Research addressing the disconnect between perceived importance and application is needed. A HEA case study would allow this disconnect to be examined in relation to the environmental constraints within the English football academy culture, whilst emphasising the meaning Category 1 players attribute to their holistic development, thus addressing the call for more in depth studies in elite youth football (Champ et al., 2020a).

### **2.2.5 Summary**

Research in the last decade has reinforced an understanding that a more holistic and systems-wide psychological and social support approach is required to promote wellbeing alongside maximising performance within professional youth football (Henriksen & Stambolova, 2017; Green et al., 2020) and that SP practice may best be delivered at an environmental level to achieve this (e.g. Champ et al., 2020a; Larsen et al., 2014). Despite advances in the literature, SP research addressing the TDE remains limited compared to the extensive literature on psychological skills training and performance enhancement strategies (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Only a small number of studies to date have focused exclusively on the social-cultural environment in elite English football academies and none have employed a HEA. As such relatively little is known about the environments that are created to support players at this fundamental developmental stage and the role of the football academy environment on psychosocial development has yet to receive sufficient research attention.

Seminal research conducted within TDEs in Scandinavia (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013) has demonstrated that both applied practitioners and talent development research can benefit from taking a HEA to talent development as it provides a framework to help assess the ATDE and understand the role of the environment in athlete development. The finding that successful environments possess common features has important implications for SPPs looking to strengthen the environment and further research is needed to examine these features within an English football TDE. There is clearly a need for research that examines the elite football academy environment in England from a HEA. The current study will use the HEA working models to assess and develop empirical models for HFC, these will be used to analyse the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development. Applying the HEA in this way will help to gain a better understanding of how players' holistic psychosocial development is currently, or could be better, embedded within an English academy environment.

## **2.3 Section B: Psychosocial skills in elite youth football**

This section of the literature review presents an in-depth exploration of the research that exists around the key psychosocial skills that impact progression in elite football. It builds on Section A by considering the importance of the TDE on players developing these psychosocial skills. Further gaps in current understanding are identified to provide additional support for the objectives of this study.

### **2.3.1 Psychosocial skills definition and introduction to the research in football**

The career transition literature emphasises that for athletes to successfully cope with the challenges of a transition a dynamic balance between an athlete's resources and the demands of the transition is needed (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2016). Both internal and external resources assist the coping process, the athlete's psychological skills are a key internal factor and social support a key external factor (Morris et al., 2016). The term 'psychosocial' has recently been defined in talent development in football literature as "pertaining to the interrelation of individual psychological skills with social influences and to the ways in which these may shape or guide behaviours" (Gledhill et al., 2017, pp. 93-94). Consistent with this definition, and that taken in the HEA, the current work considers psychological skills as socially supported, culturally contingent and dependent on the specific environmental circumstances as opposed to inner, independent and stable features of the individual. The ecological perspective discussed in Section A moves the focus away from the individual athlete to the context in which the athlete is developing (Larsen et al., 2012), and the aim of the current research is to understand the development of psychosocial skills in players in relation to their environment. As such the term psychosocial skills will be used in this thesis however when discussing prior literature the terms used in the relevant study will be used, e.g. psychological characteristics.

Studies addressing the impact of psychological characteristics on player development in elite football have taken a variety of approaches in terms of the psychological skills analysed, the research design (e.g. interviews vs. questionnaires) used to explore these skills and the research questions addressed (e.g. characteristics of successful players vs. those lacking in unsuccessful players) (Sarmiento et al., 2018). Although the fundamental role of an individual's psychological skillset in reaching an elite level in football has been frequently

identified (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006) the scope of research is wide-ranging and interpretation challenging. Three seminal studies contributing to knowledge in this area will first be introduced to provide a rationale for the approach taken to help make sense of the available research.

Holt and Dunn's (2004) interviews with Canadian and English professional youth scholars and English professional coaches offered one of the first building blocks in advancing understanding of elite player development from a psychosocial perspective. Their theoretical model suggested that the competencies of commitment, discipline and resilience alongside favourable social support contributed to the successful transition to the professional level, and it was the interaction of these four factors that was theorised to optimise success. This work was criticised as it examines the views of developing players who may or may not have successfully progressed to the professional level and as such, the conclusions are somewhat tentative. Holt and Mitchell (2006) examined the psychological characteristics lacking in youth football players on the verge of being released by a professional club to explore the reasons why there were not making it in comparison to their successful counterparts. This research resulted in a refinement of Holt and Dunn's original model, rather than presenting commitment and discipline as distinct psychosocial constructs they integrated hope theory as the mechanism to explain success in football. This advanced model predicted that players with high hope, who are resilient and receive strong social support are more likely to successfully progress to the professional level. Both of these studies were influential for furthering understanding on the key role psychosocial competencies play in progressing in professional football, however they provide us with limited contextual understanding of the daily lived experiences of those within the academy environment (Champ, 2018).

Another significant contribution to knowledge in this area was provided by Mills et al. (2012) who interviewed ten elite development coaches responsible for the development of the players at the scholarship stage to examine which attributes they perceived impacted the transition from elite adolescent to professional soccer. Findings showed that awareness (e.g. self-awareness, awareness of others); resilience (e.g. coping with setbacks, optimistic attitude); goal-directed attributes (e.g. passion, professional attitude); intelligence (e.g. sport intelligence, emotional competence); sport-specific attributes (e.g. coachability, competitiveness); and environmental factors (e.g. significant others, culture of game) were considered significant. An important finding that extends prior research was that awareness

emerged as a fundamental and mediating factor for understanding how scholars were able to transition to the professional level. Together, findings from these three key studies highlight that a number of psychosocial factors are needed to progress to the highest level in football and emphasise the importance of the interaction of factors to optimise success.

Numerous additional psychological factors have been associated with talent development in football, this is highlighted in a recent review of the literature in which Gledhill et al. (2017) identified 22 psychological characteristics associated with successful talent development. Gledhill et al. (2017) searched a range of databases and included 43 studies which adopted both qualitative (12), quantitative (29) and mixed methods (2). The scope of searched databases and the replicable nature of their detailed screening and appraisal process ensured the authors added a comprehensive understanding to the literature. Gledhill et al. (2017) suggested that out of the 22 psychological factors identified in the research, self-regulation, resilience, commitment and discipline made the most significant impact on player development either through their ability to differentiate between players who have gone on to success and those who have not, their correlation with engagement in adaptive behaviours, and/or the relative significance given to them by coaches. Similarly, in their review of talent identification and development in football literature Sarmiento et al. (2018) found that the most successful players express high levels of these four factors. Given these four psychological factors have repeatedly arisen in the research as having a valuable impact on youth player development they will be the focus and direct the structure of this chapter; each concept will first be introduced in the wider SP literature and then examined in relation to the research in elite youth football. As discussed earlier in the chapter, there has been growing understanding in recent years that players on the verge of the elite senior level must not only possess a range of psychosocial skills but crucially, must also be provided with a rich and vibrant development environment in which to develop them (Mills et al., 2014a). Research linked to the development and the impact of the context on the development on each of these skills will be addressed throughout. The chapter will end with a broader examination of the role of the academy environment in developing psychosocial skills and examine the limited but valuable research which has integrated psychosocial development into the elite academy environment.

It is important to recognise the limitations of setting out the following section in this way. Firstly, addressing each of the four broad characteristics as distinct categories is problematic

due to their cumbersome nature (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). Each involves a sub-set of concepts and there is potential for overlap between characteristics which will be acknowledged throughout. Secondly and as noted above, a number of additional psychological characteristics have also been associated with successful talent development, for example, Sarmiento et al. (2018) found that higher levels of motivation, confidence and concentration were also repeatedly associated with talented youth footballers. Whilst the scope of the literature review prevents a detailed examination of copious psychological characteristics, a number of additional psychological characteristics are integrated within the chapter due to the aforementioned overlap. Collectively the research in elite football has identified the multidimensional nature of talent development (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006; Mills et al., 2012) and it is imperative to consider the interaction of psychological characteristics coupled with favourable social support and development environment to optimise the successful transition to the professional level (Gledhill et al., 2017).

### **2.3.2 Resilience**

There has been burgeoning research interest in resilience in the SP literature in the last decade, however, understanding of resilience has been hindered by confusing conceptualisation, the merging of resilience with related terms such as ‘mental toughness’ and ‘grit’ (Bryan, O’Shea & MacIntyre, 2019) as well as colloquialisms in applied practice (e.g. resilience is often referred to as ‘bouncebackability’ in football circles, Mills et al., 2012). This confusion is partially due to alternative conceptualizations of resilience as a process or as a trait in the wider psychology research literature (Sarkar, 2017). The impact of these misunderstandings on the measurement and development of resilience in research has hampered understanding of its unique contribution to psychological health and well-being (Estrada, Severt & Jiménez-Rodríguez, 2016).

A recent article drawing on the body of knowledge in resilience in sport to date addressed these inconsistencies and defined resilience simply as ‘the ability to use personal qualities to withstand pressure’ (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016, p. 136), where these qualities include a combination of process-driven states (malleable skills, e.g. goal-setting, imagery) and outcome-oriented traits (less malleable, e.g. general self-confidence, optimism). This definition extends previous conceptual work in the area and provides clarity by capturing aspects of both trait and process conceptualizations of resilience. Resilience is understood as

a capacity that develops over time as processes of adaptation and growth from stressors occur in the context of person-environment interactions (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Those working inside of sport as well as academics have recognised the value of resilience. In a recent independent report into athlete welfare across Olympic, Paralympic and professional sport commissioned by the UK government, Paralympian and gold medallist Baroness Grey-Thompson acknowledged that “Mental resilience is not something that all participants and coaches automatically have and should be developed with the same consideration that physical resilience is built” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 23).

The relationship between psychological resilience and optimal sport performance has been well documented in the wider sport research (e.g. Fletcher and Sarkar, 2012). Earlier work on resilience in elite sport focused on the importance of resilience for progression in sport highlighting that resilience can help athletes to adapt to common challenging situations such as injury and career transitions (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Galli & Gonzalez, 2014). Similarly, the football specific literature has identified resilience as a key psychosocial competency that makes a major contribution to a successful transition to the professional level (Holt & Dunn, 2004). This is unsurprising given that the elite youth football academy environment has been shown to be characterised by a highly pressurised climate for success (Sagar, Busch & Jowett, 2010) in which young players encounter a number of personal and interpersonal challenges (Richardson, Gilbourne, & Littlewood, 2004).

The elite football coaches interviewed by Mills et al. (2012) identified resilience as an indispensable attribute in the development of elite youth football players to the professional level. Their findings highlight the multi-faceted nature of resilience as a concept. More specifically, four lower-order themes emerged from raw data themes relating to resilience. Firstly, confidence was considered a key component in building resilience. Coaches quoted the need for players to ‘trust in one’s ability’, and ‘play without fear’. Given the demands placed on developing players, an optimistic attitude (e.g. maintaining a positive outlook) and coping with setbacks such as losing a place in team or coping with injuries were also seen as important. Moreover, coaches reported that it was crucial for players to be able to cope with adversity through ‘bouncing back’ as failure is needed to learn and can facilitate development. Finally coping with pressure (e.g. handling criticism, training with senior team) was found to be perceived by coaches as critical for building resilience, for example, one

coach described the U16-18 phase as a “pressure cooker” (p. 1598) and emphasised how important it was for young players to be able to handle those pressures (“to get a pro-contract, the manager calling you over to train with the first team”). An important finding in Mills et al. (2012) work that extends prior research that has associated resilience with progression in football is that awareness (e.g. of what is required to excel, capacity to reflect on experience) emerged as a catalyst for developing resilient behaviours (e.g. coping with setbacks). For example, coaches reported it was imperative for young players to understand that adversity can facilitate development as ‘opportunities to grow’ and players must introspectively ‘dig deep’ to grow. Coaches in this study acknowledged it was important players had the ability to intentionally reflect, assimilate, and adapt, these processes will be discussed further in relation to self-regulation but highlights the interaction of psychological characteristics to optimise success.

Coaches perceptions that resilient athletes were able to use problem-focused coping strategies to overcome a number of competitive and organisational stressors (e.g. de-selection, training with senior team, pressure to secure contract) is reinforced by research examining the views of elite players (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006; Van Yperen, 2009). For example, the successful players in Holt and Dunn’s (2004) study reported using two positive situational coping responses to manage the demands and pressures of elite soccer. Firstly, young players identified that responding positively in training and competitive situations to mistakes and criticism was important to progress as a professional soccer player. Secondly the importance of having the confidence to thrive on pressure was recognised.

Prior research has shown that individuals use two main types of coping in almost all stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Taylor & Stanton, 2007). Problem-focused coping, or proactively acting on a stressful situation (e.g. making a plan of action and following it) has been found to be generally most appropriate in situations in which there is a potential for altering the outcome, whereas emotion-focused coping, defined as the cognitive regulation of stressful emotions (e.g. shifting focusing onto other things) is most appropriate when little can be done about the outcome (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Van Yperen (2009) found that engagement in problem-focused coping behaviours was a psychological factor that predicted career success while statistically controlling for initial performance level and demographic variables. Relative to the unsuccessful soccer players, successful soccer players in the prospective study not only reported being more likely to engage in problem focused

coping behaviours, they were also found to be more likely to seek social support in stressful circumstances. The authors suggest that this may reflect successful players being better able to adapt to the stressful circumstances they inevitably encountered during their soccer careers by using their coping skills and social resources more often and more flexibly.

Larsen et al's. (2013) case study exploring talent development in an elite Danish football academy found that professional players, the club manager and professional coach reported that it is crucial to be "able to handle adversity", "learn from mistakes and deal with pressure" in order to make the transition to professional soccer. Interestingly they do not mention the term resilience in their study but instead report these findings under the psychosocial skill 'managing performance and process outcomes'. This shows the variety of approaches and terms used to describe the ability to cope in an elite sport environment. In Larsen et al's. (2013) study, although the ability to handle adversity, learn from mistakes and deal with pressure were considered essential psychosocial skills from the professional players' experience for making the transition to professional soccer, observations showed there were no direct teaching of these aspects of performance. Instead, observations of the environment suggested that the players in the academy had simply learnt to forget the mistakes and keep up the hard work (emotion-focused coping). This shows an important discrepancy between what people in positions of power within the club perceived to be important (i.e. learning from mistakes) and what was actually happening in the day to day running of the club (i.e. forgetting mistakes), as well as highlighting the different ways of coping with challenges.

The research discussed thus far has demonstrated the multi-faceted nature of resilience; bouncing back, awareness, confidence and coping with pressure have all been associated with a player's ability to cope with the inherently challenging nature of elite youth football (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Gledhill et al., 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2018). Although an individual's psychological characteristics are the foundation of the resilience process (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016), it is essential to look beyond an individual's personal qualities to the wider environment in which the individual is operating. An awareness of the role of establishing the optimal environment for effective development has been documented in football (e.g. Mills et al., 2012). The coaches in Mills et al. (2012) study stated that in considering the interaction between the environment and the individual they aimed to develop important intrapersonal attributes (e.g. coping with pressure) via the tough,

challenging training environments they created (e.g. competitive training, training with senior team). Mills et al. (2014a) demonstrated that elite coaches perceive that exposing athletes to tough, challenging experiences within the framework of a positive and confidence building environment can help players to adapt positively in the face of adversity, however more research is needed to examine how a conducive environment might be created. There remains a gap in research examining how environmental factors interactively facilitate the resilience development process in an elite football academy environment.

Recent work by Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) in the wider sport literature has been seminal in advancing understanding of how resilience can be developed over time. Their mental fortitude model of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) states that three key areas (personal qualities, facilitative environment, and challenge mindset) work together to enhance a performers' ability to withstand the pressures of elite sport. This model considers the context of person-environment interactions in the development of resilience and emphasises that the environment must balance high levels of challenge and support to facilitate both excellence and welfare in elite sport. Fletcher and Sarkar (2010; 2012; 2013 & 2016) propose that for resilience to be developed for sustained success a facilitative environment needs to be created and maintained. A facilitative environment is illustrated by:

supportive challenge towards a goal, individuals having input into and taking ownership of goals, individuals seeking out challenges to develop, individuals craving constructive feedback, good relationships between performers and leaders or coaches, a psychologically safe environment that encourages sensible risk taking, healthy competition, everyone supporting one another, learning from mistakes and failures, recognition and celebration of success, and a “we’re in this together” attitude. (Sarkar, 2018, p. 21)

Fletcher and Sarkar, (2016) acknowledged these characteristics should be developed with and through the main decision-makers (e.g. performance directors) and main personnel (e.g. coaches) whose opinions will most likely impact potential intervention (cf. Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016). Their research also discussed how an imbalance in challenge and support, for example too much challenge without relevant support creates an unrelenting environment with the potential to compromise well-being. The unrelenting environment is portrayed by:

unhealthy competition, leaders exposing and ridiculing under performers, a blame culture when high standards are not met, an avoidance mentality due to the consequences of making mistakes, little care for well-being, people feeling isolated, potential conflict, unsustainable performance, potential burnout, and a “sink or swim” attitude (Sarkar, 2018, p. 21).

Such characteristics fit with some of the recent athlete welfare issues that have been raised and investigated in some British Olympic sports following media reports and anecdotal evidence around winning at all costs. Although recent research (e.g. Champ et al., 2020) has acknowledged that a tough masculine culture reflected by an authoritarian management style, demonstration of power, dominance, and control continues to exist in elite football, the elite football environment is yet to be explored in relation to the different environments of the mental fortitude model. This work demonstrates that a complete understanding of psychological resilience in athletes will only be obtained if it is studied within the context of the stress process (Sarkar, 2017).

The mental fortitude model of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) provides an evidence-based approach to developing psychological resilience and suggests training in psychological resilience should be both proactive (cf. robust resilience) and reactive (cf. rebound resilience) and target performers before, during, and after stressful or adverse encounters. For example, it is important individuals are assisted in positively and appropriately evaluating the pressures they face, together with their own resources, thoughts and emotions. Fundamental to this is supporting individuals to adapt negative appraisals into positive or constructive thinking. Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) emphasise that these processes need to be practised regularly and highlight the role the environment has in facilitating this development through the appropriate balance of challenge and support discussed above. Developing resilience in elite sport, especially creating and maintaining a facilitative environment, needs a multi-level approach and commitment from all layers of and personnel within an organisation. It is vital for sport organisations to reflect on their existing culture and this is something a SPP could aid. As Sarkar (2018) acknowledged working at the organisational level is much more challenging for a SPP than working at the individual level in terms of developing resilience, however it is critical. There is a need for further research to reflect on the existing elite youth academy culture, this could be addressed through a number of questions such as “Can individuals have open and honest discussions about their resilience? Do individuals view

pressure as an opportunity to perform, or is there a threatening culture where pressure evokes a fear of failure?” (Sarkar, 2018, p. 21). There is also a need to explore best practice as to how football academy environments could move towards a more facilitative environment.

Although research has identified an awareness from key stakeholders around the importance of resilience to progress in elite football (e.g. Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012) and acknowledged the role of establishing the optimal environment for effective development (Mills et al., 2012; 2014a), scarce research to date has examined how resilience is proactively being developed in elite youth football. Understandably adapting theory and process into a practical client-friendly approach is challenging given the clients are adolescents in a high-pressured environment, within the complex system of a Premier League football academy (Green et al., 2020). Recognising these challenges Green et al. (2020) recently published a seminal article which shares the work of the ‘psych-social team’ (PST), in a Premier league academy. More specifically, they provide practical and operational solutions for developing players’ resilience, grounded on their PST support mechanism framework (education, support, intervention and sharing). Their system level approach involves a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) of staff representing all facets of academy life meeting regularly to discuss the wellbeing and resilience of each player to agree system level actions. This work advances the SP literature by offering an invaluable insight into how recent advances in resilience research (e.g. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) have been used to cultivate proactive strategies to develop resilience in an elite football academy. Their approach works towards their academy vision to be ‘the most challenging and caring football environment in the world’ (Green et al., 2020, p.64) which epitomises the balance recommended in the resilience fortitude model.

In line with the work of Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) Green et al. emphasised how a shared understanding amongst staff is fundamental in facilitating a dynamic environment that supports resilience. This is highlighted in the prominent applied initiative shared in the paper, their concept of the ‘Academy Island’; a collaborative initiative that supports the development of emotional literacy and a common language that has allowed for a typically uncommunicative group of teenage boys to express themselves to help staff gain an understanding of the various challenges and the shared support that is needed to assist learning from these challenges. Staff and players at the academy worked together to co-develop Academy Island which is described as “a visual metaphor that represents the journey of a player facilitating discussions of the person’s emotional world, identity and psych-social

issues". The authors reflect on how it has created a common language regularly used by all PST staff (psychologist, player liaison, and safeguarding) to begin conversations, the players themselves as a starting point to talk about their thoughts and feelings as well as parents, coaches, support staff, scouts, and even agents, to help better understand and support the players. The authors note that they are only three years into a long-term project of culture change, however, to date internal reflections acknowledge that players have had an enthusiastic and remarkable uptake and contribution to the initiatives introduced. The model and interventions were shared in the hope of generating interest, discussion, and collaboration across academic or football settings and particularly, to promote discussion about how best to create practical working solutions to better protect, promote resilience in, and improve performance of young players across football. This work provides a valuable insight into applied practice however further research is needed to scientifically evaluate both staff and players' perceptions of the impact of such applied interventions for developing resilience within the youth academy culture. Although discussed in relation to resilience, clearly this initiative has consequences for the development of other psychosocial skills also.

In summary, resilience has frequently been identified as a pivotal factor when describing what it takes to reach an elite level in both sport in general and professional football (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Gledhill et al., 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2018). Moreover, the need for players to be able to cope with adversity and pressure has clearly been established as a crucial attribute for progression in elite football given that development in elite youth football is inherently challenging and players face a unique set of challenges as they progress within a professional football academy. What is less well known is how players develop the resilience to respond to these challenges, as research exploring the specific development of resilience from a talent development perspective is limited. Resilience is understood to be an ongoing process of interactions between the person and their environment and literature has emphasised the need for athletes to be exposed to challenging situations in a supportive environment (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Despite some promising work beginning to explore this such as the Academy Island (Green et al., 2020) more work is needed to understand the role of the elite football academy environment in developing resilience and how resilience can be proactively developed within this environment.

### 2.3.3 Commitment

Sport commitment is defined as a psychological construct reflecting “the desire and resolve to continue participation in a sport over time” (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993, p. 7). Research has recognised that commitment is a key psychological characteristic underpinning successful development in sport (e.g. Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993), this includes commitment as a broader concept as well as goal commitment, defined as one’s determination to meet a goal (Locke & Latham, 1990), both of which will be discussed in the following section. Several studies using interviews with elite athletes, coaches and parents have demonstrated that a high level of commitment is required to reach the highest level in sport (Kreiner-Phillips & Orlick, 1993; MacNamara et al., 2010a) and conversely research examining failure in developing performers has suggested they lacked the commitment to take them to the next level (Taylor & Collins, 2019).

Similarly, research in football has identified commitment as a psychological success factor that distinguished successful players from their less successful counterparts (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004). Holt and Dunn’s (2004) work was influential in identifying commitment as one of four major psychosocial competencies that appeared to be central to success in elite youth soccer. Commitment was represented as the motivational forces and psychological attachment underpinning the pursuit of a soccer career. Analysis of their semi-structured interviews identified that sub-categories of motives and strategically planned career goals were associated with commitment and these were used to describe and explain the commitment required to pursue a professional career (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Players’ motives included intrinsic factors such as love of the game and determination to succeed, social factors such as perceived social status, and extrinsic factors such as money. These motives were supported by three types of strategically planned career goals; professional and international goals, playing up, and gaining exposure. As discussed above it was the interaction of commitment, discipline, resilience and social support that were found to optimise success and the authors subsequently concluded that the model as a whole may be most useful for understanding factors that distinguish successful players than considering the individual competencies in isolation.

The follow up study by Holt and Mitchell (2006) found two important differences in relation to the commitment in the players who failed to make the transition to professional adult

soccer. Firstly, although players' motives generally mirrored the findings of Holt and Dunn (2004) (e.g. love of the game and money), there was an absence of an intense determination to succeed in those players who failed to make the transition (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). This finding led the authors to suggest that those who are successful in the transition may possess a specific and intense determination that is absent in those who do not progress. Secondly, Holt and Mitchell (2006) reported that although the majority of players on the verge of release reported lofty aims to break into the first team, they appeared to lack strategic planning to work towards these aspirations, in other words their pathways to excellence were missing. This differed to the elite players in Holt and Dunn's (2004) work that reported strategic planning to reach their ultimate career goals, e.g. purposefully selecting professional clubs based on a balance between facilities / reputation and chance of playing in the first team. This research advanced understanding of the role of commitment in progressing to the professional level in elite football by highlighting the importance of the determination to succeed and strategic planning (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). Both studies were significant for furthering understanding of the key role commitment plays in progressing in professional football; however, limitations of the findings include the small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and an absence of behavioural verification. More recently Taylor and Collins (2019) took a similar approach to Holt and Mitchell (2006) and examined the perspectives of experienced coaches on players who failed to make the transition to the professional level. They found that coaches believed that those who failed to progress lacked commitment and motivation: "on its own, this is hardly a revelation, yet clearly illustrative of the nature of motivation and commitment-like resources being critical for the realisation of talent" (Taylor & Collins, 2019). While it is clear that motivation and commitment are crucial resources, more research is needed to explore how they interact to influence talent development and how they may be nurtured within TDEs.

Winter, O'Brien and Collins, (2019) made a valuable contribution to knowledge in the area of commitment in talent development. They interviewed 12 academy coaches, across a range of sports, including four football coaches from English Premier League Academies, to gain their perceptions regarding commitment in their developing athletes. The work expanded that previously discussed by considering how cultural and organisational idiosyncrasies (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) impacted commitment. The football coaches identified environmental factors including the young age at which players are recruited to academies, the early professionalization and the full-time nature of their programs were associated with some

young players becoming complacent and blasé and not wanting to put in the work rate required. Football was the only sport in which coaches referred to external player motives including perceived social status and money. This reflects earlier findings (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006) and their comparison with coaches from other team sports who described more internal motives driving athletes suggests the large financial awards and status associated with professional football impacts player motives. Coaches across sports agreed on the defining features of an ideal hardworking and committed athlete including being humble, respectful, and disciplined; appreciating values; taking ownership for development; and generally being good characters. This extends earlier findings by providing insight into additional concepts and the behaviours associated with commitment. They identified a discrepancy between these ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete. There was also a recurring theme that the most exceptionally talented athletes regularly displayed the least committed attitudes and behaviours.

These findings are important for the current research. The work provides a valuable insight into the perspective of academy coaches regarding commitment in developing athletes and the environmental challenges relating to differences between ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, however, there is a need for a more in-depth exploration of how the youth football development environment impacts player's commitment and associated behaviours. The present research will address this by gaining the perceptions of players and support staff alongside the coaches on what commitment means to them and the associated behaviours, as well as observe how commitment and associated behaviours are impacted at an environmental level. Winter et al. (2019) suggest that the finding that talented academy athletes often exhibit challenging behaviours and commitment issues has important implications for SPPs working with the academies. Whilst developing commitment is certainly within the scope of a SPP's role, their suggestion that SP may work to modify athletes' challenging/maladaptive attitudes and behaviours is reactive and a more proactive approach acknowledging the optimisation of the environment to maximise player commitment may also be needed. An in-depth examination of the TDE as offered in the present research is needed to obtain the understanding required for commitment to be addressed at an environmental level.

### ***2.3.3.1 Goal setting and goal commitment***

Goal setting has become a key psychological strategy in sport; setting goals can help athletes to direct attention, increase persistence and effort and is viewed as a valuable process which can help athletes enhance their performance (Healy, Tincknell-Smith & Ntoumanis, 2018). Goal setting is widely embraced by researchers, practitioners, athletes, and coaches alike, however it has been acknowledged that the available literature fails to critically acknowledge the complexity of goal setting in practice and recommendations are largely overly simplistic (Healy et al., 2018). Goal setting strategies must be carefully applied and systematically integrated in order to have a beneficial effect on performance (Larsen & Engell, 2013). In Larsen et al.'s (2013) case study discussed in Section A, although participants consistently reported the importance of goal setting skills, the explicit teaching or practicing of goal setting was not observed in the environment and players had difficulty in making their individual goal setting effective. The authors suggest this may imply a lack of organisation, knowledge or proficiency towards goal setting in this elite environment. This finding led to a follow up applied case study with the aim to enhance understanding of the processes involved in a long-term goal-setting program with four professional footballers from a team in the highest league in Denmark. The work identified an important distinction between the "science" of setting goals, and the ability of the SPP practicing the "art" and process of setting goals. They found that goal setting is a dynamic, evolving and complex phenomenon and that the individual sessions and success is socially constructed and shaped between SPP and player. Thus goal setting processes must be applied in an individual and flexible manner. This supports the contention of Weinberg and Gould (2011) that the effectiveness of any goal-setting program is dependent on the interaction between individuals, systems and the situation in which the individuals are placed. This has important implications for the current research as goal setting is an important process to support a long term development focus and a focus on long-term development is one of the common characteristics of successful ATDEs from a HEA (Henriksen et al., 2011).

Research has long highlighted the role of goal commitment in the goal setting process and Locke, Latham, and Erez, (1988, p. 23) affirmed that "It is virtually axiomatic that if there is no commitment to goals, then goal setting will not work". Research in elite football has found that having high ambitions is common amongst players at scholarship level (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006; Van Yperen, 2009); however, those who have gone on to be

successful have been shown to have a higher goal commitment; they felt more psychologically bound to their goals and had higher levels of motivation to reach their goals.

Longitudinal, prospective research has shown goal commitment to differentiate between players who made it to an elite level in football, and those who did not (Van Yperen, 2009). Goal-commitment was examined in sixty-five academy players between the ages of 14 and 18, fifteen years later, participants were designated to either a successful or unsuccessful group dependent on if they had secured contracts and met one of three goals. The goal of making it in professional soccer was high and largely invariant in Van Yperen's (2009) sample which is unsurprising as all were at academy level. The youth players who successfully progressed into professional adult soccer felt more psychologically bound to their goals in comparison to their unsuccessful counterparts. The authors suggested that this increased goal commitment may have impacted their willingness to put effort into goal attainment, their persistence in pursuing their goals over time, and a stronger reluctance to lower or abandon their goals. This fits with findings from Ward, Hodges, Starkes, and Williams (2007) who showed, using a retrospective cross-sectional design, that compared to sub-elite players, elite soccer players aged between 9 and 18 years of age reported higher levels of motivation to reach their goals. Van Yperen's (2009) work provides a rare longitudinal insight into the psychological factors required to progress in elite soccer and findings suggest that goal commitment is an important psychological factor for predicting career success in football through its relationship to engagement with quality practice behaviours (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). This work is not without limitations. Performance differences were measured by coaches' ratings at the initial data collection, the players perceived to have higher potential at this stage may have subsequently received more attention and support from coaches which may have facilitated further development in comparison to those initially deemed less likely to go on to success. It is likely that when someone expects to master a challenging task, they invest significantly more effort and are more motivated than when engaging in a task that fails to challenge them or when self-competence is low (Bandura, 1993) and coaches support may have enhanced their self-belief (Bandura, 1977). Given that no process variables were collected in the fifteen-year period in between initial data collections, findings are speculative.

The elite coaches in the work by Mills et al. (2012) perceived goal-oriented attributes as a valuable quality in players and one of the key factors associated with making the transition

from elite adolescent to professional soccer. Goal-oriented attributes contained five lower-order themes: desire/passion (e.g. highly motivated to succeed, passion for the game); determination (e.g. having a 'never give up' attitude); work ethic (e.g. willingness to give 100%); professional attitude (e.g. being self-disciplined, taking responsibility for own development); and focus (e.g. able to block out distractions). Coaches reported that these qualities interacted to drive players to succeed. Importantly Mills et al. (2012) discussed how these goal-directed attributes work collaboratively, and awareness emerged as a fundamental agent of change that drives effective development.

The research discussed so far demonstrates that a high level of commitment is necessary to succeed in elite football. The importance of commitment as a psychological asset for talent development was acknowledged from an applied perspective by its inclusion in the FA's 5C model, although literature has not yet examined how commitment, together with the other Cs may be implemented at scholarship level. Research exploring the role of the English academy environment in fostering or hindering commitment is limited, despite the finding (Winter et al., 2019) that elite youth football coaches identified environmental factors that they felt limited the commitment of some young players. Larsen et al. (2013) found that 'commitment' was one of the four values of the Danish AGF football club, these values were displayed around the club (for example in the under-17 locker room). These findings further support the perceived importance of commitment in relation to success in football and advance prior work by considering this from an environmental level. Although it was clear it was incorporated into the culture of the club and reinforced through artifacts and communication, it would be useful to have more detailed information on how this was practiced in the environment. More research into the role of the elite academy environment in relation to commitment is needed. For example, it would be interesting to examine the role of the academy environment in structuring, implementing and reviewing quality practice behaviours given that the relationship between goal commitment and engagement with quality practice behaviours has been identified (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). Similarly it is important to explore the implementation of the goal setting process in an academy environment given this is a key psychological strategy to assist persistence and effort and an important process to support the long term development of players (Larsen et al., 2013).

### **2.3.3.2 Summary**

In summary, there is considerable research that attests that a high level of commitment (both as a wider concept and goal commitment) is a fundamental requirement to pursue a career in elite sport. Not only has commitment been shown to be a quality valued by elite level coaches in qualitative research (e.g., Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills et al., 2012), longitudinal, prospective evidence has also shown that commitment is a factor differentiating players who make it to an elite level in men's football, and those who do not (Van Yperen, 2009). Motivational forces such as the strong determination to succeed and strategic planning have been identified as important underlying aspects of commitment (Holt & Mitchell, 2006; Taylor & Collins, 2019), however the means by which commitment plays a role in reaching the elite level is comparatively neglected. Career management research has suggested that goal commitment can change with psychosocial intervention (Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007) however there is an absence of research examining the development of goal commitment in sport and more specifically within the elite football academy environment. Whilst goal setting can be a valuable process to help athletes direct attention and increase persistence and effort it is a dynamic and complex phenomenon which must take into account the interaction between the individuals and their environment (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). The research discussed has provided useful insights that commitment is associated with success however there is a need for further research to explore the impact of the environment. Given that the research discussed is primarily from coach perspectives there is a need for research that examines the meaning players attribute to commitment, their observable behaviour may not always reflect this and the environment may play a role in shaping this. The present case study will allow for these issues to be examined.

### **2.3.4 Discipline**

Closely linked to commitment, discipline has been frequently cited as a pre-requisite for talent development in football (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012; Morley et al., 2014). Holt and Dunn's (2004) interviews with elite players and coaches was one of the first studies which identified and discussed discipline as a key competency contributing to a successful transition to the professional level in football from the perspective of those within the game. Their analysis revealed that discipline was described by the subcategories of conforming dedication and willingness to sacrifice, which were expected

both in the players' personal lives and sporting performances. The authors noted that strict institutional demands (in terms of lifestyle and training) imposed on young players by professional academies likely led players to learn to display appropriate disciplined behaviours. Conforming dedication represented ways in which young players complied with these institutional demands and was further broken down by the concepts of taking personal responsibility, obeying orders, and production. Players thought that their coaches expected them to be personally responsible for their development and behaviour which mirrored the coaches' thoughts. Engaging in extra practice and not getting influenced by friends engaging in risky activities were behaviours that reflected players taking personal responsibility for their own development.

The players in Holt and Dunn's (2004) study also felt they sacrificed valued aspects of their adolescent lifestyles including family and friends/social life to pursue a career in professional soccer. Coaches supported this view stating sacrifices were an expected and necessary part of making it to professional level. A number of players had moved away from family, some overseas, and coaches appreciated leaving home for the first time was difficult. It appeared that these sacrifices were willingly made because players were able to delay gratification, they realised the rewards for their sacrifice were not gained immediately but rather would be paid off later in life if they became professional. Holt and Mitchell's (2006) study supported the finding that sacrifice represented a necessary part of talent development, their findings suggested that the ability to delay gratification by forward thinking and planning may be a factor linked to making the transition to professional soccer. Similarly, the elite coaches in Mills et al. (2012) study recognised players needed to be self-disciplined and demonstrate a readiness to make sacrifices.

The importance of leading a disciplined lifestyle and sacrificing elements of a "normal late teens/early adult life" to progress in elite football was further supported by Gledhill and Harwood's (2014) interviews and fieldwork with female elite youth footballers in the UK. Gledhill and Harwood's (2014) work noted the importance of both football-friends and non-football friends to help the female players to lead a disciplined lifestyle; through encouraging (or discouraging) adaptive lifestyle behaviours, a finding which has not yet been discussed in male football. The study found that increased commitment, discipline and sacrificing a "normal teenage life" was central to continued development in the game between 17 and 19 years of age. The players stated that further increased commitment was needed (such as

refraining from having a boyfriend/girlfriend, and from drinking alcohol). In this way this study supports the players' and coaches' views in Holt and Dunn's (2004) study, however it also highlights the overlap between discipline and commitment as constructs. Larsen et al. (2012) similarly highlighted the overlap between the use of discipline and commitment as concepts in their research, both fell under the theme of the ability to work hard. During their observations the researchers noticed that the ability to work hard was evident in the club before, during, and after training sessions and matches; the players were able to "sacrifice social life", "stay committed", "deal with large amounts of practice" and "set high demands for themselves". The ability to work hard was an important psychosocial skill explicitly stated and practiced in the environment it was also supported by artifacts within the organisation as part of the identity of an AGF-footballer, wearing the club shirt, was synonymous with the ability to work hard.

Morley et al. (2014) added to the literature exploring the role of discipline in development in elite football, by gathering both coaches' and players' opinions regarding developmental contexts and features of elite academy players. They found that, in line with Holt and Dunn's (2004) findings, 'discipline' emerged as a noticeable theme throughout; both the coaches and players identified discipline as important for development. Although the term was frequently used by participants, the authors noted that the complete nature of discipline remained unclear as it was unknown whether each respondent held the same meaning for 'discipline' across contexts; for example, in training discipline may refer to working hard throughout a session, as opposed to meaning avoiding bad influences in the lifestyle context. The authors conclude that the prominence of discipline found in the study may be because the player-participants were located in a school context that emphasised a culture of courtesy and respect. Like Holt and Dunn's (2004) findings this suggests that discipline could be engendered through the school/academy culture, where young players are required to display disciplined behaviours to comply with institutional demands.

The research discussed above has highlighted widespread agreement that discipline is as a pre-requisite for progressing to the professional level in football. Coaches and players regard discipline as an important characteristic for successful development to the professional game (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen et al., 2013; Morley et al., 2014). Discipline is conceptualised as a multi-faceted concept and dedication and willingness to make sacrifices have been associated with success. To date there has been some productive work on the contributions

of discipline to success and the impact of the environment. The current study aims to extend this work by examining the impact of an elite academy environment on player discipline and analysing player and coaches understandings of discipline. In addition, this work seeks to contribute to clarifying the relationship between the concepts of discipline and commitment and how they impact players' development and contribute to success.

### **2.3.5 Self-regulation**

Self-regulation has been defined, in a learning and development context, as the extent to which individuals are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally proactive participants in their own learning process (Zimmerman, 2006). Put simply, self-regulated individuals know how to attain their goal of performance improvement, are motivated, and take the appropriate action (Toering, Elferink-Gemser, Jordet & Visscher, 2009). Literature has described how the metacognitive aspects of self-regulation relate to thinking about one's own thinking and consist of processes such as planning, self-monitoring, evaluation, and reflection (Toering et al., 2009; Toering et al., 2011). The self-regulation process begins prior to initiating action through planning by comparing the task demands with personal resources. During task performance, self-regulation involves self-monitoring by mentally checking actions in relation to a goal. Following performance, self-regulation comprises evaluating the process as well as the outcome. In addition, continuous reflection upon the entire process throughout this cycle can be used to translate thought into action and gain strategy knowledge from action (Toering et al., 2009). These self-directed processes assist individuals in acquiring knowledge and skills more effectively and enable learners to transform their mental abilities into performance skills (Zimmerman, 2006). Learning more effectively may allow athletes to gain more benefit from practice and competition which will enable them to maximise their potential for progression (Toering et al., 2011). The wider sport literature has demonstrated a positive association between self-regulation and sport performance (e.g. Anshel & Porter, 1996; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2001; Toering, Elferink-Gemser, Jordet, Pepping, & Visscher, 2012), particularly at the high end of the pathway as pressures increase (Taylor & Collins, 2019). Although research has provided evidence of a link between self-regulation and progression in elite sport, many different indicators of self-regulation are used in the research which makes drawing conclusions about the specific components of self-regulation complicated.

The latest reviews of the literature in football (Gledhill et al., 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2018) have similarly identified how self-regulation can differentiate between elite and non-elite football players, however, only one study specifically examining self-regulation in football is mentioned in both reviews (Toering et al., 2009). Toering et al. (2009) examined the relationship between self-regulation and performance level in youth elite and non-elite soccer players using a questionnaire that assessed planning, self-monitoring, evaluation, reflection, effort, and self-efficacy. Elite youth football players were found to be better self-regulators than non-elite players scoring higher on self-rated reflection (“The player thinks about what he has learnt, his strengths and weaknesses, and how he can improve.”) and effort (“The player is willing to expend effort in order to successfully execute a task.”). The quantitative nature of this study is useful for demonstrating an association between self-regulation and performance, however simply highlighting a positive association between self-regulation and performance (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Toering et al., 2009; Toering et al., 2012) fails to explain how effectively regulated learning leads to more effective learning and better performance.

Toering et al. (2011) acknowledged the need for qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of self-regulatory processes in sport. Coach interviews and player observations were subsequently used to examine what effective self-regulation of learning looked like in elite youth soccer players to determine how self-regulatory processes can impact performance. Firstly, the researchers conducted coach interviews which revealed they perceived self-regulated behaviours to reflect a proactive approach to learning during training (e.g. self-regulated players were anticipated by the coaches to show verbal approach behaviours, coaching of teammates, and behaviours referring to focused practice). The second part of the study involved observing these behaviours in eight elite youth soccer players (aged 15–17 years) during training and associating observed behaviours with the players’ self-reported self-regulated learning scores to explain behavioural correlates of self-regulation. The self-regulation practice behaviours displayed most frequently were “coaching teammates (with gesture),” and “asking for the ball” whereas “verbally approach the coach during and after exercises” appeared the least. Mills et al. (2012) provided further support for coaches identifying the importance of players being able to exhibit a variety of self-regulatory skills, the elite coaches in their study discussed the need for players to self-monitor, reflect upon their technical development and be “cognizant of what the coach wants”. Recently Taylor and Collins (2019) identified a lack of self-regulatory capacity in high potential elite youth players who failed to meet their expected performance level. The

higher order theme of a lack of self-regulation was represented by the lower order themes of difficulty managing freedom, poor learning skills, poor training behaviours and a lack of focus on individual weaknesses (Taylor & Collins, 2019). These themes show some overlap with those identified in the commitment and discipline findings, for example managing freedom and sacrifice, this further demonstrates the multifaceted nature of these concepts as well as an overlap in their meaning.

These findings in elite football support the general self-regulation research (e.g. Zimmerman, 2006) that suggests that self-regulated learning is reflected in taking responsibility for learning as well as findings from previous qualitative research in youth football that has demonstrated that athletes who have excelled in their sports take responsibility for their learning (e.g. Holt & Mitchell, 2006; MacNamara et al., 2010a). The coaches in the work of Winter et al. (2019) stated how taking responsibility for development underpinned the notion of sustained development, and they described how their best athletes took ownership for their development which included taking responsibility to use the various support services on offer to them. Although Holt and Dunn (2004) did not identify self-regulation as one of the four key competencies, the previously discussed finding in relation to discipline that found that successful players engaged in extra practice and did not get influenced by friends engaging in risky activities were behaviours that reflected players taking personal responsibility for their own development. These findings further show how self-regulation can be linked to the psychological concepts discussed, in this case discipline. It has been suggested that players who make it from scholarship to professional engage in training on a more volitional basis, defined as a process that initiates an action and maintains it until a goal has been reached (Beckmann, 1987), than those who do not make it. Research in both male (Holt & Mitchell, 2006) and female (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015) elite football has found that players who failed to make the transition to professional adult soccer lacked volitional behaviour. Holt and Mitchell (2006) found that players who failed to make the transition to professional adult soccer worked hard to satisfy the demands of their coaches rather than taking personal responsibility for their long-term development and training behaviours.

In their review of the talent development in football literature, Gledhill et al. (2017) devised a concept map in which self-regulation was identified as a psychological factor leading towards career progression. The map demonstrates hypothesised relationships between three higher order themes (psychological factors, external social factors and player-level behavioural

indicators) which contributed towards increased chances of progression from the academy to senior team. It is hypothesised that self-regulation may enhance adaptive volitional behaviours (one of five player-level behavioural indicators of talent development in football on the map), this may subsequently enhance the quality of practice behaviour and lead players to seek more high-quality practice opportunities (Toering et al., 2011), which may enhance the chances of consistently high level of performance and in turn enhance the chance of career progression. This work is important as it addressed the processes through which self-regulation may act and considers the role of the elite football environment on the self-regulation of players. This is critical as research has emphasised that the training environment (i.e. coaches, teammates) should be taken into account when investigating youth soccer players' self-regulation and development (Toering et al, 2011) and will be discussed further below.

A key feature of successful TDEs is that they teach athletes to be autonomous and responsible for their own training as well as supportive in helping the athletes acquire the skills necessary to take on that responsibility. For example, the successful sailing TDE (Henriksen et al., 2010a) showed that the artifacts, values and basic assumptions of the club were centered around the elite athletes taking individual responsibility and autonomy for their own excellence, for example they emphasised the importance of athletes taking individual responsibility for their own development and encouraged athletes to be proactive in seeking any help. Autonomy and responsibility (developed through training without a coach), and a strong work ethic (always completing their training regardless of whether a coach is present, whether it is raining, or whether they are tired) were the main categories in individual development in the ESF model across successful TDEs in the HEA case studies in Scandinavia (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011).

Other contextual factors that have significant implications for athletes developing an ability to take responsibility for their own development are the interpersonal dynamics between the coach and the athlete and coach behaviours. In an examination of social-contextual correlates of players' developmental experiences across four elite youth soccer academies, Taylor and Bruner (2012) found that the extent to which players perceived that coaches build rapport with them and made them feel efficacious, valued, and autonomous made an impact on how likely players were to take opportunities to show leadership and take responsibility for their own actions in the wider soccer academy environment (Taylor, & Bruner, 2012). The authors

also suggested that coaches who are understanding of players' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness may help players manage the many and changeable emotions associated with elite performance. Individuals who felt that their needs were supported in close interpersonal relationships were more likely to emotionally regulate through social support, compared to those whose needs were not fulfilled (Taylor, & Bruner, 2012). This is important given the ability to perceive and use social support has been associated with the development of other psychological skills, for example developing resilience (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016). These findings suggest that having a psychologically satisfying relationship with one's coach may be an important tool for the development of greater personal agency, attention, and effort towards the challenges that young soccer players encounter (Taylor, & Bruner, 2012) as well as aiding the development of other psychological skills such as resilience (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016).

As introduced above, Gledhill et al. (2017) similarly considered the role of the elite football environment and more specifically the potential impact of coach behaviours on the self-regulation of players. They acknowledged that research has shown that paradoxically both volitional behaviours (Gledhill & Harwood, 2014) and conforming dedication to coach instructions (Holt & Dunn, 2004) are perceived to be important for successful development in football. Enforcing conforming dedication through autonomy thwarting coach behaviours e.g. not providing a clear rationale for decisions and not valuing player input or decision making (Stebbing, Taylor, & Spray, 2011) may reduce a player's opportunity to self-regulate and act in a volitional manner and has been associated with increased levels of behavioural disengagement from players as well as to unsuccessful efforts by players to progress to a professional football career (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015). Autonomy supportive coaching has been related to behavioural engagement (Curran, Hill, & Niemiec, 2013) and enjoyment (Quested et al., 2013). As Gledhill et al. (2017) note, coaches and other key stakeholders could benefit from education into self-regulation, including what it is, how it can impact a players' development and how they can support players' development of self-regulation through autonomy supporting behaviours.

The research discussed so far highlights the multi-faceted and complex nature of self-regulation. The self-directed processes of reflection, evaluation and planning are particularly important for the present research given their association with maximising learning from practice and competition (Toering et al., 2011). This is essential for academy soccer players

who must consistently perform to a high standard with limited time to impress the coaches and earn a professional contract. i.e. 2 years. Parallel to this is the role of the environment in facilitating players to take responsibility for learning through engaging in these self-regulatory processes (Henriksen, 2010). Self-awareness has been recognised as a fundamental precursor to effective self-regulation (Anderson, Hanrahan & Mallett, 2014; Chen & Singer, 1992) and this will be discussed in the section that follows.

### ***2.3.5.1 Self-awareness***

Self-awareness has been defined as the ability to engage in introspection and retrospection to understand one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Vealey, 2007). Mills et al. (2012) examined the experiential knowledge of elite youth football coaches and found that the ability to consciously reflect, absorb, and adapt was considered important to effectively translate one's potential into excellence and that awareness (e.g. aware of what is required to excel, capacity to reflect on experience) emerged as a fundamental agent of change that drives effective development. This work has significant applied implications given that awareness played an important role in developing the psychological skills deemed important to progress in football discussed throughout this chapter, for example by acting as a catalyst for developing resilient behaviours (e.g. coping with setbacks) and goal-directed attributes (e.g. professional attitude).

The authors suggested that reflective practice is an applied technique that would likely be beneficial in an elite football academy environment given the central role that awareness played together with the importance coaches in their study placed on creating the optimal environment. It is important to note the overlap in self-regulation and self-awareness as concepts as self-reflection has been shown to be key to improving self-awareness (Middlemas, & Harwood, 2018), reflection is also an aspect of self-regulation discussed above. Given self-awareness is a precursor to self-regulation, it is likely that reflection impacts self-regulation through self-awareness. Reflective practice can create the opportunity to recognise areas for improvement and formulate ideas for change (Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Neville, 2001). Richards, Mascarenhas, and Collins (2009) showed how reflective practice could be incorporated into coaching delivery to promote an environment in which athletes and teams are empowered to engage with, and contribute to, their technical and tactical development. Mills et al. (2012) argued that embedding structured reflective practice

within development programmes has the potential to extend beyond the tactical and technical to develop players' socio-emotional development. They contend that a more systematic and holistic approach to reflective thinking skills could help develop resilient, goal-directed, and intelligent performers to be better equipped to transcend the challenges that elite academy football presents.

More recently, literature has examined video feedback as a useful tool to help elite youth footballers prepare for and reflect on performance and training (Middlemas & Harwood, 2018). Video analysis is now widely employed in football academies and forms a significant aspect of the self-analysis and reflective logs of academy players as outlined by the EPPP (Wright, Carling, Lawlor & Collins, 2016). Wright et al. (2016) examined full time academy and senior players perceptions of the use of video performance analysis (PA) to supplement reflective practice and their engagement in the process. Although the use of video analysis has been shown to be central to self-reflection for elite players the extent to which players engaged with self-reflection varied (Wright et al., 2016). They found that the dissemination of team PA generated feedback varied significantly across the clubs in their study, from a highly coach-centered directive delivery of instructional information, to an approach which facilitated open discussions. Players felt that being engaged in the process through the more open approach enhanced their learning, game understanding, individual development and identification of strengths and weaknesses. Whilst some players recognised that PA played a predominant role in their own independent reflection on their performance in their own time, some players acknowledged they were unable to self-reflect effectively without the assistance of the coaching staff and felt they would benefit from further guidance in what to look for and why. The authors concluded that a 'one size fits all' approach to PA is flawed, players' preferred learning approach as well as the coaches' approach to forming and delivering PA should be considered to maximise impact. This requires coaches to have a strong awareness of their own delivery approaches and preferences (Wright et al., 2016).

In a study examining the role of psychological factors within the delivery of video feedback in elite youth football, Middlemas, and Harwood (2018) found that elite youth coaches identified reflective thinking as a desirable quality for video feedback analysis sessions, this was represented by players seeking help (e.g. asking questions) and apologising for errors. Both coaches and players reported self-reflection and self-awareness as important aspects of the ability to cope with challenges in the academy environment such as poor performance,

deselection, and losing. The finding that reflection and awareness facilitate resilience supports the work of Mills et al. (2012) and is another example that has highlighted the complexity and interconnectedness of the key variables thought to facilitate player success.

Larsen et al. (2012) similarly demonstrated that self-awareness was deemed an important psychosocial characteristic by those inside the elite academy environment. Self-awareness was a psychosocial skill which the club explicitly talked about in the environment as well as in documents and yearly reports. Coaches in their study reported that players need self-awareness in order to survive the demands of the game, conceptualising it as players' ability to believe in their talent and skills, be reflexive about their development and understand how to act in different situations. The authors' observations and informal talks allowed a deeper understanding of implicit aspects of self-awareness as a psychosocial skill which represented dealing with unknowns about future, displaying patience and self-confidence to maintain their position in the club, and learning to accept a different life than their peers. Although not discussed by the authors the aspects of self-awareness found in this study appear to overlap with the other psychosocial skills addressed earlier in this review, for example self-confidence is a personal quality involved in resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

#### ***2.3.5.2 Summary***

In conclusion, self-regulation has been identified as an important psychological characteristic as it can assist individuals in learning more effectively (Zimmerman, 2006) and the latest reviews of the literature in football identified self-regulation as a key psychological characteristic possessed by successful players. Although earlier literature highlighted a positive association between self-regulation and sport performance (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Toering et al., 2009; Toering et al., 2012) it failed to address the processes through which self-regulated learning leads to more effective learning and better performance. An increase in qualitative work in the last decade (Gledhill et al., 2017; Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012; Taylor & Collins, 2019; Toering et al., 2011), beginning with the seminal work by Toering et al. (2011) has allowed for a deeper insight into what effective self-regulation of learning looks like in elite youth soccer players and highlighted the importance of players being proactive and taking responsibility for their learning. Toering et al. (2011) were the first to use observation methods to study self-regulation in elite football, they emphasised that the training environment (i.e. coaches, teammates) should be taken into account when

investigating youth soccer players' self-regulation and development and the key self-regulatory behaviours identified in their work will be useful for the observations in this research. Similarly, self-awareness has been identified as a fundamental agent of change that drives effective development. Research in the last decade has demonstrated the importance of self-awareness for success in elite football and suggested it may play a mediating role in developing other key psychological factors such as resilience (Larsen et al., 2012; Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012). There is clearly overlap between the concepts of self-regulation and self-awareness in the literature, for example both encompass the ability to reflect and reflective thinking has been shown to be a significant regulatory strategy used by high-level players in youth football (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Toering et al., 2009). Both appear to underpin processes that facilitate learning a range of skills including the key psychological skills of resilience and goal commitment discussed earlier in the literature review, more research within an English elite youth football context is needed to explore how this may occur.

### **2.3.6 Development of psychosocial skills**

Much of the available research, as discussed throughout this section, has focused on identifying the psychosocial skills necessary for optimal talent development in elite youth football. Although this has allowed for a good understanding of the characteristics which differentiate those players who progress onto the professional level, limited research has developed and examined the effect of applied psychological interventions to specifically target the development of these characteristics and integrate their development practices into the academy scholarship phase. This appears in part due to environmental barriers including a lack of coach understanding of their role in the psychological development process (Champ et al., 2020b) and a continued stigma attached to psychological support (Gervis, Pickford, Hau, & Fruth, 2020).

#### ***2.3.6.1 Coach education***

Research has demonstrated that whilst psychosocial skills were perceived as important for progressing in football, they were inadequately addressed in the academy environment relative to other aspects of performance such as technical skills and physical conditioning (Cook et al., 2014; Larsen et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2012). This suggests a disconnect between

the perceived importance of the psychological aspect of development and its systematic application within existing development programmes. This disconnect may be due to a lack of understanding, as one coach in the work by Mills et al. (2012) explained, “The reality is we don’t get involved in SP because the majority of us don’t understand it enough and we should be honest and say that” (Mills et al., 2012, p. 1600). Cook et al. (2014) found that coaches similarly reported a relative lack of knowledge about effectively nurturing psychological development in players.

A need for increased coach education has subsequently been advocated, both in relation to coach understanding of the psychosocial aspects of performance (Mills et al., 2014b) as well as their role in the psychological development process (Champ, 2018). The coach plays an important role in the psychological development of athletes through their role in emanating the organisational culture and motivational climate (e.g. Gledhill et al., 2017; Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002; Mills et al., 2014b). Furthermore, the interpersonal dynamics between the coach and the athlete and coach behaviours have significant implications for athlete psychological development (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016; Taylor, & Bruner, 2012). Champ (2018) suggested that coaches may not be aware of their role in developing psychological characteristics in young players; the elite youth coaches in her study believed that it was only through life experiences and home background that players would develop characteristics such as resilience. Many of these coaches were ex-professional football players themselves and spoke about how dealing with challenging experiences on their own contributed to their development. This might be problematic given that too much challenge without relevant support has the potential to compromise well-being (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Champ (2018) suggested that coaches may benefit from education about their role in the process of developing psychological characteristics.

The need for coach education has also been supported more specifically in relation to the development of self-regulation (Gledhill et al., 2017). Gledhill et al. (2017) suggested that coaches (as well as other key stakeholders) may benefit from education into what it is, how it can influence a player's talent development and how coaches can support players' self-regulation development. This is significant given Toering et al. (2011) found that self-regulation of learning is individually determined and behaviours were open to different interpretation by coaches and players. As Toering et al. (2011) stated it is often the coach who makes the decision about who is selected for a team and who progresses in an academy

and although they may not always be accurate, their perceptions of behaviour are thus crucial. From an applied perspective it is recommended that both coaches and players are educated that behaviours can be interpreted in different ways (Toering et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is important that coaches are made aware of any potential disparity that exists between players and coaches in relation to which aspects of player development are most important so the players can be informed of coaches' expectations; closing the gap on any potential misunderstanding.

The case study in this research project will provide an opportunity to critically analyse and compare the perspectives of both players and coaches. Although research has clearly established a need for coach education around their role in psychosocial development, much of the literature in elite youth football simply ends with a short-applied recommendation in relation to coach education. There is a lack of literature specifically addressing how these ideas about the coaches' role in developing psychological skills can be put into practice in real world football academies (Sarmiento et al., 2018).

#### ***2.3.6.2 Role of the sport psychologist***

The continued finding that the limited application of SP is a cultural factor that hinders the developmental process (e.g. Cook et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2012) is concerning given that it is now nearly two decades since the FA launched its Psychology for Football strategy. A core objective of the strategy was to increase the awareness and application of SP within professional football and professional youth academies based on the 5C concept (confidence, control, concentration, communication, commitment). This involved education for coaches, players, and support staff (including SPPs) through a range of courses (Harwood, 2008). In their recent research into psychological support mechanisms for long-term injured footballers, Gervis et al. (2020) found that despite the FA's objective to increase the awareness and application of SP in English football (Pain & Harwood 2004) cultural barriers continue to prevent the implementation of psychological support. The role of education in reducing the stigma currently attached to psychological support has been discussed (Pain & Harwood 2004; Gervis et al., 2020) for the last decade and a half with calls for psychological support to be rebranded as 'performance coaching', however, little appears to have changed in the culture and psychological support continues to be stigmatised and not fully understood within football.

The lack of knowledge and scepticism about SP has been discussed in relation to a lack of clarity around the services practitioners can provide and problems integrating SPPs into high-performance organisations (Johnson, Anderson, & Fallby, 2011). Larsen (2017) explained that SPPs have been incorrectly perceived as problem fixers, as opposed to “architects of hurricane-proof, long-term psychological foundations in athletes” (Harwood & Steptoe, 2013, p. 169). Johnson et al. (2011) acknowledged some coaches “articulated fear and a negative perception about SP consultants because of distorted prior knowledge about the potential of SP services, such as perceiving it as ‘mumbo jumbo’ or just being about relaxation training in the locker room” (p. 315). Subsequently, more education of the role of the psychologist in supporting players is needed to create an environment where psychological support is valued and normalised. It is important to note that there are several fragmented approaches to SP delivery and worryingly, numerous people engaged in practice are not registered, chartered or licensed psychologists (Anderson, 2005). Given a looseness of approaches taken within the SP field itself it is perhaps unsurprising that there is an uncertainty around the role of the SPP from stakeholders. This suggests a need for more clarity within the field itself.

Since the Psychology for Football strategy was launched scant research has explored its practical delivery and effectiveness for developing the psychosocial needs within elite youth academy football. It has been argued that in focusing on the 5Cs and the delivery of mental skills training, the EPPP has overlooked some of the significant psychological challenges that young footballers face (Champ, 2018). It has been suggested that a deeper level of support beyond mental skills training is needed as although mental skills training might help performers to enhance specific psychological characteristics associated with performance it may at times plaster over the cause of the issue (Nesti, 2010), often psychological issues need more holistic support. Arguably, coaches still need a better understanding of SP as a discipline beyond the 5C psychological characteristics, this in turn might help to reduce the stigma and promote acceptance of its integration within the youth development framework (Champ, 2018).

As discussed in the previous section, there is growing recognition that SP practice within professional youth football may best be delivered at an environmental level (e.g. Champ et al., 2020a; Larsen et al., 2014) and a more holistic and systems-wide psychological and social support approach is required to promote wellbeing alongside maximising performance

(Henriksen & Stambolova, 2017; Green, 2020;). This implies a SPP would need to be fully immersed in an academy to gain an in-depth understanding of the sub-cultural features and characteristics of the organisation (Champ et al., 2020a). As Green et al. (2020) recently noted, “remembering that, first and foremost, a young footballer is a person attempting to navigate their way through life, is the back-bone of being able to support players psychologically and socially in an elite academy” (Green et al., 2020, p, 63). Larsen et al. (2012) similarly highlighted the need for both the player and the systems surrounding the player to consider a “holistic awareness” in their ongoing development of soccer skills which meant there was a focus on the importance of creating awareness in the whole environment (coaches, teachers, coordinators, family) that talent development and the progression to professional soccer is centered around the player as a whole person. The review of the TDEs in elite youth football literature conducted by Gledhill et al. (2017) suggested that overall, TDEs may not be adopting a holistic approach to talent development and may still be reluctant to change their psychosocial development practices.

There are some exceptions that have demonstrated how the development of psychological skills can be integrated across the academy environment. Larsen et al. (2014) provided an ecological-inspired program and intervention which targeted the development of psychosocial skills (e.g.. coping with adversity and setting own goals) which despite being recognised as important for the transition to the professional level were not taught as part of training. These psychosocial skills were introduced and developed through workshops which encouraged players to reflect and better understand themselves and their learning processes. The coach and SPP had daily contact during the program to enable the coach to work independently to practice and integrate the workshop themes into training. Coaches, management staff and players reflected that the program was a success. Following the intervention coaches highlighted players were more autonomous and reflective and they reported more quality in training due to having an increased awareness of goals. In line with the findings of Mills et al. (2012), this suggests that reflective processes which enhance self-awareness may have a mediating role in developing other key psychological factors such as resilience and goal setting. Larsen et al. (2014) discussed how the coach was closely involved and played a pivotal role in the success of the intervention through positively advocating the program and integrating the topics from the workshops and the perspectives of the program into daily training. The coach recognised that his involvement was fundamental for long-term program success. This led the authors to reflect on the key points for consideration when

delivering intervention programs from an ecological perspective; stimulating relationships inside an environment are time consuming but necessary, the coach's acceptance and support in the intervention programme is paramount as is taking SP onto the pitch. This work emphasised the importance of delivering SP from an ecological approach and the benefits of integrating it into the environment, psychological skills need to be practised regularly and the environment can facilitate this development. Whilst these findings are promising, the authors note that the ecological program was eventually terminated due to a lack of financing, which underlines that although they had made good progress, SP was still not a top priority in football (Larsen et al., 2014). The aforementioned work by Green et al. (2020) also described and reflected on the advantages of using a holistic, systematic and practical approach to psychosocial development in a category one academy. Their 'psych-social team' (PST) worked to integrate their psychosocial model of development across an MDT to create a psychologically informed and safe environment to enhance performance and development of the young players. It is important that future research within an English elite youth football context continues to examine how a holistic, systematic and practical approach impacts the development of other key psychological skills.

It is important to return to the concluding point from Section A that recommendations that SPPs work at an environmental level to shape cultural change and embed psychosocial development into an academy's culture (e.g. Mills et al., 2014a) may be somewhat idealistic given the "short-term approach" (i.e. a need to win, avoid relegation and survive at all costs) inherent in professional football (Larsen, 2017). Larsen (2017) shared his experiences of delivering a SP program in a Danish professional soccer club. His overall responsibilities as clarified by the top management involved a long-term perspective of making SP an important part of performance enhancement in the club, yet, midway into the season following several sub-standard team performances the head coach was dismissed which impacted the practice of the SP program in the club. The club shifted focus to surviving relegation, and the arrival of a new head coach meant less interest in SP and neglect of developmental areas which had previously been identified as important, ultimately the SP program and his role with the club ended. This work demonstrated how the short-term approach in football impacts the operating culture of the organisation and how this conflicts with the long-term focus and a stable environment preferential for SP delivery, put simply by Larsen, "in professional sports results trump processes" (Larsen, 2017, p. 7).

### 2.3.7 Summary

In conclusion, there appears to be a universal acceptance that an individual's psychological skillset is essential when describing what it takes to reach an elite level in football (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). More specifically, research has identified that self-regulation, resilience, commitment and discipline are regarded as fundamental characteristics for successful development in elite football. Literature highlights a disconnect between the perceived importance of psychological factors and their systematic application within elite academies (Mills et al., 2012) and a failure to address psychological development continues to be a key factor in the derailment of high potential players (Taylor & Collins, 2019). The existent literature confirms the complexity of the role of psychological factors in the talent development process by highlighting the multifaceted nature of each of these factors, as well as an overlap between the meaning of factors. Despite this there is a lack of research investigating the interaction and development of these psychological characteristics in elite football academies, e.g. when these skills might be developed (i.e., training, pre-match, in-match, post-match) and how the social agents within the academy can best facilitate this development. It is unsurprising then that elite coaches have reported a lack of understanding about effectively nurturing psychological development in players (Cook et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2012). Whilst there is growing recognition that psychological development is impacted by social and organisational factors and that a more ecological approach is needed (Larsen et al., 2014), research explicitly examining how the academy environment interacts with these psychological factors in the talent development process in English football remains limited. There is a lack of clear practical advice regarding strategies to create an environment that optimises their development in real world football academies. A hopeful exception is the recent work of Green et al. (2020) which advocates the importance of building a psychologically informed environment integrating psychosocial development across all areas of the academy. More examples of detailed, scientific accounts of best-practice is needed to help SPPs to assist academies in optimising their environments for psychosocial development (Mills et al., 2014a).

## 2.4 Summary of the literature review

This chapter has provided an in-depth exploration of the literature addressing the role of psychosocial skills in talent development in football and the importance of the TDE in psychosocial development. Reviewing the available research in these areas has identified a number of gaps in the current body of knowledge, thus providing support for the objectives of this study. There is widespread acceptance in the literature that psychosocial skills are necessary for successful progression in elite football and growing recognition that the development of these skills is impacted by environmental factors. Alongside this it has been acknowledged that a more holistic and systems-wide approach to delivering SP practice within professional youth football at an environmental level (e.g. Champ et al., 2020a; Larsen et al., 2014) is required to promote holistic psychosocial development alongside maximising performance (Henriksen & Stambolova, 2017; Green et al., 2020). Despite this the role of the football academy environment on psychosocial development has not yet received sufficient research attention. A dearth of studies to date have focused exclusively on the social-cultural environment in elite football academies and relatively little is known about the environments that are created to support players at this fundamental developmental stage. A recent review of the talent development literature in male football highlighted this issue (Sarmiento et al., 2018) concluding that there is a need for more research on the psychological and environmental aspects impacting talent development in football. A seminal body of research developed in the last decade has demonstrated that both applied psychology practitioners and talent development research can benefit from taking a HEA to talent development and that successful environments possess common features (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). To date, the HEA has only been conducted within TDEs in Scandinavia and the success of the approach in these contexts suggest that it could be successfully employed to examine English football. Given the lack of research addressing how the academy environment interacts with psychosocial development in the talent development process in English football there is a need for an in-depth exploration of the day-to-day settings and experiences of the staff and players in the English academy environment. The two working models (ATDE & EDF) offered by the HEA will provide a framework for the present study to structure and present findings from a unique and complex elite academy environment in an understandable format.

As well as providing a lens to examine specific TDEs, the HEA also recommends a case study methodology (Henriksen et al., 2020). As highlighted throughout this chapter, to date, research on the environment in football has frequently used structured questionnaires, instruments and interviews to collect data (e.g. Mills et al., 2014a; 2014b). A case study will provide greater depth to this line of research and broaden the method of data collection to gain insight into the players', coaches', administrators' and support staffs' perspective of the academy experience and psychosocial development which are grounded in actual experiences and observations, rather than ideals (Cook et al., 2014). To date, no researcher has spent a prolonged period within an English Category 1 academy to gain insight into the TDE specifically in relation to player psychosocial development. The current study will help to gain a better understanding of how players' holistic psychosocial development is currently, or could be better, embedded within the academy environment which will have important implications for SPPs looking to optimise the environment. This contributes to a growing body of literature moving beyond a focus on individual skills and beliefs to an understanding of influence of the environment. This is important given there is a lack of research which gives applied recommendations as to how to create an environment that optimises player development in real world football academies. A holistic understanding of players' lived experiences is also imperative from a moral stance given the alarming statistics on the small number of boys who go on to make a career in the game (Calvin, 2018). Finally, there is a need to examine whether the aims of the EPPP to develop young boys holistically are being met and to determine whether the TDE is equipping young academy players with psychosocial skills that will optimise their development both on and off the pitch.

## **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

A single case study and qualitative design were used to address the objectives of this thesis. This chapter will first explain the philosophical and theoretical underpinning of the research to provide a rationale behind the methodology. This discussion is followed by a detailed explanation of the research methods by addressing the process of gaining access, the setting and the participants and the procedures to collect and analyse the data. The chapter ends with methodological reflections regarding the researcher role, research quality and ethical considerations.

### **3.1 Rationale for the methodology**

The paradigmatic positioning of the research is outlined by addressing the epistemological, ontological and methodological positioning the researcher has taken, which is discussed in the wider context of research paradigms in the field of SP.

#### **3.1.1 Research paradigms in sport psychology**

Kuhn's (1970) seminal work has been credited for encouraging researchers in the social sciences to attend to the notion of paradigms (Schempp & Choi, 1994) and this work continues to be frequently cited and influential today. The concept of a research paradigm is complicated, exacerbated by the fact that it has been defined in different ways. Guba and Lincoln (1989) conceptualised the term as a belief system that allows one to see and make sense of the social world. This idea was advanced by Sparkes (1992) who proposed that the values and assumptions of each paradigm are learned and established via socialization and acquiring certain assumptions regarding questions of ontology and epistemology (Sparkes, 1992). Epistemology refers to questions about the nature of knowledge, and the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known. Closely linked with epistemology is the issue of ontology which relates to questions regarding the nature of existence, i.e. what is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2005). Whilst it is generally accepted across the social sciences that researchers' worldviews and assumptions regarding the nature of reality, truth, and the social world are important to assist the reader in understanding how they have

impacted the research (Morrow, 2005), much research within the field of SP simply describes the methods employed in the research and fails to explicitly address the paradigmatic positioning of the researcher. This is problematic given that researchers may use the same methods but from a very different research paradigm (Van Maanen, 1988), as Avis (2005) recognised: “Neither qualitative nor quantitative research can be seen as a methodological monolith” (Avis, 2005, p.2). The current thesis addresses this issue by explicitly discussing the ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs associated with the positioning of this thesis to enable the reader to understand how they have guided the formulation of research questions and selection of suitable methodology (Schemmp & Choi, 1994).

To provide context to the position taken in this research, the major philosophical assumptions of two paradigmatic extremes (positivist and interpretivist/constructivist) will be contrasted and the emergence of post-positivism in SP introduced. Positivists embrace objective epistemological and ontological positions, assuming there is a single true reality that can be measured and understood through experimental design and without interference from the researcher’s values (Giacobbi, Poczwardowski, & Hager, 2005). In contrast, interpretivist/constructivists deny the existence of permanent objective truths about reality and instead adopt epistemological and ontological views that embrace subjective understanding on the assumption that there are multiple realities (often co-existing) constructed through lived experiences and interactions with others. In addition, interpretivist/constructivist paradigms posit that reality is co-created by the researcher and participants and the researcher cannot separate themselves from what they are investigating (Giacobbi et al., 2005). These paradigmatic positions also primarily differ in the methods used; positivists tend to adopt quantitative methods that emphasise prediction and control and believe that findings can be generalised across different contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) whereas interpretivist/constructivists tend to use qualitative and multi-method approaches. Traditionally, SP research was conducted predominantly from a linear positivist approach and group- orientated empirical studies dominated with the aim to establish broad, general, and universal laws (Clark-Carter, 2010). Whilst undoubtedly important for scientific development in psychology, in emphasising prediction, generalisability and control nomothetic (i.e. a tendency to generalise) studies neglected the complexities of social life (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Over the last 35 years a number of researchers (Brustad, 2002; Dewar & Horn, 1992; Krane, 1994; Krane & Baird, 2005; Martens, 1987) have recognised this and have expressed the need for SP to embrace alternate research paradigms and

increased flexibility in research designs in order to enhance knowledge and understanding within the field. These appeals for alternative ways of knowing led to an increase in research which has questioned the wholly positivistic view of value-free inquiry. This led to an increase in qualitative research, although SP as a discipline continued to operate within a mostly positivist view, as highlighted by Culver et al. (2003) “like the wolf in sheep’s clothing, much of the qualitative research in SP has been conducted from a descriptive/quantitative approach under the guise of qualitative research” (p. 7), in this way the emerging qualitative research was often grounded in this traditional view, assuming a post-positivistic stance. Post-positivism, like positivism adopts an objective epistemological and ontological position and single reality, but unlike positivism it claims our understanding of that reality is imperfect and is constructed through research. Post positivism therefore acknowledges an approximate truth and objectivity rather than absolute, and probability rather than certainty (McGannon, Smith, Kendellen & Gonsalves, 2019) and embraces a wider range of methods, including quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods (Krane & Baird, 2005). Whilst somewhat acknowledging the complexities of social life, post positivism often undermines this by continuing to use traditional evaluation criteria and quantify data with the aim to produce valid, and generalizable research (Larsen, 2013). Post-positivism is now the dominant paradigm for qualitative research in SP (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron & Sweet, 2020). In their recent review of the psychosocial factors associated with talent development in football, Gledhill et al. (2017) emphasised the continued bias towards descriptive, correlational and cross-sectional research designs in the literature, their search yielded 43 eligible studies, 29 of which were quantitative compared to only 12 qualitative and 2 mixed-methods.

Krane and Baird (2005) recognised that a shortfall of much emerging qualitative work was that it failed to address the paradigmatic positioning of the researcher which is problematic given various belief systems underline the methods used within nonpositivist paradigms and researchers may use comparable methods from very different epistemological perspectives. An adequate explanation of the researcher’s belief systems underlying their choice of methods is essential for the reader to understand the interpretation of findings and omitting this reduces the extent to which the research can be understood with certainty (Krane & Baird,2005). In the time since this claim, more qualitative SP researchers have acknowledged this limitation and more adequately explained the belief systems underpinning their choice of methods and analytical strategies (e.g. Champ et al., 2020a; Larsen et al., 2013).

Subsequently, broadly categorised interpretive and critical epistemological perspectives, what Lincoln and Guba (2000) called “new paradigm inquiry” have challenged positivism (and post-positivism) research in the sport setting and examined the complexities of social life with renewed insight (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). An understanding of the paradigmatic approach facilitates the reader in gaining a better understanding of the basis for the study and can help to establish an understanding of the nature of the knowledge about the phenomenon under study, how this knowledge is collected, the position of the researcher, and the impact of the researcher's values on the findings from the study (Krane and Baird, 2005). For example, Champ et al. (2020a) explicitly states and discusses her social constructionist approach which helps to increase clarity as to how she formulated her questions, selected methodologies and interpreted her findings.

As discussed in the literature review, the HEA to talent development research (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2010;11; Larsen et al., 2013) represented progress from talent development primarily being viewed as a static, linear and stable cause-and-effect process of being, to the changeable and dynamic process of becoming. Larsen and colleagues (2013) explicitly made a deliberate attempt to move away from positivism into paradigms that were at the time mostly uncultivated in SP. In line with the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and systems theory (Kneer & Nassehi, 1997) on which it is based, this thesis assumes that the complex world does not fit a simple linear model (Luhmann, 2000) and recognises that constituent parts interact to form a whole system which is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts. As Larsen (2013) states this approach is embedded in both social constructionism and constructivism, nonpositivist (but not synonymous) paradigmatic approaches which emphasise social processes as a crucial part of meaning and understanding in human activity, that advocate the use of in-depth methods such as ethnography, case studies or action research to assess symbolic relationships and meanings, providing a more subjective epistemological basis for study. In line with the HEA, the paradigmatic position taken in this thesis is built on a foundational belief that the complex world is constructed by dynamic and movable processes. Given the aim of this research was to increase understanding within a social context (elite youth football academy), the research was positioned within a social constructionist, interpretive paradigm.

### **3.1.2 The social constructionist approach**

The social constructionist approach is one of relativism, it accounts for the complex processual nature of reality, suggesting that there are multiple perspectives of understanding the world which coexist in parallel rather than one objective and ‘true’ account of human psychological and social phenomena (Burr, 2015). This fits with the prior literature exploring talent development in sport from a HEA that each case is unique and complex and must be examined from multiple perspectives as no simple model of explanation can account for complex phenomena (Henriksen et al., 2020). The constructionist approach advocates that all phenomena occur from social life, the interactions between people and the meaning-making activities of groups and individuals around those phenomena (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). These interactions are given structure and content by the social conditions in which we are embedded (culture, economic conditions and power relations) which are subject to constant fluctuation. Social constructionism seeks to understand the mental lives of selves in relation, recognising the subjective human creation of meaning and the ways humans create, institutionalise and make traditions from social phenomena. This requires a critical approach regarding our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (Burr, 2015).

The subjectivist epistemology adopted, acknowledges the subjective nature of reality and claims that knowledge is created through social interaction, and therefore situated. As such there is a need to understand the everyday patterns of interaction which create, sustain, and alter social rules and meaning (Cornbleth, 1990). Epistemologically there is the assumption that the researcher and the object of research are interactively connected so that the data is created as the research proceeds and knowledge personally experienced. A relativist ontology recognised the social construction of reality throughout, alongside the assumption that reality should be interpreted rather than measured. This requires a close collaboration between the researcher and the participant, while enabling participants to describe their views of reality through their stories (Pink, 2015). This brought to the fore the principles that there are multiple social realities and truth is relative and it impacted by one’s perspective. Assuming that there is a singular knowable truth, the researcher risks overgeneralising or overlooking significant versions of reality (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000). The research process aimed to recognise the array of constructions that existed to create as much consensus as possible (Guba, 1989) and the naturalistic and qualitative set of methodological procedures occurred in the natural world of those under study (Champ et al., 2020). This is in line with

interpretivism which embraces an ideographic approach to research and emphasises the use of qualitative research methods to uncover the subjective human creation of meaning of participants (Poczwadowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002).

## **3.2 Research methodology**

The researcher must be clear on their methodological approach concerned with the logic of scientific inquiry (Grix, 2002) before the actual methods (e.g. the procedures to collect and treat data eventually resulting in new knowledge) can be designed and implemented consistent with that methodology (Pink, 2015). This section explains the choice of methodology, or procedural rules which guided the researcher to the specific methods used (Krane and Baird, 2005). As clarified above, a researchers' epistemological beliefs are interconnected with their methodology and this section builds on the last.

### **3.2.1 The qualitative case study as a research strategy**

A qualitative case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p 12). Since this thesis is interested in examining holistic psychosocial development in the TDE in the social unit of a single elite youth academy, a single case study and qualitative design were used. Qualitative case study methodology offers tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and allows for a rich understanding as the researcher becomes the ‘instrument’ of research. In the current thesis this choice of methodology provided a lens into the players’ and staff members’ experiences and how they perceive their environment. Given the ecological perspective views talent development and behaviour as the product of the interaction between the person and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), a case study offered an appropriate methodological choice for an in-depth exploration, interpretation, and understanding of the academy environment whilst retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2009).

Two of the main approaches that direct case study methodology are provided by Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) respectively, and this thesis drew on elements of both of them. Both aim to ensure that the subject is well examined, and that the core of the phenomenon is revealed in its complexity and entirety (Baxter & Jack, 2008). There are also central differences to

consider. In a comparison of the main approaches Yazan (2015) acknowledges that whilst Yin does not explicitly state his epistemological orientation he demonstrates positivistic leanings in his work, for example by discussing the importance that case study researchers “maximise four conditions related to design quality: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability” (Yin, 2002, p. 19). In comparison, Stake is explicit that constructivism and existentialism (non-determinism) epistemologies should position and inform the qualitative case study and views qualitative case study researchers as interpreters, and gatherers of interpretations. As such there is a need for qualitative researchers to report their interpretation or construction of the constructed reality or knowledge that they collect.

The approach taken in this research is social constructionist, however like Stake’s constructivist approach is nonpositivist and emphasises that multiple perspectives of understanding coexist, knowledge is constructed and reality should be interpreted rather than measured. In this way whilst my approach aligns more closely epistemologically with Stake (1995) than Yin (2002), some of the strategies and guidelines suggested by Yin are embraced and the case study approach taken by this thesis is synthesised by both approaches. Yin (2003) recommended that a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions and when it is perceived that the context plays a central role in explaining and understanding the phenomenon being studied. Stake (1995) acknowledged qualitative case studies are appropriate if a bounded system is being examined where behaviour is patterned. As Holt and Mitchell (2006) recognise “a sports team is a bounded system with clear lines of identification and membership where players and coaches engage in patterns of repeated practices and games over time” (Holt & Mitchell, 2006, p 81). Accordingly, a qualitative case study was a suitable methodology for this thesis for a number of reasons. Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) assert that it is incumbent that case study data is drawn from multiple sources to ensure the case under study is captured through a variety of lenses and multiple facets of the phenomenon are revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This thesis data was collected using a range of methods (discussed in the data collection section below) to gain a deep and rich understanding about the environment and psychosocial development in a single elite football academy, with the aim to extend knowledge in the field of research on psychosocial development in the elite youth football TDE.

### **3.2.2 Case study design and implementation**

It is important to approach a case study with a clear process as failure to produce a logical research design can limit the potential depth and understanding of findings, recommendations, and conclusions (Yin, 2003). Baxter and Jack's (2008) work on qualitative case study design and implementation was drawn on for designing the present case study. This section provides an overview of the design process.

### **3.2.3 Determining and binding the case**

Determining the unit of analysis is a vital initial step in the case study design process. As documented within relevant literature (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) the case study approach involves intensive analysis of a phenomenon (unit of analysis) occurring in a bounded context (defined by space and time) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the present study, the unit under examination is the academy (the 'space') during one competitive season (time). Once the case is determined, consideration needs to be given to what the case will and will not examine to ensure the study remains reasonable in scope of the research timeline, funding, and personnel (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To achieve this the literature has recommended placing boundaries on a case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) which clearly indicate the breadth and depth of the study and not simply the sample to be included. A case can be bound by time, activity, place, definition, and context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The present case study has been bound by the academy chosen, the period of data collection (November-end of season), and the focus on the academy environment and players' psychosocial development from a holistic ecological perspective.

### **3.2.4 Determining the type of case study**

Swanborn (2010) suggested that in selecting a case, pragmatic criteria are often combined with substantive criteria. Yin (2003) differentiates between explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive categories as well as single, holistic and multiple-case studies. In this work, a single case study was appropriate due to the theory building nature of the work (Yin, 2003), the holistic nature of the unique academy environment as well as access to a single academy. Stake (1995) discusses four defining characteristics of qualitative research at large (and as such qualitative case studies): "holistic", "empirical", "interpretive" and "emphatic", all of

which are met in the current research. The case is holistic in that it considers the interrelationship between the phenomenon under study and its contexts, empirical in that it is based on observations in the field, interpretive in that the researcher- subject interaction and the role of the researcher as co-constructor of the reality that is being examined are acknowledged and empathic in that the vicarious experiences of the participants are reflected in an emic perspective (Yazan, 2015).

Like all social knowledge, is important to consider what makes for comprehensive qualitative research and how the researcher can “persuade his/her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). There are two major traditional approaches to theory in practicing case study research. Despite the differences, the main objective of both approaches is to offer explanation. The first, the theory testing approach is derived from experimental research and uses cases as the means to confirm or reject pre-chosen theory (Maaloe, 2004). In contrast, the theory building approach is grounded in an inductive accumulation of data with no bias towards prechosen theory, at its extreme this approach is grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). Aquilina (2013) notes that merely reporting collecting data inductively to build explanations into theory is too simple an account since “the data we collect or the phenomena we choose to look at, and treat seriously, rather than regarding as trivial, are a product of prior thoughts, concepts, conceptual schemes or theories” (Aquilina, 2013, p, 382). This suggests it is important that the researcher acknowledges their theoretical influences on the data collection process. On this basis, Maaloe (2004) proposed the need for a third, broader approach beyond simply searching for explanatory evidence that considers a sensitivity for the context. Maaloe’s explorative integration approach to case studies was used which is “a cyclic approach of a continuous dialogue between pre-chosen theories, generated data, the researcher’s interpretation, and feedback from informants, which will hopefully lead to more inclusive theory building or even understanding” (Maaloe, 2004, p. 8). Data collection and analysis are intertwined in this approach, in contrast to retrospective studies which assume that the researcher knows the research question in advance of data collection. This provides the opportunity to formulate questions one may not have anticipated, but that later may prove to be very important (Yin, 2009). A major strength of this approach is that it allows for the researcher’s assumptions to be tested based on actual events as they occur (Flyvbjerg, 2006) as I continually received new information during the data collection I was able to incorporate this knowledge into the overarching research questions. This is in line with Nilsen and

colleagues (2012) who claimed that reality is best understood as a (re) construction that occurs in the encounter between the researcher and the subjects of science.

### **3.2.5 Conceptual framework**

The research initially proposed to investigate and contribute to holistic ecological perspectives in talent development and psychosocial development. As discussed in the literature review, this approach is holistic in nature and in line with ecological approaches highlights the power of the environmental context on human behaviour. Developed in the last decade, the HEA provides a lens to examine specific TDEs as well as principles to inform applied SP work (Henriksen et al., 2020). The HEA provides empirical versions of two working models (ATDE & EDF) to structure and present findings from complex environments in an understandable format. Similar to Larsen et al. (2013), who applied the HEA to an elite football academy in Denmark, the case is a “paradigmatic case selection”, as it was chosen with the aim “to maximise the utility of information from small samples and single case [and] to develop a metaphor or establish a school for the domain that the case concerns” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). I entered the research with a scholarly curiosity and a general sense of what I wanted to examine based on my knowledge of the HEA to talent development, however I approached observations with an open mind and broad research questions. My review and understanding of the holistic ecological literature was imperative to help focus initial observations, identify key data, and direct continued observations and interviews (Frow & Morris, 2000) based on what the social group members believed important (Krane and Baird, 2005). The research methodology used aligns with that recommended by the HEA, specifically a case study approach which takes a contemporary view of the environment (as opposed to retrospective) with data collected from multiple sources. Basing research on a conceptual framework (i.e. the HEA) in this way poses a risk of limiting the inductive approach when researching a phenomenon. Taking this into account, I kept a journal of my thoughts and decisions throughout the process and discussed these with my supervisor /other researchers to highlight if my thinking had become too driven by the framework. This was used as a safeguard against becoming too deductive.

### **3.3 Research methods**

This section outlines in detail the research methods used, from the process of gaining access to the club to the procedures used to collect and analyse the data.

#### **3.3.1 Access**

Prior to beginning this research, I had spent 18 months in an intern role of mental skills coach at HFC. This afforded a natural entry to an elite football club and provided an opportunistic case for research in an environment which is notoriously difficult for academic researchers to access (Moore, & Stokes, 2012). The familiarisation established in this time allowed me to build trust with the academy staff and enabled me to discuss my broad research ideas in a meeting with the gatekeeper (academy manager) informally whilst in the mental skills coach role. He thought this was something the academy would be interested in and gave preliminary acceptance, informing me the next step would be to arrange a formal meeting with the head of the academy. I felt a mixture of nerves and excitement during this meeting; although I had a broad idea to assert which I felt had potential to add value to the academy, at this stage I knew little about which direction this might go and like other researchers before me felt a sense of “authority without expertise” (Rock, 2001 p.33). My nerves were quickly calmed when the head of the academy confirmed the club would benefit from research in the psychosocial development space. I then had a number of meetings with the projects and innovations manager at the club regarding the club’s research protocols (e.g. the process of gaining participant consent) and a formal research proposal was compiled and approved.

#### **3.3.2 Setting and participants**

HFC is an English professional association football club founded over 140 years ago. During the season of study the club competed in the English Premier League. The club has an established history and takes pride in developing professional players from the academy. In accordance with the English football system, the academy is split into 3 development stages. The Foundation Phase (FP) consists of the U9-U12 age groups, the Youth Development Phase (YDP) U13-U16 age groups and the Professional Development Phase (PDP) is U16-U23 including the scholarship phase (i.e., 16–18) a 2-year full-time football development and

education programme. Players are exposed to increasing levels of coaching, sports science and medicine, and education support as they progress through these stages and the club employ a number of both full time and part time staff to support players in each phase. In July 2012, the academy was awarded and has since maintained the category one status, the highest possible under the EPPP. This means the academy received the maximum funding level from the FA and Premier League and is not subject to the travel limit rule for signing players for the full-time training model in the Youth Development Phase (U12-U16). The academy players shared the training ground and facilities with the first team, an uncommon set up for a category one academy where there is often a clear separation between the 1st team and the academy facilities. There was a significant redevelopment of the training ground in the summer of 2016 which aimed to ensure the facilities were the best available. The participants in this thesis were nine first-year scholarship players (who had been at the academy for at least one season prior to the start of data collection) and related staff in the academy. The setting and participants are described in more detail in the empirical version of the ATDE model for HFC presented in the next chapter.

### **3.3.3 Data collection**

I spent 9 months carrying out data collection using a multiple method approach (Kahan, 1999) for the case study. A combination of methods was deemed the most appropriate to generate meaningful data and a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomena under study, in line with my paradigmatic positioning discussed above. Case study data was collected from multiple perspectives from within the micro-environment, i.e., coaches, players, support staff and management in the club. A variety of perspectives helped to broaden, thicken and deepen data to enable the development of a holistic understanding (Denzin, 1989). Like other SP researchers who have used naturalistic, multiple data collection methods, I sought to keep the complexity, and the depth of the data collection by immersing myself in the environment and used observation, field notes, interviews, and focus groups to supplement my own reflections. This choice of methods allowed me to capture complexity as it happened, where it happened and it also enabled me to portray complex interactions and events in a language that is specific to the phenomena themselves (DeMarco, Mancini & Wuest, 1996).

**Observation:** A typical week involved 2 or 3 observations days which accumulated to 474 hours of observation data, which as described by Adler and Adler (1999) provided a “fundamental base” of the research methods. Observation involves the researcher conscientiously observing the many social interactions and patterns, events and actions that may be happening simultaneously within a setting. I observed players and staff within the academy by immersing myself in the day to day life of the first year scholars including training, education, gym work and mealtimes in the cafeteria as well as matches and social events. Listening to the stories, seeing customs, traditions, buildings and cultural artifacts such as logos and kit enabled in situ insight into how the environment creates and maintains its culture (Larsen, 2013). It has been recommended that the researcher looks beyond the mere appearances, uses subtle eavesdropping, asks questions and “when in doubt, collects facts” (Armstrong, 1993, p.12). Whilst the ATDE and the ESF working models were used to facilitate the development of the observation guides, initially my observations used a wide observation lens, I took mental pictures of both the small and the large, the mundane and the routine. As the data collection process progressed and began to unveil the most prominent themes in terms of the research questions and what needed further clarification, I started to narrow my observations towards the aims of the research (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). I also learnt to become more efficient at positioning myself appropriately to maximise observation time and quality as the data collection process progressed, towards the start I often found myself observing training sessions stood next to the SPP and fitness trainer and would often get distracted by their chat. Whilst this could at times be useful earlier on to build relationships with them, gather their perspectives and updates on academy life there were times when it compromised me paying full attention to what was happening on the pitch as noted in an early observation note;

*I bumped into one of the support staff on my way over to training, he slowed down so I could join him and we walked over to the pitch together. I felt a sense of dread, this meant spending the whole session together. As much as it was nice to have company at the side of the pitch I knew it would compromise my ability to gain quality observation data as previously when we'd stood together we'd chatted for much of the session (much of this was unrelated chat). I wasn't sure how I'd ever navigate this issue, wouldn't it seem rude not to stand with him now?" (Observation note).*

After discussing this issue with my supervisor I decided I needed to be clearer with my boundaries and from this point on explained to any support staff on the side lines that I needed to focus on observations (which they understood) and when necessary intentionally positioned myself away from them on the side-lines.

**Note taking:** Fundamental to these observations and the research at large was a rigorous process of notetaking. Lofland and colleagues (2006) argue that if you do not take fieldnotes then you might as well not be in the setting! Guided by Champ's perspective to "Report on anything that is meaningful to you no matter how big or small" (Champ, 2018, p 116), I took mental notes in the setting with the aim to conjure a journalistic sense of what was going on in the environment. These mental notes were jotted into a journal as soon as possible to best preserve the observations and written up to full fieldnotes within 24 hours of the observation whilst memory was fresh. They included as much detail as possible in the earlier stages of the research when it was challenging to establish what was important data (Krane & Baird, 2005) however as I got more confident in my researcher role I became better at streamlining this process. I ensured I remained at the lowest level of inference throughout and documented the meaning participants attributed to events or actions (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006). Descriptive field notes of observations and informal conversations allowed me to reflect on any further questions and thoughts raised throughout. Those that were considered to enlighten my research question were used to focus subsequent observations. I decided against writing detailed notes in front of the participants as I felt that standing out as a researcher could have changed the behaviour of participants or made them feel uncomfortable (Champ, 2018). As such the majority of notes were made when alone in the classroom and finished at home that evening. The observation and field note process allowed me to obtain a comprehensive running description of the environment including the interactions, conversations, activities, the experiences of the players and staff who took part in the activities, and the meaning of these experiences as they happened from the perspective of those who were being observed. This afforded me data that might be missed from interviews either due to being overlooked or participants being reluctant to discuss certain topics (Champ, 2018). For example, I observed how one player's work rate tailed off as he went from being one of the hardest workers in the team to reducing his efforts drastically towards the mid and end of the season. In his interview at the end of the season this player spoke about continuously applying himself fully and realising the importance of working

hard every day, the observation data suggested otherwise. I knew that there was more to the story due to my observations and was able to further question the player on his work rate.

A reflective journal was kept throughout the study to supplement the field notes, this allowed me to document my insights and the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that I experienced. This was imperative as my own responses and inner dialogue constitute part of the research and contributed to my understanding of the environment. May (1961) stated that it is an existential fact that we become part of the social world that we study, and therefore cannot stay completely objective. My reflective journal allowed analytic insight by considering whether my own emotional response to a situation was prevalent amongst participants, it also served as a tool to highlight any biases I brought into my field work during the analysis process. An example is given below in relation to an observation note following an informal conversation I'd had with a member of the academy management about SP;

*I left our conversation feeling slightly bemused by the discipline I'd chosen, although the acknowledgment they needed someone full time felt like fantastic progress, there was a long way to go, furthermore it doesn't seem to be given priority in terms of budget compared to the other support services (observation note).*

*On reflection I feel my conversation with Paul regarding the value of SP had provoked an emotional response in me and my initial instinct was to feel like I wanted to defend the field regarding his comments on measurement and launch into a spiel around importance and value. I understand this is not my place in my role as researcher and the importance of not passing judgment and probing him further on his views in his formal interview (reflective journal entry).*

Documenting my feelings and opinions in this way allowed me to monitor and reflect on my emotional responses to situations and my influence on the emerging data. Reflective journal notes extended to all of the methodological techniques used in the research process including the interviews.

**Interviews:** Both formal and informal interviews took place throughout the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews took place between months 2 and 9 of the data collection, the goal of which was to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' subjective experiences of the environment and their psychosocial development and to explore themes

that arose through my observations. All interviews started by thanking participants for contributing to the study, a simple overview of the research and a reminder of the position on confidentiality (Smith, & Sparkes, 2016). The opening question of each participant's first interview asked them to tell me how they got involved in football. This allowed us to build rapport at the start and often opened up a narrative of their background and history at the academy. The interviewees were asked about the microenvironment, daily life, their perception on key psychosocial skills and how they felt that the club environment was beneficial to developing these skills as well as insights into the larger environmental system in which the club sits. The player (Appendix B) and staff interview guides (Appendix C) were structured loosely with predetermined areas of interest influenced by the ATDE and the ESF working models but presented in accessible everyday language. This helped to guide data collection and offered a dynamic conception of the TDE and psychosocial development which enabled consistency in terms of areas explored. The exact wording of questions and the order in which the questions were asked was not strictly determined ahead of the interview and alongside the more structured questions necessary to obtain the data required ("e.g. which psychosocial skills do you think are important to make it as a professional footballer") less structured follow up questions were used to provoke each participant's unique perspective (Krane & Baird, 2005). This flexibility and the open-ended nature of questions allowed the interviewer to follow up on topic areas and prevent silencing the interviewee's story by giving them freedom to discuss issues that were personally significant to them. When appropriate, questions encouraged participants to provide concrete examples of their beliefs, cognitions and behaviours in their answers (for example, "can you tell me about a time this season when you've shown resilience?") (Smith, & Sparkes, 2016).

All interviews took place at the academy training ground, either in the classroom, canteen or academy managers office. The interviews ranged from 35 to 104 minutes. A total of 28 formal interviews were conducted with 19 interviewees, all of whom were connected to the academy micro-environment (scholars, analyst, three coaches, head of academy, academy manager, SPP, teacher, fitness coach and academy operations manager). Ten staff members were interviewed once each and nine scholars were interviewed twice formally alongside numerous informal conversations.

The explorative integrated approach (Maaloe, 2004) of collecting, analysing and reflecting on the data meant that the initial player interviews as well as 6 months of observation and field

note / reflective journal data were used to inform the interview guide for the second player interviews and remaining staff interviews, identifying any follow up on any points from the first interviews which needed clarification, and creating direction for the remaining interviews in line with the prominent themes and aims of the research. For example, in the first 6 months of data collection two broad themes emerged in relation to the psychosocial factors scholars and staff deemed important to succeed; character (hard work and resilience), and responsibility for driving development (responsibility and awareness) and the second player interviews and staff interviews allowed me to probe further into the cumbersome nature of each of these themes and how they felt they were being developed within the environment.

The seven months between the first and second player interviews gave me the opportunity to build stronger relationships with the scholars which meant some opened up and spoke in greater depth in their second interview as trust had been established. For example, several players gave cautious answers in relation to areas they'd like to see improved when asked in the first interview (e.g. different food in the canteen), whereas in their second interviews they offered more detailed and candid answers *"like they're all talk and no action...."* (Tazly interview, scholar). I have 8 years of experience of conducting interviews in the corporate world as well as my more recent experience as a trainee SPP. This experience helped me to feel confident to establish rapport during interviewees, probe further when necessary and sit comfortably with pauses and silences rather than feeling the need to jump in (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). A number of both players and staff thanked me and disclosed that they felt it had been really useful to have been given an opportunity to speak up during their formal interviews. *"I think we should have sessions more, like this....I think there needs to be a time and a place where you can say stuff and speak freely"* (Kieran interview – scholar).

Informal dialogue happened regularly throughout the nine months of data collection, for example with staff in the canteen over lunch, players sitting round in the gym and classroom and support staff at the side of the training pitch. This provided an opportunity to build rapport as well as an opportunity to gain further understanding of the experiences of those embedded within the environment. To do this I probed staff and players when appropriate to gain deeper insight of the meaning participants gave to specific interactions and experiences of academy life. In line with the narrowing of my observation lens as the data collection progressed and themes were unveiled, my approach to these informal conversations too

became more focused to fill gaps in knowledge (Champ et al., 2018). A key to me building rapport within the environment was my interest in football and the current Premier League results was always an easy topic of informal discussion with the players and staff alike. The team I supported were having a surprisingly good season which often led to jokes from the players. Informal conversations allowed me to become more familiar with the language and banter used by the boys (e.g. ‘wasteman’, ‘dead’ and ‘the burn’) as well as staff (e.g. ‘worldie’ and ‘big time’). Banter is part of the culture of professional football which many outsiders may fail to understand (Parker, 1996). Understanding the language allowed deeper understanding of the world of the players and their formal and informal discussions.

**Focus groups:** Two focus group interviews were conducted in the classroom. The focus groups lasted 40 and 45 minutes respectively. The group split (four in one group and five in the other) was dictated by the timing of players’ schedules. The “skills required to conduct the group interview are not significantly different for individual interview” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652), and the procedure outlined above for the semi-structured interviews was largely followed with the use of open questioning and flexible probing. I was mindful to ensure more dominant characters did not dictate the whole conversation and attempted to attain responses from all members of the group to ensure the richest data was gained. The focus groups were beneficial to probe further into examining not only what participants think but why participants think as they do. They also offered unique insights into group norms and dynamics around relevant issues and provided an opportunity for me to observe the spontaneous interaction of focus group members (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) and become more familiar with the language and banter between boys;

*Basically Alex’s team was getting popped in training by my team (Smithy scholar – focus group)*

*I didn’t get popped...(Alex scholar – focus group)*

*I had the ball, Alex came to tackle me and I dunno what happened but the next thing I know he turns around, squares up to me (laughs) (Smithy scholar – focus group)*

**Document analysis:** Document analysis was carried out on documents, or the “social facts, produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways” (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997, p. 47). These included the club website, media communications regarding the academy and talent

development, player profiles, the Life Plan schedule (Appendix H), timetable (Appendix G) documents from the FA regarding the EPPP and the scholarship phase. Documents were skimmed (superficial examination), read (thorough examination), and interpreted to further develop understanding, discover meaning and insights relevant to the research question (Bowen, 2009). Relevant information was identified and separated from the non-relevant and organised into categories related to the central questions of the research. The accessibility and usefulness of particular documents was taken into account alongside the original purpose of each document and the target audience. Data collected from this process provided additional background and context information from both the microenvironment (e.g. club artifacts) and macroenvironment (e.g. Charter for Players and Parents, The English Football League, 2018), generated additional questions to be asked in the interviews and offered supplementary data to enrich the findings (Bowen, 2009).

### **3.3.4 Data analysis and representation**

Whilst presented separately it is important to note that data collection and data analysis processes were inextricably linked rather than reduced to discrete stages of the research (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). A vast amount of raw data from multiple data sets was generated, (for example over 257,000 words of raw interview data), which made data analysis a challenging task. The world of elite youth football is both messy and complex, and to enable research to truly inform the applied world the analysis process must embrace this. As such, the aim of data analysis was to make sense of the data and draw findings that accurately captured the messiness and complexity of the environment in a way that offered insight into the research objectives. The following section outlines the ongoing and structured data analysis process from initial data collection through to the presentation of findings, to best ensure the messiness was maintained at a manageable level. In practice the data analysis process was messier than this account could ever truly illustrate (Bowles, 2015).

There is no single, conclusive method used to analyse data collected through qualitative methods. I took caution not to let my initial questions dictate findings when analysing data, with this in mind, an abductive and explorative integrated approach to research was adopted which consisted of an ongoing cyclic approach that intertwined data collection and analysis (Maaloe, 2004). The continuous cycle of collecting, analysing and reflecting on the data collected enabled the development of initial ideas and analytical hunches which opened up

new lines of examination (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This helped with the process of developing layers of data, for example every three weeks I stepped back to organise the field notes, identify what was relevant and what direction the research would go in and the next steps of data collection to continue to proceed to build on what had become known in the earlier stages of the research (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). In this way there was a continuous dialogue between the HEA theory, data generated and the researcher's interpretation. This ongoing analysis developed new questions and new meanings that were then explored further via the various methods. For example, in line with the ESF empirical model in the Danish football club (Larsen et al., 2013) team development and achievements was considered as part of the initial interviews and observation data, however, this element of the model did not emerge strongly in the data and wasn't developed any further.

The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded on an iPhone and transcribed verbatim to produce a script for each (Appendix D & E). An abductive approach has been described as a cross between induction and deduction, this consisted of two steps which were systematically combined (Dubios & Gadde 2002). Firstly, a deductive categorization of the initial interview and observation data was conducted; each script was read and reread several times to group the data into major themes (awareness of psychosocial skills, holistic development etc) that were meaningful in relation to the research question, using labels and commentary within a word document captured thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the data and sparks of understanding (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). The two working models offered by the HEA, (ATDE and ESF models) facilitated this process by providing structure for the higher order themes. In line with prior case studies using the HEA (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013) the ESF and ATDE models were instrumental in structuring and facilitating the disentanglement of an overwhelming amount of data (Mathorne, Henriksen & Stambulova, 2020) and helped me to identify conceptual links. This first step organised the data into a meaningful format and provided initial direction towards answering the research questions. Higher-order themes helped to provide much-needed direction for further interviews and observations. These related to the players' experiences and challenges, the staff's perception of psychosocial development and the broader environment and systemic factors that impacted player psychosocial development. At this point it was decided that the player's experiences should remain the main focus of the research but the wider environment and staff themes were inseparable from the experience of

the player. As such it was decided that data collection should continue to capture the psychosocial demands facing the player, and the impact of the environment on this.

The second step was a theoretical reading, used to generate explanatory themes. I worked towards a higher level of interpretation by identifying and grouping these broader descriptive themes into subthemes and further subthemes most relevant to the objectives of the study, this process continued until theoretical saturation was considered to have been reached (Côté, Salmela, Baria & Russell 1993) (Appendix F). It is important to note that sub themes allocated at one moment of the analysis were not immovable, and were changed along the analysis process in order to attain refinement (Andrade, 2009). Once established, categories of data were compared and combined with the themes that emerged from the field notes. This allowed for unique insights from each of the data collection methods to be weaved together to help address the research question. Although this process was systematically applied, the themes were generated from the data themselves, with collection and analysis mutually shaping each other as outlined above (Sandelowski, 2000). It must be acknowledged that while I present my interpretations of the data, there is always a degree of indexicality with qualitative data and others may interpret and code data ‘segments’ differently to arrive at different conclusions, particularly if data is taken out of context. I have some confidence that my interpretations are grounded in contextual understandings of the participants lifeworlds given that I immersed myself in the environment for 9 months of data collection (and had worked in the environment previously) and had familiarity with the academy and the sub-cultural terminology and meanings (Cook et al., 2014). Following the nine months of data collection I removed myself from the environment to immerse myself in the data, reflect on the research as a whole and fully engage in the analysis and write up process. The draft of the literature review chapters written earlier in the research process were returned to in the dual process of reviewing the literature and writing up findings. I supported data with theory throughout; using the concepts of the HEA enabled me to move from description toward explanation to present layers of meaning to capture the complexity of the psychosocial development process.

### **3.4. Methodological reflections**

This section outlines the practical issues encountered in the research process and the measures taken to obtain research quality.

### 3.4.1 Researcher role

Maaloe (2004) acknowledged that although the researcher is not able to control the environment (i.e. interactions among persons) in case study research, the researcher's own preconceptions, awareness and sensitivity to the environment are essential. A recent review of the talent development in football literature suggested that few qualitative studies reported the researcher's influence in data collection or analysis (e.g. how researchers interacted with participants; how the researcher's background may have influenced data interpretation) (Gledhill et al., 2017). I was cognizant and honest about my own preconceptions, biases, goals and foibles (Tracy, 2011) throughout the process of research and discussed these with my supervisory team regularly whilst remaining open towards their suggestions. This critical self-awareness regarding my influence on the research permitted me to realise my limitations as an explainer (Foley, 2002) and to reject the idea of absolute truth and objectivity in line with my paradigmatic positioning. Like Champ et al. (2020), I acknowledge that I did not approach the research as a completely objective blank slate, instead my paradigmatic positioning and personal background and experience meant I brought several 'selves' to the field of study including an academic researcher-based self, a female self, a student self, a trainee SPP self and an enthusiastic football fan. Imperative for my research was how I dealt with these different selves (Etherington, 2001) for example how I navigated the boundaries accompanying being female and an academic researcher in an industry which has been described as both masculine and anti-intellectual (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006), this will be addressed below. My fieldnotes and reflective journal noting my thoughts and emotions as I was in the setting were key to evaluating how these identities were positioned in the research process. My research diary and fieldnotes contained reflections on my thoughts and emotions as I was in the field, and I continued these during write up (Hogan, Dolan & Donnelly, 2009).

There has long been a debate amongst qualitative researchers about the benefits of researchers being "outsiders" or "insiders" to the social world under study (Unluer, 2012). The outsider doctrine values researchers who are separate from the communities they study as neutral, emotionally detached observers, emphasising objectivity, whilst the insider doctrine claims that an inside researcher is uniquely situated to understand the experiences of groups of which they are members (Merton, 1972). Both have their challenges and benefits, for example whilst inside researchers may be able to better engage participants to establish

trust and gather richer data it may be more challenging for them to separate their personal experiences from those of the participants. More recently research has acknowledged that it may be necessary to move beyond a strict outsider/insider dichotomy to underline that researchers' identities are relative depending on the specific research context (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Like Smith (1999), my position in the current research felt like it occupied the “space between” as I neither had complete membership of the group being studied (an insider) nor was I a complete stranger (an outsider), the dichotomy exemplified in the following reflection;

*10 November 18*

*I still feel unsure about how to dress for the club, I thought back to how when working with the club last season I used to bemoan the unflattering staff kit (ill-fitting navy club tracksuit) I now longed to wear it again, not only to ‘blend in’ but also to prevent the morning wardrobe decision. This morning I decided to opt for sports gear again, joggers and a jumper; I’d be out watching training and comfort and warmth were priority. There was no one manning the reception desk when I arrived so I printed my own pass with confidence and headed through – passing a visitor who was patiently waiting on the sofa to be checked in. I greeted the security guards as I passed, they knew that I was no intruder.*

My work at the academy previously meant that staff were familiar with my presence, which mitigated some of the boundaries associated with being accepted as a researcher in an insular industry (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). This is highlighted in the reflective journal entry above in my ease at entering into the training ground. Although I no longer had a staff pass and had to sign in to get a visitor's pass on each visit I was already a familiar face and was greeted with recognition by the reception staff and security. This is in contrast to Cushion (2001) who described his experiences of being stopped often by security within the professional football club where he conducted his research to question who he was and where he was going. I was aware that my identity as a female meant that I stood out and was more likely remembered. The familiarity from my practitioner role also meant I had already established trust and rapport with many of the participants in the environment (although the player participants had just transitioned onto the scholarship phase I had no prior familiarity with the players). This familiarity also afforded me with prior knowledge which would have taken an outsider a longer time to acquire, for example I was familiar with the layout of the

training ground, staff roles and the gatekeepers (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). During my interviews and observations I was able to combine insider knowledge with outsider questions which Schein (1990) recognised can help to bring underlying assumptions to the surface, this process of inquiry was interactive and I continued to probe until assumptions were drawn out. An example of how familiarity was useful was demonstrated in my reflective journal following my interview with Roy, a coach who was part of the furniture and epitomised the masculine culture at the club. Over the two years at the club I'd built a relationship with Roy which fluctuated from banter about the football teams we followed to more serious conversations about his family.

*7 March 2019*

*I interviewed Roy today, such a character as always! I felt it went well, we spoke for nearly an hour and a half. His in-depth and well considered answers were interspersed with his usual flippant comments, at one point he threatened "if you ask me what I think or what I feel one more time...you bloody psychologists". I appreciated the relationship I've built with Roy over my time at the club more than ever during this interview, thinking back to when I first entered the club as a practitioner I would have been like a frightened rabbit to this comment, there's no doubt such comments would have unnerved me mid interview and thrown me off track, however, I knew by now this was just Roy's 'way' – I laughed and continued as planned.*

I was cognizant that greater familiarity can lead to a loss of objectivity and making assumptions based on the researcher's prior knowledge. To address this I ensured I regularly discussed my reflections and analysis with my supervisory team who acted as "critical friends" (Sparkes & Smith 2002) and sounding boards, discussing and challenging my reflections to provide views from complete outsiders. Despite this familiarity, I often still felt like an outsider, firstly I was one of only a handful of females in a male dominated environment which led to different treatment from some, for example Roy (coaching staff) would regularly greet me with "Alright treacle". It was often Roy who initiated gender related banter and "Your mum's a worldie" and "don't she scrub up well" were examples of sexist and derogatory comments. Whilst the majority of males in the environment did not initiate the gender discourse they participated in the banter through laughing along and no one called Roy's comments out as inappropriate. When I first entered the environment in my

applied role this made me uncomfortable and challenged my own values and beliefs, however by the time the research started I was familiar with this (as discussed above) and made it my objective to maintain a respectful personal demeanour. Over the course of the data collection I had several conversations with the teacher who could relate to the experiences of being female in a male saturated environment. We both agreed that the fact we were both well informed on football and could hold our own in discussions around that week's fixtures added to our acceptance within the environment and on the whole this seemed to supersede gender differences in terms of treatment and acceptance. In addition, we acknowledged there may actually be an advantage of being a female in terms of players opening up to us, they appeared to be more reluctant to display any signs of weakness to male counterparts in an attempt to be masculine. This allowed me to obtain a depth and quality of data including the players' frustrations and critiques of the club as well as their excitement and pride at being in top level football that might have been missed if player's viewed me as 'similar' to the male coaches who had a capacity to make influential decisions regarding their future (Nesti, 2010).

*15 December 2019*

*Ruth told me that Ben had cried to her this morning. She'd asked if he was OK and he'd broken down in tears and told her he was homesick. I'd seen him out on the training pitch earlier and he'd been involved with the banter as usual, 'keeping up appearances' in front of the other boys and male staff. Ruth added that she thinks the players see her as a safe person to speak to about anything, she had a sense of pride in her tone as she informed me that a number of players feel comfortable enough to come and talk to her about problems such as girlfriend issues etc. She added how being female likely contributed to this. I reflected that not only is the role of 'agony aunt' traditionally seen as feminine but our female identities marking us as 'different' likely reduced the threat that we could jeopardise selection choices and standing as a player.*

Another factor which made me feel like an outsider was that my researcher role meant I did not spend as much time in the organisation as full time members of staff and I was no longer honoured with the staff tracksuit. Whilst I stood out from the coaching and support staff who were alike in the full club tracksuit I ensured I wore sports kit so as not to look 'too academic'. While it was recognised that I was conducting research, I was mindful that standing out as an academic researcher could have changed the attitudes and behaviour of

participants, as such I did not use a Dictaphone, or any other tools that would have might have impacted trust (Mitchell, Charmaz & Grills, 1998) and informally communicated with staff in the same manner that I had during my intern role, i.e. joining in with banter when relevant. I was also aware that I needed to be an active part of a football club, and as noted by Cushion (2001) just 'hanging around' would not be perceived well, therefore I regularly engaged in football related chat and often collected stray balls in training whilst observing at pitch side. This 'space between' position had the advantage that I was not too close to the culture to be critical (Mercer, 2007), however it lead to some discomfort especially early on in the data collection process as I adjusted to my role as a researcher in the environment.

SP as a field often reveals a separation between research and application (Kellmann & Beckmann, 2003). Many studies in applied settings tend to be conducted for research purposes only and subsequently have limited impact on practitioners who seldom access or use the research findings in their practice. Practitioner-researcher approaches have become increasingly present and accepted within social sciences in recent years (Krane & Baird, 2005), whereby practitioners conduct research for the purpose of progressing their own practice alongside understanding the social world under study. Whilst the current thesis involved a full-time researcher role, I had previously occupied an applied role within the club and was simultaneously conducting applied work outside of the club on the BPS SP Trainee pathway. The fact that I was an applied practitioner helped me to bring an applied awareness to the research process which helped to bridge the gap between research and its applied implications (Kellmann & Beckmann, 2003). In addition this mitigated the issues associated with the traditional researcher role in which there is a clear division between the researcher and the practitioner (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman & Vallejo, 2004).

### **3.4.2 Research quality**

Whilst there is not one agreed set of criteria to judge the quality of qualitative research methods, many qualitative researchers have questioned and rejected the use of traditional quantitative research judgement criteria and concerns with validity, reliability, and generalizability (Sparkes, 2000). An abundance of guidelines, frameworks and concepts for critically appraising qualitative research exist in the literature in place of the conventional evaluation concepts (e.g. validity, reliability and generalisability) (e.g. Forchuk & Roberts, 1993; Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mays & Pope, 2000). The numerous judgment

criteria illustrate the complexity of the qualitative methodological landscape and the different interpretations of social phenomena (Tracy, 2010). Guba and Lincoln's (1994) judgement criteria is widely used across qualitative research, this approach centres around the term 'trustworthiness', which assesses the worthiness of the research and whether the claims made are warranted (Williams & Morrow, 2008). Guba and Lincoln (1994) proposed five criteria for establishing trustworthiness; credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity. These will be discussed in the section that follows to clarify how trustworthiness was established throughout the research.

### ***3.4.2.1 Strategies for Achieving Trustworthiness in Case Study Research***

Credibility is a key factor in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1989), this refers to the truth in how participant views have been interpreted and represented by the researcher (Cope, 2014). There are a number of ways to enhance credibility including the researcher describing his or her experiences as a researcher, prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation and verifying the research findings with the participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) believe that the use of triangulation shows an attempt to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. This view of triangulation is essentially the use of different vantage points to examine a research issue, this includes a mixture of methods and perspectives to maximise the range of data and enable a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A strategic selection of informants (Lofland et al., 2006) was used to ensure that a variety of information from a range of participants was gathered and as well as player interviews, interviews were conducted with staff situated in numerous positions within the academy (analyst, coaches, head of academy, academy manager, SPP, teacher, fitness coach and academy operations manager). Furthermore, observations were conducted in the full range of academy settings including the gym, canteen, classroom, training dome, training pitch, match pitch, coaches office, kitchen and off-site at a careers event. Data was gathered over a prolonged period of engagement at the club (nine months) which allowed for insights that wouldn't have been available if the research was conducted over a shorter period of time. I captured changes that occurred in the environment over time which would have been missed if data had been collected at only one time point, such as in prior work in elite youth football which has captured players (Mills et al., 2014b) and coaches (Mills et al., 2014a) views at one moment in time only. Scholars were interviewed twice, towards the start and at the end

of the data collection period. This allowed for an examination of the consistency of what they said about a topic over a period of time. Whilst in their first interviews many players spoke about how after a few months they had got more used to the intensity of being on the full-time programme, in their second interview many spoke about being exhausted again and desperate for a break. Being in the environment for 9 months allowed me to understand how the fulltime regimen took its toll on players and to spot fluctuations and nuances that would have been over simplified by only getting a snap shot from interview data. The triangulation of methods (Patton, 1990) was used as discussed in the mixed method rationale above, each method chosen offered another unique perspective on the phenomenon and contributed a different piece to the puzzle to provide a more detailed picture (Farmer, Robinson, Elliott, & Eyles, 2006). Checking the consistency of findings generated by different methods allowed for a comparison of how participants acted in public (i.e. on the training pitch) in comparison to what they said in private (i.e. individual interviews). This allowed findings to be corroborated across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases (Bowen, 2009). This provides confidence that the work is more than just a product of the method. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual and no method can provide the definitive truth, or grasp all of the delicate variations that occur in human reality. What is important rather is how I have justified my choice of mixed methods as the most appropriate. Patton (1990) discusses how within qualitative methods triangulation “will seldom lead to a single, totally consistent picture ... The point is to study and understand when and why there are differences ... At the same time, consistency in overall patterns of data from different sources and reasonable explanations for differences in data from divergent sources contribute significantly to the overall credibility of findings” (p 468- 469). From this perspective, divergent results can enrich the explanations for the phenomenon rather than leaving the researcher confounded with what to do with results that do not converge. Using different methods did not always provide a clear path to a singular view of what is the case. This was exemplified in relation to the role of education in the club, document analysis of the club website revealed that the players’ education was of paramount importance, whilst observation data revealed that this often came second to on pitch matters. In this case the range of methods was vital for understanding incongruence in the organisational culture as independently methods do not give the complete picture, this is important given the aim is to unravel the breadth and complexity of the academy environment.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the reader is able to generalise the findings of a study or “how far a researcher may make claims for a general application of their [sic] theory” (Gasson, 2004, p. 98). The paradigmatic positioning and interpretive frame of the research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of a single academy context, which makes it difficult to generalise beyond the specific environment studied. The literature suggests that multiple case studies provide more generalisability than single cases. However, the use of theory in single case studies can add to the external validity of the case (e.g. generalisability or transferability) (Yin, 2003). This work aims for theoretical transferability through enhancing our understanding of the HEA and psychosocial development as opposed to statistical generalisation. This is the first study examining an English football TDE from a HEA and enhances our understanding of how the approach applies outside of Scandinavia. It is hoped that the large amount of rich and diverse data and the detailed information provided regarding the researcher as instrument, the research context, processes and participants will enable the reader to decide how the findings may transfer and provide a platform for further comparisons within contexts of a similar type (i.e. elite TDEs in other English sports or other football academies). Findings must be considered in the context of observational research, which relied on one researcher’s perspective in the logging and primary interpretation of relevant events. Observer bias was minimised by explicitly stating the processes through which findings were derived as well as clearly highlighting influences (e.g. researcher role) on the data collection and analysis (as discussed in the data collection / analysis sections above).

The HEA working models (Henriksen et al., 2011) were used as a tool for evaluating my findings and this study drew on Larsen’s (2013) work to apply the HEA to an elite youth football environment, which provided a point of comparison. The approach to data collection was informed by these previous HEA case studies and in this study observation time and interviews within the context ultimately exceeded this previous seminal work. Given a strength of the HEA is that it highlights the central role of the environment as it affects a prospective athlete, the current study provides additional depth to the holistic understanding of players’ lived experiences and what it means to be a player within the academy environment.

Being explicit with the use of the established, systematic data collection and analysis helped to establish confirmability and dependability in the research. Work was regularly peer

reviewed through my supervisory team, this included routine doctoral supervision from my primary supervisor as well as a research advisor who was unfamiliar in my research area to ensure that someone outside of the area could follow and understand my research activities and processes. Throughout the research the supervisory team posed a variety of questions and comments which pushed me to challenge any assumptions made by being so immersed in the research and adapt and clarify elements of my research when necessary. Finally, 'authenticity', or the fact that the text is faithful to the events that occurred, and expresses a feeling of life within the organisation was an important consideration for the research. The 'daily life at HFC' vignette at the start of the findings aims to bring the academy to life. The findings are presented in a way which invites the reader to experience life in the academy vicariously by the re-telling of events that occurred to enable the reader to gain experience of the participant's lives, including feelings, experiences, situational variety, and language, quotes and observation notes interspersed throughout the analysis are key to achieving this (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994).

As Cushion (2001) notes, Guba and Lincoln's (1994) judgement criteria have been criticised for being hypocritical in relation to ontological and epistemological assumptions; accepting multiple constructed realities on the one hand, whilst applying foundational criteria to differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy results on the other (Smith, 1984; Sparkes, 1998). Sparkes (1998) asserts that criteria revolving around 'trustworthiness' are parallels of positivistic criteria as opposed to alternatives to, and that they developed and were used from a defensive minority of qualitative researchers against a wider research community dominated by positivistic research. Reading Cushion's (2001) standpoint on this resonated with me, like Cushion (2001), I used this framework as an opportunity for reflexive elaboration and increased understanding of my research process and findings as opposed to a method to establish contact with some external reality. It is hoped that the considerations discussed throughout this chapter demonstrate the diligence taken in the methodological choices made throughout the research.

### **3.4.3 Ethical considerations**

Presenting ethical issues is essential, not only to prevent harm or distress to participants but also to give the reader a deeper understanding of the constraints under which the researcher was operating (Norris, 1993). Prior to commencing the research, I obtained approval from

Brunel University ethics committee. I produced specific participant information sheets (Appendix A) and consent forms for both players and staff and discussed these with the projects and innovations manager who was the main gatekeeper which resulted in some minor adaptations to ensure they were in line with the club research protocols.

Participants were provided with a verbal briefing to ensure they were aware of and understood the purpose of the research. This involved introducing myself as a researcher and informing them of the aims of the research, data collection procedures and positions of anonymity and confidentiality. This enabled them to give their informed consent from a position of knowledge. Confidentiality was assured for all participants and no real names were attached to the data or included in the study. Due to a relatively small number of participants in the study I omitted some details to ensure anonymity was maintained, for example there were certain personal details about individuals that may lead to the identification of any individual that I did not record (e.g. the home country of a player). In addition given some staff roles were only occupied by one person, I labelled all staff data either 'coach' or 'support staff' to mitigate the potential for their identity to be guessed. The exception to this was the teacher for whom I could not guarantee the anonymity, this issue was explained and she gave consent for this. It was made clear that anything that happened in the classroom whilst I was observing or anything she disclosed in her interview that she wished to be kept confidential would not be used in the thesis. Despite regular reminders of this she did not ask me to withhold anything. Whilst a pseudonym was used for the club name, I was aware I could not fully guarantee the anonymity of the organisation given my prior role with the club, however all information was anonymised as far as possible, for example I masked the location of the club. Most importantly I understood my responsibility to act in the best interests of the participants at all times and used good judgement as a guide to good practice (Fleming, 1995).

After discussions with the main research supervisor it was agreed it was impractical to gain written informed consent from everyone observed during the course of the case study, as such, the research innovation manager provided consent on behalf of the organisation for the observation element of the study. Whilst participants did not have the opportunity to opt out of observations, all observations were in public areas of the club where participants would normally expect to be observed. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Observations notes were coded and participants names replaced with pseudonyms or codes so that the

individual's name were not attached to the data. Any description of incidents used in papers or publications will be confidential.

Consent was obtained from every member of staff and player who was interviewed (aged 18 or over). The main ethical issue of the research was the participation of adolescents below the age of 18. Assent was gained from participants unable to give consent and informed consent was gained from the parents of those who were under the age of consent. This posed a challenge as one player kept forgetting to bring his consent form in from home, this dragged on over several weeks. This was resolved after I had a discussion with the academy operations manager about the issue, he suggested he chase him on this too and text him to remind him to bring it in. All participants were informed that they had a right not to answer all of the interview / focus group questions and a right to withdraw from interviews or focus groups at any time, no participants requested this.

While they may be observed, there was no requirement for participants to engage in informal interviews or conversations. The researcher was aware that young people in the academy may have felt that their participation in the research was required or that a decision not to participate may be viewed negatively within the club. All participants were informed both verbally and in writing that participation in interviews and focus groups was voluntary and that there were no negative consequences for choosing not to participate. I reiterated this to the players before each interview and whilst they confirmed they were happy to participate I felt three players held back and were less open to in depth discussion in their first interviews. As stated above, the time between the first and second player interviews gave me the opportunity to get to know them and build trust and they all subsequently opened up further in their second interview. A number of players stated they relished the opportunity to be able to speak up about their experiences; *“I'd like more of like this...just one to one speaking. There's a lot of people you don't know what's going on inside of their head...The coaches won't know what's going on with anyone to be honest unless they have these sessions one to one they'll never find out”* (Aaron interview – scholar). In addition, all participants were told that anything they disclosed in interviews that they wish to be kept confidential would not be used in the thesis. On two occasions during interviews staff members specified “don't write that down” and that was respected and the information not used.

It was recognised that there was potential for a conflict of interest due to my prior role as a mental skills coach for 18 months prior to beginning this research study, this would be

problematic if participants expected psychological support from me. To ensure this was not an issue I only included players that I had not worked with in my role as mental skills coach previously in the study, this meant data collection commenced at the start of a new scholarship intake. During the study no players reached out to me for psychological support, however on a number of occasions two members of staff referred to me as if I was still in the role of SPP at the club, often by making jokes about how little the SPPs did “you psychs just get paid to sit on the sofa and chat” or by joking about “sorting someone’s head out”.

I feel my experience with working in the applied setting and complying with strong ethical practice as an applied practitioner gave me an advantage for adhering to good ethical practice as a researcher, for example I am practiced at non-judgmental listening and maintaining a position of confidentiality (Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018). In line with the approach I take to my applied practice I made sure I behaved with compassion, honesty and integrity towards all of the individuals within the club HFC.

### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter has aimed to give the reader a deep understanding of the methodological approach taken and highlighted the potential for a single qualitative case to deepen our understanding of the complex topic of psychosocial development within a complex TDE. First, the researcher’s paradigmatic positioning was set out as a rationale for the qualitative case study approach. The qualitative case study as a research strategy was examined in detail to explain how the case was determined and bound. The research methods were outlined, including details of how the researcher gained access, the setting and participants, collection of data and how this data was analysed and represented. The chapter concluded with methodological reflections which encompassed the researcher role, research quality and ethical considerations. It is hoped that this detail not only allows the reader to understand the rationale for the approach taken and methods used but also heightens awareness of the challenges faced and solutions developed which may inform others who seek to undertake research in a similar environment in the future. The next two chapters present and discuss the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4 HOLGATE FC AS A TALENT DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT**

This is the first of three chapters that present and discuss the findings of the study. The broad aim of the thesis was to examine the TDE (TDE) of an elite (Category 1) football academy from a HEA to gain an understanding of the psychosocial needs and development of elite youth footballers and how environmental factors impacted this. In order to address this aim the objectives were developed as follows:

- (i) investigate an elite football academy TDE to provide a holistic description of the elite academy environment and create an empirical ATDE model for HFC;
- (ii) evaluate the players' holistic psychosocial needs and development during the first year of the full-time academy scholarship phase
- (iii) create an empirical ESF model for HFC to use as a framework to critically analyse the interplay between the TDE factors (including the organisational culture) and player psychosocial development.

The discussion is organised into three chapters. Chapter 4 is structured into three sections all of which address the first research objective by providing a holistic description of the elite academy environment. First a vignette of daily life as a scholar at HFC is presented to provide a vivid description of a typical day at the academy. The second section presents the empirical version of the ATDE model for HFC which describes the unique components and structure of the environment under study and the role of these components and relations within the environment and the talent development process. The final section of this chapter provides an analysis of the players' immediate surroundings at the micro-level, where athletic and personal development take place, to further understand their scholarship experiences.

Chapter 4 thus provides a rich contextualisation for the two subsequent discussion chapters. As well as meeting objective one Chapter 4 begins to address the second research objective by identifying some of the players' holistic psychosocial needs. The second research objective is then directly addressed and discussed further in Chapter 5 which examines the significance of psychosocial skills for success in the academy and how the academy environment impacts the development of these skills. Chapter 6 brings the findings from Chapter 4 and 5 together to present an empirical version of the ESF model for HFC, thereby

further addressing the first two research objectives as well as the final objective of the research. The ESF model outlines how a set of factors (including the organisational culture) interact to create the ATDE's effectiveness in developing players and thus provides a framework to structure the discussion around the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development.

#### **4.1 Daily life as a scholar at Holgate FC**

At 8.20am on a crisp December morning, the sun rose over the HFC training ground. Tucked away in a leafy residential suburb the site hosts the training facilities for the first team as well as the academy. This set up allows hopeful academy boys to see the big guns in the flesh; a luxury not afforded to many category one academies. As I passed the tall fence surrounding the facility to block out prying outsiders, a blacked out first team coach pulled out of the car park. An early start for the elite ahead of an away game this evening. The large TV sitting centre-piece on the wall of the security porta cabin blared out SKY sports news, the evenings fixtures being analysed by the presenters and the chirpy security staff alike. Folk here really do eat breathe and sleep the beautiful game. I checked in with the made-up receptionist and headed out through the player car park which reflected the enormity of player incomes. Shiny Audis and Mercedes flaunted in neat rows. Having recently turned 17 and passed his test Mikey's Mercedes sat amongst them. Dave recently expressed to me his disapproval that these kids can now lease a £70,000 car, distorting where they are in life. Ruth too conveyed disbelief that Mikey had spent £6000 on his car insurance this year, and laughed at how her first car had cost £500. The staff car park in comparison is dramatically modest. I headed into the academy headquarters, the smaller of two grand white manor-type buildings, through the side entrance to the classroom. The huge wooden plaque adorning the wall proudly displayed the names of those academy graduates who had made a first team appearance. The latest wonder kid was a name that was brought up repeatedly amongst staff proud of their role in his success.

The classroom was empty on arrival, the boys were not due in for another 10 minutes and were likely still up at the canteen eating breakfast together. Chicken and eggs, chicken and eggs. Matty nodded hello as he rushed through the door to set up his laptop for the upcoming team analysis session, Jimmy and Roy joined soon after. Smithy and Tom were the first boys to arrive, forever partners in crime. Both looked tired as they slouched down on the sofa

quietly. There was a lethargic energy around the academy this week, it had been a long slog and it felt like the upcoming Christmas break couldn't come soon enough. The other boys arrived sporadically over the next 5 minutes, some in more excitable spirits bantering amongst themselves, the biggest excitement of the morning seemed to be over Joe's fresh new kicks which Kieran exclaimed he'd dropped £400 on. Footwear provided a small opportunity to display individuality among the matching training kit, however eight of the eleven boys sported white socks and sliders, a look recently common amongst the pros. Nick arrived last and out of breath from running to make it on time. It was 8.40 on the dot, this time he'd dodged a £5 late fine. Joe had told me recently that the shame of being late mattered more than the insignificant sum. Just as Smithy and Tom were always the first, Nick was consistently the last to arrive. Unlike education where late comers often nonchalantly strolled in a couple of minutes late, there was a sense of urgency for team analysis or any of the sessions run by the coaches. The boys pulled their chairs round to face the coaches who were in front of the big screen, the clips following Saturday's 3-3 draw at the ready. Matty was sat in the corner in control of the laptop, submissively taking orders from the coaches to start / pause / rewind the footage. There was a mixture of energy from the boys as Jimmy began, the usual boys engaged and sat upright towards the front of the room, others had more relaxed slouched postures. Jimmy spoke loudly with authority at the front, the atmosphere for team analysis noticeably more serious than education. Roy chipped in with comments now and again, often riddled with humour "Are we a man short there or is someone off changing their shirt or what?". A few minutes into the session Jimmy spoke about the boys' 'concentration' in the second half of the game. Matty had been asked to stop a clip and slow motion it to show Alex failing to pick up his man, Jimmy singled Alex out and delivered a shit sandwich "you do this all day long in training for fun.....what's going on here? You've let him go....we'd never see this in the first half". Alex nodded compliantly, this publicly administered feedback was now old hat. Jimmy then addressed the group as a whole warning them that switching off and losing concentration will cost them. Although this wasn't the first time I'd heard the coaches speak about the importance of concentration I hadn't yet witnessed anyone addressing the implausibility of full concentration for 90 minutes or how they may develop focus. The overall tone of the session from Jimmy was positive, highlighted in his closing comments "Well done lads, brilliant – I haven't seen us play like this in a long while, lots of improvements to take away...more positives than negatives here for me. You shown real character in the game". Roy's conclusion was slightly less gracious "I want to see the mentality that this is U18 football now, goals will make the difference, the

mind-set we can go out to win. We gotta be taking our chances”. Jimmy drew the session to a close and the boys filed out indifferently towards the gym.

I followed moments later via the coaches office. Roy threw a dirty sock in my direction with a greeting of “Alright treacle”. Like a number of legacy staff, he is part of the furniture at the club and does what he wants. Dave was stood updating the whiteboard with player availability; Joe the latest addition to the ill-fated rehab list. Pat the 23s physio rushed through the door and informed Dave that Tommy (an U23 player) was in a strop and refusing to play with the U18s for their upcoming game. Dave huffed “tell him to stay in the gym, we’ll arrange a meeting with Harry for this afternoon, he’ll be gone tomorrow” Pat nodded in compliance and headed back to the gym. Not the first time I’d heard this threat. Dave huffed again and muttered to me as I headed out of the door “The youth of today eh”.

The gym was a hub of testosterone. The boys were spread out down the far end with hip hop blaring. Lights surrounding the large speaker flashed in time with the heavy beat. Aaron was on DJ duty and bopped in time to his chosen tunes. Likewise Nick and Kieran weren’t shy to show off their moves. Mikey tried to take control at one point and attempted to grab the iPad from Aaron who clasped it for dear life “Bruv your tunes are shit”. Pre-act was a 15-minute slot intended to get the boys switched on and ready for a pitch session. Various warm up stations were set up, Joey guided stretches on the mats in the middle where teasing about Smithy’s girlfriend ensued and he blushed as he tried meekly to defend himself. Alex looked lethargic on the hurdles, two of the 2nd years were messing around playing keep uppies with a ball on the periphery. Owen moved between stations, guiding the boys occasionally “a bit more urgency there Alex”. Having come from Olympic sports this season, Owen believed in giving young people ownership where possible but was realising the challenges given the immaturity of this group. Joe, a self-proclaimed joker sat alone staring into space on the hip abductor machine, his mature body, long limbs, bulging thighs and sculptured biceps a parody of his childish personality. I approached to see if he was OK, he forced a smile and nodded but his downbeat demeanour suggested otherwise. I thought back to Dave’s list. I questioned how he’d continue his recovery over the break, he admitted he wasn’t a member of a gym at home overseas and paying for only 10 days would be a waste of money. Those on professional contracts such as Joe could be on approximately £900 a week, I thought back to the trainers, insight into the financial priorities of the boys.

Tony greeted me in his usual cheeky manner as we crossed paths on the way down to the training pitches “Alright Nick –you must be nearly done for the day?!” he looked down at his watch. This banter fitted with the ongoing narrative that the sport psychs worked very little. He was one of a number of staff who still referred to me in the role of SPP, although I’d not worked in that capacity at the club for over 8 months now. I passed the first team training pitch, the green grass immaculate like the surface of a snooker table. Over on the academy pitches the usual suspects kicked balls amongst themselves, pass, touch, pass, touch, pass, touch, repeat. Dave and Jimmy were setting up cones into a small grid. The others joined in dribbs and drabs. The boys kicked balls amongst themselves for a few minutes while the coaches continued setup. Aaron, Mikey and Kieran joined in with three of the 2nd years, they yelled ‘test me’ prior to smashing balls into each other to see who could control it, laughing as the ball smacked Mikey in the chest.

Owen yelled from the far side of the pitch “warm-up time boys”, they jogged over lethargically. Owen demanded more urgency “come on, get behind the line boys, stationary”. They lined up for shuttles, a mixture of speeds, sizes and musculature amongst the 15 boys. Faces grimaced, positive reinforcement barked at them as they ran “nice, strong and sharp” “good pace you lot”. Gavin had joined to observe the session, he took on the role of ball boy when the drills began. The first drill consisted of 4 minutes of possession in small sided teams, efforts were half-hearted for a drill they’d done countless times, bar Smithy and Simon the incessant exceptions. This lacklustre didn’t go unnoticed by Dave “that was the worst 4 minutes of football I’ve ever witnessed. If it doesn’t get better in the next 4 then no one is having the day off on Thursday”. This alarmed Gavin who whispered “they have the day off on Thursday? No one told me, I was planning on coming in”. Gavin fitted his three days a week around the schedule of the boys but wasn’t always kept in the loop on this. The threat of a day off led to a temporary rise in intensity Dave recognised this with shouts of “that’s better”, “good work son”. Jimmy ran the second half of the session, a diamond shape for set piece practice, a man out wide whipping in the ball to the box. Nick vocalised frustration when the delivery was poor “c’mon man”, Gavin and Owen foraged in the bushes for a lost ball. Jimmy stopped play a few times to add some technical pointers whilst reminding them they needed to concentrate. As another session on the pitch came to a close the boys headed towards the esky where their pre made recovery drinks were ready and waiting with their initials on. Etienne arrived first clumsily knocking them all out as he dived in for his, after a sigh he reluctantly picked the others up slowly. Kieran arrived panting, he

moaned as he took down some of the pink liquid whilst two of the second years sneakily poured theirs away. Apathy reigned as Jimmy instructed the boys to help clear up “boys we aint got time to be standing around, everyone’s gotta be doing something, we gotta get in for lunch”. Simon sprinted to get the cones on the far side, always the one to pick up the most cones.

Nandos style chicken was a hit with the boys at lunch. Salmon or vegetarian lasagne the less popular items of the day served by chefs in their crisp whites. Tazly was in front of me in the queue, his plate piled high with beige; chicken, rice, bread roll, roast potatoes, like many he’d opted out of the bountiful salad bar. The boys had spread themselves across four tables on the left whilst the staff took up three tables on the right, sky sports on the TV provided welcome topics of conversation. Roy tried his usual trick “Oi, what’s that guy’s name in A-team, Mr...what was it”, Gavin fell hook-line and sinker and was sent off to make the teas, Roy found this hilarious. Gavin returned sheepish and headed out of the door with his tail between his legs. A text came through on the WhatsApp group to remind the boys they needed to be in the classroom for 1pm for the ‘sexting’ talk.

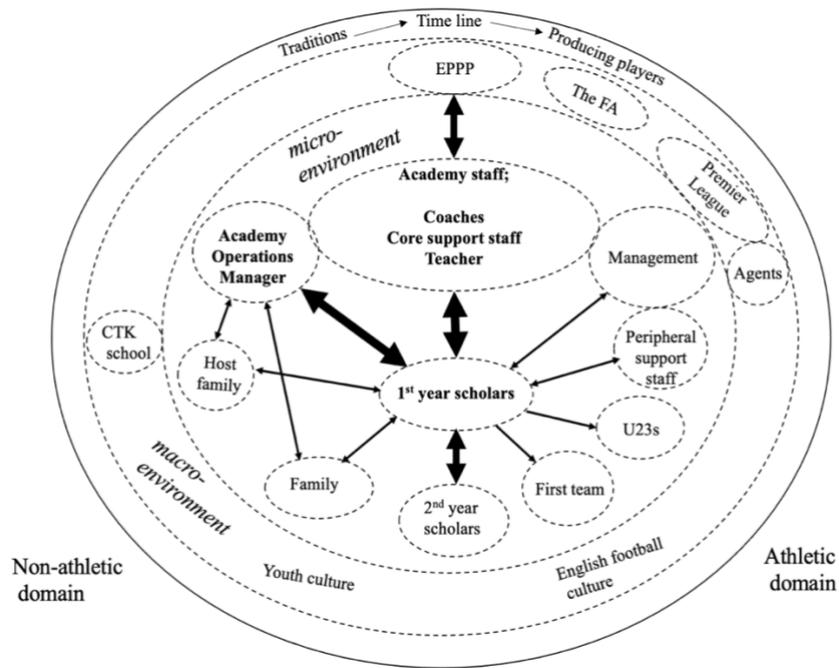
Over in the classroom Ruth explained that the text was the first she’d known about the talk in place of education. One of many occasions when education had taken a backseat and wasn’t communicated to Ruth who was worried time was running out to finish the module before Christmas. The boys piled in complaining about the smell in the classroom “someone needs to start using their lynx Africa” “rough man”. Tony came in with a smartly dressed lady I hadn’t seen before, another ‘outsider’ employed by the PFA to present life plan sessions to the boys. Tony addressed the room with his usual spiel “Afternoon boys, there’s a lot of shifty looking people in here today...I know it’s an awkward topic for you. Like all these things for development of you as human beings, this could save your lives. Open your mind – allow it to come in, if you don’t you’ve got the issue. I bet a million pounds this will affect every one of you. Open, embrace, take on board, use these experts”. He perched up on one of the desks at the side of the room as today’s guest introduced herself, it transpired she was a criminal lawyer and her role included both prosecuting and defending people who had got this sensitive topic wrong. She got right into the meat of it, some boys looked embarrassed which she picked up on “yeah yeah I say rude words”. The session was around the risks and illegalities of indecent images, recognising the pressures they may have as young boys. Early on in the session she shrieked at Nick “Wohooo can you just sit up, you’re falling asleep it’s

making me feel like I'm boring you to death". He said nothing but sat up slightly. Kieran and Smithy also struggled to keep their eyes open. Tazly's legs straddled the backwards chair and he had his head resting down on the desk, I spotted he'd hidden his phone behind the chair and was watching football on the screen. If it wasn't football related, he wasn't interested. Many of the boys were engaged and mature, lots of questions were asked at the end. Ruth whispered to me that she couldn't believe their level of interaction. The session closed with Tony inviting the boys to thank the speaker and he added "There was a wealth of wise words there boys, let me know if you have any private questions as I know you're all macho and might not want to ask in front of others. My message to you all is to protect yourself at all times" The final comment was delivered in a condescending tone; "think you know, www.think.com".

3pm and the boys were officially done for the day bar Smithy who grabbed his books and headed next door where his A-level Maths tutor waited. Tazly shouted over to see if Tom was staying for 'extras' in the gym whilst the bulk charged out of the classroom door, another day another dollar.

## **4.2 The ATDE model for Holgate FC**

Figure 8 shows the empirical version of the ATDE model adapted to present and describe the unique components and structure of HFC at the 1st year scholar phase. Given that all the components of the environment are interconnected, the model depicts the most important components and relations within the environment and the talent development process.



**Figure 8:** *The ATDE empirical model for HFC Academy*

### *Microenvironment*

The microenvironment consists of an athlete's immediate surroundings where athletic and personal development took place. This study focused on nine players in the first year of their scholarship and the young prospective elite players appear at the centre of the model. All of these players had been at the club for at least 1 year prior to the start of the study however the majority had been with the club for at least 5 years. The most central relations in the players microenvironment (marked by thick lines) are relations to their scholarship peers, coaches, relevant support staff, academy operations manager and the teacher. Those relations marked with a dotted line are either typically present in the daily environment but have less frequent contact (club management, SPP, younger scholars and the first team / U23 squads) or outside of the direct academy environment (host families and family).

### *Scholarship peers*

The scholarship phase consisted of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year scholars who shared space and a schedule (they trained, played matches, ate, conducted gym and life plan sessions together). The exception was education for which the two age groups were split into adjacent classrooms.

There were a total of eighteen prospects in the scholarship phase, nine of which were included in the study (as they met the criteria for 1<sup>st</sup> years who had been at the club for at least a year prior to data collection), as well as two additional 1<sup>st</sup> year scholars who had moved to the club at the start of the season from Australia and Finland and seven 2nd year scholars. Given that the majority of 1<sup>st</sup> years had been at the club for a number of years during which many had played up an age group at some point, they had good relationships in place with the 2nd year scholars. Some spoke about how this helped them to settle in at the start of the scholarship phase as exemplified by Mikey and Alex;

*It's good cause, like for me I've been playing up, like up an age group with older kids most of my time here so I've got a good relationship with like all of the older kids, so it was easy to settle in...like most of the boys know each other well anyway so it's easy. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

*When we were younger like u15s we would play with the u16s which are the second years now...So we already have like good relationships with the 2nd years, so it's just kind of like continued into this season. (Alex interview - scholar)*

The scholarship players spent a large amount of their time together. As well as moving around the daily schedule together they also spent their free time at the academy together usually in the lounge room where they could relax and play pool. These informal exchanges helped strengthen relationships. Within the 1st year scholars there were two main friendship groups who would occasionally hang out in the evenings together either going out for food or to each other's digs. Some of the boys spoke about the importance of these friendships as they understood the different lifestyle they were leading in comparison to friends outside.

### *Coaches*

The U18s had two full-time coaches, an on-field coach and a goalkeeper coach. In addition, the head of coaching who had been the U18 coach in the season prior oversaw the U18s and U23 teams but focused on the U18 towards the end of the season. All three coaches had played youth football themselves at a high level but two suffered injuries which cut their careers short. The coaches had all been with the academy for at least 7 years and had a combined total of 32 years of experience of working at the academy. The players saw the

coaches as technically competent and trusted them with their on pitch development. *“I think the coaches know what they’re doing cause like obviously everyone knows like they’ve produced great footballers and they’ve been in the game for a long time, so I trust them”* (Kieran interview - scholar). The players interacted with coaches during training, games and team analysis sessions. In addition, players and coaches had some informal interaction in daily life around the academy including in the canteen at mealtimes.

### *Teacher*

Education was delivered in house at the academy by teachers employed by the club. HFC was one of the first clubs in the Premier League who moved all of the scholarship phase education in-house, allowing the players to be on-site at all times. This freed up time by eliminating travel to and from college and eased the issue of trying to balance contradictory demands coming from the fields of education and elite football which are often nurtured and administered independently (Bourke, 2003; McGillivray and McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2006). The education department at the club was small, consisting of two full time teachers (one for each year of the scholarship phase) and the head of education. The first-year education was conducted by a teacher who was in her first season with the club. The boys trusted the teacher with their development in the classroom; *“She’s a very good teacher, I like her, she like trusts us just to get on with the work and just do it yeah”* (Tazly interview - scholar). A total of 8 hours a week were scheduled for education in the classroom but whenever there was a clash in schedule, education would be the first to be compromised and players usually had a maximum of 6.5 hours of education a week.

### *Academy operations manager*

The academy operations manager had a significant engagement with all of the scholars, as well as working closely with their host families. He played an overarching role that *“encompasses the education programme, holistic development/player care, recruitment and helping the coaches maximise players’ potential”* (Club website). There was a narrative throughout the academy that the academy wants to produce “proper people as well as proper players”. The academy operations manager was responsible for organising the Life Plan (Appendix H), which aimed *‘to deliver a programme to individuals within the academy that enriches their character, develops a performance lifestyle and provides information about*

*personal development and well-being in a structured and progressive way'* (HFC Life Plan document).

#### *Core support staff*

The support staff that had regular contact with the scholars included a full-time fitness coach, physiotherapists and a performance analyst. Players would conduct pre-activation sessions in the gym prior to daily training as well as strength and conditioning sessions in the gym with the fitness coach and physio. Injured players would spend more time in the gym and physio treatment rooms. Two hours a week were scheduled for classroom sessions with the analyst, one hour for individual analysis and one hour for team analysis. These staff played a fundamental part in the exchange of knowledge in the environment. Every morning an informal breakfast meeting was held in the canteen where the coaches and support staff discussed and shared any relevant knowledge such as the injury status of players, behavioural issues and player performances.

#### *Academy management*

The management were on the periphery as although based at the academy and present on site daily, the boys had varying levels of contact. The academy director role consisted of a number of areas from *"player acquisition and contracts, staff engagement and deployment, through to budget management of the academy and being the lead person for the Club reporting through to the Premier League"* (Club website). The academy manager role involved working closely with the academy heads of department and focused on the strategic planning, football operations and helping to drive improvement throughout the programme.

#### *U23 squad / First team*

The academy players shared the training ground and facilities with the first team. This was uncommon for a category one academy. Most players and staff saw this as a benefit *"because we're on one site and the first team is here, it's really nice that the young boys can mix with the pros"* (Roy interview - coach), although it was recognised that there were some restrictions given that academy plans at times got disrupted due to the requirements of the first team, for example the first team training schedule would dictate the time the scholarship

players and staff could eat in the canteen. Throughout the season a number of boys were given opportunities to train up and play with the U23 squad as well as train up with the first team squad if they were short of players.

### *Peripheral support staff*

The SPP was on the periphery because he had limited contact with the athletes given his part time role (25 hours a week split between the scholarship phase and the YDP. Furthermore, his role often involved acute treatment rather than long-term performance support. The SPP was in the process of completing his Stage 2 chartership training with the British Psychological Society. When asked halfway through the season if they'd worked with the SPP most had only had an introductory meeting with him and the majority of the boys couldn't remember his name or got this wrong;

*Nah, I spoke with..Eddie (wrong name)...but nothing that I needed help with, just getting to know him if I need to I can go to him. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

*I can't remember their name...To be honest, I don't need it but I still think it's good that I get it. (Nick interview - scholar)*

### *Host families*

All but one of the young players had moved in with host families in digs close to the academy. Living in digs was viewed as both advantageous and challenging by the players. It meant leaving their support networks and limiting time with their families and friends which led to boredom. However, the boys also identified it saved travel time which permitted more time to rest and recover as well as allowing them to develop independence. Most boys stated that they ate meals with their host families but spent the majority of time in digs alone in their rooms relaxing; *"Say hello, have dinner and stay in my room basically"* (Alex interview - scholar).

## *Families*

Since the majority of players lived in host families for an extended period, the family is on the periphery of the microenvironment. Despite not having daily contact with their families all boys recognised the continued support their families provided; *“My Mum my brother, they help me a lot...like, on and off the pitch to do with football and non-football and yeah they’re just always there and try to give me the best advice”* (Kieran interview – scholar). Some spoke about family members providing advice regarding contract negotiations, managing their money and others spoke about family members coming to watch games. Boys whose families lived close enough to the club would usually travel back home after the match on Saturday and return to digs on Sunday evening although those who played up with the 23s or lived further away were able to go home less regularly.

## *Friends*

The majority of players spoke about having limited time to see friends outside of the club. A number of players acknowledged having a very different lifestyle to friends, whilst some said their friends were supportive and understood this;

*Obviously (home friends)... they live a pretty different lifestyle to me, I try not to get involved in some of the things they’re doing but I still stay in touch with them and I see them the odd weekend but, yeah, it’s alright, yeah they’re supportive of it, (pause) they sort of want me to do well so (pause) they understand everything* (Tom interview – scholar).

Others spoke about how their main friends were within the academy.

## *Macroenvironment*

The macroenvironment comprises of the larger context in which the microenvironment was embedded. It consists of people and organisations with whom the players did not have significant daily contact but who impacted their development. It also contains a number of cultural layers including the culture in English football. Although there is undoubtedly variability in the specificities of the running of each individual club, it has been

acknowledged that there are a number of common environmental characteristics which apply across the board within an English football context (McDougall, Nesti, Richardson & Littlewood, 2017; Nesti, 2010). The TDE within English professional football is unique in that very few industries recruit and develop potential employees from such a young age (Platts, 2012) and young elite players may have to operate under intense organisational stress beyond their years. This presents a distinctive set of challenges and psychological demands for young players as they move through a professional football academy (Mitchell et al., 2014) which have been normalised in the wider football culture including; deselection and dealing with expectations (Mitchell, et al., 2014). The vast commercialisation of the football industry in recent years and the subsequent opportunity for financial profit, along with worldwide scrutiny has created a constant results-driven pressure for English clubs to win and survive at all costs (Gammelsæter & Jakobsen, 2008) which impact a club's philosophy and operating culture and filter down to academy level. The short-term culture existent in the Premier League has been recognised as a major challenge for elite youth player progression to the first team (Bullough & Mills, 2014) and only a small percentage of academy graduates progress to a club's senior team (Gledhill et al., 2017). Some staff recognised the problem with this system; *"listen we're failing in that, all clubs in this country are so, it is, you know the dropout rate is phenomenal that is something that we've got to improve on"* (Dave interview – coach). The wider culture of professional football in England impacted both working practice and recruitment at the club; *"I think it's the system of youth, where everybody is fighting to get the best players"* (Jimmy interview – coach).

A central component in the macroenvironment was the Premier League and in particular the application of the EPPP which has impacted the working practices of both staff and players within English football academies (Adams, 2015). As discussed in the literature review, since the introduction of the EPPP the Premier League has had an enhanced focus on developing a holistic programme to support the mental, lifestyle and welfare development of all academy players alongside the technical, tactical and physical development (Premier League website). There has also been a marked increase in the awareness of the need to provide young footballers with knowledge about the industry and the risks, expectations and possibilities that currently attach to being a professional footballer (Champ, 2018). The players received several Premier League led workshops which aimed to educate them about the demands of work as a professional footballer and preparing for life after football. In addition, players had reviews with a Premier League representative every 12 weeks.

### *CTK school*

The academy had a pioneering partnership with a local secondary school and had 50 schoolboy players enrolled at the school. The close proximity of the school to the training ground allowed the schoolboys to have increased contact time at the academy. Five of the nine players in the study had attended this school together and as such had a long history at the club.

### *Agents*

A number of the players were represented by agents. The role of the agent was primarily to act as an intermediary between the player and the club in terms of contract negotiations. Agents would also try to obtain sponsorship for some players. The FA recently introduced a rule that anyone representing a player as an agent must be registered with the FA as an intermediary. Those players with agents mostly reported they felt looked after by their agents, contact varied depending on the stage of the players' contract. One player stated that his agent had been watching him since he was 12 and he had friends at other clubs with the same agent also which influenced his decision to work with that agent.

## **4.3 Analysis of the microenvironment**

The final section of this chapter provides an analysis of the microenvironment of the academy to underpin further evaluation of how the environment impacts psychosocial development in Chapter 5. The factors influencing the success of HFC as an ATDE were explored and three broad themes emerged in relation to the elements of the environment that were particularly influential in shaping players' experiences within the academy; stepping up to the scholarship phase; the paradox of professionalism; and, communication. The factors discussed in the section that follows were key to the formation of an empirical version of the ESF model for HFC presented in Chapter 6.

### **4.3.1 Stepping up to the scholarship phase**

Stepping up to the scholarship phase presented a number of new challenges and opportunities for the young players. There was consensus amongst staff and players alike that the step up from schoolboy to a full-time scholarship was huge:

*Being a school boy to being a scholar...it's night and day, chalk and cheese, it's massive, psychologically it's different, the changing intensity, the change in expectations....you're under a microscope now, you could do things and get away with it...and it matters far more and the standard is so much higher, you know, there's no comparison to it...the change, you know coming out of home...you spend your life here as opposed to being at school and then coming in. (Tony interview – management staff)*

As illustrated by Tony in the above dialogue, differences in expectations and intensity of being on the full-time scholarship programme were recognised. The boys echoed staff discourse that there were new challenges encountered on the scholarship stage. The characteristics of the step up were broken down and represented by four subthemes: older boys and a bigger squad; playing up with the 23s and first team; the move onto a full time programme; and, an increase in expectations both on and off the pitch. These will be addressed in the first of three sections of the final section of this chapter.

#### **4.3.1.1 Older boys and a bigger squad**

*When they first step into it they'll be playing and training with boys a year older, maybe more. (Paul interview – management staff)*

The scholarship phase combines the U17 and U18 age groups, which posed two challenges that were recognised by both staff and players; the increased number of players to compete against for places in the team as well as an increased physicality of playing with boys a year older;

*There are more players to compete against for your position basically, cause like now it's two age groups together there's obviously the older kids that I'm playing against that are bigger and it's just adjusting to the physicality of things and the bigger people basically. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*Now like we're playing against older people as well so you gotta be more physical cause they are more physical so you gotta learn to adapt to that as well. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

*Mikey is going to fail massively more, cause 16s he was dribbling past everyone and now he can't dribble it past one person cause they're bigger and physically stronger. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Here both players and staff recognised the scholarship phase requires the players to adapt to greater physical demands and increased competition.

The coaches described how during the previous year in the U16 age group, the group these players were in was particularly small and they were used to playing every week. A bigger scholarship squad meant many boys now experienced deselection for the first time. Staff and players identified de-selection as a new challenge, source of stress and threat to players' confidence in the scholarship phase; *"They're not picked and then they're not picked again and not picked again for like 4 weeks so then it's dealing with that and keeping that confidence in your own ability that is difficult."* (Matty interview – support staff). Aaron spoke about how this impacted the morale in the team; *"A few of us are deffo annoyed that that we're not getting enough game time...or I'm not playing the position I want or stuff like that so it's been down init"* (Aaron interview - scholar). Interviews with coaches and observations of players indicated that deselection was challenging, reflecting the literature that has reported deselection as a commonly reported stressor within professional football (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Reeves, Nicholls & McKenna, 2009; Sæther, & Aspvik, 2016). For example, Sæther and Aspvik (2016) found that players who are given less playing time reported a higher level of stress compared to those who played more matches. Subsequently, one of the skills required by academy players as they step up to academy life is the ability to deal with new challenges such as de-selection.

#### ***4.3.1.2 Playing up with the 23s / first team***

The first-year scholars were given opportunities throughout the season to train up with the U23s and first team with whom they shared the training facilities. Although challenging, both players and staff acknowledged that these opportunities were invaluable;

*I think there's been fantastic opportunities for them over the last 2 years because there's been managers in place where they've had opportunities to train (with 1<sup>st</sup> team). (Dave interview - coach)*

*There's some good players up there (first team)....it's a good experience you learn a lot which is good. (Alex interview - scholar)*

Each level higher was seen as another big step up in standard;

*I think even when in training, the standard in the 23s is much higher than 18s...cause everyone's just on it and they don't like mess around as much as the 18s do. (Kieran interview - scholar)*

As well as the increased physicality and intensity, players also commented on the increased mental demands of playing with older age groups;

*You have to change your mentality cause like if you give a mistake maybe in the 18s nobody will say anything but 23s someone will say something and you just gotta learn to deal with them.. you can't go into the 23s and like be soft mentally because they're at you. (Aaron interview - scholar)*

*It just goes up and up...from the 18s to the 23s to the first team, it just gets more and more serious each level you jump up.. within a 23s game situation I mean there's more pressure and it's definitely different to what I'm used to with the 18s, it's definitely a big step up physically and mentally as well. (Tom interview – scholar)*

Although physically and mentally challenging, opportunities to play up were seen as beneficial as they exposed the scholars to the different expectations of these squads and facilitated an understanding of the requirements at the higher level; *“It's been physical to say the least, but I been trying to close that gap cause I do extras and the gym and I been trying to do stuff like that...I know they're going to be better physically, I gotta try and close the gap”* (Tazly interview - scholar). This is in line with research that has shown that opportunities to play up with a higher squad have the potential to benefit the young players by allowing them to be explicitly aware of what is needed to succeed at the top level (Larsen et al, 2013). Moreover, proximity between the youth and professional departments and exposure to role models have been identified as important factors in successful TDEs (Henriksen, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). The experiences afforded by the proximity to the U23s and

first team undoubtedly gave players an opportunity to learn from more experienced players and further develop their own game.

#### **4.3.1.3 Moving to full-time training**

Players entering the scholarship phase became full-time and were at the academy every day. Staff identified that full time immersion in the professional environment was a challenge for the scholars as exemplified by Jimmy;

*There is a big difference from school, or part-time football to full-time football, you know...just getting used to the everyday schedule... finding the everyday shift, whether that's getting up in the morning because it becomes a job now. (Jimmy interview - coach)*

Many players reported that they found the increased time and intensity of the new training schedule arduous; however a few months into the season they got more used to it;

*Moving to the 18s the challenge has been that we're in every day now so just like getting used to like the new schedule, being in every day, training every day and then games on Saturday. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

*At the start it was hard, 8.15 starting and then like, maybe like 4.30 finish, it's like 9-5 almost so it's long but like just get used to it but now it's just like normal init. (Aaron interview – scholar)*

Some players reported the increased intensity had helped them to get fitter and training every day had helped them to develop as players;

*Well to be honest I'm getting fitter, so that's good, yeah, I'm looking sharp. (Nick interview – scholar)*

*I think I've got a lot better as well with development defensively like from going into the U16s where it was just like with one to one drills like I can remember a lot of times where I'd just get beaten by my man way too easily, or destroyed by my man way to easily, where now I barely get beaten so yeah, defensively I've improved a lot. (Tazly interview – scholar)*

There was generally a consensus among players that they had got more used to the intensity of being on the full-time programme and some realised the benefits.

The fulltime regimen, however, did take a toll on players. There were periods in the season, including just prior to the Christmas break and in the last few weeks of the season, when a number of boys were exhausted and desperate for a break. Smithy acknowledged this in his last interview;

*It's honestly been building up how tired like everyone is getting, .... Everyone's just so drained basically, tired.... It's literally been non-stop..the most we've had off is a week at Christmas, but apart from that it's literally straight through like 40 weeks straight of just football. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*I definitely feel more tired now [three weeks before the end of season] everyday than I did for the first few months... now it's everyday I'm feeling rough... my body is slowly just deteriorating...I'm feeling like a 60-year-old man. (Tom - scholar focus group)*

This finding is consistent with prior research in elite youth football which has shown that high-intensity training and continuous compact daily schedules are linked to emotional/physical exhaustion (Carling, 2013) and that full time scholars reported decreases in perceptions of well-being as the season progressed (Noon, James, Clarke, Akubat & Thake, 2015). The exception was Tazly who identified how he had experienced exhaustion and a lull in motivation before Christmas, but this had come back towards the end of the season when he felt he had more to play for as he felt there was potential to make his first team debut;

*Like last year, December I think it was...like you know what, I can't be arsed...I needed a break yeah, cause it's like my first time being on like a full time schedule so like being in every day...6 days a week, sometimes 7 days a week, no like rest so yeah I was probably just getting a bit worn out and now (motivation) it's come back, because we got like 5 games left, ... so could be pushing for a debut at the end of this season and if not definitely next season. (Tazly interview – scholar)*

Some players recognised that the coaches understood the impact the full-time schedule was having; “they understand that we're tired, they do get that we're still just kids....like our bodies can only take so much, like it is good they understand” (Smithy interview – scholar).

The amount of training and resulting feelings of physical and even emotional tiredness were a key challenge of stepping up to the academy. This was exacerbated by the lack of breaks or holidays. As Tazly showed, however, motivation and outlook could change in relation to possibilities for success.

Another challenge of the full-time nature of the programme was that players acknowledged that academy life had become repetitive. Players discussed how the general day-to-day monotony increased as the season progressed, as exemplified in the following focus group discussion;

*I'd say I was more excited at the start of the year than I am now, yeah....I was open to everything whereas the seasons gone, I've done the majority of stuff now, there's not a lot of stuff to do.....like I could have told you at the start of the year like what we're doing today, it's just like the same thing over and over again (Tazly – scholar focus group)*

*Yeah, I feel like I need a new challenge (Tom - scholar focus group)*

*A bit of variety (Alex – scholar focus group)*

*And...knowing that we have the same thing next year. (Smithy - scholar focus group)*

Players recognised repetition in various ways including the food in the canteen “*breakfast could be varied...everyday it's just chicken and eggs or omelette*” (Mikey interview - scholar), resting alone in their digs and primarily the training sessions;

*I don't really like the training sessions, like they're constantly repetitive....like I could probably tell you what we're going to do like next month training it's gonna be like erm runs, possession, passing, crossing and finishing and a game, I could tell you that and it will probably happen. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

*When the sessions are the same, it can get boring, like...the other day we had a little chat and predicted the training sessions throughout the week and 90% was right (Mikey – scholar focus group)*

This dialogue illustrates that players felt training sessions were repetitive to the point they were able to predict them in advance. This led to players experiencing frustration and boredom which impacted engagement levels in training. Repetition was addressed during a mid-season meeting and while there was more variety at first, players felt that it became

repetitive again towards the end of the season. Research in elite sport that has recognised that a great deal of training while necessary to improve performance can be extremely repetitive and monotonous (Green-Demers, Pelletier, Stewart, & Gushue, 1998).

Players recognised the positive impact on enjoyment and engagement when the coaches did occasionally introduce variety in a session;

*There was one session this week, I think it was Tuesday, it was like....no one knew what it was...we were like oh this is different and like we were getting it going like we were really doing it well, it was more fun (Aaron - scholar focus group)*

*It's just exciting (Kieran - scholar focus group)*

*Gets you going (Aaron - scholar focus group)*

Players also felt that repetition was part of elite football and could help them to improve so needed to be accepted:

*You just gotta get on with it so, cause training at the end of the day it makes you better, even if you're doing the same stuff it still makes you better. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

*Everyone gets bored. Football is a boring sport, like you do it every day it gets boring....but you have to do it init. (Aaron interview – scholar)*

Staff similarly spoke about how repetition is part of the process of becoming an elite player and the young players themselves needed to be able to deal with the boredom; “*there is a notion of to get to the top you need repetition to hone those skills, to hone those attitudes, if you don't, you could come short. You know and it is part of the slog, it is part of the slog*” (Tony interview – management staff). Gavin recognised that this repetition is a reflection of life in the first team;

*I was having this conversation with a first team player last week, you've got to be able to deal with boredom... cause a footballers life ultimately sucks, which we don't tell them, academy lifestyle is similarly monotonous and planned out and we're scared to tell them which is, you will have your life planned out so you come in at 8.15 for breakfast, you go to the gym at 8.40, you go and you will have media from 9.30 til 10 you'll go and train from 10.30 til 12 you'll then go home....But you can't, you're then, in your contract you're not allowed to go out and do X, Y, Z because you*

*might get injured and then we don't have a player and you're doing that monotonous lifestyle for 15 years when you're meant to have the most fun. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

Repetition was identified as an important challenge for the players however some recognised it might be necessary to help them to develop and the coaches were to an extent intentionally repetitious in the training as they thought it was useful to the players. There was an ethos that repetition and routine were a regular feature of life in professional football and necessary to produce players for the first team (Roderick, 2006). This was a key challenge for players who varied in their ability to adapt.

#### ***4.3.1.4 Increasing expectations on and off the pitch***

Across the club there was a consensus from the young players and staff that the scholarship phase brought increased expectations for players to perform on the pitch. This included adjusting to the coaches' style of play;

*I just feel at times I feel restricted cause I can't really play my football, instead they just want you to play the way they like think is best where I think the way I play is best for me and the team but you just have to get on with it. (Kieran interview – scholar)*

*The coaches want me to be a bit more simple... like...I just try new things, try new skills, just not be ordinary cause for me that's boring. (Mikey interview – scholar)*

Some players found it challenging to have to play to fit the club's way of playing and found they were called out if they were not doing this right; *“we have to adjust to the style of play basically and now that it's competitive it's like our jobs, like if we're not doing it right we're going to get told that we're not doing it right”* (Smithy interview – scholar). Coaches highlighted any aspects of performance that were not meeting expectations during team analysis;

*Jimmy got Mikey to stop the tape again... “Two pieces of bad defending here. Joe, you let your man go, you've gotta be in a position where you're not flat footed”. Smithy was next... “that is bad defending in any walk of football. Now we're 2-0 down and we're chasing the game...people have just gone to sleep here. Joe he just pulls off of you....That reaction...if you're looking there to blame someone you can only blame*

*yourself. You're given a role / responsibility and you gotta do it. I've known people at the next level dragged off for that. Not doing their job". (Observation – team analysis)*

*Again we've gotta score these, I've seen this so many times this season...it don't happen at 23s and it definitely don't happen in the first team. (Observation – team analysis)*

Quality was expected by coaches, and players were publicly criticised for their performance errors during training, games as well as video analysis sessions. As performance demands increased in the scholarship phase, coaches expected the players to prove themselves individually and an ever increasing level of maturity and independence were expected. Players felt pressure to grow up quickly once they were full time scholars;

*We actually have a job basically that other people rely on us, if we don't play well then the coach's job is at risk, that sort of thing so I think it makes us grow up quicker. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*It's just serious effort like you can't mess around no more...even if it's the dream that everyone wants init it's like at the same time I'd have to be, for a professional I'd have to act like a man at this young age. (Aaron interview - scholar)*

The academy emphasised the need for the young players to be mature to be able to adapt to the step up to scholarship phase and to enable the coaches to progress players further; *"I do think that they are told to grow up quickly...because it's so competitive the environment that they kind of have to and they have to be mature otherwise you can't accelerate their progression"* (Matty interview - support staff). This is in line with prior work in elite football (Mills et al., 2012) in which coaches conveyed the importance of emotional maturity for transitioning to the professional level, stating that growing up and showing maturity allowed players to better adapt to changing circumstances. Larsen et al. (2012) similarly found that the young players had to learn to be mature while pursuing the dream of being a professional soccer player.

In summary, the scholarship phase brought a number of challenges the boys had not experienced before including an increase in expectations both on and off of the pitch, competition for places and step up to full-time academy life. Additional but less frequently reported challenges included dealing with injury for the first time and moving away from home. There was a narrative among both staff and academy players that these challenges

were part of the journey to becoming a professional footballer and players frequently conceded that “*You just gotta get on with it really...like I can’t do anything to change it*” (Smithy interview – scholar).

#### **4.3.2 The paradox of professionalism**

*When a paradox is widely believed, it is no longer recognised as a paradox* (Mason Cooley)

Fully immersed into the academy environment, young scholars were introduced to the notions of professionalism. This proved a confusing space for most, in part, due to mixed messages around ‘making it’. While a number of elements of the environment reinforced the message that the players were stepping up to become professional footballers such as signing professional contracts and receiving large amounts of money, this was a grey area as players were not yet deemed professionals. Staff were aware that many players did not make it past the scholarship stage and there were attempts to communicate this to players however not all were cognizant with these messages. The following section is represented by two subthemes; the professional environment, and holistic development; proper people as well as proper players (Life Plan and education).

##### ***4.3.2.1 Professional environment***

The scholars shared state of the art facilities with the first team including a new all-weather indoor dome, a full size outside astro turf pitch and kitted out gym. In addition to their surroundings, the scholars received other treatment that was in line with the first team including abundant new kit and chefs to provide daily breakfast and lunch. Players were included in traditions, examples included a page of the club website dedicated to the new scholarship signings and the ritual of a signing on photo in which the player posed with a pen and paper when they signed their contract, this mirrored the first team process. A number of the scholars were issued professional contracts during the scholarship phase extending their agreement with the club by one year. Boys could sign a professional contract when they turned 17, however some were promised this in advance and signed on their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. The large salaries received by young players on professional contracts enabled them to purchase expensive clothes and cars similar to first team players which contributed to the formation of a professional footballer identity. For example Louis Vuitton wash bags were

viewed as a staple item of a professional footballer; *“he was happy being the I’m a footballer, got the wash bag”* (Tony interview - management staff). Chat and banter amongst the boys about money and who had the most expensive items was regularly observed; *“The chat turned to money and I soon realised it was a pay slip that Joe was clutching. Mikey joined in and started bragging about his weekly payment. “You earn bare money”... “You gunna get those sick trainers bruv?!”* (Observation – classroom). Players’ immersion into the traditions and culture of a professional environment served to provide a feeling of success; *“The contracts, the money that’s involved – external voices around them, the PR, announcements on websites, there’s loads that contribute to a perception you’ve made it, you’re now a full time footballer”* (Paul interview - management staff).

Coaches believed that treating academy players as professional footballers could cause problems:

*Some of them are guaranteed a professional contract at 17, you’re not a professional footballer ‘til you’ve played in somebodys first team...until the first team manager whose job’s on the line picks ya and even then it’s not playing one game, it’s getting ten under your belt and then consistently.* (Dave interview - coach)

Support staff similarly felt that players were awarded contracts before they were developmentally ready to be treated as a professional;

*We treat them as Premier League footballers too early... and if you don’t make it there then you’re going to struggle whereas you should prepare them as a person, then prepare them as a general footballer, then prepare them as a league footballer. But it’s not as glamorous to go that way, it’s really easy to sell the dream of being a Premier league footballer.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

In addition, coaches felt that players could lose their motivation to train hard once they received a contract.

*Some of the boys like Mikey and Joe, they’ve got professional contracts now. So they’re thinking...I can improve yeah but I’m comfortable, I’m here for a while, I’ve got money...so they don’t have that necessary fear factor of I could leave so I need to do everything I can and it was the same with Lawrence, like he was told that he might not be staying here and suddenly he was like amazing and working really hard and*

*turning up to everything and then he got another contract and then nothing. (Matty interview - support staff)*

*We've got a lot of young players that have been given professional contracts too early, where's the hunger? (Jimmy interview - coach)*

This finding supports the recent work by Winter et al. (2019) that found that elite level youth coaches felt that early professionalisation was associated with some players becoming complacent and not wanting to put in the work rate required. Likewise, some players noticed that; “*Some kids sort of abuse the fact they got contracts and slow down...just cause they're getting a lot of money for what they do at this age, they think ah I've made it, I can do what I want*” (Smithy interview - scholar). This discourse suggests that the issuing of contracts lead some players to feel they had attained a key milestone in their pursuit of success in football and relax and reduce their efforts in training as a consequence.

In contrast, coaches and some players recognised that signing the contract was only a first step and was no guarantee of long term success. This included Tazly and Smithy who maintained their focus on working hard:

*I think everything is just down to me, like, I just feel like as I said it's staying humble is just a mindset I think personally, just keep working hard, keep wanting to be like better and keep learning from the coaches and take that advice and yeah I think I'll eventually make it one way or another. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

*I haven't made it yet, ... like I'll never think I've made it until I'm like 30 and have all the money in the world, like have a house, a family, be able to look after other people who rely on me, even like looking after my Mum and Dad or whatever, brother and sister do you know what I mean, and I've had a good career. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

This variance in players' approach to training and recognition of the effort it would take to be successful was in part due to differences in their overall approach to life in the academy and their social, emotional and psychological maturity. Gavin stated;

*They're just getting their first bit of money, just signed their first pro deal, classic photo and you're relying on them having the foresight to be able to say 'oh I might*

*not have this permanently'. We know adolescents don't have that.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

*I think it's the system of youth, where everybody is fighting to get the best players, nobody wants to miss out, sometimes you pay over the odds ... sometimes coaches have to give out certain contracts to certain kids who don't deserve them cause there's a fear of losing them.* (Jimmy interview - coach)

Staff acknowledged that mixed messages around making it were precarious and required players to have a strong awareness of where they were in the process and what it takes to progress into first team life. The culture of the club meant that players often had to learn these skills informally and this resulted in great variance among the players. The pressure to recruit young players by offering contracts demonstrates a key was a tension between what staff felt was necessary for the club versus what was best for individual player's holistic development.

#### ***4.3.2.2 Holistic development; proper people as well as proper players***

The academy clearly identified that they were committed to producing “proper people as well as proper players”. Staff were aware that professional football is a short and risky career and the academy experience aimed to educate and assist young players with development for life beyond football. This included a Life Plan curriculum alongside continued in house education. Some players understood the messages around the importance of off-field development, however the majority of players were not engaged with plans for life beyond football as football was their overriding priority.

##### ***4.3.2.2.1 Life Plan – broad aims and delivery***

The narrative that the academy wants to produce “proper people as well as proper players” was observed in artifacts such as an online article with the head of the academy and spoken about regularly in staff interviews. The main spokesman for this message was the academy operations manager who was responsible for organising the Life Plan which aimed to cultivate well-rounded individuals and develop communication, humility and citizenship skills; “*we want boys who leave here having a really good educational experience off the*

*grass as well as on the grass”* (Tony interview - management staff). The academy ran an extensive Life Plan programme, sessions were delivered over the course of the season often in the form of a workshop every two weeks. This included a number of Premier League led workshops, often run by guest speakers which aimed to educate players around the demands of work as a professional footballer and preparing for life after football, a range of practical skills workshops as well as opportunities for players to be involved in the club’s outreach programmes; *“At the older end we’re doing really in-depth financial education, property, driving skills, cooking skills we do a lot of mentoring programmes with lots of local areas, children who are disadvantaged in any way or disabled, you know we’re really big on doing giving back projects”* (Tony interview – management staff). The scholars were given opportunities to develop these life skills through interacting with community groups, they played a game against the club’s Down’s syndrome football team and ran a coaching session for local school children. A number of players acknowledged these were positive experiences and Smithy recognised that the academy endorses the importance of giving back to others;

*HFC always talk about giving back to people because like they say that footballers are selfish...so they do encourage it which is good yeah...they organise stuff to help the community out...The game (against the down’s syndrome team) was really good yeah I enjoyed it, I realised how lucky I actually am.* (Smithy interview - scholar)

Observation data and interview data from players and staff found that the academy regularly communicated the importance of giving back to the community, particularly Tony who stated that ‘give back’ was a mantra of his, a philosophy that some players echoed. It was recognised that the academy had a longstanding history of the holistic development of players having introduced work of this nature prior to the requirement from the Premier League through the EPPP:

*We’ve been ahead of the curve so we’ve been doing this since I came in, we’ve always done an extra curriculum programme to balance it out... It’s become far more sophisticated now and sort of grouped...so it’s easy for people that come in to look at it like advisors or monitors or you know inspectors who have to comment on the programme and they’ve all been very favourable.* (Tony interview – management staff)

Management and staff took pride in the club’s positive reputation for holistic development; *“we have people like Tony, Andrew and Harry who are magnificent at helping people away*

*from football, helping people become good human beings as well”* (Roy interview - coach). There was a consensus amongst staff that the academy was more focused than ever on the personal development of youth footballers on and off of the pitch.

#### 4.3.2.2.2 *Rationale and players understanding*

A key aim of the life plan was to educate the players around the risks of the short-term nature of a professional career and the importance of preparing for life after football. As discussed in the previous section, the staff were well aware that most players will not make a professional career in the game and those who did it would be short-lived:

*The basic line is we’re aware that not many of these are going to come through and have a career in the game but because of the commitment ... you have a responsibility to make sure they are supported but also educated to take the skills they develop here through this programme, to be useful in other aspects of life..we want fine citizens and you’ve got to give them opportunities to develop and acquire those skills.* (Tony interview - management staff)

The academy operations manager would often relay a message at the start of sessions whilst introducing a guest speaker to emphasise this message to players. On one occasion when the guest speaker cancelled his session the academy operations manager dedicated the session to reiterating the significance of the Life Plan, Tony decided to use the session to talk to the boys.

*[Tony began] In life you need people who tell it like it is; it is going to be a difficult journey here – if you’re really lucky some of you may have a career until you’re 34. For some of you it will end at 18, most of you it will end at 18, you need to be prepared for life after, you can’t be constantly looking back and holding onto the glory days.* (Observation – Life Plan)

This observation exemplifies the club’s efforts to illuminate the risks and short-term nature of a career in professional football. Some players were able to reiterate these messages;

*[Life Plan’s] useful for a footballer cause anything could go wrong at any point.* (Mikey interview - scholar)

*Obviously football is such a hard business to make it to the top in. (Tom interview - scholar)*

*Tony just gives us stories..I could recite a whole story he's told me all before...he's told me like that same story like 9 times, it's like he's saying it, I'm speaking it with him. So it's like it helps but like you've told me already...like please don't tell me again. (Aaron interview - scholar)*

Players' acknowledgment of key Life Plan messages suggests that the academy education around these issues had helped some players to be aware of the risks of the game, however some felt these warning messages were retold so often they found them repetitive and frustrating. These messages appeared to be overlooked by some;

*They probably say like 1 of us to our faces to scare us init but deep down they know that all of us are very good players so yeah I think...they wouldn't admit it, you'll never hear it from them but most of us will make it at the top...maybe not at the top but we'll make it as professional footballers. (Aaron interview - scholar)*

*Some of us are probably better than some of the first team players but just cause they're 24, we're 17, it's looked at different. (Mikey interview – scholar)*

*I know I will be a successful player. (Joe interview - scholar)*

*One way or another I promise you that I will be in the first team, like one way or another I will be the first team right back. (Tazly interview – scholar)*

Although provided with advice about the low odds of becoming a first team player, most if not all of the boys were certain that they would succeed.

Another key aim of the life plan was to educate and assist players with the demands of being a professional footballer, this included talks by ex-players which tended to focus on the difficulties they'd experienced during their careers including dealing with career ending injury, gambling and alcoholism as well as reflections they wish they'd realised sooner such as the importance of having options for when their career finished. Player engagement in life plan sessions varied depending on the content of the sessions;

*I've forgotten like...a lot of it (last week's finance talk)...it's just long because you have like a full day of training, education and then like you have to have a speech so it's just like I really just zoned out. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

*I think the stories of the people who have had a career or gone through an academy and then not gone on to make it are intriguing because it's always good to know like what you could potentially face and obviously from their experience you can obviously take on and then you know what to do in advance of those situations. (Kieran interview - scholar)*

Ex player talks were viewed as both interesting and useful by players as they felt that they could relate to ex-players and valued learning about their experiences to help them progress in their own careers. Life Plan content that focused on life beyond football or alternative careers was not assimilated in the same way as information that the players believed would benefit them in terms of progressing towards a career in football.

*Andrew had organised a career fairs event at the club stadium as a chance for the boys to think about 'Plan B'. Ruth informed me that most of the boys had moaned this morning about attending the event, "why do we have to go?" "what's the point?", she rolled her eyes and attributed this down to the fact most just "think they're going to be footballers". The room was crowded and set up with a number of stalls flying their company flags and goodies, it was all football focused with Football Manager, the FA for Referees, LAPs (an elite sport employment charity), Loughborough University, Solent University and First Point an organisation that works with US universities for scholarships. There were mixed levels of engagement from the boys, whilst a few were proactive in making their way around the room speaking with the various companies, the majority were huddled around a laptop towards the front of the room, engrossed in the football manager stall. Many didn't move from this position all morning. (Observation – careers event)*

When asked about this event in their interview some players expressed the view that these alternative options were not for them;

*You get a different picture about what other people do that you didn't know before and it's interesting to find out what they do...not for me...I'm not trying to go down that route but yeah..it's different, yeah it's good. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

*Erm, I didn't really like pay attention in that careers thing I just played on player manager for the whole thing so (laughs) ...yeah.. , for me it's just simple life just football and that's it. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

This data supports Parker's (2000) work that 'for the majority of trainees, dreams of footballing success far outweigh issues of post-career vocational planning in terms of lifestyle prioritisations' (Parker 2000, p. 74). The majority of the young players viewed the achievement of a career in the game as dominating all other concerns, as such, exploring options outside of the game is to accept they may have no future in football (Platts & Smith, 2009). While the message was made clear to players that they needed to prepare for life after football, educational messages about the importance of exploring and developing options outside of football are likely not enough if processes are not in place to support these messages.

#### *4.3.2.2.3 Education; academy business Vs life after football*

There was a discrepancy between the business of developing professional footballers and the need to encourage players to consider life after football. Whilst education was part of daily life in the academy, football undoubtedly took priority. Consistent with other research in elite sporting environments (e.g., Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Hickey & Kelly, 2008), whenever there was a clash in the schedule, education would be the first to be compromised;

*People just come in say "oh the boys need to do this" or they've got a game or... and education is quite low on the list, so, like I've not even taught them anything nearly since January because I haven't had time, it will just be like spoon-feeding them to catch up... at some point you're going to have to skip the actual teaching part and say you need to do this. (Ruth interview – teaching staff)*

A total of 8 hours a week were scheduled for education but players usually had a maximum of 6.5 hours week, often less. This meant time was limited to complete the syllabus and subsequently the teaching was often skipped and content spoon-fed. The teacher recalled how she felt the coaches showed little interest in the boys' educational development. *"Jimmy doesn't take any interest in education. Dave will ask a few times when passing through "is anyone misbehaving" I don't think anyone's said "can we see where are they up to on their work, what are their grades?" They wouldn't have a clue what they were doing – not a clue"*

(Ruth interview – teaching staff). This has important implications given that the coaching department has a significant influence and authority over players and are in a position to deliver a powerful message around the importance of education; *“They (the coaches) said if they’re not behaving then they won’t play football but you learn straight away that that’s not actually the case”* (Ruth interview – teaching staff). Although the importance of education was verbally acknowledged in the environment this feigned threat from coaches gives the message that education is not a concern of theirs and not sincerely valued by those with the most influence over the players’ football career.

It transpired that not all staff were convinced of education’s place in an elite sport academy. Some staff felt that time spent on education meant less time spent on football which should be the priority;

*I think it has a fantastic emphasis on education, they’re doing as much education as they are football but we’re expecting them to be footballers. Don’t get me wrong the education is brilliant, but I just think you should be in trying to be footballers and it would free up so much time for us and psychologists ...to talk to them about football football football. (Roy interview - coach)*

*There is a big emphasis on education, from my perspective probably too much (laughs)...I just think for what we’re producing, we’re not a school, we’re actually a football club but obviously I understand the importance of it...but I always thought that the boys have chosen to do football, how are you going to have a good solid foundation in either football or education if you’re doing a little bit of both. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Here staff questioned the level of emphasis that should be put on non-football activities, underpinning this was their commitment to the core aim of the academy, to prepare the boys to be professional footballers. The view that education may be a distraction from players’ football expressed by some staff may have impacted the boys perception of education; *“you can tell that impression of education rubs off on the boys like “ah do we have to be here?” whereas if everybody was like education is really important, they’d be like “OK let’s get this lesson done we need it”* (Ruth interview – teaching staff).

A number of boys acknowledged the importance of education as a back-up to football;

*I've got decent exam results for my GCSEs and I just thought I'm not going to let them go to waste, I might as well try and get an A-Level of some sort, I just thought, go for Maths and see how it goes, you might as well do it because if football doesn't work out at least I'll have something just to fall back on. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*Education is definitely something I wanna do well in cause obviously nothing's certain in football – obviously...the main focus is football but I want to do well in education just in case. (Tom interview - scholar)*

Education was seen by these players as something that needed to be complied with to give them a necessary safeguard should they not progress into a career in football. In this way the players are echoing the key messages of the Life Plan that football is a risky career and it is important to have something to fall back on. Tom and Alex had given up on A-levels and others had chosen not to take these as they didn't want to have to do the extra work as this meant taking work home. Despite this, a number of boys including both Tom and Alex frequently stayed behind to do 'extras' in the gym, in this way additional education could be seen to rival football related additional activities in terms of time restrictions. Thus in 'Lewinian' terms (Lewin, 1951), the social, psychological, and physical valences towards the focus of sporting performance are typically greater than those that drive the boys towards education (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). The idea that they should complete their B-Tec qualification was one that was generally accepted by many of the boys, and some were positive about. However, the potential benefits of continuing education remain in the distant future whereas football matters in the here and now, thus nothing other than football has serious psychological existence for the majority of the boys (Lewin, 1951). Prior research in elite football has found that it was only upon their deselection that the participants began to realise the value and need for educational qualifications (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

In summary, the academy implemented an extensive life plan curriculum which delivered educational messages to players about the importance of exploring and developing options outside of football, including in house education, given that football is a short and risky career. Some players absorbed these key messages and displayed some foresight in this regard; however, it was observed that the majority of players were not engaged with plans for life beyond football as football was their overriding priority. This was reflected in players' views that although options for life outside football including continued education were important this was very much a backup plan and not given the same value as succeeding in

football. The verbal message that it was important to consider a life beyond football was overridden by the day to day message lived out in the academy and the recognition that the main priority of the academy was to develop professional footballers.

### **4.3.3 Communication**

*The upside of painful knowledge is so much greater than the downside of blissful ignorance (Sheryl Sandberg)*

Communication was a key factor shaping players' experiences within the academy. Uncertainty around progress was the key theme relating to communication, this consisted of the subthemes of formal and informal processes and sources of information.

#### **4.3.3.1 Uncertainty around progress**

One of the challenges for players was gaining understanding of how well they were doing and what this meant for their future. This uncertainty was difficult for players as they were on short term contracts and dependent on the club for achieving their goal of a professional football career. This uncertainty was, in part, due to the unevenness of the communication practices at the club. For example, players felt that there was a lack of one to one opportunities to discuss progress with coaches. Feedback from coaches often relied on individual initiative and meetings were rarely scheduled. This meant that players tried to ascertain information about their progress by relying on and interpreting messages and activities at the club which often could be ambiguous or inconsistent.

##### **4.3.3.1.1 Communicating progress through formal and informal processes**

A common method of communicating progress to players is through formal and informal meetings. In this research, there were few formal, one-to-one meetings between players and coaches. In addition, players felt unable to approach coaches and initiate conversations about their progress; *“it probably would be beneficial to have their feedback on like what I could be doing but yeah, like I’m still looking at what I can improve on and what I should be doing better”* (Tazly interview – scholar). Similarly, players did not feel they could challenge coaches or question their decisions.

*I feel like if you asked them, they're gunna turn around at us and be like what do you mean, do it right here first (Aaron - scholar focus group)*

*I think if you ask them it's the wrong thing...if you go to the coach and ask them (Joe - scholar focus group)*

*I feel like if you question them it's the wrong thing (Kieran - scholar focus group)*

*They don't like it (Joe - scholar focus group)*

*They don't like being questioned (Kieran - scholar focus group)*

A number of boys acknowledged that they would like more one to one conversations with coaches away from the pitch;

*There's not enough like meetings with the coaches like one to one or you and a few of the coaches. They said we would in that big meeting at the start of the year, everyone agreed, and nothing has happened since. I'd like more support in my development in terms of off the pitch, on the pitch I'm fine doing it, I'm out there so I get a lot of opportunity to ask questions and stuff but see off the pitch, talking about your development is quite scarce, how you improve...in that respect. (Tom interview - scholar)*

*I think we should have sessions more, like this, where I think players should be free to speak cause, I know some players have things to say, where if we don't do this then they won't really say....I think there needs to be a time and a place where you can say stuff and speak freely. (Kieran interview - scholar)*

This dialogue highlights players would value more opportunities to sit down with coaches one to one. Tom acknowledged that more one to one communication between players and coaches was something that was discussed in a group meeting at the start of the year, however he felt this hadn't changed since the meeting. This implies good intentions and awareness from the coaches around a need for clearer communication but a gap in implementing this.

In support of the wider talent development literature (e.g. Martindale et al., 2007; Henriksen et al., 2011), Larsen et al. (2013) found that an open organisational culture was an important feature that contributed to the success of the football TDE. An open approach was evident in the way the staff worked with the players; the coaches had an open door policy and caught up

with the players every day for informal chats. At HFC, the coaching office was an intimidating place for players and some support staff.

Matty, a member of the support team, spoke about the need for the coaches to take responsibility for ensuring conversations are taking place;

*I would like to think that the conversations have been had to tell him [Nick] why he's not being pushed, but I'm not entirely sure that it has..they need to know what they're doing well and what they're doing bad regularly...but I know that Smithy and Alex will go to the coaches in front of everyone and be like, "oh I'm not feeling good with this deh deh deh" whereas someone like Nick won't do that, because of image and maybe personality so he needs that, like in here maybe just to talk to him, like what's going on...ah I don't feel like I'm being pushed enough...and then we can say look OK here are the reasons why. Almost like forcing them to do that, because if they're given the option they won't do it. I know that because I've said to all of them come to my room and we'll look over the clips together one to one but they don't. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Smithy was the only player in his interview who said he felt he could lead the communication with both coaches;

*They'll like me to go up and talk to them individually because it shows that I wanna get better and it just proves a point that I've got the character to go and do it. Even if people think they can't it's just...I think cause our coaches are quite intimidating, if you actually go and talk to them they're alright, it's just on the pitch they seem scary...like...the first time I went to speak to them I was probably nervous....but my Dad actually said go and talk to them even though I know you don't want to go and do it cause I know it's the right thing to do. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

Here Smithy acknowledges that not many players approached the coaches like he did as they could be intimidating, however when they did the coaches were willing to help. Smithy was able to realise and take personal responsibility for driving his own development by pushing himself out of his comfort zone and speaking to the coaches. Matty echoed Smithy's message that he felt the coaches were happy to help when the boys opened up to them, however reiterated that he didn't think the boys felt they could;

*If you do open up they will help you, they want to help and they're passionate about helping them but the boys don't feel like they can...like Alex, playing well but not getting picked or Joe scared to things on the pitch cause he gets shouted at or....stuff like that.* (Matty interview – support staff)

Nesti (2010) suggested that players may show a reluctance to speak to a coach due to their capacity to make influential decisions regarding their future. This was recognised by Matty “*They feel they definitely can't talk to the coaches cause they're scared that they will disagree with what they're saying, then not pick them for the team*” (Matty interview – support staff). Mikey spoke about impression management in front of coaches; “*You gotta know when to act how you act, at the end of the day they're making the decision*” (Mikey interview – scholar). This player normalised the lack of explanation around selection, accepting it was their responsibility to know why themselves. When asked in an informal chat whether reasoning was given by coaches Mikey explained “*Na, they don't need to tell you why. If it's because I've not played good then I know*” (Mikey - scholar informal catch up).

Understandably, players had varying relationships with the different coaches. A number of players spoke about how they felt they could relate to and speak more easily with Jimmy as he was from a similar background to them. He was perceived as more approachable than the other coaches by a number of players as they felt they could have a joke with him as well as get guidance on their football development. It was observed that communication with Jimmy was often informal and not equal to all players;

*I don't really have conversations with like Dave, or Barry (U23 coach), that's just the way they are like, they don't really like talk to us much, but I'd say Jimmy's the person that I can have a conversation with, because like I think he's from the same area so I think he understands like where I'm coming from a lot more than a Dave or a Barry would.* (Tazly interview - scholar)

*Would anyone feel like they could go and talk to the coaches* (Researcher)

*Nah I don't think we have that relationship* (Aaron - scholar focus group)

*Yeah...Jimmy maybe, I think yeah* (Mikey - scholar focus group)

*Yeah Jimmy maybe, Roy... definitely no* (Joe - scholar focus group)

*Roy no* (Aaron - scholar focus group)

*Jimmy will have a chat on the way in from training, but like with some players, not the others (Kieran - scholar focus group)*

*You can approach Jimmy (Joe - scholar focus group)*

*He approaches you as well (Kieran - scholar focus group)*

*He chooses only certain players (Mikey - scholar focus group)*

*It's not really fair (Kieran - scholar focus group)*

*Do you feel like you can chat to him Mikey? (Researcher)*

*Yeah, I've spoke to Jimmy before 1 on 1, so yeah (Mikey - scholar focus group)*

*You can talk to Jimmy but like there can't be only one coach you can do that (Joe - scholar focus group)*

*We only feel like it's comfortable to go to him (Mikey - scholar focus group)*

*You can't trust a lot of people (Aaron - scholar focus group)*

Jimmy was involved in bringing a number of players into the academy and some of these players had subsequently built a relationship with him and felt he was a crucial agent in their development. The focus group dialogue exemplifies that some boys felt more comfortable approaching Jimmy informally than the other coaches. Players recognised that there were some preferences over those players Jimmy would look out for. It was clear there were barriers to approaching the other coaches and generally the protocols around communicating with coaches were not clear or consistent. There was some uncertainty from coaches around their role in communicating with players, for example one coach recognised that the ever-increasing interdisciplinary nature of academy football meant that coaches now spent less time talking to players;

*There's such a talk about this interdisciplinary thing now, where actually your coaches are actually not talking to your players half as much as they used to, and erm, I think it would be good (to have more one to ones)..but it was a lot easier 5 years ago and before that because I thought that we were the main voice. (Dave interview - coach)*

Prior research has suggested that as young elite athletes spend such a large proportion of time in an elite sport setting it can be argued that the coaches act as second parents to players (Jowett & Poczwadowski 2007). The coaches in this study appeared to play less of a hands-on role with players, interacting with them predominantly only on the pitch and during some analysis sessions and team meetings. The present study found communication was available

for those players who took the initiative however for the majority there were limited opportunities to discuss their playing progress with coaches due to reticence on both parts.

#### 4.3.3.1.2 Sources of information: Selection and training up

One source of information that players used to ascertain their progress was selection for training and matches with higher level teams. Players often perceived that being invited to play up or train up indicated that they were perceived to be performing well;

*You'll be doing well in the 18s then they'll call you over.* (Alex interview - scholar)

*I feel good again cause I'm training well and like training up with the U23s.* (Nick interview - scholar)

Player selection for opportunities to train up was due to a multitude of reasons that were not clearly and consistently communicated to the players and did not always have to do with ability. Players, however, used this information to try to assess their ability and the lack of clarity about the meaning of playing up led to confusion in the players;

*Communication is very bad..one week I'm getting told I'm playing 18s, next week I'm getting told I'm playing 18s then I'm playing 23s then I'm playing 18s then I'm playing 23s, 18s, then 23s, then something else then something else...then first team.* (Tom – scholar focus group)

Tazly discussed how he was told by a member of management he was better than a player in his position in the first team squad which led to confusion as to why he was not then given more opportunity to train with them;

*Holgate are very misleading so they'll say one thing and do the other, Tony's told me already like that he sees me better than Todd and Gary, who are right backs ahead of me. Like surely if you think I'm better than Gary, surely when he trains first team, I should be training first team. I've only trained with the first team once whereas others have trained like 3 or 4 times so it's very hard, for them to say like "ah yeah we see you as this" but nothing is happening so it's hard.* (Tazly interview - scholar)

For Tazly, there was a mis-match between the feedback he felt he's received from a coach and the number of times he was able to train up with the first team.

For the coaches; however, training up was not necessarily an indicator of a player's ability. Players could be selected on the basis they were training well, the first team manager had asked for a spare player for a specific position or because they were not selected for the 18s team and not needed in preparation for an upcoming game;

*Quite often it's the spur of the moment like all of a sudden someone will get injured from the first team and they'll be like oh we need a midfield player and you go like whoever's there, you go. I think we need to be more smarter as a group to say look who do you think should go up? (Roy interview - coach)*

Management acknowledged the potential danger of mixed messages from training up and how this was currently being talked about amongst staff; *"lots of boys are getting an opportunity to train [ with the first team] but the mixed messaging that can come out of that is damaging... it's something we're talking about more and more, how best to manage that"* (Paul interview – management staff).

Although there was an awareness of the danger of mixed messages there was ambiguity amongst staff as to whether the reasons for training up were properly communicated to the boys and how this should best be done. There was an expectation for players to be aware of their progress themselves; *"You have to know your own game, you have to know where you are, cause there's some people who go and train with the first team and just blow it away and there's others who don't quite do as well as they think they've done"* (Dave interview – coach).

Providing young players with an opportunity to step up to compete in an older and higher level age group under pressure can have a number of benefits (Cook et al., 2014) including an opportunity to develop resilience if this process is purposeful. Fundamental to this process is a subsequent review and support from coaches to help to ensure positive development and progression from such experiences which was overlooked in the academy (Martindale & Mortimer, 2011).

Management acknowledged the importance of conversations between coaches and players around selection choices however there were a number of barriers, including a lack of clarity about who should talk to the players and concerns about de-motivating players.

*Often it's about who is best to share that information with the player and when is best to share that information erm...do you do it before they go so or does that negatively impact their excitement, their motivation? Is it the coach receiving them that does it, is it the coach that they're leaving that does it? Is it someone outside of the coaches that does it? So it's more complicated than it initially seems. (Paul interview – management staff)*

Paul's discourse suggests some tension from staff between what might be good for an individual and what is good for the club and that the club were not fully aware of the best way to communicate messages around playing up in order to get the most out of the player.

In line with previous research within SP that has emphasised the importance of open lines of communication and discussing expectations with athletes (e.g. Rhind & Jowett, 2010), there was an awareness from staff around the importance of clear communication and that more needs to be done in terms of managing expectations of how players are performing;

*I think we've got to deliver the messages so people understand, you know, so that anybody who is with 23s pre-season...we'll say "listen, you're there by default, cause 6 of the players are with the first team on the tour, so don't think you're an u23 player and don't start sulking when you're playing in the 18s for us again this season, cause when the 6 come back, they're better than you at the minute... Ultimately the people that tend to succeed is when they know what they are...I think it is managing the expectation, it's communicating more. (Dave interview - coach)*

*I think as they get towards the end of the scholarship and certainly when they go to the U23s the reality starts kicking in because they will also see their peers suddenly breaking away and getting 1<sup>st</sup> team experiences or and they are not yet and it starts to create a bit of reality (Paul interview – management staff)*

*Do you think that could be communicated to them any more in the scholarship phase? (Researcher)*

*Maybe.....yeah you don't want to dampen their dreams or impact their motivation, what I think we could do more is just be honest about the realities that not everyone will play in our first team, not everyone will play in the champions league but your destiny is to some degree in your own hands and I think we could probably be a little but more transparent about that. (Paul interview – management)*

Dave's acknowledged the importance of players having a realistic awareness of their strengths and ability and this could be developed by managing expectations better through more communication. Likewise, Paul's dialogue shows acknowledgment from management that communication to manage expectations could be clearer, however there was some fear about dampening the players' dreams and impacting motivation. This again illustrates tension between what is important for the players versus concern for the club. The lack of formal feedback opportunities meant that players and coaches did not necessarily share understandings about players' development.

In summary, communication was a key factor influencing the organisational culture of the academy. Most players felt there were limited opportunities to discuss their playing progress and future with coaches often due to reticence on both parts, which led to ambiguity. Despite staff acknowledging the need for the boys to have the awareness to know where they are in the development process there were few formal, one-to-one meetings between players and coaches. It was recognised by staff that the messages around selection and general progress could be clearer, however, data found that the onus was largely on the boys themselves to take responsibility to drive their own development and approach coaches for feedback on selection choices. For some players communication around progress was available but this often involved the players taking the initiative. A number of players didn't have the awareness or agency to do this and subsequently weren't clear on where they stood in terms of selection and often felt that they were reliant on their own skills and knowledge to assess their progress. There were a range of reasons for this reluctance from players to speak to coaches directly, including a perceived lack of coach approachability as well as their power to make influential decisions regarding selection and their future (Nesti, 2010) and a feeling that they should know things for themselves.

#### **4.4 Summary**

This chapter has provided a holistic description of the elite academy environment and a rich contextualisation for the two discussion chapters that follow. The vignette of daily life as a scholar at HFC set the scene of a typical day at the academy, providing a vivid description of a typical schedule, the academy space and the format of activities undertaken by the scholars. The empirical version of the ATDE model for HFC gives the reader an understanding of the structure of the environment and the role of the components and

relations at both micro and macro level. The final section focused on the microenvironment and identified and examined the features that were particularly influential in shaping players' experiences within the academy.

A number of key features of the environment impacting psychosocial development were introduced throughout the chapter. Players were immersed full time into a professional environment, many aspects of which mirrored the set-up of the first team which were found to be associated with some young players becoming complacent and not putting in the work rate required. A number of the scholars had signed professional contracts, which in part signified 'making it', for example the large financial rewards received. Some let up in training after signing their contract whilst others showed more awareness about the need to work hard to become a first team player. Communication around player expectation and progress was found to be limited and the onus was on the players to display responsibility and take the initiative for seeking this information from coaches, although many didn't have the awareness or agency to do this. Staff were aware that giving out contracts prematurely may give mixed messages as many players did not make it past this stage and there were attempts to convey this to players. An extensive life plan curriculum delivered educational messages to players about the importance of exploring and developing options outside of football and in house education was carried out on the recognition that football is a short and risky career. Some players absorbed these key messages and displayed some foresight in this regard; however, it was observed that the majority of players were not engaged with plans for life beyond football as football was their overriding priority. A tension between what staff felt best for the club versus what was best for individual player's holistic development was identified, associated with the main priority of the academy to develop professional footballers. These key features of the academy environment are significant for the formation of an empirical version of the ESF model for HFC presented in Chapter 6.

By providing an understanding of the challenges and opportunities the young boys faced in stepping up to the scholarship phase, the chapter has signposted the need for players to develop and display psychosocial skills to help them to deal with these challenges and progress in professional football. A number of skills such as autonomy, resilience, and character were identified and the need for a further evaluation of these skills and their development demonstrated. This will be addressed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 5 PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS AND DEVELOPMENT AT HFC

*I still believe psychology is the biggest untapped advantage in our sport..we've covered most other areas of development but there's still a reticence...I think in football we're still scratching the surface (Gareth Southgate, 2020)*

This chapter provides an evaluation of the psychosocial skills identified for success in the academy and how the academy environment impacts the development of these skills, thereby directly addressing the second objective of the research. Two broad themes emerged in relation to the psychosocial factors scholars and staff deemed important to succeed; the expectation to show the right character and taking responsibility for driving development. These themes provide the structure for the two main sections of this chapter, each is further broken down into two key subthemes (hard work and resilience, and responsibility and awareness). The analysis of factors affecting the necessary implementation of psychosocial skill development contributes to the formation of an empirical version of the ESF model for HFC presented in the next chapter and therefore this chapter further lays the foundations for the third objective of the research.

## 5.1 Expectation to show the right character

Character was one of the CLASS characteristics that an academy player was expected to embody and was used to make recruitment, retention and release decisions. Character was viewed as a crucial quality for successful players and letters etched in black paint across the wall of the coaches' office served as a permanent reminder of this. Staff identified that the right character is necessary for a player to make it to the professional level.

*So for me, the number one quality a player must have is the right mentality stroke character at all times, to become a first team player....it's a hard graft and to do that you can have fantastic ability um, but it's not enough .... (Jimmy interview - coach)*

*One of the main things is the character side... ability gets you in at 16, character sees you through to 35..and we've done a study of the last 2 years, the two main things that people have been released on have been lack of mobility/speed and character. (Dave interview - coach)*

*Character is the big thing, it's not football ability that gets you through it's character and you have to have the right characters. (Tony interview – management staff)*

Staff considered football ability alone was not enough; character was required for progression. This is consistent with a recent finding by Winter et al. (2019) in which elite coaches across sports (including football) suggested that the right character was key given that all athletes at academy level met a number of physical and technical standards. Staff in the present study frequently associated character with hard work and resilience and suggested that it was primarily developed through individual experiences, particularly through setbacks such as injury, not being picked to play in weekend matches, and even being released. Through these setbacks the 'penny might drop';

*The right character, um a lot of boys don't have that hard work ethic, they just think ... they're just going to be given it....And unfortunately life don't go like that.... they might have to suffer a setback for it to kick in ...and it's how you react, you know cause...some of these lads might have to even be released from here, for it to kick in. (Jimmy interview - coach)*

A number of players recognised the significance of displaying the right character, with some discussing how staff reiterated this message;

*They talk to us a lot about character. Like in meetings and team talks they make sure we know how we have to think and what our attitude should be, yeah, they make it clear to us....Head down, work hard, always be positive. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

Likewise, players echoed key messages from staff emphasising that character consisted of working hard and being resilient which were fundamental to progress in football;

*Football is about showing character...I think you just need to work hard and be resilient because when things don't go your way you just have to stick to it and keep focused and have like a bounce back ability, so like, don't like hammer yourself, just take away learnings from like erm bad things that happened so it shouldn't really effect you but it should effect you in a way where you should be working harder and just doing things to improve it. (Kieran interview – scholar)*

Observation data further supported this finding that the importance of character was explicitly reinforced by staff in the academy environment. The association of hard work and

resilience with success in elite football fits with previous literature that identified resilience, discipline and commitment as key psychosocial competencies that make a major contribution to a successful transition to the professional level (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills et al., 2012; Van Yperen, 2009).

Staff generally felt that character could be developed through the academy environment. One way this was addressed was through the Life Plan sessions which aimed to cultivate well-rounded individuals as discussed in the previous chapter. The development of those skills associated with the right character (hard work and resilience) was however, primarily situated with the individual;

*I would say he is your classic could fall either way but if he doesn't develop them character traits of dealing with disappointment you're going out the game at this level, and that's for any of them. But if he does, he's got a great chance. (Dave interview - coach)*

For this coach, character was positioned as an individual characteristic that needed to be developed. He felt that the academy had some responsibility to ensure that players were provided with experiences that would help them to flourish but acknowledged that not enough was currently being done; *“One of the main things is the character side. And I don't think we've achieved that in the last 12 months as much as I would have liked to...I think we've really got to get on top of that next year”* (Dave interview - coach). Another coach offered that the skills relating to character may have been developed by workshops as well as the challenges players encountered daily; *“They do lots of workshops based around character...I'm not sure about the actual details...and also the situations that they're put in on a day to basis....they're challenged, yeah”* (Jimmy interview – coach). Putting the players through challenges emerged as a theme related to developing character, however it was generally observed that the academy lacked processes to develop player's character partly due to a lack of shared understanding around how this may be done.

There was a shared articulated discourse in the environment around the importance of character. Paradoxically, although character was felt by some to be the most significant CLASS characteristic in terms of progression to professional level it was given the least attention in terms of development from coaches. Given that hard work and resilience

emerged as the two main themes commonly associated with the right character, these will be explored in detail in the two sections that follow.

### **5.1.1 Resilience**

#### ***5.1.1.1 Essential for progress***

Players and coaches deemed qualities associated with resilience as essential to progress into a career in professional football, more specifically they referred to the importance of being able to cope with adversity, and to persist and bounce back from competitive and organisational stressors (e.g. de-selection and injury):

*It's how you deal with being in that full-time programme, you know, not being picked every week, more likely to be injured cause the intensity is greater, you're training every day. (Dave interview - coach)*

*Like when you make a mistake just bouncing back, I think that's probably the most important thing, just not to like hide or feel like you want to give up, just keep going. (Smithy interview – scholar)*

This discourse highlights the importance of players coping with the challenging circumstances they encounter during the scholarship phase. The players recognised and accepted that adversity was part of the game; “*It's like a rollercoaster, Tony says it a lot, you have ups you have downs*” (Alex interview - scholar). There was recognition from staff that professional football is unforgiving, and players needed to experience challenges in the academy to prepare them for the harsh realities of the professional game;

*You tend to be a lot more patient, forgiving and understanding in an academy than you do at first team level so we've got to try and make sure as you come through that transition that we're putting them in a position that is preparing them...you gotta make demands of them. (Dave interview – coach)*

This finding is congruent with earlier work in elite football which has shown that the resilience to cope effectively with a number of stressors (e.g., bouncing back from criticism) was considered a key requirement for making the transition into professional football (i.e. Cook et al., 2014; Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012; Van Yperen, 2009). For example,

both the professional players and coaches in the elite Danish football academy (Larsen et al., 2013) study reported that it is crucial to be “able to handle adversity” and the elite academy coaches interviewed in the work by Mills et al. (2012) perceived resilience as one of the six factors to significantly impact progression to the professional level.

#### **5.1.1.2 Personal quality / onus on players**

Resilience was often characterised by staff as a personal quality, something that players needed to have or to acquire through experiences. Staff expressed the need for players to show positive coping strategies and associated confidence and staying positive with being able to cope with challenges:

*It's dealing with not being selected and keeping that confidence in your own ability that is difficult. Sometimes those players strive to be better players, but most of them just fall off. (Matty interview – support staff)*

*[If deselected the coaches] ...would be expecting the player to control their emotions, to continue to demonstrate the same training load levels ...to show that they're ready if and when called upon. (Harry interview – management staff)*

Some players echoed the importance of positive coping strategies and gave examples of the need to get themselves through challenges by staying positive, believing in themselves and working hard to prove themselves:

*I wasn't really playing...I just had to get through that period, it's hard but you gotta, your whole career will be like that, just keep telling yourself that it will come and believe in yourself and your ability....I just gotta keep training to my maximum. (Alex interview - scholar)*

*I was training with the 23s all week then I'm not in the squad and I'm like OK cool let me just go into the game be serious, be professional, get a goal get a win...Saturday comes and I played well and I get a goal so I think that just shows how resilient I was cause if it was other people then they could just be like I'm not in the squad so what's the point in trying hard. (Kieran interview – scholar)*

These findings support the multi-faceted nature of resilience as a concept (Holt & Dunn, 2004) and are in line with previous research in elite football (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills

et al., 2012) that has identified staff deemed personal qualities such as confidence and maintaining a positive outlook as key components in building resilience, more specifically, the need for players to ‘trust in one’s ability’ and display an optimistic attitude to cope with setbacks such as losing a place in team (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Similar to the scholar discourse above, the players in Holt and Dunn’s (2004) study recognised the importance of using positive situational coping responses to manage demands and pressures of elite soccer and Van Yperen (2009) found that engagement in problem-focused coping behaviours was a psychological factor that predicted career success.

In the current study players varied in their ability to use coping responses to manage demands. With regards to players who found themselves out of the team, some took it as an opportunity to work harder and regain their place as exemplified by Kieran’s discourse. Others were less able to engage in coping behaviours when they faced challenges and motivationally maladaptive behaviour such as reduced effort or lack of emotional control became evident both on and off the pitch. This was discussed by staff;

*He has an unbelievable amount of talent but as soon as he’s up against someone who’s giving him a problem he tends to moan at the referee, moan at something else, rather than accepting this is going to be a tough day for me today. (Roy interview – coach)*

*He’ll work really hard, but the minute it don’t go right there’s like this....stop. (Dave interview – coach)*

Although coaches recognised that responding to setbacks was a quality that players can develop, the onus was found to be on the players to work through challenges. This was supported by staff interview discourse:

*That’s football and they gotta deal with that...you’ve just gotta find a way of dealing with it, just find a way, find a way. (Roy interview - coach)*

*It’s how you deal with not being picked every week, more likely to be injured cause the intensity is greater...and I think some of them find that very difficult. (Dave interview – coach)*

*All of a sudden two players walk in who they never even heard of who they acquired from somewhere else abroad and you know it's deal with it, you know, it don't matter where you start it's where you finish. (Tony interview – management staff)*

Coach narratives often focused on football as a tough industry that players themselves need to find a way of dealing with through personal qualities. Subsequently there was no direct teaching of resilience in the academy. This supports the work by Larsen et al. (2013) who found that although deemed crucial by staff in order to make the transition to professional soccer there was no direct teaching of handling adversity, learning from mistakes and dealing with pressure. Observations of the environment suggested that the players in the academy had to simply learnt to forget the mistakes and keep up the hard work. An emphasis on how players themselves react and deal with the challenges that academy life brings is problematic given that literature (e.g. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) has demonstrated the need to move away from placing the responsibility for developing resilience on the individual and consider the environment which cultivates resilience.

#### **5.1.1.3 Creating demands**

Management admitted that more needed to be done both in relation to creating challenges and supporting players through these experiences;

*I think we could be better at implementing certain experiences to create some need for resilience, it might not be football based, it might be taking the boys off site to other challenging environments, but exposing them to situations where they need to be resilient...I think we could do more of that and I think we could continue to get better at...supporting the players when moments of resilience occur and being clear with the player what the support networks look like and how they can access it. (Paul interview – management staff)*

This discourse shows an awareness from management about the significance of both challenge and support in developing resilience and how both elements could be improved within the academy. Coaches similarly identified the need to create opportunities for players to experience challenge in the academy environment and felt more could be done, however, a key difference is that coaches did not explicitly acknowledge the role of support alongside challenge:

*How do they deal with Mr adversity?...And probably that's one thing that academies aren't good at is putting kids in a real adversity position, whether or not that's going out on loan, sorry but at the moment you're not doing great for us go there...what's it like in terms of say travelling to say Liverpool over a weekend and making them sub? How do they deal with that? (Roy interview - coach)*

*It doesn't matter if it's in the classroom, on the training pitch, in analysis, in the gym, you gotta challenge them...stretching them where they're a little bit uncomfortable, throw different things at them and see how they react, get them out of that comfort zone....I think we've dropped off on that. (Dave interview - coach)*

This discourse advocates an experiential learning approach to developing resilience, staff recognised the importance of taking players out of their 'comfort zone'. Previous research within elite football (Cook et al., 2014; Nesti 2010) has found that physical training drills, high expectations, harsh criticism and placing players in uncomfortable situations such as sending players to train with the first team where weaknesses were uncovered were all reported as challenges to make players uncomfortable (Cook et al., 2014). Staff in the current study discussed how they had intentionally set up challenges to take players out of their comfort zones last season, but this had dropped off:

*We previously did things where I could see some people coming out of their comfort zone...we asked the boys to review the game and then stand in front of the group and feed it back, or if we had an 11 v 11 I used to ask the boys to take the team and you'd see a couple of them actually assumed the role of coaches properly and they were the people then that provided a bit of leadership when needed in games as well...I was seeing others that you could see were totally "oh I don't like this". (Dave interview - coach)*

Coaches emphasised creating demands which players themselves needed to deal with and failed to explicitly acknowledge their responsibility to support players through these challenges. Literature (e.g. Arnetz, Nevedal, Lumley, Backman & Lublin, 2009) has stated that exposure to stressors in moderation can activate untapped resources, engage social support networks, and help build a sense of mastery for future stressors. In this way exposing players to challenging situations can assist the development of resilience and allow subsequent demands to be perceived as more manageable ultimately helping to improve performance (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). While resilience can develop through challenging

experiences, previous research demonstrates that proactive design is more effective (Collins, Abbott, & Richards, 2011), and exposure to challenge should be purposeful and carefully considered; preceded by preparing athletes for challenges, supporting them through the experience and then encouraging positive evaluation and reflection (Collins, McNamara & McCarthy, 2016).

#### ***5.1.1.4 An unsystematic approach to support***

It was observed that the academy had a haphazard approach to supporting players with the challenges they were facing. Opportunities to play up with the first team in the academy were a powerful opportunity for scholars to learn through challenge, however this was an example of providing a stressor without consistent support. Rather than carefully supporting players through the challenge of playing up to ensure they coped with the demands this placed upon them (Cook et al., 2014), the data discussed in the previous chapter demonstrated the lack of review conversations following training up, compromising the development of resilience. Subsequently the players evidenced uncertainty about how well they were doing.

When asked what the academy did to help players cope with the challenges of deselection, management conceded it was disorganised:

*We have a scattergun approach to the ability to actually engage with those individuals [who can't cope] and to whether either explain the decision making process or to identify the challenges they may be facing and to actually have in place some kind of action plan for them to be able to cope. (Harry interview - management staff)*

This is consistent with observational and further interview data that demonstrates an absence of a carefully considered approach to supporting players through challenges to aid the development of resilience. Subsequently, while players recognised the importance of resilience, some struggled to articulate how they coped or suggested they were not always equipped to deal with the different challenges they faced in the academy:

*I didn't really cope with it well I just sort of got through it. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*When you're injured, like I didn't have that much support to be honest like you just feel like forgotten you feel, I felt aside so, I didn't feel good....you're not yourself when you come back as well with training you still feel like you're on the side so...that was one of the hardest moments. (Joe interview – scholar)*

*You've got to try and stay positive and know how to deal with it and like there's people at the club you can go to, like psychologists that can help you if you are struggling which is good. (Mikey interview - scholar)*

Some of the boys felt alone when they faced challenges, others felt that support was there if needed it but data suggested that many didn't use this support. The absence of acknowledgement from coaches around their responsibility to support players suggests there may be a lack of coach awareness around the fundamental role of support in the resilience development process or a feeling it is not part of their role as a coach. Players had access to a wider network of support staff from which they could seek support or advice. Although there were clearly benefits of this, it may impact the coaches devolved responsibility for their role in supporting players through challenges.

Management staff acknowledged that although they felt that everybody had a responsibility to help players to develop resilience, not all staff members understood this or shared this view:

*I think you'll find a really varied response to addressing it [resilience] amongst staff so some will naturally identify this as being significant factor and relate to the players and there are some other members of staff, whether it's coaches or others who actually probably not only don't see it, or wouldn't address it if they did, but actually don't believe that it's part of their responsibility I think they would say that's down to others, and or the player to be able to deal with that situation if they can't then they're not for me.... like a filtering process. (Harry interview – management staff)*

This suggests an awareness from management staff around varying levels of cognisance from staff in recognising the need to support the development of resilience as well as varying attitudes towards how much this is actually their responsibility. This supports the coach interview discourse above that emphasises an onus on the players to work through challenges. Green et al. (2020) assert that a collaborative approach and a shared understanding amongst staff on the resilience of each player is needed to facilitate a dynamic

environment that supports resilience and optimises holistic development and performance. Their work included an MDT of staff meeting regularly to ensure shared understanding and agreeing actions that need to be taken at system level. In the current research there was a lack of communication between departments which limited a shared understanding amongst staff. A lack of clear communication meant that although management were aware, not all staff members understood or shared the view that everybody had a responsibility to help players to develop resilience as evidenced by Harry's discourse above. This is problematic given that the effectiveness of resilience training depends on the breadth and depth of commitment from all athlete's stakeholders and leadership, management, coaching, support staff and parents all have important roles in creating and role-modelling the desired culture, through appropriate motivational and developmental feedback (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

#### ***5.1.1.5 Summary***

There was widespread agreement throughout the academy that the ability to cope with and recover from adversity is essential to progressing in football and that demanding experience can facilitate development. This was reinforced in academy life and some players had responded to this knowledge. There was a shared understanding from staff and scholars that resilience consisted of persistence, learning and bouncing back, however players varied in their ability to use positive coping strategies when faced with challenges. Coaches primarily recognised that resilience could be developed because the environment 'demands' it and whilst the importance of pushing players out of their comfort zone was recognised, there was limited attention given to how players could be supported to recover from stressors effectively. Subsequently, whilst all players articulated the importance of resilience and related it to success as a footballer, some were less able to identify how the coaches and academy environment clearly helped in their efforts to deal with setbacks. Management were somewhat aware of the gaps in the academy approach to developing resilience, the varying levels of understanding from staff in recognising their role in developing resilience as well as varying attitudes towards how much this is actually their responsibility. There is a need for a shared understanding across all staff involved in players' development that they all have an important role to play in supporting the development of resilience in players. The SPP has a key role to play in facilitating this shared understanding, the environmental factors that limited this will be addressed in the final chapter.

## 5.1.2 Hard work

### 5.1.2.1 Essential for progress

Hard work was explicitly recognised as fundamental for progressing in football both by the staff and the players and the narrative that hard work was essential for success was embedded into the academy culture (as well as the wider football culture). Coaches and management regularly reinforced the importance of working hard as did Premier League reps during review meetings and the players echoed this message. The idea that talent, defined in this context as footballing ability, alone was not enough and hard work was critical was reflected in explicit staff discourse in the environment, recognised in staff interviews and echoed by the players:

*I think talent will get you up to that scholarship but then you have to have all the stuff around it, you have to have commitment... You gotta be able to turn up every day even if you are not feeling it and just give your all....you're not going to make it on talent.*  
(Gavin interview – support staff)

*It doesn't really matter about talent. I think you have to have talent to be in an academy but if you keep pushing and working hard, because even if you're not the best player when you start, if you keep on working harder than everyone else, you'll eventually be one of the best I think. If you even just have a little bit of talent because people who don't work as hard as others, they'll just drop eventually.* (Kieran interview – scholar)

As in other research, the ability to work hard was associated with success and encompassed high levels of commitment and discipline (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2012). These two main themes and their relating subthemes provide structure for the following section, this includes the two key subthemes that emerged in relation to discipline (sacrifice and conforming dedication) and three in relation to commitment (as an individual characteristic/requirement, as influenced by peers, and as influenced by coaches/academy environment).

### **5.1.2.2 Discipline**

There was widespread agreement amongst players and staff that becoming a professional footballer involves a certain disciplining of the self so that one might be, or become, more professional. In line with previous research, discipline in this context was multi-faceted and comprised broadly of sacrifice and dedication (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006).

#### **5.1.2.2.1 Sacrifice**

Two main elements of sacrifice emerged from the data. Firstly, there was an expectation that sacrifice was a necessary part of the elite game. This consisted of the sub themes of missing out on the normative social aspects of teenage life, moving away from home and full immersion into academy life. The second element, a willingness to sacrifice given professional football was deemed worth it, consisted of the sub themes of appreciation for the current situation, realisation of the benefits of rest and recovery, delayed gratification, and participation as a privilege.

#### *Expectation to sacrifice*

Staff recognised that as players became increasingly immersed in academy life and their role as footballers they had to make sacrifices in terms of the social aspects of their lives; *“They’re sacrificing a lot....they’re working at the weekend when their friends might be off or in the evenings when there are a lot of other distractions but they have to solely focus on football...obviously it’s hard”* (Matty interview – support staff). The level of sacrifice required was recognised at club level as well as system level by the FA; *“Youth footballers may not have the opportunity to experience a range of experiences as a result of the long term, intense, and demanding training and competition schedules that they are exposed to from as young as 8 years of age”* (The FA, 2010). There was a consistent expectation that making sacrifices was a necessity for obtaining success:

*If you’re going to be an elite player you can’t burn the candle at both ends, you need to really make sacrifices and I find that looking back if you look at all the players who have made it...they’ve all made sacrifices, it could be leaving home, it could be not*

*going out with their mates, it could be doing extra after training, it could be getting here early...making sure you're giving yourself every chance to become a professional footballer. (Roy interview - coach)*

Staff supported the view that sacrifices such as moving away from family as well as doing extra work beyond the academy schedule, are an expected and necessary part of making it to professional level.

A number of players similarly spoke about the large sacrifices that are needed to be made including moving away from families and friends and sacrificing their social life at an age when friends were going out enjoying themselves. Some recognised that to get to this point they had already sacrificed a lot of their youth. One player who had moved country was observed to be particularly downbeat that he was missing his families biggest celebration of the year at New Year's Eve as well as talking about regularly missing out on life events during his interview:

*I came here really young, so like I haven't lived with Mum and Dad for 2 years now, it's a big sacrifice...I missed all my friends' birthday, I miss my Mum's birthday, I miss a lot of things going on, family things, friends things...they're doing it and I'm in my bed doing nothing. I can't go back there cause obviously I got training, so...it's a big sacrifice. (Joe interview - scholar)*

Many players recognised the ongoing importance of not being distracted by things outside of academy life that may be detrimental to becoming a footballer such as parties; *"My mates at home, I can't do the stuff that they do cause I probably won't be a footballer"* (Smithy interview - scholar). Full immersion in the professional academy environment and moving to digs close to the academy appeared to help minimise these distractions and boys spoke about how they supported each other with this by understanding the unique position they were in; *"That's why I stay with these guys the most cause we understand each other better than anyone else would...what we can and can't do...obviously our lives aren't normal lives compared to other people"* (Smithy interview - scholar).

### *Willingness to sacrifice*

Players believed that obtaining a career in professional football was worth the sacrifices being made. Some players spoke about the sacrifices being worth it for the position they were in currently:

*I think what I've got...I'd prefer to be in the situation I'm in than the situation they're in [friends outside] so I've gotta make the most of it, so I don't get involved in any of that.* (Tom interview - scholar)

*I don't really see it as missing out cause like I know the benefits of not going to parties.* (Mikey interview - scholar)

The examples above highlight that some players felt that pursuing a career in football outweighed missing out. Players reported justifying sacrifices with an appreciation for their situation, in this way the involvement in professional football was aggrandised and used to explain their commitment to the game and normalise the sacrifices required. The benefits of not going to parties recognised by Mikey included the importance of sleep and recovery. Other players similarly recognised the importance of being disciplined to maximise rest and recovery given their intense training schedule; *"If you go out, you know the next day you'll probably be really sore, so it's always good to make sure you got a lot of time at digs. Although it's boring, it's just best for your rest and recovery....it's part of it"* (Alex interview - scholar). Although considered essential to allow them to recover and perform optimally, many reported how a combination of boredom in digs and exhaustion meant they spent most of their time at digs sleeping; *"Go home and just fall asleep, just like cause I'm bored and nothing to do and when you lay on a bed you get sloppy and you don't know what to do...the best thing to do is sleep"* (Joe interview - scholar). As both Joe and Alex exemplify, refraining from going out and instead resting in digs was deemed monotonous and boring but a necessary part of the process of becoming an elite player. Players ultimately accepted that the boredom would be worth it when they were professional, this exemplified delayed gratification; *"In the end it will pay off in it but...at the time it feels rubbish but when you're older and when you're signing your contract and you're happy, it will all pay off and you'll realise why you did it"* (Aaron interview - scholar). The finding that some players realised the rewards for their sacrifice were not gained immediately but rather would be paid off later in life if they became professional is in line with previous work in elite football (Holt &

Dunn, 2004). Holt and Mitchell (2006) found that the sacrificing of friends and social life associated with the quest to become a professional didn't differentiate those who made it to the professional level and those who did not. This highlights that holistic development and developing skills that prepare players for life outside is imperative given that so many talented young players are competing for so few professional contracts.

Staff also subscribed to the narrative that working in professional football is unparalleled and justified the need to work extremely hard:

*I'm lucky, I'm fortunate to work here...I worked hard...so I was coming here after uni, doing extra unpaid work for HFC just to gain experience so just to do as much as I could.* (Matty interview – support staff)

*It's a prestigious post, you know it's a Cat 1 club, great name, but it just goes to show if you work hard and you're doing well you know, opportunities come.* (Jimmy interview - coach)

This discourse suggests some staff felt privileged to work for the academy and reflected the hard work and sacrifices they had made to get there. Jimmy's personal experience appears to have confirmed to him how imperative hard work is. The importance of staff dedication to the academy was further highlighted through observations of times when staff were required to be flexible to a reshuffling of the schedule contingent on performance; for example a bad performance where boys were required to come in on their day off on Sundays had consequences for staff as well as players.

There was agreement amongst staff and players that an expectation to show dedication and willingness to make sacrifices including valued aspects of adolescent lifestyles was an essential part of making it to the top in the elite game. This finding has important implications for holistic development given so few will go on to play at the professional level. The data collected in this narrative is consistent with prior research in elite football (Cook et al., 2014; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006) which suggests the sacrifices made by players were comparable to those of players within other professional academies. Both staff and players rationalised these sacrifices by the belief they were privileged to be involved in professional football, this underlying belief will be explored further in the next chapter.

#### *5.1.2.2.2 Conforming dedication*

Conforming dedication was embedded into the academy culture as the other main sub theme that represented discipline. Conforming dedication was deemed necessary to enhance the efficient working of scholars and reflected ways in which young players complied with strict institutional demands. This was represented by the further themes of obeying orders, and on pitch production.

#### *Obeying orders*

Obeying orders encompassed the need for players to learn to follow institutional demands (in terms of lifestyle and training) both on and off the pitch. Players were required to display appropriate disciplined behaviours including punctuality, not using phones when walking around the academy, wearing the appropriate kit, not having their hands in their pockets on the pitch and generally showing respect to staff and each other. Despite players recognising that obeying orders was deemed necessary to progress in football the day to day level of obedience that players demonstrated varied greatly between individual players as well as between areas of academy life. This was in part due to inconsistency in the environment; inconsistent behavioural expectations for different players were observed as well as inconsistent enforcement of sanctions when players did not comply.

Sanctions emerged as the main sub theme of obeying orders. Sanctions were used to encourage players to obey orders and occurred in relation to both group and individual behaviours. They varied in severity and included fines, removal from sessions, having to stay late and the ultimate sanction of deselection from the squad. Sanctions were represented by the subthemes of impact on player development (preparation for first team, professional image, group work rate, individual work rate and responsibility) and inconsistency (lack of behaviour policy, staff perceptions, ability, lack of clarity with values and coaching style). Players could be fined if they were late for training, education or group sessions, those on a professional contract were fined £10 whereas scholars were fined £5 to reflect their difference in salaries. Fines have frequently been cited as a sanction in professional football (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004). Although players were often observed arriving to sessions out of breath from running to make it on time, there was an agreement from players and staff that these fines were insignificant for the players:

*A fine is just money, you can give the money to the club, they give it back anyway but the biggest thing about fines is the image, like professionalism again, it's like 'ah he's always late'.. in the back of the coaches head or teachers head it's like 'oh it's him' or 'him again', like show that you can do it properly. (Joe interview – scholar)*

As demonstrated by Joe's discourse the money itself had limited significance however the negative impact of being viewed as unprofessional was given greater importance and contributed to the players' efforts to comply. Obeying orders represented the notion of professionalism; *"You have to be on time, not be lazy and do the right thing...be a professional. Coaches don't like people that they think are not professional so to make it to the next step you need to be professional, if you keep that professionalism you go very far"* (Joe interview – scholar). Players recognised that behaving in a professional manner by obeying orders was deemed necessary to progress.

More serious sanctions included removal from the pitch, gym and classroom sessions when behaviour was immature, out of line and sometimes when players were late for a session. It was observed that removal from sessions was often used to make an example of players:

*The boys flocked into the classroom following lunch and took seats around the table some chit chat amongst themselves. Tony began and a minute later Joe entered...having taken one step into the classroom he was dismissed with "too late, get out". He looked shocked but didn't argue as he turned back around. Tony later told me that he thought Joe was one of the 'good guys' he was generally well behaved just away with the fairies and he felt it was important to make an example when the good guys step out of line. (Observation data)*

Removal from sessions in this way had more significance for players than fines given the association with unprofessionalism discussed above. Although sanctions were intended to set an example and to communicate to the scholars the importance of discipline whilst preparing players for the discipline required in first team football, inconsistencies in the application of sanctions undermined this message. Players recognised there were different consequences for not obeying orders for different individuals:

*It's definitely one thing for one person, one thing for the other...some players are expected to always do the right thing, like never be late cause that's what they've*

*always done and players here will be late some days but that's what they expect cause their expectations are lower. If I was late tomorrow I would probably get more of a punishment than if one of the other boys was late because they expect more from me than they do from other players. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

As highlighted in Smithy's discourse players felt this inconsistency was due to different behavioural expectations for different individuals. Some players felt these differences were based on staff recognising varying maturity levels in players as well as favouritism for those who coaches felt had more chance of success:

*I think if they feel you're going to be a player for HFC's future then they get treated better than like the majority. (Tazly interview – scholar)*

*Like one of them we call them God, we just call him God, like he can do what he wants, nothing will happen to him. (Aaron interview – scholar)*

Support staff similarly recognised the uneven treatment of players:

*It's different rules for certain individuals...we can't do anything about it cause the powers above make decisions so say for example Jason mucks about in training... the staff will react differently cause it's him erm whereas if Alex were to do it, it would be different, and I think that's wrong...it should be the same for every single player. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Although Matty recognises he doesn't agree with the uneven treatment of players he felt powerless due to the hierarchy in place at the academy. Despite Tony stating the players had agreed to a behavioural code of conduct "*there's a code of conduct....that's done by the first team, filters down and waters down, it's all there and they sign it, they agree to abide to it and it's the way you should be working*" (Tony interview – management staff), this was not discernible in the environment and meant staff members had various perceptions of what discipline should encompass and which behaviours required sanctions. Some support staff spoke about how the resulting inconsistencies in the enforcement of sanctions reinforced undesirable behaviours as well as other potentially negative consequences for the development of the group as a whole:

*We don't have a set behaviour policy here...we don't have any consistency...I've seen one kid be stripped of captaincy for one minor incident...come down on like a tonne*

*of bricks, whereas other players who can have 5 or 6 misdemeanours which are of a higher level are swept under the carpet or...we'll deal with that later and then we don't deal with it and then that person continues to kind of take the piss of the programme. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

*I think that maybe detrimental to their learning and also the results and development and the whole mentality of the group.... like not working hard, cause they see other players not working as hard but getting rewarded. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Management too recognised that the enforcement of discipline around the academy was inconsistent:

*Do you think that challenging behaviours for example messing around and immature behaviours, are treated in a consistent style? (Researcher)*

*No, I don't, because I think we still have work to do around different staff members perceptions of behaviour and immaturity and things like that. I still think we still have some inconsistencies around the staff...so one member of staffs immaturity may be another member of staffs lack of discipline, we've still got some work to do on that. (Paul interview – management staff)*

Observation data supported the discourse from both players, staff and management that the sanctions enforced were often relative to the player in question. Recent research in elite football has shown conformity equated to an immediate and unquestioning response to official instruction (Parker & Manley, 2017), the present study differed as players showed varying levels of conformity as they learnt non-compliance could at times be overlooked. This meant there were certain individuals in the group that often messed around and distracted others without consequences which as Matty acknowledged at times caused others in the group to drop their standards. Although players generally found the inconsistency unfair and frustrating most felt that it was something that they needed to accept and deal with themselves and even use to motivate them; *“I think having a higher expectation of you pushes you more, that's why I like the pressure on me because it sort of keeps me in my lane or whatever, I don't want to drop off, or get lazy of whatever”* (Smithy interview - scholar). Smithy discusses how he used this expectation to drive him to work harder to give himself the best chance of becoming a professional footballer. This reflected a difference in the

ability of players to take personal responsibility for their own development (Holt & Mitchell, 2006).

The recognised need for more consistency in ensuring staff all promoted the same pre-agreed set of common behaviours appeared to be linked to a lack of clarity around academy values. The academy had a number of values frameworks; both classroom walls as well as the coaches office wall displayed the 5 P's of the club (Professional, Pride, Personality, Purpose and Persistence) as well as the 3 Hs (hard work, humility and honesty) as behavioural values that the club were looking for. Some staff spoke about how the 3Hs had replaced the 5Ps whilst others said they were in addition to, although the 3Hs were not physically visible around the academy "*We've changed from the 5 Ps, we haven't replaced the artwork*" (Gavin interview – support staff). When asked in his interview the academy manager also spoke about another set of staff values. He wasn't able to name all of these and stated they could be more explicit to have a real impact on staff behaviours. Other members of management and staff felt the values for driving behaviour could be clearer:

*We need to tidy our act up...I think we need to all be very consistent in ensuring we are all promoting the same pre-agreed set of common behaviours that we'd expect of ourselves and of others and I'm not sure that's clearly in place".* (Harry interview – management staff)

*I think we've got values but I don't think we're living them and I think they've dropped off if I'm honest... this should be the one place where they come through the door where what is expected is clear and consistent and I just feel you know we might have got that clouded.* (Dave interview - coach)

Staff acknowledged although there were values in place, there was a discrepancy in how these were being promoted and lived, the resulting lack of clarity around pre-agreed behaviours had an impact on players' discipline.

Different coaches' styles also impacted how they enforced discipline, Jimmy often had a more informal manner when addressing players whereas Dave had a more authoritarian style. As such parameters around acceptable behavioural standards within training varied depending on who led the session, at times when Jimmy ran sessions some players lacked discipline and talked over him, whereas Dave favoured a more disciplined approach. It was

clear from observation data that Dave became frustrated when players weren't conforming with demands, he was often observed demanding disciplined engagement, yelling at players in an attempt to capture their attention if he felt they failed to engage with the session at the level he required. Dave acknowledged that he could “*deliver a right hook*” and stressed that his aim was to be respected rather than liked as a coach; “*I like to be respected, I'm not bothered about not liked, it's as simple as that, you know*” (Dave interview – coach). Dave felt establishing respect was important as it enhanced his ability to support the development of the players. Dave discussed how he felt the modern-day game had less of a disciplined approach which he found challenging.

Similarly, support staff were observed to demand disciplined engagement from players to varying extents, this was associated with the player's conformity and work rate as recognised by players:

*People tend to like mess around more depending on the staff, so in training if it's Dave then no one messes around but if it's in the gym where there's someone like a new member of staff they will mess around because they think they can take advantage of it.* (Kieran interview – scholar)

Boisterous and disruptive behaviours were often observed in the classroom, analysis sessions, gym and to varying extents on the pitch depending on the staff present. This finding that certain staff were unable to control players challenges prior research that has demonstrated that strict discipline, subordination and control comprised the core of the elite academy trainee experience (Parker & Manley, 2017). As exemplified by Kieran's discourse, certain staff were taken advantage of by players, this was related to the power staff were perceived to have in making influential decisions about their career. This is in line with research that has long demonstrated that a power hierarchy exists within the elite football culture (e.g. Roderick, 2006; Champ et al., 2020a).

### ***On pitch production***

The scholars were required to produce effective performances in the competitive setting. The main subthemes emerging from on pitch production were staff pressure to perform and comply or face punishment, which had the further subtheme of inconsistency.

### *Comply or face punishment*

Players were required to meet performance expectations and were punished for collective poor performances. There were occasions when players were made to come in on Sunday, their day off, following a bad team performance / loss to do game analysis which emphasised the importance of collective responsibility for on pitch performance. For many of them this meant missing their only chance to go home. The players had no choice but to conform with this or face further punishment. Tazly who regularly played up with the U23 squad protested by not turning up on a Sunday when the rest of the U18 squad were required to come in, he felt his performance hadn't warranted the punishment. He was disciplined by being sent back down to the U18 squad for a number of weeks. Tazly described how the coach used the incident to make an example of him:

*The way Dave was talking in the first training session it was just like he was very rude and he was just taking like little digs at me cause of the things I've done and he was using me like as an example. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

This finding is in line with research within other professional football academies which has found players to have no option but to act in accordance with the suggestions of their coaches or face punishment, this was deemed necessary to give themselves the best chance of becoming a professional footballer (Champ et al., 2020). Although Tazly initially challenged the coach's requirement to come in on his day off, he ultimately had no choice but to comply with the added punishment for disobedience which was used to make an example of him. This display of resistance towards authority impacted his future on pitch development by limiting opportunities to play up with the U23 squad. In this way, conforming to coaches' commands was in the developmental interest of trainees. This unquestioning obedience is in opposition with the idea of players having autonomy and taking responsibility/ownership of their development (Toering et al., 2011).

### *Staff pressure to perform*

Prior research in elite football has demonstrated that effective production meant performances needed to demonstrate the desired results and outcome (Holt & Dunn, 2004). In the present study there was the narrative that results were deemed secondary to the main objective of helping individuals to reach their potential "*We're not here to win football*

*matches, we're here to help players fulfil their potential"* (Paul interview – management staff), however findings suggest results did matter. Some staff felt that being part of a winning team helped to develop players individually *"you develop a lot more players in a winning team than you do a losing team and that historically has been proven"* (Dave interview – coach). Management felt certain coaches needed results for affirmation they were doing a good job;

*When you're in the business of long term athlete development and the work you do may not be seen for years to come, no one may ever attribute it back to the work you do and so for those people who need that reassurance that they are doing a good job, winning football matches and results are an easy metric to use.* (Paul interview – management staff)

This indicates that like scholars, staff too were required to produce effective performances in the competitive setting.

Players could avoid sanctions if they were seen perceived as crucial to the team's success;

*So you could muck about as much as you want if you score a goal on the weekend that's keeping him in his job.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

*If they're of a good ability, they undoubtedly get a little more leeway, or if they're in a position we don't have anyone else.... there's a lot of pressure to win games and that's felt by the coach in terms of who they keep and not keep...I think people pay lip service to the idea of we need to put behaviour first when actually results are coming first.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

Although the coaches threatened that players wouldn't play football if they misbehaved in the classroom this wasn't actually the case if they were needed for a game.

Some players felt a lower work rate in certain areas of academy life were justified if they were performing on the pitch:

*If you're doing bad in the gym but you're scoring a goal every game...you shouldn't really care like, who cares, if you're doing your job on the pitch.* (Mikey focus group – scholar)

*Let's say Messi is laughing in his education (laughs) in the game he can do what he wants, it's like you can't really tell him anything, if you're doing it on match day.*

(Aaron focus group – scholar)

The need for on pitch production illustrates that different work rates were displayed for different areas of academy life, particularly education where some players did the minimum to get by.

In summary, there was clear variation in the level of conforming dedication that players made in order to maximise their chances of success both between individual players as well as between different areas of academy life. This was in part due to inconsistencies in institutional standards and expectations as well as inconsistent implementation of sanctions for non-compliance. Literature has shown that conformity to strict behavioural norms dominate the elite youth academy environment and institutional standards and expectations are designed to ensure the efficient and consistent functioning of trainees at all times (Parker & Manley, 2017). Whilst conforming dedication was deemed necessary to enhance the efficient functioning scholars, the present findings are novel in highlighting that the need for on pitch production at times undermined the enforcement of discipline.

### **5.1.2.3 Commitment**

Commitment emerged as a facilitating factor which helped the players to maintain the discipline required to be immersed in the scholarship programme and keep progressing through the host of ups and downs and repetitive daily slog of academy life. The goal of making it in professional soccer was high and largely invariant amongst the players:

*Hopefully to be in the first team if Holgate progress higher in the premier league or if not go to a better club and we'll win a lot of trophies.* (Mikey interview – scholar)

*I want to be the best player I can be and the best player in the world to be honest.* (Kieran interview – scholar)

This level of ambition is unsurprising at scholarship level and is similar to the findings of prior research in elite football (e.g. Van Yperen, 2009). Whilst all players reported a determination to succeed, there was a noticeable difference between those who demonstrated a commitment to excellence and displayed high work rate and effort

consistently and those who possessed the desire to be a professional but lacked the commitment necessary. Four main themes emerged in relation to this; the academy goal setting process, commitment as an individual characteristic/requirement, as influenced by peers, and as influenced by coaches/academy environment. These will be discussed in the following section.

#### *5.1.2.3.1 The academy goal setting process*

The goal setting and player development process in the scholarship phase was centered around the CLASS (character, learner, ability, speed and success) target system. The sub themes of player engagement (usefulness of process and ability to take responsibility) and staff engagement (regularity of review meetings, dictating targets for players, need for SPP involvement) emerged in relation to this theme.

Boys met with the coaches at the start of the season and set individual targets for each of the CLASS areas. Players had weekly individual analysis sessions to review their video clips relating to their targets with the view to discuss these with the coaches in a review meeting every 6 to 12 weeks. Some players felt this process was useful. One saw it as a welcome opportunity to sit down with coaches, while others acknowledged using their CLASS targets to direct their attention during the analysis process:

*They ask you what you think you can improve on and then we go through it with them and they've already set you targets just to see if it's the same as what you think. It's good to see what they think you can improve on and what you think you can improve on. (Alex interview - scholar)*

The majority of players acknowledged that the target review meetings were usually at least every 12 weeks with some suggesting they were less regular than this, one acknowledged that he hadn't had a discussion with coaches around his CLASS targets for over 6 months. Not surprisingly then, a number of the boys were unable to recall their current goals whilst others referred to their phones where they had them saved:

*They're useful if you remember them but obviously if you're not having meetings about them then it's quite easy to forget about them, that's partly our fault and partly the club and coaches' fault for not having the meetings often enough. (Tom interview - scholar)*

Tom took some responsibility for disregarding his targets but acknowledged the importance of the coaches having regular meetings. The irregularity of the coach player catch ups on individual targets suggests a lack of proximal and regular feedback on goal attainment which may have implications for motivation (Martindale et al, 2005) and limits the potential for performance benefits (Larsen & Engell, 2013). Regular review meetings should be a priority to promote player engagement and personal responsibility for targets (Cook et al., 2014).

Whilst some of the boys stated that they'd had a discussion with the coaches to come to an agreement around their targets, some suggested that the coaches had told them what their targets should be:

*I just did the coaches target...The one they gave to you...(pause)...I don't know all of them.* (Joe interview – scholar)

*Character is erm, organising and communicating around the team...The character one was like (laughs) they told me that and I was just like you know what just put that there, cause it's like, even if it is a target I don't think I'll speak, like it's just the way I am, I don't speak on the pitch really, I'm just quiet, yeah.* (Tazly interview - scholar)

Tazly suggests he complied with his character target to appease the coaches, he didn't feel it was realistic which will unlikely have any performance benefits; this is demonstrated by his resignation that he won't communicate on the pitch. Allowing players to create their own goals rather than try to reach goals others have set for them has been associated with players having an increased sense of control of their own development which can strengthen the players' motivation (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996; Larsen & Engell, 2013). Observation data suggested that the individual analysis sessions were often disorderly and not taken seriously by some players who used them as chance to mess around or to gain bragging rights through selecting clips to impress others (both in the room and on social media) rather than an opportunity to reflect on their targets and consider areas for development. In comparison, despite the rowdiness some players were able to come in and get their heads down to work, which represented taking responsibility for their own development. For example, whilst acknowledging more support would be useful Tazly discussed how he took responsibility for ensuring he was still working towards his development points:

*Yeah, see the, you saw me doing the analysis this morning, I had the paper there, that has the CLASS targets...like that's what I look for in my games.....so it probably*

*would be beneficial to have their feedback on like what I could be doing but yeah, like I'm still clipping either way and I'm still looking at what I can improve on and what I should be, what I'm doing better and stuff like that. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

The differences in player's ability to take responsibility for this process will be discussed further in the self-regulation section later in the chapter.

Support staff recognised the gaps in the goal setting process including support of boys and ensuring coaches are aware of players' goals:

*It's the right thing just done badly... goal setting is as old as time in terms of a useful technique but anyone who's done a little bit of goal setting knows the flaws behind it, and we just play into every one of those flaws...They're written down but they're not made...not evidenced...say like for a striker the goal they'll have here will be like "score more goals", really? Is that how basic we're going? Our job should be to break that down to such a level that there is no doubt about it. (Gavin – support staff)*

*I reckon if I stood on the side of the pitch and asked an 18s coach 'What is his target and what are you doing to develop it?' They couldn't tell me, therefore that target is null and void in my opinion. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

Research in elite youth football (Cook et al., 2014), has discussed how facilitating reflection enabled coaches to gain a better understanding of a player's personal strengths and limitations. This was key for developing player action plans, a tool which was used to encourage independence and responsibility in players.

Some staff suggested they'd like to see the SPP play more of a role in the goal setting process:

*As football coaches we sometimes have 20 players to go round and talk to about their technical ability.... I think it would be a good idea for the sport psychologist to set the targets because then it's measurable, you can sit them down and say look..for example...we say you're going to work on crossing this month, how many crosses have you done? Ok was it all from one side or was it from another side? What did it feel like, do you feel like you're getting any better? How can we then measure your success? (Roy interview – coach)*

This coach showed a strong awareness of how goal setting should be applied but acknowledged that as the expert, it would be useful for the SPP to play an active role in the target setting process, recognising the coaches time resources were limited. Research has provided support for this assertion, Larsen and Engell (2013) recognised goal setting as a dynamic, evolving and complex phenomenon which requires a SPP to implement. The SPP in the current study did not oversee the goal setting process.

In summary, although there is a goal setting process in place at the scholarship phase, it was not applied consistently. In particular, players were not always clear about their targets so did not always use the goal setting process as a tool for motivation or guidance. Staff recognised that they should do more on goal setting and that it was not being executed effectively in the club. One recommendation was that a SPP was used to actively educate and help staff implement a more beneficial process. A number of players had personal goals alongside this process but differed in their ability to implement goals which were beneficial for performance this will be discussed next.

#### *5.1.2.3.2 Commitment as an individual characteristic/requirement*

The difference between those who demonstrated a commitment to excellence and displayed high work rate consistently and those who possessed the desire to be a professional but lacked the commitment necessary was in part recognised as an individual characteristic. Commitment as an individual characteristic was represented by the sub themes of motives, strategically planned goals, engagement with quality practice behaviours, willingness to do extras, awareness and maturity.

Players possessed a number of intrinsic reasons for pursuing careers in football including a love of the game “*doing what you love it’s worth it yeah*” (Kieran interview - scholar) and a determination to succeed “*I want to be successful before anything...I always put my mind on football...I need to be a footballer.... I want to be a footballer* (Joe interview – scholar).

Money also reflected an extrinsic reward among the players. Winter et al. (2019) recently found that financial motives to succeed were recognised in elite development environments in football but not other sports given the large financial awards associated with the professional game. For some this was discussed in relation to the need to be able to support their families; “*I have to make it as a footballer... make my Mum stress free, make my family*

*have a good life*” (Aaron interview – scholar). These findings are in line with prior research which indicates that individuals possess individual reasons for chasing careers in the game that may include intrinsic, extrinsic, and social factors. (Holt & Dunn, 2004).

Research has identified that strategically planned proximal and distal goals are crucial to provide direction for the career objectives of the players in combination with motives (Holt & Dunn, 2004). A number of players discussed having personal goals outside of the CLASS process, however varied in their ability to strategically and realistically breakdown these goals. When asked about their personal goals a number of the boys first spoke about performance goals such as playing with the 23s, training up with the first team more and making their first England cap:

*To make an England appearance this season.* (Tom interview – scholar)

*To be in the 23s team next season...that's the main one for me.* (Smithy interview – scholar)

Some players had broken down these goals further; *“I have personal targets for myself...Like how many goals I'd like to score, how many assists I'd like to get for the season, for the game stuff like that”* (Mikey interview - scholar). For some however, both the understanding of the steps to reach bigger performance goals as well as the regular monitoring and reflecting on goals was somewhat vague *“Keep playing well...just continuing working hard and obviously the rest will take care of itself”* (Kieran interview - scholar). For some, their lofty ambitions of breaking into the U23s or first team within the next year were unlikely, this has potentially detrimental consequences for performance as unrealistic goals may create stress or reduce motivation and effort (Weinberg & Gould, 2011).

Players varied in their commitment to the pursuit of their ambitions. Smithy discussed how he continued to strive when the pressure was off from the coaches, he recognised the importance of maintaining the work towards his longer-term goals:

*The end of season's coming up and we can't win anything so, there's no pressure on us to perform..... so I sort of set goals for myself to say look what I can do now to make sure that next season, I'm starting, or I'm playing up with the 23s basically just like pushing myself cause I always like to do better or look further in the future.*

(Smithy interview - scholar)

This dialogue demonstrates volition, a process which involves knowing how to motivate oneself when other control processes fail and initiating an action and maintaining it until a goal has been reached (Beckmann, 1987). This is significant given the successful players in Holt & Mitchell's (2006) study worked to pursue goals for themselves rather than to appease the coaches.

One way in which the players differed in their goal commitment was through the engagement with quality practice behaviours in training as well as engaging in extra training to improve their development points. Some players recognised their limitations and did 'extras' on top of the scheduled programme to work on their individual development points; *"So after training I do like gym and upper body cause that's where I feel like I need to improve on. And my shooting as well, so like go outside, do some shooting, get some balls"* (Kieran interview - scholar). Those players who did extra spoke how about how the desire to improve motivated them to do more; *"I want to do it cause I know I can get better from it... Now I see improvements it's good...I feel stronger on the pitch, I've got better on both my feet so it is good"* (Smithy interview - scholar).

There was an expectation from staff that those who were going to go on to make it as a player would do extras:

*We let them have a bit of free time after every training session, 15/20 minutes if they wanna go work on their weaknesses or their skills they've got that time to do it...the ones who are gunna be players do it. The ones who aren't gunna be players will end up maybe doing it for a couple of minutes then go, ah I'm going in you know and that's it.* (Roy interview – coach)

Staff who had been at the club for a long time spoke about how they'd seen over time that those who were successful had the ability to drive themselves;

*The ones who are on the board out there, the ones who are having a career, they drove themselves....the kids all had something, they had a drive, a desire to do well, to get better.* (Tony interview – management staff)

*Listen the players that strive – are achievers, they're never tired, they just keep going and going and going...they're the people that make it, because they're constantly thinking well if I'm training today, your rival might not be, I might be ahead of him*

*and...you can't coach that...you're driven...you can help develop it by stretching people and everything but it tends to be the tendency that you see it....you see the people that have got that. (Dave interview - coach)*

*The coach should be able to come away and if you listen to the great players and the great managers, you talk about Alex Ferguson at Manchester United, he said that Eric Cantona at the end of training he'd be out there taking free kicks with David Beckham for 45-50 mins.....they just want to do it...it's gotta come from within the individual. (Roy interview - coach)*

These examples suggest that some staff felt drive ultimately comes from within the individual. Prior research in football has similarly shown that having a burning desire or motivation to achieve and progress was considered important by elite academy coaches (Cook et al., 2014).

Variance in players' intensity of effort and desire to self-improve was associated with their awareness and understanding of the effort it would take to be successful, this was in part due to differences in their social, emotional and psychological maturity. Some players consistently showed a desire to learn and improve and acknowledged it was their responsibility to maintain their focus on working hard; *"it's on myself to make it high intensity cause like no matter what, like with training, it's up to you if you want to put your effort in and like get better"* (Tazly interview – scholar). Smithy too demonstrated a strong awareness about the work rate required and recognised that high intensity effort levels were important and expected and accepted consequences when these weren't met; *"just as long as we put in effort, like they wouldn't make us run or they won't shout at us at all... but if you don't put the effort they will let you know about it, which is fair enough"* (Smithy interview – scholar). Other players were observed to be less astute.

The difference in work ethic was discerned by a number of players who acknowledged that there were boys in the academy who trained hard and those who were less serious; *"There's boys who just take liberties and don't work hard, and there's boys who stay behind every day grinding"* (Smithy interview - scholar). Observation data confirmed there were some players that were disruptive and found it difficult to be professional. Aaron disclosed that the boys referred to this disruptive group as the "most hated" as they were the ones who were constantly in trouble. In addition, there were those that could adopt either approach but would

often get influenced by others and pulled into the disruption.

Staff in the current study noticed these differences in players' approaches to hard work:

*Smithy, Tom and Alex are in this section (gestures hands) where they do everything, do it all, then they don't get swayed by the others. Kieran, Mikey and Joe want to work hard and you can see that and when you've got them alone they will listen to you and they will do everything they can because they're good players and they know they're good and they want to improve but if they're with Nick and Aaron... (Matty interview – support staff)*

Here Matty comments on the potential negative peer impact on individual work ethic.

Observation data supported the player's and staff insight that scholarship peers could both encourage or discourage player work ethic.

#### *5.1.2.3.3 Peer Impact*

The positive impact of scholarship peers was observed with the group of boys that regularly conducted extra's together, players were regularly observed gathering each other up to head to the gym in free time. Tom spoke about how doing extras with others motivated him to push harder; *“There are a group of us who do it (extras) more often than anyone else....you seem to do more when you're with them, so yeah it definitely helps”* (Tom interview - scholar). This is in line with research in elite female football in the UK which found that peers can help players to lead a disciplined lifestyle through encouraging adaptive lifestyle behaviours (Gledhill & Harwood, 2014; 2015).

Another way that peer's impacted work rate was through competition for places:

*It makes me want to be better than the person that's in my position so um, making sure that I'm playing in front of them and it sort of keeps me improving instead of just like sitting back and things being easy like in front of me...I think it's good. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*I see it as a good thing having someone that level here cause it just pushes you more, cause I think if I was head and shoulders above other keepers I was training with I*

*wouldn't develop as much...I think it's a good thing we're both here together we can push each other. (Tom interview - scholar)*

In this way a number of players discussed using competition as a motivation to work hard and improve. This is significant given that research in elite academy football has highlighted competitiveness (both with self and others) is an important factor impacting player progression to the professional level (Cook et al., 2014; Mills et al. 2012). Cook et al. (2014) found that elite academy football coaches reported competitiveness as a burning desire or motivation to achieve and progress and prove superiority over others. This was recognised by Tony as an important characteristic of those who went on to make it:

*The real ones who went on to have a career...they hate losing and hated losing silly little games you know training games....it mattered, it was the be all and end all, it drives them on, it's an energiser it's a prime driver the fear of losing you know. You know and you gotta have that in you. (Tony interview – management staff)*

Here Tony suggests it is something that comes from within the individual. This is in line with the discourse above in which staff spoke about those they'd seen go onto success had an innate drive to succeed.

A number of players spoke about the potential negative impact of peer influence which included messing around in training:

*He can definitely get pulled down by some of the other boys here that he's friends with...you see it sometimes at training he can get distracted, I don't think it's his fault it's just cause of his friends, if they're messing around he'll drop down to their level just cause he's mates with them, but when he's with good players who like always give 100% he will step up his game. (Smithy interview - scholar)*

*It's hard to not get sucked into it sometimes to be fair, like I'll admit I've had sessions where I've been shit, cause I've been getting involved in it...you just have to try stay out of it to be fair, which aint always easy. (Tom interview - scholar)*

*It's just having a bad combination of players, like when certain people are not there then other players will train harder and not get distracted but when people are in their little groups then that's when people will start to...be unserious and just try and get attention or whatever. (Alex focus group – scholar focus group)*

Players acknowledged that there were certain individuals in the group that didn't take training seriously, distracted others and even caused the team to drop their standards. When asked during a focus group what it would be like to be in an environment where everyone was striving to be the best they can be Tom stated "*It would be much better*" (Tom focus group - scholars), Smithy and Alex agreed adding "*I think that's what separates the better academies*" (Alex focus group - scholars). This links to the inconsistencies in behavioural expectations and discipline discussed in the prior section as at times some players were allowed to get away with disruptive behaviours without consequence. One explanation for peer influence was the desire to impress their peers by showing off, having a laugh, avoiding overt displays of working hard and instead appearing to expend minimal effort, behaviours that have been characterised as 'laddish' (Platts & Smith, 2018).

The impact of public performance and the considerable importance given to presenting the 'right front' to peers was similarly recognised by staff; "*He works hard in private but when he's with others...the majority of them they don't. Which is why I want to try...from my aspect, to get them as individual and private as possible*" (Matty interview – support staff). As Matty suggests here peer influence in a group setting impacted the work rate of certain players who applied themselves better when working individually with staff. Although some of these players explicitly stated they wanted to be successful and were self-proclaimed hard workers often doing extras, their behaviour was frequently driven by peer approval and impression management particularly away from the pitch and when the coaches weren't present;

*They're always trying to do the thing that will impress the others when really they need to do things that will impress themselves and will impress the people that matter, like the coaches rather than their friends. But I think that could possibly be an age group thing as well though....I don't know whether it's a generation thing where they're just like, I just wanna be looked to see that I'm not working hard but I can still get success...but it doesn't really work like that.* (Matty interview – support staff)

The need to fit in often diverted these players from fully applying themselves as they got easily distracted by disruptive individuals in the group which lead to immature and aloof behaviour.

Similarly, whilst most of the boys articulated in their individual interviews that educational qualifications were important to optimise their future success post football, a number of the boys spent time in the classroom seeking social validation through expressions of laddishness (Platts & Smith, 2018). An example was Mikey who expressed an ambivalent attitude towards education. The teacher deemed Mikey to be underperforming in the classroom and stated he was far more intelligent than he let on. ‘Uncool to work’ and ‘effortless achievement’ discourses were observed from some players, which research has suggested are often central to working-class identifications with education (Platts & Smith, 2018) alongside aspiring to be ‘average’ or ‘ordinary’ to fit in. The routine expression of dominant forms of masculinity and laddishness presiding within the professional football context (Parker, 1996) appeared to influence the educational engagement of a number of the boys. Research in elite development environments across other sports has similarly acknowledged that high-performance expectations at a transitional period of adolescence has been associated with athletes displaying challenging behaviours and commitment issues (Devaney et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2016). Adolescent brain development and maturational imbalances between the development of socioemotional and cognitive control systems (Schnell, Mayer, Diehl, Zipfel, & Thiel, 2014; Steinberg, 2010) can contribute to the behavioural characteristics of adolescence including less than desirable work rate behaviours which is in contrast to the commitment and discipline identified as important to succeed in this environment.

#### *5.1.2.3.4 Academy environment*

Both staff and players recognised that the ability to work hard was necessary to progress to the professional level, this was incorporated into the culture and part of the shared articulated discourse in the environment. Themes relating to the impact of the academy environment on players’ work rate encompassed verbal reminders, onus on players to drive themselves, coach athlete relationship, ‘bad group’ narrative and lack of consistency.

Coaches and support staff were observed using verbal reminders of the importance of work rate and positive reinforcement when players were training to the intensity expected;

*Alex looked lethargic and sluggish, he was such a laid back personality and this was visible on the field. He needed Jimmy to energise him.... “Come on,,Head the ball*

*son” when he got to it he was reinforced “good lad - OK you three, maintain that standard now”. (Observation data)*

Staff recognised that some players lacked awareness around the level of commitment required, as well as the necessary discipline; *“sometimes young players just see one side of it and it tends to be the glamour, the flair side of it and they might just miss out on how much hard work and diligence has gone into it”* (Dave interview - coach), however other than the verbal reminders, the onus was largely on the players themselves to take responsibility to drive themselves. In focusing on the innate drive of the individual, coaches somewhat overlooked the role of the environment and there was no explicit focus on the players’ learning of hard work and motivation as psychosocial skills. This is similar to the findings of Larsen et al. (2012) who found that aspects of motivation as a psychosocial skill (e.g. the passion and desire for the sport, motivation to practice alone) were indirectly practiced and talked about in informal talks between players and coaches but not explicitly taught in training. Research has suggested that interventions that build levels of commitment, belief in control and enjoyment of challenge would support the pursuit of higher levels of achievement (Collins et al., 2016). This is significant given that the belief that ability leads to success rather than effort has been associated with boredom, negative attitudes, and a lack of enjoyment which is likely to reduce the enjoyment and sustained effort that developing athletes exert (e.g. Carpenter & Morgan, 1999).

Management acknowledged the need for a greater awareness of what may be preventing a player from working hard:

*If you’ve got a player who is not putting in what you’d expect them to, what do you think could be done to develop that? (Researcher)*

*I think it comes back to trying to understand a player better, there will be a driver for the loss of motivation or work ethic...probably just understanding that before you start diving in with consequence or strategies to fix it, erm, yeah I think that’s probably the key, just trying to understand what it is you are trying to fix (Paul interview – management staff)*

*Yes, and what is currently being done at the minute in terms of trying to get to the bottom of that understanding? (Researcher)*

*I think the player reviews would form a part of it, but I think it probably leans on the coaches and staff through their relationships to try and identify what those factors*

*maybe so when we are talking about players in our succession planning process or in the pre meeting before review meetings, staff talking about why that might be and conversations they've had and stuff like that.....it happens now but like everything it can definitely get better, definitely. (Paul interview – management staff)*

Here Paul discussed that staff relationships with players are key to understanding what may be causing a player to lack effort. Literature has established if athletes perceive that the environment accommodates their psychological needs, they may be more likely to feel more committed and respond by increasing work rate (Spink, Wilson, Brawley & Odnokon, 2013).

There was a narrative from staff that in the main this cohort was a 'bad' group;

*I think this cohort in particular, they're not self-driven, they're not self-motivated they can't separate themselves from the silliness sometimes that goes on with their behaviour you know, there are a few clowns in there, whereas the majority should be saying 'listen, we're here to learn, we're here to work. (Jimmy interview - coach)*

As highlighted in Jimmy's discourse there was an expectation for players not to get distracted by the immaturity of some and take responsibility for driving themselves. Gavin acknowledged how the lack of consistent discipline discussed in the previous section contributed to the narrative that they were a 'bad' group:

*That lack of consistency contributes to the behaviour we see from the lads, so I think it's a lazy thing to fall into which I have as well myself which is to think "they're a bad bunch" ....and you gotta try and cut a little bit deeper...It is an easy way for us as coaches to absolve responsibility a bit.. if you give a kid an inch they'll take a mile, but I see that all the time...and we let them get away with things that they shouldn't do and we also don't reward things which we're looking for. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

Gavin acknowledges that the environment impacts players behaviour, more specifically recognising that as players are allowed to get away with certain behaviours then they will. This links to the observations that both low intensity and disruptive behaviours were often displayed when players felt they could get away with them.

#### **5.1.2.4 Summary**

The narrative throughout players and staff at the academy was that a high level of commitment, dedication and discipline is required to reach the highest level in football. Sacrifice was agreed to represent a necessary part of the scholarship phase and players had all sacrificed normative social aspects of teenage life with the view to maximise chances of future success. Although both players and staff were aware of the importance of the ‘ability to work hard’, players differed significantly in the day to day level of dedication and effort they made. A number of environmental factors contributed to this including inconsistencies in behavioural standards and the different approaches of coaches to enforcing discipline. Although hard work was valued to the extent that it was recognised as more important than talent to progress in football its development was not given the same priority as player’s football development and the onus was again primarily on the players to take responsibility for driving themselves. This indicates that the organisation and players do have some awareness of the importance of discipline and commitment but less understanding of factors that would facilitate players’ development of the relevant skills and attitudes.

## **5.2 Responsibility for driving development**

Although the term self-regulation was not explicitly talked about in the environment or discussed in interviews, staff acknowledged the importance of players being able to demonstrate a variety of self-regulatory processes, most notably taking responsibility for driving their own development. In this context, responsibility refers to times when players took accountability and ownership of their development and demonstrated volitional behaviours. Two broad themes emerged in the data in relation to players taking responsibility for driving their development, awareness and responsibility which structure the final section of this chapter.

### **5.2.1 Awareness**

Staff acknowledged awareness was an important factor involved in progression to the professional level, players needed to have a realistic awareness of their ability and understand their strengths and weaknesses:

*Ultimately the people that tend to succeed is when they know what they are. So, you know what you've got, how to use it and when to use it. (Dave interview – coach).*

*They need that understanding that this is what I need to do to get here. (Matty interview – support staff)*

*You need to be able to place yourself realistically so genuinely be able to look, reflect on your game and think I'm here because, I'm good at this...this puts me above that person, but I'm not good at this which puts me below that person, so therefore I need to continue to develop in both but I really need to focus in on here to get better. I don't see enough of that... from our players. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

Players were expected to have a strong awareness of where they were in the development process and what it takes to progress into first team life, this was especially important given the precarious mixed messages around making it discussed in Chapter 4. Environmental factors were associated with the development of awareness, for example some players spoke about how opportunities to train with the first team allowed them to be explicitly aware of what is needed to succeed at the top level and gave them an increased awareness of what they needed to work on in their own game. Environmental factors also played a role in distorting some players' awareness; as there were few formal, one-to-one meetings between players and coaches and a lack of communication around selection and playing up. This represented an expectation for players to be aware of their progress themselves and meant that players and coaches did not necessarily share understandings about players' progress.

Players varied greatly in their awareness about the level of work needed to become a first team player and where they were in the process. This was exemplified by Aaron who had hardly featured in the starting squad;

*I always feel like nah just chill out don't think about competition, just let everyone see your quality and they'll realise alright cool he is better than him. I feel like I'm better than most people, so it's like when the coaches realise that then I'm good. (Aaron interview - scholar)*

The ability to reflect on and learn from performance was identified as important for developing self-awareness by some staff members; *“having to do reviews and reflect on their own development and performance is really important [to develop awareness]”* (Paul

interview – management staff). Players conducted both team and individual video analysis to reflect on their performance. Individual analysis sessions involved players looking through the video clips of their performance for the things they'd done well and the things they felt they could improve on. Some players discussed how this reflection process could impact their learning through increasing their awareness:

*Matty will get together the clips then you just pick the stuff you think you should have done better and things you done well.... Mainly you gotta start with the negatives, and after you've done that look at the things you did well... it's always good to see what you did well, see what works, how you impacted the game cause - obviously if you do something well you can do it again. (Alex interview – scholar)*

*I try not to look at the result but how I performed and I'm critical which I think helps me...but it's much easier to reflect on the stuff I've done well so I try to look at the stuff I done badly more so. (Tom interview – scholar)*

*How do you help yourself learn from the game? (Researcher)*

*I'd watch over the game and pick up things that I could be doing better and then just apply it in training and the next game and maybe try and do actions on it, so for example Newcastle I delivered one good ball but then the rest of them are poor, I'd be thinking like listen I gotta focus on crossing this week, like putting it into good areas and picking up people. (Tazly interview – scholar)*

These examples demonstrate some players had a good understanding of reflection as a self-regulatory process; they recognised the need to remain self-critical regardless of performance outcomes (MacNamara et al., 2010b) and understood the importance of balanced reflection to distinguish what they should continue doing well as identifying areas for improvement (Knowles et al., 2001). Tazly's discourse highlights how reflection allowed him to understand the underlying factors affecting his performance, he was able to pick out an area of weakness (crossing) and recognise a specific action relating to this that he felt he needed to work on for the next game (putting the ball into good areas and picking up people). The finding that players used video analysis to reflect and increase their self-awareness is in line with prior research in elite academy football (Middlemas & Harwood, 2018).

Players varied in their ability to maximise learning from reflecting on games:

*I rather not reflect....I don't want to think about it...I know what I need to work on but just don't want to think about the game and I don't really like watching when I play bad..cause it just don't help...I know I played bad, I know I need to improve but I don't like watching it...I only take what is good for me and all the bad things, the bad words that I've heard from anyone, just come from here and go over...but I just take the good so, I learn. (Joe interview – scholar)*

Here Joe articulates a reluctance to reflect on his weaknesses and he expresses a negative perception of constructive feedback. This may represent a lack of awareness about the benefits of gaining an understanding of the factors affecting bad as well as good performances, which could have a damaging effect on his engagement in learning. Matty discussed how some players showed a reluctance to highlight their weaknesses when having to work alongside each other in a classroom setting:

*Sometimes they group round the computer and I'm thinking, well they're not properly learning here, cause they're just looking at Kieran's goal or they're looking at Joe falling over and laughing at him...they're not focusing on what they need to focus on because they don't want to highlight their weaknesses in front of everyone. (Matty interview – support staff)*

This discourse suggests that the importance given to presenting the 'right front' to peers impacted the learning process as it prevented players conducting a balanced reflection on their performance. Matty acknowledged that some players would address their weaknesses when they were one to one with him however, others who did not approach him missed this learning opportunity. This has important implications given that research has shown that reflecting on weaknesses can create the opportunity to recognise areas for improvement and integrating this into future actions can maximise performance enhancement (Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, de Roos & Visscher 2012). Furthermore, reflection can enhance self-awareness which may have a mediating role in developing other key psychological factors such as resilience and goal setting (Larsen et al., 2014).

As discussed in the communication section, some staff recognised that players needed more support in developing their awareness and suggested managing player's expectations through clearer communication was necessary; *"So someone like Mikey, I think he needs to be sat down and say look, in your position this is what an elite player does....Mikey tends to just*

*watch the game go by and I think he has to work both ways up the pitch”* (Roy interview - coach). When asked if a coach had had this conversation with the player he replied:

*I think the analyst does it more for the team and they go on the computers and look at their own individual targets but often you're not very critical with yourself. We give feedback after a game as well but...I think quite often with coaches it's like a random comment, you know like you can do better there Mikey you lost the ball, you know what does that mean? They need to be shown.* (Roy interview - coach)

Roy acknowledges that players might not have the critical insight to be able to identify development areas and recognises it would be beneficial for coaches to sit down and explicitly show players, however he concedes coaches' feedback was more in the form of random comments. As previously discussed, the follow up reviews from coaches were irregular which impacted player engagement in the process. Research in elite football has also discussed the impact coaches input may have on player's learning and development of independence. Wright et al. (2016) suggested that individual analysis has potential to encourage more independent learning but this must be supplemented with a coach's input for those players who had difficulty critically analysing their performance. Given some players in the current study lacked this critical insight they would likely benefit from more follow up support from coaches on the individual analysis sessions to allow them to maximise their learning.

Players were also given a chance to reflect on games as a group during team analysis. During these sessions coaches were observed questioning players' decision making with open questioning; *“why did you run to the ball when there's a short corner?”* (Jimmy observation – coach). This use of open questions by coaches allowed players to reflect and be involved in the feedback process, open questioning was also observed on the training pitch and at half time during matches. Including the players and encouraging them to reflect on their own as well as the team's performance has been shown to expand players' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness which are important determinants of persistence and performance (Mills et al., 2014). Coaches disseminating video analysis feedback in a manner which facilitated open discussions and player engagement is associated with enhanced learning, game understanding, individual development and identification of strengths and weaknesses (Wright et al., 2016).

Open questioning in groups did not always elicit engagement from the players which may, in part, be due to the public nature of the discussion. For example, Joe was observed approaching the analyst before a session to ask if a clip he was embarrassed about could be omitted from the session. Within this research, little consideration was given to players' feelings about receiving feedback publicly. According to Middlemas & Harwood (2018), greater appreciation of player's psychological responses to feedback as well as the delivery climate would enhance the use of video as a self-regulation strategy for performance enhancement in elite football.

Matty suggested that the SPP could play more of a role in helping to build player's awareness in general; *"the psychologist should get them to understand their strengths and be happy with their strengths and praise when they are doing something well and tell them when they're doing something bad"* (Matty interview – support staff). This suggests that players themselves might not possess the critical thinking skills needed to benefit from reflection. The SPP could certainly play an important role in implementing a more systematic approach to reflection in the current academy and ensuring players are supported through the reflection process. A more systematic and holistic approach to reflective thinking skills could be key in developing the resilience and work ethic needed for players to transcend the challenges that elite academy football presents. Self-reflection has been identified as central to improving self-awareness in youth football (Middlemas & Harwood, 2018) and awareness has been shown to be a fundamental agent of change that acts as a catalyst for developing resilient behaviours (e.g. coping with setbacks) and goal-directed attributes (e.g. professional attitude).

### **5.2.2 The responsibility paradox**

Whilst staff acknowledged it was important that players took responsibility for their own development, paradoxically many aspects of day-to-day life in the academy limited opportunities for the players to do this. Primarily this was associated with a lack of ownership, accountability and independence given to players (terms which were used interchangeably in staff interviews). Two main themes emerged from the data that reflected how the environment impacted player's ability to take responsibility; the regimented scholarship schedule (which consisted of the subthemes of limited ownership over areas to work on, lack of flexibility, resistance to change, strategies to transcend boredom) and the

level of hands-on support both directive support (multiple support staff, spoon-fed education, ownership over tasks) and material support (kit ready, meals prepared).

### **5.2.2.1 Regimented scholarship schedule**

In line with observation data a number of staff expressed that the current scholarship programme was very rigid, players had little autonomy over their day and were told exactly where and when to be with little freedom:

*When I say everything is done for them, they come here in the morning, they come through the gate. Their kit is given to them, they're then told to be up at breakfast at 9 o'clock, they're then told to be in the classroom at 10 o'clock, they're then told to be in the physio room at 10.20, they're then told to be on the pitch at 10.30...they're then told to have lunch at 12... (Roy interview – coach)*

*I think we've become that rigid in our programme that they know what we're doing every day. (Dave interview - coach)*

The players similarly reported that they had little autonomy over the way in which many aspects of their daily lives were conducted; “*I just turn up and I'm told where to go*” (Smithy interview - scholar). Requirements to conform with the rigid schedule of regulated activity limited the autonomy of scholars. Staff recognised that the young players were resistant to change as a consequence:

*Because we're so rigid...once you throw a curve ball in, it's like “ugh, why are we doing this?” for instance, about 6 weeks ago, we had an u18 game on a Wednesday and the first team manager wanted a team to play against on the Thursday, so I made the boys, only for 30 minutes, but once they were told they were training on the Thursday, the day after the game they were like “oh we never do this”.. one or two of them were like children. (Dave interview - coach)*

*They aren't used to taking ownership for their own learning and development....they're so used to doing this this this...like as soon as I introduce something new they're like, “ah what, what is this? I don't want to do it”...because it's not normal...I've introduced a google form and they just didn't wanna do it cause*

*it changed from previous...they'd been so rigid in doing it. (Matty interview – support staff)*

The players had become so used to the fixed schedule that they were averse to the change even when it meant an opportunity to play up with the first team as exemplified in Dave's discourse. Some staff acknowledged it would be valuable to give the player's more freedom and flexibility in their schedule;

*I feel the boys just aren't given the opportunity to work on what they feel and we feel they need to work on, cause it's always so structured...They could choose where to go where best suits them, so they have a slot in a time scale where it's like an hour where they can go, OK now I'm going to go see Matty and do analysis or now I'm going to go to the gym cause I need to work on this...there's not really much flexibility on that in the academy environment. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Matty suggested allowing players to be behaviourally proactive participants in their own learning process (Zimmerman, 2006) by giving players more freedom in terms of being able to decide the overall areas of the game they felt they needed to work on. This suggestion is valuable given that research has shown that giving players less direction and emphasising the importance of the players themselves taking some control over their own development can help to foster their independence and resourcefulness (Cook et al., 2014).

One way in which players were afforded the opportunity to take ownership in the academy was that they were given a small amount of free time after training which some players used to complete extras:

*Although we're saying let them take ownership, it's quite regimental so we have to find a way of them taking the responsibility of what they do, you know so probably we need to back off a little bit? I like to think that we let them have a bit of free time after every training session, 15/20 minutes if they wanna go work on their weaknesses or their skills they've got that time to do it. (Roy interview - coach)*

Roy recognised the staff had a responsibility to find ways of allowing players to take more responsibility over their daily activities but acknowledged that there were structural restrictions from having to fit around the first team schedule which meant a certain degree of rigidity was inevitable; *"It's difficult because some of them things have to be done because of the first team, we have to lunch at a certain time, their kit has to be there ready for them but*

*how do we make them take ownership” (Roy interview - coach). Dave similarly felt that the academy staff had a responsibility to mix up the schedule to create new experiences for the players; “we’ve got to create as many experiences as possible as an academy moving forward, not being rigid in what we’re doing all the time, throw different things at them and see how they react” (Dave interview - coach). Tony recalled a time during a previous season when a coach had gone against the weekly schedule to mix things up and how this had worked well:*

*Good coaches, good programmes will vary it but get the same results, freshen it up....I remember one of the best things a coach did in here, came in for training and went come on we’re going for a walk, he took them to Dunkin Donuts and bought them donuts up there, throw it out the window...we won the next day. He says, you know I just sensed we need to do something different, a bit tired, a bit worn out.*

(Tony interview - staff)

Whilst it was acknowledged that more variety at the environmental level could be beneficial, as discussed in the previous chapter there was a narrative that some repetition and routine might be necessary to help players to develop as well as prepare players for life in professional football. Repetition was identified as an important challenge for the players moving onto the scholarship phase and players varied in their ability to adapt to this repetition.

In summary, the regimented nature of the schedule meant limited opportunities for players to take responsibility for their own training or daily schedule, this resulted in a disconnection between how coaches and staff wanted players to develop responsibility to drive their own development and the opportunities players were given to do so.

### ***5.2.2.2 Level of hands-on support***

The financial and material resources (preconditions) of the club allowed top class support to players, this consisted of material support (e.g. preparing players kit) and directive support (from multiple support staff). Players’ schedules were set, their laundry was done, and their meals were prepared. This support mirrored the set-up received by first team players and meant that players had limited responsibility or decision-making requirements in relation to

their lives within the academy. Observation data highlighted a number of ways in players were given hands-on support:

*At 9.55 the rest of the boys got up to leave, some sighing as they got up about going to recovery, others wishing us a Merry Christmas as they left the classroom for the last time this year. Joe was slow to get up and hung behind to speak to Ruth and I. I asked if he was flying back to France today after the Christmas lunch. He nodded and I asked which airport (BBC news had informed me earlier they'd closed a terminal at Gatwick due to the drones). He shrugged and smiled; he didn't have a clue which airport as he was getting a lift straight there arranged by the academy. Although flying alone at 16 suggested a degree of independence it was paradoxical as on the other hand every step was arranged by the club. This was epitomised when Ruth said she'd find out for him rushed out of the classroom to the office to check. She returned 5 minutes later relieved it was Heathrow! (Observation)*

*As Ruth and I stood chatting in the classroom two kit men knocked and greeted us with "alright...we've got the boys kit for tour to bring in" – they preceded to shuttle 15 shiny new kit bags into the classroom. Once they were gone Ruth looked at me and shook her head "this is why they can't do anything for themselves, they get their bags packed for them". (Observation)*

Staff identified that the level of support given to players may be restricting autonomy and opportunities for players to learn to take responsibility for their own development:

*Lots is given to them in terms of myself and the other staff members...it's good cause obviously we want to help them as much as we can but there's also maybe as aspect of not allowing them to have some control over what they do. (Matty interview – support staff)*

*I would argue that our current programme does not prepare people to be independent athletes because we are coming at it from a perspective of giving them more support and more directives...in being too supportive you can actually become less supportive because if you're giving them too much material support for example erm they might be lacking their own self-development, they might be lacking the environment to develop their own individual selves because too much is being given for them. (Owen interview – support staff)*

These examples demonstrate that staff generally felt that excessive support may inhibit the young players developing independence and the ability to take responsibility for themselves. This was not only in the context of football, players also received excessive support in the education element of the academy; *“I’ve never known anything like it, I disagree with it, I wouldn’t be mollycoddling them but they’re used to it and that’s what they’re like”* (Ruth interview – support staff). Ruth acknowledged that she had had to adjust her approach to fit the system.

Owen recognised that the specific directive support given was representative of the level of support received by the first team and would likely prepare any players who did go on to make a career at the highest level;

*It’s a very specific directive type of support rather than trying to create more independent learners... The one guy who may make it in the premier league, you could argue that we are preparing them for that type of life because they’re getting a programme that is much more like a senior first team premier league player will encounter.* (Owen interview – support staff)

Setting the environment up in a way that mirrors the level of support at first team level was perceived to prepare the minority who may progress to professional level whilst inhibiting opportunities for players to take responsibility for their development. As discussed in Chapter 4, staff were aware that many players did not make it past the scholarship phase stage and although there were attempts to convey this to players the messages were mixed.

The central purpose of the academy scholarship programme was to maximise the likelihood of producing players for the first team, given first team players received excessive support over personal responsibility, the academy did not prioritise opportunities for scholars to develop the ability to take responsibility. This finding is likely compounded by the earlier finding that some staff felt that the ability to take responsibility for driving their own development comes from within the individual. Artifacts, values and basic assumptions in the successful TDEs in Scandinavia (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2013) were centred around the athlete’s taking individual responsibility and autonomy for their own excellence and were intentionally developed through processes such as training without a coach. This emphasises the need for more to be done at the environmental level in the current study.

There was a consensus amongst staff that the academy needed to provide more opportunities for the players to take ownership and accountability for their development:

*I think if you can get them just to take more accountability...we don't train any accountability here, we don't train any independence here and this isn't HFC specific, this is now across probably just football. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

*I think we could be better on ownership....that's something I'm looking at because I do believe that if you think you own something you do it a lot better, you look after it more. (Dave interview - coach)*

*I think the support is really good I think maybe we need to give them a little bit more ownership but in ways where... they can think for themselves where they can go to the gym or they can go to analysis...but once they go to that area, that's where they shouldn't have ownership or they are allowed ownership when they are showing the signs that they have learnt. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Gavin acknowledged, the lack of accountability and focus on developing independence may be an issue across football. A directive and instructional approach that limits opportunities for players to shape their own experience has long been associated with the traditional coach centered approach in elite football (Partington & Cushion, 2013; Williams & Hodges, 2005) and continues to prevail (Champ et al., 2020). Matty spoke about how as the season progressed he provided an opportunity for players to take ownership within his sessions:

*I've taken a step back. It's my way of saying look this is how you can take ownership of your learning and your career whereas maybe the programme doesn't do that it's my little bit to do that....at the start of the season I was on them constantly like, remember to do the google form, remember to do this...remember to do this... Now I send it out to them, whoever does it is up to them. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Matty discussed how he gave players the ownership over whether to complete the task itself, however he demonstrated uncertainty about the balance between letting players take ownership and supporting them and he felt too much ownership in his area could negatively impact their development:

*We get told to allow the boys to take ownership but in our area it's difficult to do..if we allow them to take ownership like we've been doing then I feel they're not*

*developing because they don't understand what they're looking for... because their knowledge isn't as good as my knowledge....If I give them too much ownership they're missing loads of clips that they should see cause they don't recognise it....They don't understand it. There's always that fine balance of giving them ownership to do stuff in order to learn themselves but also we want to try and support as much as we can. (Matty interview – support staff)*

Matty's example highlights that to an extent directive support was necessary for individual analysis given the scholars were still learning to read the game, not all players had the critical insight and awareness to allow them to maximise learning by completing the task independently. This finding is in line with Roy's earlier discourse suggesting some players lack critical insight as well as prior research in elite football that has shown that simply having video the footage available to analyse independently is not necessarily sufficient to facilitate effective self-reflection as some players find it difficult to critically analyse performance and need further guidance and support in what to look for and why (Wright et al., 2016). Whilst it was known amongst staff that it was important to provide the young players with opportunities to take ownership and more could be done, there appeared to be some uncertainty on how to best balance ownership with support.

### **5.2.2.3 Summary**

Whilst the benefits of affording player autonomy are well documented (e.g. Ivarsson et al., 2015), a more authoritarian style continues to prevail in elite football (Champ et al., 2020a). Providing opportunities for athletes to gain ownership of their goals and development has been shown to be effective in developing intrinsic motivation (Hardy et al., 1996) in line with Dave's discourse above. Research has acknowledged that athletes need to be challenged and supported appropriately to help them develop the self-regulation skills and intrinsic motivation to take personal responsibility for their development (Deci & Ryan 1995). This can be fostered by providing opportunities for ownership over development alongside clear feedback on mastery, ability and process requirements for further success (Collins et al., 2011). If players are encouraged to take more responsibility it is critical this is followed up with the appropriate support to maximise learning. There is currently a lack of regular feedback and communication from coaches off of the pitch and it is critical that players are given more follow up support from their individual analysis sessions, this may involve the

coach playing more of a role in facilitating reflection. Findings suggest that creating an appropriate environment to facilitate a more autonomous approach is currently a challenge in the academy and they would likely benefit from more education on ways in which player ownership could be balanced with support to benefit the players at this stage of their development.

### **5.3 Summary of psychosocial needs and development at Holgate FC**

The previous chapter identified the challenges and opportunities faced in stepping up to the scholarship phase and signposted the need for players to display and develop psychosocial skills to help them to cope with and make progress in this phase. This chapter builds on the last, and addresses the second research objective, examining the player's psychosocial needs and development in depth. The key psychosocial skills deemed necessary for success in the academy were evaluated as well as how the academy environment impacted the development of these skills.

Players were expected to show the right character and drive their own development which was represented by hard work, resilience, responsibility and awareness. There was a narrative throughout the academy that the ability to cope with and recover from adversity and exert a high level of commitment and discipline were essential given the challenging nature of the professional game. The data presented shows that this message was reinforced in academy life and consequently both players and staff were aware of the importance of both resilience and hard work. Staff also acknowledged the importance of players being able to drive their own development through displaying awareness and responsibility and these concepts were perceived to underpin effective development in a number of ways including facilitating the development of the other psychosocial skills such as the development of commitment and discipline required for hard work. The significance of these psychosocial skills to progress to the highest level in football is consistent with the findings from prior research in elite youth football (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2012). Players were found to vary significantly in their ability to demonstrate these skills which had important consequences for their development, for example, those players who lacked the awareness or agency to take responsibility for approaching coaches for feedback were often unclear about their progress.

Despite recognising their importance, the development of psychosocial skills was not given the same priority as player's football development, this discrepancy between the perceived importance of the required psychosocial skills and the proactive development of skills is again in line with prior research (Cook et al., 2014; Larsen et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2012). This was found to be due to environmental factors in the academy as well as less understanding of how the relevant skills may be systematically developed. Staff were somewhat aware of the gaps in the academy approach to developing psychosocial skills, but there were varying levels of understanding from staff in recognising their role in developing these skills as well as varying attitudes towards how much this was actually their responsibility. Findings emphasised the need for more to be done at the environmental level to help players develop the skills needed to transcend the challenges that elite academy football presents. A number of environmental factors found to impact player psychosocial development (including some of those introduced in chapter 4, e.g. limited opportunities for communication), were discussed in relation to the disconnection between how coaches and staff wanted players to display and develop the required psychosocial skills and the opportunities players were given to do so. For example, the regimented nature of the schedule and the level of directive and material support (related to the professional academy set up introduced in the last chapter) limited opportunities for players to take responsibility for their own development despite staff recognising it was important players did so. The final discussion chapter will bring the findings from this chapter together with those from chapter 4 in an empirical version of the ESF model for HFC as a framework to further analyse the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development.

## **CHAPTER 6 A HOLISTIC ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

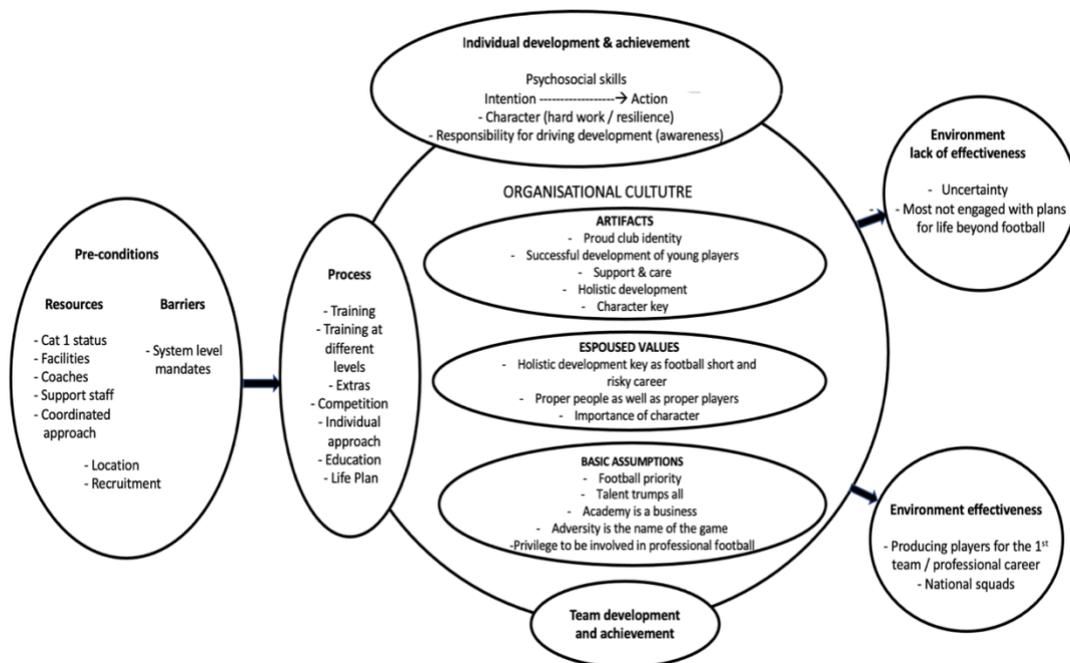
This chapter presents the ESF model for HFC and in line with the aims of the thesis uses this to structure the discussion around the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development. The first section presents and discusses the ESF model to outline how a set of factors (including the organisational culture) interact to create the ATDE's effectiveness in developing players and helping them to make a transition to the senior elite level. The second section of this chapter discusses the features of the ESF model in relation to the key focus of the thesis, the development of psychosocial skills. An intention action gap is conceptualised based on the finding that although the importance of psychosocial skills was acknowledged in the environment, psychosocial development was not pursued with the same persistent conviction as the physical, technical and tactical development of players. This intention action gap is defined and examined through a HEA, drawing on the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and systems theory (Kneer & Nassehi, 1997) the dynamic processes within the academy environment and the interactions between the parts of the environment emphasise the complexity of psychosocial development (Luhmann, 2000).

### **6.1 The ESF model for Holgate FC**

The ATDE and the ESF working models together represent the holistic ecological perspective in talent development. An empirical version of the ATDE model for HFC presented in Chapter 4 offered a framework to describe the environment and provide contextualisation for the subsequent discussion chapters. An empirical version of the ESF model is presented in the first section of this chapter which advances the ATDE model with its explanatory potential. The model provides a framework which serves as a summary of the case by incorporating and structuring the factors that contribute to the ATDE's effectiveness in developing players and helping them to make a transition to the senior elite level. The models were inspired by systems theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) which examines the interactions and the role of the environment for talent development and recognises that constituent parts interact to form a whole system which is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts. This premise was fundamental for the current research which was the first to apply the holistic ecological model to an English TDE and more

specifically to an elite English football academy environment.

The empirical version of the ESF model (Figure 9) summarises the factors influencing the success of HFC as an ATDE. Presented in the model are major factors related to preconditions, process, and organisational culture of the club followed by their effects on the players' individual development, as well as the academy's effectiveness at scholarship phase. Findings suggest that the academy shared some features with successful environments in the holistic ecological research (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013), while at the same time some features differed considerably, this will be addressed in the sections that follow.



**Figure 9:** *The ESF empirical model for HFC Academy*

## Preconditions

The club's central resources in the talent development process include the category one status of the academy, the comprehensive experience of coaches, the multidisciplinary staff, the coordinated / immersive approach and the training facilities which were shared with the first

team. The location of the academy was seen as both a resource and a limitation due to its impact on recruitment. System level mandates including the age requirement of admission onto the scholarship phase were identified as barriers. As the staff were described in the ATDE model the other resources and barriers are described below;

#### *Category One Status;*

The academy had maintained category one status, the highest possible under the EPPP since July 2012. Benefits of category one status were that the academy received the maximum funding level from the FA and Premier League and increased contact time for players and coaches. In addition, this top status meant there was no travel limit rule for the academy players engaged in the full-time training model in the Youth Development Phase (U12-U16) which allowed the academy to sign players from further afield at this younger age, enabling a stronger squad to select players for the scholarship.

#### *Facilities;*

There was a significant redevelopment of the training ground in the summer of 2016 with the aim to keep the facilities in line with the best available. The players generally felt happy with the facilities, although some felt they still lagged behind some bigger clubs:

*I can't really say it's bad cause there's people out there who would like chop off an arm and a leg to be here, so, the facilities are good but compared to like (another category one academy) and like (another category one academy) there's a big gap, yeah. Big gap. (Tazly interview - scholar)*

Staff too acknowledged they were still behind bigger clubs but that the facilities were excellent:

*Wonderful facilities for a young player coming in it's very good, it might not be your (Another club) and your (Another club) ranks but it's still an outstanding facility in its own right so I think everything is here for these players to achieve, got a wonderful new dome that's less than 2 years old, a full size outside astro, the pitches on their day when they look nice and the changing room facilities, the showers, the lads don't have any reason to fail. (Jimmy interview - coach)*

In comparison to the elite club in Denmark (Larsen et al., 2013) there was closer proximity between the youth and professional departments as the facilities were shared with the 1<sup>st</sup> team, the benefit of which was acknowledged by staff. Despite the physical proximity, the youth and professional teams very much ran as two distinct departments, which is common to the soccer environment in general across Europe (Relvas et al., 2010), and similar to Larsen et al. (2013) the first team assumed the priority role. There was some informal communication with the 1<sup>st</sup> team due to the shared facilities, however there was no intentional mentoring and in this way the academy missed an opportunity to fully maximise the benefits of having role models on site to help smooth the transition (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2011).

#### *Location / recruitment*

The academy had a network of scouts that watched games and identified players from Under-7s to Under-18s on a local, national and international basis and brought them into the club for trials. This rigorous scouting programme allowed the academy to possess a blend of homegrown and overseas talent. Most of the players had been scouted from their local clubs with one boy being scouted from his Sunday league team at eight years old. Jimmy ran a grass roots club and as well as coaching, part of his role was to head up recruitment to find the next generation of players.

The academy emphasised quality (as opposed to quantity) as key for recruitment (club website). Staff spoke about how this meant that the squad was limited with numbers unlike a number of competitor academies and felt this allowed for a more personal approach to player development than at many academies. Analysis revealed that whilst this served as a contributor for player development it also acted as a barrier as it was associated with inconsistency in behavioural standards, for example as discussed in the previous chapter if a player stepped out of line their sanction may depend on whether they were needed in the squad for the next game.

The academy was located in a unique position on the boarder of a leafy suburb and a major city, this attracted a mixture of backgrounds and ethnicities. Staff identified that the number of other clubs in the city area brought competition to sign the best players:

*The system of recruitment is very competitive so you will always be cognizant of that, be thinking about how you get a competitive advantage and sometimes that then overrides a more circumspect approach to bringing in a youngster into a programme over a period of time which may suit their needs much better. (Harry interview – management staff)*

*Regardless of competition sometimes coaches have to give out certain contracts to certain kids cause there's a fear of losing them. (Jimmy interview – coach)*

In this way staff recognised the competitive system put pressure on the academy to sign talented players in a way that might compromise the needs of the individual. This was a barrier for player development and highlights that some factors which contributed to the success for the club were not always in line with success for individual players.

#### *System level mandates*

Management acknowledged that having to make a cut off decision to sign boys onto the full-time scholarship programme at such a young age was another challenge of the competitive system. This came from the structure of academy football at system level and management felt that at 16 years old not all boys were ready for such a dramatic change in their lives which created pressure on the young boys:

*I think we have this arbitrary cut off which is kind of a bit ridiculous, whereby at 16 we're making decisions on a boy....it's a pinch point for the rest of their lives, they've got GCSEs...they're right in the heart of their adolescence, you know it's a crazy time to be making those sorts of decisions and also it's a challenging time to create a lot of change in their lives, which is what we are doing... maybe if the timelines were a bit more malleable to the needs of the individual, it might allow for more positive experience or less moments of unnecessary pressure. (Paul interview - management staff)*

The system level pressure discussed by staff suggested that the academy had adopted a 'if you can't beat them join them' approach and one member of the management team acknowledged that the system of academy environment was a bubble that was difficult to step out of:

*Sometimes we are conditioned into a way of working and we don't step outside that bubble... I'm going to say something which wouldn't be popular amongst colleagues, I think there's almost like a...an industry conditioning approach, so take a very small example like lunch...meal times, very rare to see staff sitting with players, we've sort of become conditioned by that, why would you not? And I think that's an example where it's learned behaviours that we just believe are a part of the boundaries for successful relationships and I just think that's garbage isn't it? (Harry interview – management staff)*

In this way the wider English football academy system (macroenvironment) impacted working practice as well as recruitment in the club. This system level pressure again contributed to the mixed outcomes of the environment and highlights a difference between success for the club and what may be best for the individual. The impact of the macroenvironment on psychosocial development will be addressed further later in the chapter.

#### *Coordinated / immersive approach*

The club had a coordinated, immersive approach where everything was provided on site (education, training, gym, life plan, meals). A main difference from the ATDEs in the work in Scandinavia was that education was delivered in house at the academy by teachers employed by the club which allowed the players to be on-site at all times and freed up time by eliminating players travel to college. Successful environments have been shown to have a coordinated approach between sport and education (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013) and conversely a lack of understanding and communication between school and sport has been identified as a barrier for development (Henriksen et al., 2014). To an extent this coordinated approach eased the issue of trying to balance contradictory demands coming from the fields of education and elite football which prior research has shown are often nurtured and administered independently (Bourke, 2003; Gledhill & Harwood 2015; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2006). The scholarship teacher fully understood the importance of the players' football commitments, in comparison, research in environments when education is administered independently has shown some teachers focused solely on prospect's "student-identity" which caused role ambiguity for the young people. There was however a divergence in the interests of the coaching staff who

needed to develop footballers and the teaching staff who needed to deliver BTEC content. Although staff and players championed the idea that education was highly valued and integrated alongside football, football took priority. This undermined the educational messages given to players about the importance of considering options outside of football and it was observed that the majority of players were not engaged with plans for life beyond football.

## **Process**

The model demonstrates how the daily routines or processes the player engaged in impacted the environment's success, these encompassed training, training at different levels, competition, CLASS, education, Life Plan and extras.

### *Training*

Entry to the full-time scholarship phase meant intensive investment in football (Appendix G). Training at the scholarship phase consisted of approximately 6 sessions or 10 hours of training time weekly either on the grass or in the all-weather dome. Training sessions began with a warmup lead by the fitness coach, followed by a technical or tactical element and game play. Coaches would often stop sessions to provide informative feedback either on an individual or group basis and motivational feedback and positive reinforcement would be given during sessions. The goalkeepers would generally train as a group separately and combine with the rest of the squad when required for shooting practice or game play. The players also had pre-activation and strength and conditioning sessions in the gym, as well as individual and team analysis sessions which served as the main space for coach feedback on player performance.

### *Training at different levels*

The U23 squad trained on the neighbouring pitch and if extra players were needed to make up numbers players would be called across. Similarly, players could be called up to train with the first team for various reasons, which allowed players to gain familiarity and exposure to what is required at the next level. Whilst previous studies have shown that coaches from successful TDEs encouraged players to occasionally train with groups at a higher level

(Christensen et al., 2011), the lack of explicit communication around this (as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6) limited the value.

### *Competition*

Players played one game a week in the U18 Premier League South. The league consisted of a total of 12 teams. Following a poor start to the season the coaches had set a goal of finishing 4<sup>th</sup> in the league however the team finished in 9<sup>th</sup> position which disappointed both players and staff. The U18 squad was also involved in the FA Youth Cup competition and got knocked out in the third round. If selected, players went on a week-long mid-season tour to Germany. Two players were selected for the U23 tour to Hong Kong at the end of the season. In addition, a number of the boys represented their respective nations in tournaments throughout the season.

### *Individualised approach / CLASS*

There was an emphasis on learning and an individualised approach which the club looked to constantly develop through a multi-disciplinary approach to training and personal development. The academy believed that a HFC player should look to embody high levels of CLASS characteristics (Character, Learned Understanding, Ability, Speed and Success) and they were used to monitor and develop talent and make recruitment, retention and release decisions; *“how we view people you know we use CLASS, it’s something we’ve used as retention throughout the age groups, it’s something they’re judged on, one of the 5 things and you’re looking for them to have 3 of the 5”* (Dave interview). The CLASS characteristics were part of the discourse in the club, each player had an individual development plan based on the CLASS characteristics, which identified their individual strengths and areas to work on. The academy monitored each player’s progress through performance reviews with coaches as well as every 12 weeks with a Premier League representative.

### *Education*

The scholars completed a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Level 3 in Sport, a vocational qualification equivalent to 3 A levels. In addition, those who didn’t obtain above a level 4 at GCSE were required to do Maths and English GCSE lessons for an hour

each a week. There was also an option for boys to take A-levels, which three of the nine participants started but only one continued. The importance placed on player's successful completion of the BTEC appeared consistent with prevailing concerns from the wider football culture discussed in the literature review about the value of education as a means of holistic development given that a career in football is uncertain and short-lived. There was a proud narrative within the academy that it is renowned for its integrated approach to football and education. Harry explained how the club value educational attainment "*We've always had an integrated approach in my time here and I think that is a great strength and credit, I think it's evolved and we've become far more committed to extending the players to achieve their maximum as opposed to a baseline*" (Harry interview – management staff). As discussed in Chapter 4 this was complicated by the business of developing professional footballers.

Showing intelligence was often synonymous with receiving banter amongst players. Some members of staff seemed to exacerbate this:

*The 'Heart4More foundation' guest speaker asked if anyone knew the difference between a heart attack and a cardiac arrest. The 2<sup>nd</sup> year goal keeper's hand shot up, he hardly stopped for breath as he churned out the model answer. Although this impressed the speaker the boys were less impressed, a few mocked Jay. ...Tony's view was "he can't keep a bloody ball out from between the net though can he".*

(Observation data)

Research has suggested the issue of trying to balance contradictory demands coming from the fields of education and elite sport is often exacerbated as the development of the on-field footballer and the development of the off-field footballer are nurtured and administered independently (Bourke, 2003; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2006). Whilst the academy had a coordinated, immersive approach as everything was administered on site, the main proprietor for the boys off-field development appeared to have an interest in their on-field performance, this threatened to undermine the clear verbal messages around the importance of having education to fall back on due to the short-term nature of professional football.

## *Life Plan*

Regular Life Plan sessions were delivered over the course of the season often in the form of a workshop every two weeks. The Life Plan programme (Appendix H) was structured into six life pillars (housing, personal status, transport, education, social development and professional status) covering a variety of topics that the academy deemed pertinent to development and wellbeing including the compulsory workshops provided by the Premier League. As an example, the aim of the social development pillar was to *“develop well rounded individuals that positively engage with society, appreciate their immediate opportunity and avoid pitfalls presented by the modern digital world. This pillar contains education regarding social media and several experiences aimed at developing communication skills, humility and citizenship”* (HFC Life Plan document). A number of sessions were run on this pillar including a sexting talk and an annual event where the scholars play a game against the clubs Down’s syndrome football team.

## *Extras*

‘Extras’ was recognised by staff and players as any extra work players did on top of the scheduled programme which contributed towards becoming a better footballer. Extras included additional gym work as well as extra on pitch work such as shooting practice. Five out of the nine players did regular extras, a number of these players spoke about the need for extra gym work to improve their physicality given U23 and first team football was increasingly physical, and working on their individual development points such as upper body strength or prior injuries. Extras were carried out during free time in the daily schedule and a group would stay behind at the end of the day to do their extras.

## **Cultural Paradigm**

The ESF model (Henriksen et al., 2011) demonstrates how the environment’s preconditions and processes are the basis of the model and can support but do not guarantee success as the organisational culture is critical in integrating the interactions between these different elements. A number of the preconditions and processes discussed above served both as contributors and barriers to individual player development, highlighting the complexity of the pre-conditions and processes within the academy. The financial and material pre-conditions

allowed for top class training facilities and an integrated environment which simulated the set-up of players at the highest level, this reinforced the message that the players were stepping up to become professional footballers. Whilst these resources were perceived to help to prepare scholars for life in the first team they were limited due to the incoherence in the organisational culture highlighting that favourable resources alone are insufficient for developmental success and may even have a detrimental effect if not integrated into a coherent culture.

### *Cultural artifacts*

A combination of artifacts gave an impression of how the academy environment understood itself in relation to five main themes; a proud club identity, successful development of young players, a supportive and caring culture, holistic development and the importance of character;

*HFC's history is full of youngsters who rose through the ranks to play significant roles in the First Team. It's a philosophy which the current academy is proudly carrying on today, with 30 players – and counting – having made their senior debuts since the start of the 2011/12 season. (Club website)*

The pride for bringing players through the academy to first team was physically manifested through various artifacts throughout the training ground; a large wooden plaque displayed outside the classroom door listed players who had come through the academy with the date of their first team debut. Staff and players regularly referenced those success stories as examples. Artifacts throughout the club made a statement about the proud history of the success of the club and the status of the level of the club in the world of football, including large images of club legends, club squad photos as well as trophies in the halls, classrooms, cafeteria, and gym. A collective identity of belonging to and being part of HFC was continuously reinforced, the club badge was displayed throughout the training ground, on the wall of each room and the décor throughout was consistent with the club colours and kit. There was a discourse around taking pride in being a HFC player.

Alongside this there were visible tokens of the culture that emphasised that the academy perceived itself as a supportive and caring culture. This message was made clear on the main academy website page and regularly acknowledged by staff. The narrative that the academy

were committed to holistic development and producing ‘*proper people as well as proper players*’ was observed in artifacts such as an online newspaper article with the head of the academy and manifested in the Life Plan programme (Appendix H) as well as continued in house education. Finally, artifacts demonstrated the importance the academy placed on character. “*Character is a very big facet in terms of what the academy recruitment department look for*” (Club website). The idea that the right character is necessary for a player to make it to the professional level was reinforced as a story within the academy environment.

Whilst these artifacts give insight into how the academy creates and maintains its culture some inconsistencies between what was claimed and what was observed were evident and further insight into the explicit meaning of artifacts was needed to ascertain what was “really going on” (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018).

### *Espoused values*

Analysis identified that whilst the academy had a number of values, there were three key espoused values that were communicated and shared through interactions in the environment (*holistic development key as football is a short and risky career; producing proper people as well as proper players; the importance of players showing the right character*). Research has suggested that espoused values may or may not reflect the beliefs of followers (e.g. players) (Schein, 1990) and the current study found that the espoused values whilst consistent amongst staff were not reflected consistently amongst players. For example, holistic development was observed to be addressed in the academy primarily through the Life Plan and education and some players understood the messages around the importance of off-field development, the majority were not engaged with plans for life beyond football as football was their overriding priority.

In addition to the espoused values, the academy had several values frameworks (5Ps, 3H’s, staff values) which as discussed in the previous chapter were associated with inconsistency in behavioural standards and discipline. Whilst the club advocated a number of idealistic values they felt linked to developing strong, positive on and off-field characteristics, staff recognised the gaps in these being lived out:

*Core values are a cool topic right now... but the words are the easy bit..you should be able to come into an environment and almost guess their values....but yeah we feel if you've picked the words, the rest take care of itself.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

The various values frameworks meant it was hard to determine what the core values were and they were not clearly linked to behaviours which, as recognised by Gavin, meant they were not visible in behaviours around the academy. For example whilst professionalism was a value (as part of the 5P's framework), there was a discrepancy between some players knowing professionalism was important and displaying professional behaviours. This was problematic for player development given clearly defined core values, expectations and behavioural standards are central to a strong and coherent organisational culture and linked to the success of an ATDE (Larsen et al., 2013). For example, the track and field club in the early work of Henriksen et al. (2010) publicly displayed the club values in mission statements but they were equally visible in the daily practices. As highlighted throughout the findings chapters there were a number of discrepancies in the current study which led to mixed messages and uncertainty for players. These discrepancies will now be addressed in relation to the deepest level of organisational culture, the basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990).

### *Basic assumptions*

Five interconnected basic assumptions formed the core of the organisational culture, guiding the thoughts and actions of the academy members (Henriksen et al., 2011). Whilst each assumption was complex, they all related to the central aim of the academy, to prepare the boys to be professional footballers; *“Our aim as an academy is to produce players to play First Team football for the Club. Failing that, we hope that they are able to fulfil their potential and have a career in football”* (Club website). An emphasis on the club's success and practices associated with obtaining this aim took on a decisive role and created a fundamental tension between the individual and academy success. Analysis revealed incongruence in the organisational culture of the academy. Competing environmental demands between the assumption that *the academy is a business* and what might be best for players in terms of holistic development (e.g. the push to encourage players to consider life after football) were associated with inconsistent messages for players. For example, the verbal messages around the importance of considering life beyond football in line with the

espoused value that football is a short and risky career were overridden by the basic assumption that football is the priority. This assumption had embedded itself into the minds of the majority of players in that football was ‘the template and epicentre of their life’ (McGillivray, Fearn & McIntosh, 2005, p. 106), for example two players had dropped their A-levels as they didn’t want to work at home, although they consistently did extras illustrating a willingness to do extra work to achieve the central goal of becoming a professional footballer. Inconsistent sanctions and players being able to get away with things if they were needed for match day were other examples of the assumption that football is the priority.

The assumption that *talent trumps all* impacted the scholarship recruitment policy, a number of staff spoke about how this undermined the expectations for players to show the right character:

*Recruiting purely on talent, like we’ll get rid of hardworking people and then question where the hardworking people are... And we’ll say because they were 1% worse footballing wise than him...we got rid of him erm and it’s difficult because ultimately, you’re trying to produce footballers.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

Two of the underlying assumptions were consistent across all levels of culture. The assumption that *adversity is the name of the game*, was illustrated by recognition from staff that professional football is unforgiving, and players needed to experience challenges in the academy to prepare them for the harsh realities of the professional game. Similarly, the assumption that it was a *privilege to be involved in professional football* was consistent across levels of culture, for example the artifacts around the proud club identity and value of pride, and as illustrated previously both staff and players rationalised the sacrifice required by academy life with the belief they were privileged to be involved in professional football. This finding is consistent with prior research in elite football (Cook et al., 2014; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006) which suggests that the narrative that it is a privilege to be involved in professional football may come from the wider English football culture. Buying into this dream may be necessary to keep both the players and staff motivated in a demanding environment where only a few achieve success.

Research from a HEA has discussed how a group’s organisational culture is central to the ESF model and serves as a foundation for understanding successful environments (Henriksen

et al., 2011). A strong and coherent organisation culture is a central factor in explaining the success of TDEs from a HEA, this is demonstrated by consistency between the artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). The picture in this case was clearly complex, whilst there was coherence between some levels of culture, this was not consistent across all levels. As such what people ‘said they did’ and what they ‘actually did’ corresponded ‘sometimes’ and to ‘some an extent’ rather than consistently which lead to uncertainty and confusion for players. The lack of clarity around values manifested in a lack of consistent expectations and lived behaviours which had a number of consequences for player development. For example whilst hard work was a value (as part of the 3H’s framework) and the narrative that the ability to work hard was required to reach the highest level in football was embedded into the culture of the academy, there was a discrepancy between some players knowing hard work was important and actively and consistently working hard. This proved a confusing space for many players as illustrated in the previous chapter, undesirable behaviours and significant differences in the level of conforming dedication were observed and players spoke about how this brought down the level of the group. Research shows the positive impact clear objectives alongside unambiguous reward and reinforcement contingencies have on behaviour (Siedentop, 1978), especially when the impact of perceptions and intentions on motivation are taken into account (Martindale et al., 2005). Espoused and enacted values were inconsistent which impacted stability and clarity for players. The findings demonstrate that artifacts and espoused values allow for some surface level insight into the academy culture however a deeper look into the core of the organisational culture, the basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990) was needed to establish what was “really going on” (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). This allowed competing environmental demands between individual holistic development and the club’s core marker of success (to produce players) to emerge and demonstrate incongruence in the organisational culture of the academy.

### **Individual Development and Achievement / Development of psychosocial skills**

The ESF model for HFC recognises that a number of dynamic psychosocial skills interacted to impact the process and outcomes of engaging with the environment and that psychosocial development is a process which is influenced by a number of environmental factors. Findings in relation to the perceived importance of psychosocial skills were consistent with a number of assumptions derived from prior research on talent development in elite football. For

example, an individual's psychological characteristics were deemed essential to cope with the various challenges encountered (e.g. de-selection, training with first team) given the inherently challenging nature of elite football (Mills et al., 2012). Character was the central concept used in the academy to represent a number of psychosocial characteristics and those which were explicitly talked about were similar to those discussed in Holt and Dunn's (2004) original model of player development (e.g. commitment, discipline and resilience). Awareness (Mills et al., 2012) and the ability to take responsibility for development emerged as fundamental facilitators to drive effective development. To illustrate, players needed to be aware of the importance of using analysis time to reflect on their game, the ability to identify areas to work on and take responsibility to seek support with this process from the analyst if needed. Consistent with prior research, the findings demonstrate the cumbersome nature of the psychosocial factors, an overlap between factors (e.g. Holt & Mitchell, 2006) and that factors 'work together' to impact development (Mills et al., 2012).

Despite these areas of congruence with prior psychosocial research (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills et al., 2012), unique insights into understanding of the scholarship phase in elite academy football were offered in relation to the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development from a HEA. Players' psychosocial development was impacted by all elements of the academy environment. Some aspects served to create a space where young players could develop their football skills as well as their broader psychosocial development, however there were also a number of aspects of the environment which inhibited successful psychosocial development.

Whilst the importance of psychosocial development was actively acknowledged and part of the discourse in the environment and some processes such as goal setting were in place, psychosocial development was not pursued with the same persistent conviction as the physical, technical and tactical development of players. Drawing on systems theory (Kneer & Nassehi, 1997), findings demonstrate that psychosocial development in the academy was limited or shaped by constraints (boundaries that constrain the interactions of system components). The organisational culture of the club and wider football specific culture meant that players often had to learn psychosocial skills informally and this resulted in great variance among the players.

Findings suggest that psychosocial and environmental factors were intertwined and related to player-level behavioural factors (Gledhill et al., 2017). For example, the ability to adapt to

the challenges players encountered in scholarship life reflected individual differences in personal qualities (e.g. maturity) as well as the ability to use social resources more often and more flexibly. As illustrated in the previous chapter, some players were able to engage in coping behaviours when they faced challenges such as not being selected for the team and worked harder to regain their place, others were less able to engage in coping behaviours and motivationally maladaptive behaviour such as reduced effort or lack of emotional control became evident both on and off the pitch. This finding supports research (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006) that highlights the importance of players' ability to perceive and use available sources of social support, however it extends previous work in elite football and provides clarity by capturing players' perceptions around aspects of the environment which impacted this. For example, the majority of players felt they were unable to approach coaches to discuss selection, this was associated with and a perceived lack of coach approachability. This is important given that developing resilience to cope with adversity is a dynamic process that operates over time, impacted by personal qualities that occur in the context of person-environment interactions (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

### **Team Development and Achievement**

Characteristics related to team development and achievements included weekly team analysis, tactical knowledge and aspects of training that were split into positional units. The scholarship programme however was primarily focused on individual development and team development didn't emerge as strongly in the data. When asked about the club's priorities in terms of individual development versus team development during the scholarship stage one coach acknowledged this:

*We've built the programme round about individual development, so you're not really putting a team plan in place as well because you're working towards all your individual plans. We think we might have just gone slightly too far that way as it's all about them and then none of them is about being in a team....Listen we will always be about the individual and quite rightly but we do feel that results might have been effected...results haven't been good enough this year..and it's not all about results you know you talk about development, but the one thing I will tell ya, you develop a lot more players in a winning team than you do a losing team and that historically has been proven, always has been the case. (Dave interview – coaching staff)*

Dave felt that the emphasis on individual development was problematic and stated that the team were considering a new approach that would provide each player with a team plan as well as an individual plan.

A number of players similarly felt that their individual progress and performance mattered more than the team's achievements:

*I feel like when we lose or we win or we draw, as long as I've played well I don't really care, cause at the end of the day, especially the way I want to go, people are looking at me, scouts are looking at me and not the team. (Tazly scholar – focus group)*

*Play for yourself...it's a team game but it's you at the end of the day, that's going to make it or not, out of your team only one could make it and that could be you so basically just always prove yourself. (Smithy interview – scholar)*

In this way players recognised the need to stand out from their peers as they fight for the limited squad places and contracts (Taylor & Bruner, 2012). In line with the work of Larsen et al. (2013) team development and achievements have been included as part of the ESF empirical model, however, given the academy's overall aim of developing individual youth players for the first team and subsequent focus on individual development, this element of the model did not develop in the data and is not discussed any further.

### **Environment Effectiveness**

Successful ATDEs in sport are teams or clubs that manage continually to produce senior elite athletes from among their juniors (Larsen et al., 2013). The academy under study had a reputation as one of the best academies for producing young footballers and offering a well-trodden route from academy to first team, in comparison to other academies (Telegraph, 2017). In the prior season, four academy graduates were given their debuts. In the season of study, a number of the boys represented their respective nations across their various age groups. Although the environment is considered successful in relation to football progression, there were several constraints involved in psychosocial development in the academy. The need to consider success beyond on pitch development is paramount given the precarious nature of elite academy football.

## **6.2 Impact of the environment on players' psychosocial development**

*Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that* (Bill Shankly)

The findings of Chapter 5 highlighted a disconnect between the perceived importance of psychosocial factors and their systematic application (Mills et al., 2012). A number of cultural factors introduced in the ESF model above were found to impact the gap encompassing both the macroenvironment (English football culture, SP field) and microenvironment (organisational culture). Whilst there was agreement that psychosocial skills were important for progressing in the game, intentions regarding how these may be systematically applied and developed together with tangible and well-defined relating behaviours were not clear and consistent. Analysis identified that the relationship between intentions and action in the academy was complex. Examining intentions allows for an understanding of the antecedents of overt behaviour (Greaser, 1992). Intentions in relation to psychosocial development were primarily imposed by the macroenvironment (EPPP), however this was at a broad level and the resulting ambiguity meant intentions were fragmented amongst staff. For example, some staff failed to acknowledge that psychosocial development was part of their responsibility and felt it was primarily down to others or the player to be able to show character. Data found that observed activities specifically focused on psychosocial development (e.g. reinforcing messages, life plan experiences, making demands of players) were not always viewed as valuable by the scholars.

Overall, the key constraint to success in regard to psychosocial development was found to be an intention-action gap. The intention-action gap is defined as a disparity between the successful psychosocial development of players' aligned with the academies awareness of the importance of psychosocial development and the EPPP requirements and their approach to embedding and prioritising this. The intention-action gap in this environment was characterised by two main themes (competing academy priorities and a lack of understanding around psychosocial skill development) which encompassed both micro and macrolevel influences. These will be the focus of the final section of this chapter.

## **6.2.1 Competing organisational priorities**

The understandings of espoused values and basic assumptions developed in the last section were used to help to explain how inconsistencies within the organisational culture were a main constraint impacting psychosocial development within the academy environment. Competing organisational priorities were central to this discrepancy. Two key sub-themes emerged in relation to competing organisational priorities; football first and the clarity contradiction. These were exacerbated by a third sub-theme; pressure from the outside; the English football culture.

### ***6.2.1.1 Football first***

The espoused holistic approach to player development was inhibited by the imperative to produce players. On- field performance had the most present psychological relevance to the players and the majority were not engaged with plans for life beyond football and the life plan activities had little meaning for them. Similarly, although education was included in the daily routine of academy life, only a few players expressed that they valued educational pursuits. This reflected the views of the coaches who clearly prioritised on field development. Psychosocial skill development was limited even in relation to developing as a footballer. Subsequently, a range of important developmental tools which could have facilitated holistic development and development as a footballer were underused at the club. As Mills et al. (2014a) suggested an athlete-centred approach where performance excellence co-exists in the same environment as personal excellence is a powerful approach to inspire young players to learn and take more responsibility for their own development. This would require an integrated and multi-level approach across the academy and English academy football to ensure all staff felt secure that producing players is not the sole outcome measure as crucially holistic development and performance can co-exist. Rather than viewing the support of holistic development as a potential sacrifice towards the pursuit for performance, there is a need for it to be valued as a factor that contributes to sporting success (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2014; Larsen et al., 2013).

### ***6.2.1.2 The clarity contradiction***

Another way in which competing priorities were evidenced was through a lack of communication between players and coaches, particularly around players' progress and expectations about a player's future. This represented a tension between what staff felt best for the club versus what was best for individual player's holistic development and meant not all players were cognizant with how well they were doing, their performance goals, and psychosocial skill development. Players were left to interpret coaches' actions on their own which sometimes led to confusion, misunderstandings and disappointment. This occurred in relation to training up, being treated as professionals and the lack of direct communication between individual players and coaches.

Staff recognised that the messages to players around selection and progress needed to be clearer, however, they felt inhibited by a fear of diminishing the players' motivation through making the reality clearer. This was illustrated by a player who had been training with the 23s during preseason and interpreted this as a positive sign about his performance. The coach revealed in an interview that he felt the player was not currently good enough to make it into the 18s team. Another player spoke about pushing for a first team debut by the end of the season although he had hardly trained with the first team. While players tended to interpret training up as a positive, coaches moved players into higher age groups for a range of reasons including the need to fill a particular position.

The holistic ecological research has shown successful TDEs exhibit strong communication and cooperation, centered around an open culture demonstrated by coaches regularly sharing knowledge with players about development plans, poor or good performances and lack of development. For example, Larsen et al. (2013) found that club coaches had daily informal talks with prospects and their office door was literally always open. While coaches in this study recognised that players needed to have a realistic assessment of their ability to advance, this seldom happened. Formal one-to-one discussions with coaches hardly ever occurred and players felt reticent to initiate meetings. The lack of openness and resulting mixed messages around progress in the current study appeared to distort some players' awareness and meant they did not necessarily share understandings about their progress with staff.

Similarly, the many ways the environment simulated the set-up of the first team support (e.g. first rate facilities and abundant support from staff) in line with the priority to prepare players

for the first team reinforced the message that the players were stepping up to become professional footballers. Some players interpreted this as having ‘made it’ and were perceived to reduce their effort and work rate, highlighting a drop in motivation with the external rewards that financial resources allowed. This suggests preconditions that have the potential to be valuable resources (e.g. top class facilities and support) were limited due to the incoherence in the organisational culture arising from the mixed messages. In these ways, a lack of clear and open communication related to the conflicting priorities of staff was a key factor impacting the organisational culture and subsequently the disparity between wanting players to display psychosocial skills and having the environment set up to intentionally and actively prioritise player’s developing these skills.

### ***6.2.1.3 Pressure from the outside; The English football culture***

Whilst academy staff recognised that the boys got treated as professional footballers too early, they acknowledged a common norm from the wider system of English academy football around the value of securing young prospects. In this way the young players in the English academy system may have it ‘too good’ and rather than needing to develop the ability to take responsibility and initiative, many had become “guests in their own development” (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016, p. 173). As discussed, the level of support in the academy replicated the set-up of the first team which was in line with the club’s priority to prepare players. This was found to limit players developing the ability to take responsibility for their own development and conflicted with staff’s assertion that this was something that players should do. In contrast, the successful Scandinavian environments had limited resources which meant young athletes had to develop autonomy which became integrated into the group culture as a value (Henriksen et al., 2014). Staff in the current study acknowledged that system level pressure also led the club to give out favourable professional contracts to retain players prematurely. As discussed, this led to confusion for some players around where they were in their career and impacted motivation and self-awareness. This differs to the findings in Scandinavia (Henriksen et al., 2013) in which the young prospects did not earn money for their sport and instead “learned to acknowledge that there are no short cuts, only hard training; no money, only sacrifices for the sport; and never enough time, only efficiency and discipline” (Henriksen et al., 2011, p. 356). The constraints from the wider football culture and the subsequent confusion for players again points to the need for clearer communication around player progress.

In addition, there were constraints within the wider English football culture that limited the SPP's role and working practices and prevented the SPP from being able to make an impact at the environmental level. This represented a paradox as, as discussed throughout there is a need for SPPs to work at an environmental level to shape cultural change and embed psychosocial development into an academy's culture but this in itself was limited by the football culture. The SPP acknowledged the constraints to making an impact at environmental level;

*I think you'd have to overhaul so much that actually it becomes really easy in this environment just to slot yourself in, come in, collect your wage, help those that you can, but also just accept that you can't change something too much, and just fall into line with that. (Gavin interview – support staff)*

English professional football is traditionally known for a hierarchical structure, in particular for the power the manager / coach holds over players (Champ, 2018; Roderick, 2006). A power hierarchy was observed in the academy and posed challenges to the psychosocial development of academy players. There was a reluctance for players to speak to coaches directly and players reported that coaches lacked approachability, in part due to their power to make influential decisions regarding selection and their future (Nesti, 2010). Coaches held power not only over players but other staff also. Some support staff felt they were unable to fully express their opinions to those in positions of power, for example a number of support staff, including a SPP, highlighted ways in which they felt players' psychosocial development could be better addressed, however they felt were not in a position within the academy to influence this. A key example of this is the SPP acknowledging the constraints to making an impact at environmental level. As stated earlier, holistic ecological research has shown that strong communication and openness are key for successful TDEs and the wider English football hierarchy hindered this.

## **6.2.2 Limited understanding of the implementation of sport psychology**

Another main element that impacted the intention-action gap and thus the psychosocial development within the academy was a difference between the awareness that psychosocial development was important and a lack of consistent understanding as to how SP may best be implemented within the academy; understanding was found to be lagging behind the

awareness. For example, some staff acknowledged it was crucial players were put through challenges to develop their resilience, but they were not consistently aware about how this may best be implemented and the role that support played in this process. In addition, staff recognised it was important that players took ownership for their own development but were unclear as to how this may look in an environment where excessive support was provided to prepare players for the first team football. This suggests a need for academy management and staff (including SPPs) to be educated about the importance of embedding psychosocial development into an academy's culture, every staff member's role in the psychological development process and the potential for SPPs to work to optimise the environment for psychosocial development (Champ et al., 2020a). The finding that a lack of understanding may contribute to the disconnect between the perceived importance of the psychosocial development and its systematic application within an academy environment is in line with prior work in elite youth football (Cook et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2012) in which coaches reported a relative lack of knowledge about effectively nurturing psychological development in players. The current findings suggest the wider English football culture contributed to this lack of knowledge within the academy. At a macrolevel there was a lack of clear guidance from the FA and the EPPP in relation to the implementation of SP, including the importance of it being embedded at an environmental level. Academy management recognised that whilst they felt like they needed a full time SPP they were still trying to work out what this looked like for the academy as they were aware there were different experts in different fields (neuroscience, clinical psychology etc.) and they were still trying to determine what may be best for the academy. This supports Champ's (2020a) assertion that the SP section of the EPPP does not consider some of the significant psychological challenges that scholars meet especially at an environmental and organisational level and suggests that there continues to be a need for more specific guidelines in relation to the delivery of SP within the EPPP framework.

### **6.3 Summary**

The empirical version of the ESF model for HFC presents a framework to outline the preconditions, process, and organisational culture of the club and how these factors interacted to influence the success of HFC as an ATDE. This was used as a foundation to structure a discussion around the interaction between the TDE and player psychosocial development.

Findings revealed a disparity between the successful psychosocial development of players' aligned with the academy's awareness of the importance of psychosocial development and the EPPP requirements and their approach to embedding and prioritising this. This intention-action gap was characterised by competing academy priorities and a lack of understanding around psychosocial skill development. The competing demands between individual holistic development and the club's priority to produce players demonstrated incongruence in the organisational culture which impacted the meaning players attributed to off-pitch development. Alongside this, a lack of clear and open communication was a key factor impacting the organisational culture and the intention action gap, this represented by a tension between what staff felt best for the club versus what was best for individual player's holistic development and meant not all players were cognizant with their progress.

At the level of the macroenvironment the wider English youth football culture, including system level pressure to recruit players at a young age and the professional set up of youth academies, exacerbated the clubs competing priorities. This led to uncertainty and confusion for some players around where they were in their career and impacted motivation and self-awareness. There was a lack of consistent and shared understanding as to how SP may best be implemented within the academy, at a macrolevel there was a lack of clear guidance from the EPPP in relation to the implementation of SP, including the importance of it being embedded at an environmental level. In these ways, the ESF model for HFC has recognised that psychosocial development is a complex process which was influenced by a number of environmental factors, this has a number of applied implications which will be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to develop the current literature base with regard to the HEA to talent development, the role of the environment in psychosocial development in elite football and the holistic player academy experience. Given the complexity of the research this chapter is intended to provide a succinct answer to the important question, “So what?”. To answer this, first the key findings from the three discussion chapters are summarised and discussed in relation to the ways in which they extend current knowledge. The applied implications and opportunities for future practice are examined. The chapter concludes by considering the research limitations alongside recommendations for future research.

### 7.1 Extending understanding

This study aimed to examine how an in-depth understanding of one environment, HFC Academy, gained through the HEA, may help to extend understanding of the psychosocial needs and development of elite youth footballers and how environmental factors impacted this. Three interrelated objectives were outlined in Chapter 1 to address this aim:

- (i) investigate an elite football academy TDE to provide a holistic description of the elite academy environment and create an empirical ATDE model for HFC
- (ii) evaluate the player’s holistic psychosocial needs and development during the first year of the full-time academy scholarship phase
- (iii) create an empirical ESF model for HFC to use as a framework to critically analyse the interplay between the talent development environment factors (including the organisational culture) and player psychosocial development.

The first research objective was addressed in chapter four which provided a holistic description of the elite academy environment and the empirical version of the ATDE model for HFC which allowed for an understanding of the structure of the environment and the role of the components and relations at both micro and macro levels. An in-depth evaluation of the microenvironment identified and examined the features of the environment that were particularly influential in shaping players’ experiences within the academy, this included the challenges and opportunities the young boys faced in stepping up to the scholarship phase

which encompassed older boys and a bigger squad; playing up with the 23s and first team; the move onto a full-time programme; and an increase in expectations both on and off the pitch. A paradox of professionalism emerged as whilst a number of elements of the environment reinforced the message that the players were stepping up to become professional footballers, this was a grey area as players were not yet deemed professionals. This proved a confusing space for many players, in part, due to mixed messages around ‘making it’. Staff were aware that football is a short and risky career and many players did not make it past the scholarship stage. There were attempts to communicate educational messages to players about the importance of exploring and developing options outside of football, primarily through an extensive life plan curriculum and in house education, however this was overridden by the day to day message lived out in the academy and the basic assumption that the main priority of the academy was to develop professional footballers. As such, the majority of players were not engaged with plans for life beyond football as football was their overriding priority. A lack of communication was a key factor shaping players’ experiences within the academy, in relation to uncertainty around progress.

The need for players to develop and display psychosocial skills to help them to deal with these challenges and progress in professional football was highlighted. This was further evaluated to address objective 2 in Chapter 5, which analysed the key psychosocial skills deemed necessary for success in the academy as well as how the academy environment impacted the development of these skills. Players were expected to show the right character and drive their own development which was represented by hard work, resilience, responsibility and awareness. Despite recognising their importance, the development of psychosocial skills was not given the same priority as player’s technical, tactical and physical development. The final discussion chapter brought these findings together and addressed the final research objective by presenting an empirical version of the ESF model for HFC as a framework to further analyse the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development. Exploring player psychosocial development through the HEA has established new understandings which extend prior research in a number of ways discussed in the section that follows.

### **7.1.1 Applying the models to an English ATDE**

This work was the first to apply the HEA to an English TDE. The approach provided a valuable framework to assess the academy and emphasise the central role of the environment in player psychosocial development in an English ATDE. After examining the specific academy environment at HFC, empirical versions of the ATDE and ESF models were developed to capture and evaluate the unique features of the environment under study.

Findings suggest that the academy shared some features with successful environments in the holistic ecological research in Scandinavia (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013), while at the same time some features differed considerably. Rather than an exhaustive examination and comparison of each of the previously identified features of success, the ESF model was discussed in relation to those relevant to the main focus of the thesis, the development of psychosocial skills. In line with the HEA, the organisational culture served as a foundation for understanding the environment. Work from a HEA to date (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013) has found that a strong and coherent organisation culture, demonstrated by consistency between the artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions is a central factor in explaining the success of a TDE. Whilst there was coherence between some levels of culture at HFC, analysis of the deepest level of organisational culture, the basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990) revealed competing environmental demands between individual holistic development and the club's core marker of success (to produce players) and thus incongruence in the organisational culture of the academy. This was associated with a lack of consistent expectations and lived behaviours which had a number of consequences for player development including uncertainty and confusion. The organisational culture was critical in integrating the interactions between the environment's preconditions and processes. Material and financial resources allowed for top class training facilities and an integrated environment which simulated the set-up of players at the highest level, these resources alongside academy processes such as opportunities to train up with the 23s and 1<sup>st</sup> team were perceived to help to prepare scholars for life in the first team. The incongruence in the organisational culture however, was found to limit the extent to which these preconditions and processes were able to support individual player development and even had detrimental effects due to a lack of clarity and stability for some players.

In this way despite HFC being considered successful in terms of bringing players through the academy, the organisational culture was found to be a constraint of the microenvironment that impacted psychosocial development within the academy. Prior HEA research has emphasised that a strong and coherent organisation culture is a central factor in explaining the success of a TDE, this finding challenges the definition of a successful environment. Studies from a HEA approach to date have defined successful TDEs as those teams or clubs that manage to effectively develop their young athletes to make a successful transition to the senior elite level. Whilst HFC was deemed successful in terms of bringing players through the academy, there were several constraints involved in players' holistic and psychosocial development and some factors which were perceived to contribute to the success for the club (producing players) were not always in line with success for individual players. The present findings suggest that categorising the effectiveness of the environment in binary terms as successful or unsuccessful may be oversimplified in this case and addressing the constraints involved in player holistic and psychosocial development could further contribute to sporting success (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2014; Larsen et al., 2013).

Applying the HEA to an English football TDE for the first time provides important insight into the way in which holistic ecological analyses of an English football TDE may be carried out. This thesis has enhanced understanding of how the approach applies outside of Scandinavia and demonstrated the importance of the national football culture. The value of holistic and psychosocial development was espoused but rarely evidenced in the environment as the focus was primarily on success in football. Cultural features within the macroenvironment of the wider English youth football culture, including system level pressure to recruit players at a young age and the professional set up of youth academies were found to impact this.

### **7.1.2 The intention-action gap**

*Compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake* (William James)

This research extends prior research in elite youth football by using the HEA to critically analyse and develop understanding of how psychosocial development was impacted by the academy environment by examining this over time from the experiences of players and staff within the environment. Findings demonstrate that psychosocial development is a complex and dynamic process, impacted by personal qualities that occur in the context of person-

environment interactions. Character was the central concept used in the academy to represent a number of psychosocial characteristics (e.g. commitment, discipline and resilience) and awareness (Mills et al., 2012) and the ability to take responsibility for development emerged as a fundamental facilitator to drive effective development. Consistent with prior research, the findings demonstrate the cumbersome nature of the psychosocial skills, an overlap between skills (e.g. Holt & Mitchell, 2006) and that skills ‘work together’ to impact development (Mills et al., 2012). For example the ability for players to take personal responsibility for their own development emerged as an underlying theme relating to hard work, specifically in relation to players engaging in extra practice and not getting influenced by friends engaging in immature behaviours.

A key finding was a disparity between the awareness of the importance of psychosocial development which was actively acknowledged and part of the discourse in the environment, and the academy approach to embedding and prioritising this. In support of prior research in elite youth football psychosocial development was inadequately addressed relative to the physical, technical and tactical aspects of performance despite the perceived importance (Cook et al., 2014; Larsen et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2012). The present research contributes to previous research by evaluating the environmental factors which inhibited successful psychosocial development and offering unique insights into our understanding of the interplay between the TDE and player psychosocial development from a HEA. Findings identified the key constraint to success in this regard was an intention-action gap which was defined and critically analysed to reveal both micro and macrolevel influences in relation to competing academy priorities and a lack of understanding around psychosocial skill development. Intentions in relation to psychosocial development were primarily imposed by the macroenvironment (EPPP), however this was at a broad level and the resulting ambiguity meant intentions were fragmented amongst staff. The exploration of the participants’ experiences enabled an in-depth understanding that observed actions towards psychosocial development (e.g. reinforcing messages, life plan experiences, making demands of players) were not always regarded to be of maximum value by the scholars. This suggests a need for an expert to increase shared understanding about the interaction between skills and how these skills can be developed. This may include education, addressing club communication practices and increasing commitment to psychosocial development. This will be addressed further in the applied implications section below.

Cultural factors introduced in the ESF model encompassing both the macroenvironment and microenvironment were found to impact the intention-action gap. As stated above, the organisational culture is central to the ESF model and served as a foundation for understanding the academy environment (Henriksen et al., 2011). Inconsistencies within the organisational culture emerged as a main constraint impacting psychosocial development in relation to competing demands between individual holistic development and the club's priority to produce players. Alongside this, a lack of clear and open communication was a key factor impacting the organisational culture and the intention action gap, this was represented by a tension between what staff felt was best for the club versus what was best for individual player's holistic development and meant not all players were cognizant of their progress or the club's plans for their future. At the level of the macroenvironment the wider English youth football culture, including system level pressure to recruit players at a young age and the professional set up of youth academies, exacerbated the club's competing priorities. This led to uncertainty and confusion for some players around where they were in their career and impacted motivation and self-awareness. Another main element that impacted the intention-action gap and thus the psychosocial development within the academy was a lack of consistent and shared understanding as to how SP may best be implemented within the academy. At a macrolevel there was a lack of clear guidance from the FA and the EPPP in relation to the implementation of SP, including the importance of it being embedded at an environmental level. This again demonstrates a need for an expert to increase shared understanding about how SP can be embedded at environmental level, this too will be discussed further in the applied implications section below. Findings highlight the complexity of HFC as an ATDE and the need for complexity in the analysis of talent development and psychosocial development. This is in line with the HEA and systems theory (Kneer & Nassehi, 1997) assumptions that the complex world does not fit a simple linear model (Luhmann, 2000), rather constituent parts interact to form a whole system which is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts.

### **7.1.3 Case Study methodology**

To the researcher's best knowledge, this case study is the first in which the researcher has been embedded within an English Category 1 academy over a prolonged period to gain insight into the TDE, specifically in relation to a player's psychosocial development. This methodology allowed for an examination of "a real-life phenomenon within its real-life

context” (Yin, 1989, p. 23), extending prior research on the impact of the TDE on psychosocial development in elite English football which to date has frequently used retrospective methods of data collection such as structured questionnaires, instruments and interviews to collect data (e.g. Mills et al., 2014a; 2014b). As a result of employing this method, it is suggested that we now have a deeper understanding of the role of the environment in psychosocial development in elite football. The prolonged period of data collection allowed for in-depth insights into the player’s and staff’s perspectives of the academy experience and their psychosocial development and captured changes that occurred in the environment over time. The length of the study and multiple methods used allowed for fluctuations and nuances that would have been overlooked if data had been collected at only one time point. The seven months between the first and second player interviews gave the researcher an opportunity to develop stronger relationships with both staff and scholars. This meant scholars who were less forthcoming in their first interviews opened up and spoke in greater depth in their second interview as trust had been established. In addition, the staff became more comfortable and reflective in interviews and informal discussions as the season progressed.

Whilst the research methodology used aligns with that recommended by the HEA; the volume of data collected from a single environment significantly exceeds that from the prior HEA research. Given a strength of the HEA as cited by Larsen et al. (2013) is that it highlights the central role of the environment as it affects a prospective athlete, the current study provides additional depth to the holistic understanding of players’ lived experiences and what it means to be a player within the academy environment. The value of the time spent in the environment meant that the researcher was able to observe the day-to-day routines across a season to gain an understanding of the deepest level of the organisational culture. Opportunities and challenges including injuries, frustrations, contracts and changes in playing up, that occurred over this time all contributed to a more in-depth analysis of the connections between the different levels of organisational culture and the connection between different aspects of the academy such as training, education and the life plan.

## **7.2 Applied recommendations**

*Vision without execution is just hallucination (Henry Ford)*

This formative body of work has a number of important applied recommendations for various groups. Firstly, the findings are important for the academy under study. Findings also have implications for SPPs working in an elite academy context as well as SP training and education pathways. Finally, recommendations are offered in relation to the wider football culture and the EPPP and as such findings are considered important for the Premier League, the FA and other key football stakeholders who consult to design and administrate the EPPP.

### **7.2.1 Recommendations for Holgate FC**

This research emphasised the complexity of psychosocial development and the importance of an awareness of the impact of environmental factors influencing the intention action gap for psychosocial development. Collectively, findings suggests that the use of mental skills training by novice SPPs is too simple to apply in complex ATDEs and advocates SPPs work at an environmental level to strengthen the environment to optimise psychosocial development. It is important that academy stakeholders are made aware of this and any potential misunderstanding is clarified so all staff are aware they have a role to play in psychosocial development and closing the gap.

Character, consisting primarily of hard work and resilience, was deemed a key CLASS characteristic for progressing to the professional level however it was given the least attention in terms of development from coaches. This was associated with the narrative that football is a tough industry with an emphasis on how players apply themselves and deal with the challenges that academy life brings. There was no direct teaching of resilience in the academy, highlighting a need for a move away from placing the responsibility for developing resilience on the individual and considering the environment which cultivates resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Opportunities to play up with the first team in the academy were a powerful chance for scholars to learn through challenge, however the academy had a haphazard approach to supporting players through this and review conversations following training up rarely took place. Exposure to the challenges such as training up should be purposeful and carefully considered; preceded by preparing athletes for the challenge, supporting them through the experience and then encouraging positive evaluation and

reflection (Collins et al., 2016). The effectiveness of resilience training depends on the breadth and depth of commitment from all stakeholders (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). A lack of communication between departments limited a shared understanding amongst staff, there is a need for staff education around the importance of a collaborative approach and a proactive design for facilitating a dynamic environment that supports the development of resilience and optimises holistic development and performance (Green et al., 2020). Clear communication is central to this process, the academy would benefit from a MDT of staff meeting regularly to ensure a shared understanding amongst staff on the resilience of each player and agreeing actions that need to be taken at system level (Green et al., 2020).

The finding that a number of environmental factors contributed to significant differences in the day to day level of dedication and effort players showed has important applied implications for the academy. Again the onus was primarily on the players to take responsibility for driving themselves which demonstrates the need for staff education around the environmental factors that impact the development of the discipline and commitment. Firstly, there is a need for more consistency in institutional standards and behavioural expectations, this would involve confirming a clear pre-agreed set of values for driving behaviour and parameters around acceptable behavioural standards. Once these are clear it is important that all staff are on board with ensuring these are promoted and lived, including consistent implementation of sanctions for non-compliance to prevent the need for on pitch production undermining the enforcement of discipline. Furthermore, other than the verbal reminders, the onus was largely on the players themselves to take responsibility to drive themselves, the academy would benefit from interventions that build levels of commitment, belief in control and enjoyment of challenge (Collins et al., 2016). This may involve targeting beliefs that ability leads to success which has been associated with boredom, negative attitudes, and a lack of enjoyment which is likely to reduce the enjoyment and sustained effort that developing athletes exert (e.g., Carpenter & Morgan, 1999). Strong and open communication is key to enable staff to attain an understanding of what may be causing a player to lack effort.

The lack of regular feedback and communication from coaches off of the pitch was also found to have consequences for player's awareness and responsibility for driving their development. The SPP could certainly play an important role in implementing a more systematic approach to reflection in the current academy and ensuring players are given

regular follow up support through the reflection process. This may involve encouraging the coach and analysts to play more of an explicit role in facilitating individual analysis sessions for those players that lacked the critical insight to be able to identify development areas, with the aim to supplement and encourage more independent learning (Wright et al., 2016). A more systematic and holistic approach to reflective thinking skills could be key in developing the resilience and work ethic needed for players to transcend the challenges that elite academy football presents.

Finally, findings suggest that creating an appropriate environment to facilitate a more autonomous approach which allows players to be behaviourally proactive participants in their own learning process (Zimmerman, 2006) is currently a challenge in the academy. More could be done at the environmental level to disrupt the regimented scholarship schedule and the level of hands-on support which limited opportunities for players to take responsibility. The SPP could play a role in educating staff on ways in which player ownership could be balanced with support to benefit the players developing these skills. As noted in Chapter 5, a directive and instructional approach that limits opportunities for players to take accountability and develop independence appears to be an issue across English football (Partington & Cushion 2013).

### **7.2.2 Wider recommendations**

Research has identified there are dominant cultural features which exist within an English football context (e.g. Champ et al., 2020a; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Mills et al., 2014a). This suggests SPPs looking to strengthen elite academy environments within other English football TDE's would benefit from the findings as a platform from which to learn as opposed to context-independent guidelines. Findings suggest that the HEA models can provide practitioners within an English football academy context with a framework to help the practitioner assess the ATDE and understand player's scholarship experiences, the challenges they are experiencing, and what is needed to optimise the environment for psychosocial development. It is recommended that if given the opportunity SP delivery within an elite academy environment includes an initial period of observation to allow the practitioner to be more attentive to the player's environment and gain an understanding of the organisational culture at the deepest level. This would then allow interventions to be structured to optimise the environment for psychological development and, in turn, performance. In line with this

recommendation, it is important that professional SP training and education routes provide a focus on working at an environmental level (including an understanding of the organisational culture) to enable SPPs to be aware of delivering support at an environmental level.

SP as a discipline also needs to take more responsibility to educate the Premier League / the FA as to what best SP practice looks like within an academy and the need for delivery at an environmental level, this can then be communicated to the clubs to help to create psychologically informed environments. A looseness in the SP field has been recognised (Anderson, 2005) and many people engaged in practice are not registered, chartered or licensed psychologists. Given there are currently several fragmented approaches to SP delivery it is perhaps unsurprising that there was uncertainty around the role of the SPP in the academy. It is important there is more clarity within the field itself.

An in depth understanding of the how environmental factors and organisational culture impact psychosocial development has been established, however findings suggests that SPPs may encounter challenges when attempting to work at an environmental level in practice. In the current study there was only one trainee SPP for the scholarship phase working in a part time capacity which represented a paradox as discussed in Chapter 6. There is a need to create a psychologically safe space to ensure all staff feel secure that producing players is not the sole outcome measure and that holistic development and performance can co-exist. This would require an integrated and multi-level approach across the academy and English academy football and suggest the importance of education and guidance from the FA and the Premier league.

### **7.3 Limitations and future directions**

The focus on a single case poses a limitation with regards to generalisability (Bowles, 2015) and the applicability of findings beyond the specific environment studied could be questioned. Alternatively, Stake (2000) proposed that to criticise a case study for its lack of generalisability is to neglect the aim of studying the case in the first place. Given the paradigmatic positioning and interpretive frame of the research a single case study was deemed an appropriate methodological choice for an in-depth exploration, interpretation, and understanding of the academy environment. In approaching the research in this way, it is accepted that the findings will not provide universal and context-independent rules and

guidelines across time and domains. It is hoped, however that the richness and depth of understanding within this specific population will enable the reader to recognise the need for an awareness of the environmental factors impacting psychosocial development in elite youth sport.

The qualitative nature and explorative design of the thesis is limited in relation to establishing rigorous causal relationships between environmental factors and psychosocial development. In line with the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and systems theory (Kneer & Nassehi, 1997) however, this is deemed an accepted consequence given the complexity of the ATDE and the assumption that the complex world does not fit a simple linear model (Luhmann, 2000) rather constituent parts interact to form a whole system which is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts.

The HEA is still a relatively new perspective in talent development research in sport and Henriksen's (2014) acknowledgment that it does not yet comprise a solid base on which to formulate a theory on the nature of successful ATDEs, still stands. Applying the HEA to an English football TDE for the first time has enhanced understanding of how the approach applies outside of Scandinavia, and provided a "good exemplar" (Flyvbjerg, 2006) within an elite English football context. It is hoped that the rich and abundant data and the detailed information provided in Chapter 3 regarding the research context, processes and participants will enable the reader to decide how the findings may transfer to other elite English football academies, this is recommended given that research has identified there are dominant features within professional football clubs that are generalisable within an English football context including an authoritarian and challenging culture (e.g. Champ et al., 2020; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Mills et al., 2014a). The present case serves as a platform for further comparisons, additional case studies from a HEA within other elite English academies are needed to supplement and expand this thesis. For example, whilst this work has demonstrated the importance of national football culture it would be useful to examine whether other English academies that are deemed successful in terms of producing first team players have similar constraints relating to psychosocial development to determine whether categorising the effectiveness of the environment in binary terms as successful or unsuccessful is oversimplified across English youth football. The work is the first to define and examine the intention-action gap, this could provide a useful concept for future research to examine in

other TDEs in which psychosocial skills are inadequately addressed both within football and in other sports.

A final limitation of the present case is that it did not include insight from senior elite players within the academy. Despite the physical proximity, the youth and professional teams very much ran as two distinct departments and there was limited access to the first team players who assumed the priority role. Future research could address this limitation by including first team players who had progressed through the scholarship phase into the first team and exploring how environmental factors impacted psychosocial development as well as identifying the psychosocial skills required for maintaining a successful elite senior career, as opposed to achieving one. This could also be achieved through a longitudinal, prospective design that followed the development of scholars over time into their professional careers. In making this recommendation, it is recognised that there is no guarantee that even a single player from a prospective scholarship group would be successful in progressing to the first team at HFC (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). Despite this, a longitudinal design could be used to illuminate the longer term consequences of players being immersed in the academy environment whether they progress within the club or are released. This was beyond the scope of the current work but is an important area for future research.

## **7.4 Final Remarks**

This research has shown that players' psychosocial development is limited by the environmental constraints of elite football. Whilst there is hope findings will make real impact to how the industry supports players' psychosocial development it cannot be overlooked that the English football culture is known to be reluctant to change (Champ et al., 2020a). If the holistic psychosocial development of young people is paramount, English football must be transformed.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Participant information sheet



College of Health and Life Sciences

Department of Life Sciences

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Study title

Organisational Culture and Athlete Psychosocial Development: A Case Study in an Elite Football Academy.

#### Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of the study is to examine the organisational culture of an elite football academy to gain an understanding of how a players' holistic psycho-social development (life skills on and off the pitch) is currently, or could be better, embedded within the academy environment. The study will involve a case study and it is anticipated that data collection will last a maximum of 12 months.

### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

The study will explore players' holistic psycho-social needs and development during the transition from the Youth Development Phase (YDP) of the academy (Under 16s) to the full-time youth training program (academy scholarship, ages 16–18).

### **Do I have to take part?**

As participation is entirely voluntary, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason, the right to withdraw at any time from the project will in no way influence or adversely affect you.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

The researcher will be carrying out participant observations of daily life in the academy environment for a maximum of 12 months. You may be asked to participate in interviews and focus groups which are anticipated to last between 1 and 2 hours per session and will usually take place at the academy. Both interviews and focus groups will be recorded using a Dictaphone.

### **What do I have to do?**

As above, you may be asked to partake in interviews and/or focus groups as part of the study. These will involve discussions around your experience in the academy to date including the academy environment and the development of psycho-social skills.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There should be no risks of taking part, however if you do find any of the interview or focus group questions uncomfortable you can choose not to answer those questions or withdraw from the interview.

### **What if something goes wrong?**

As stated above, participation in the study should not carry any risk of physical or psychological harm. However, should you have any questions or complaints about the conduct of the research please contact relevant person detailed at the end of the document.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The research data will be coded (for anonymity) and analysed by the researcher(s) before being reported and your name will not be used in any publications.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results will be used primarily for my PhD thesis and may also be published in academic and practitioner publications and reported at conferences. The anonymised research data may also be shared with other researchers for further analysis, but at no point will any uniquely identifiable data be shared. The data will be stored by the lead researcher for a period of at least five years from completion of the project (subject to any legal, ethical or other requirements of the funding body). If you take part in this research, you can obtain a copy of the publication by contacting the researcher.

### **Who is organising and funding the research?**

Brunel University is funding the research through the Isambard Scholarship.

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed by the College Research Ethics Committee.

### **Passage on the University's commitment to the UK Concordat on Research Integrity**

*Brunel University is committed to compliance with the Universities UK [Research Integrity Concordat](#). You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from our researchers during the course of their research.*

### **Contact for further information and complaints**

#### **For general information**

Dr Laura Hills, project supervisor: [laura.hills@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:laura.hills@brunel.ac.uk)

**For complaints and questions about the conduct of the Research**

Professor Christina Victor, Chair College of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics

Committee: [Christina.victor@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:Christina.victor@brunel.ac.uk)

**FC Contacts**

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] <https://thecpsu.org.uk/>

- **Subsequent to the participant information sheet and consent forms being issued the thesis title changed but the content of the research stayed the same**

## Appendix B: Player interview schedule



College of Health and Life Sciences

Department of Life Sciences

### **Player Interview Schedule 1 (November 2018)**

Thank you for participating in this study about the talent development environment and psychosocial development in an elite football academy.

#### **Football experience / breaking ice**

Can I start by asking you to tell me about your background in football?

How long have you been with the academy?

How did your opportunity at the club come about?

#### **Environment (based on the ATDE model)**

##### *Microenvironment*

Can you describe your experience in the academy to date?

Who helps you in your efforts to make it as a professional footballer?

How would you describe your relationship with the academy coaches / support staff?

What is your relationship with the first team?

How does the club interact with your parents?

What is your relationship like with peers outside of the academy?

##### *Macro environment*

How do you feel the FA / Premier league influences your scholarship experience?

#### **Environment (based on the ESF model)**

Do you think the academy is a successful talent development environment?

What tells you that it is / isn't successful?

What do you feel is the most important aspect of the academy experience?

Are there any aspects of the academy that you think could be improved?

### *Preconditions*

What do you think of the facilities available here?

### *Process*

Please describe your daily life on the scholarship...

How do you find the balance between training / education / life plan activities?

### *Org culture*

What does being part of the academy mean to you?

Does the academy have any specific traditions?

What attitudes or values are appreciated in this environment?

### *Individual development*

Do you feel supported by the club with your overall development both inside and outside of football?

What have you learnt from your academy experience so far?

### **Psychosocial development**

Which psychosocial skills do you think are important to make it as a professional footballer? (why?)

Which psychosocial skills do you think are important for life outside of football? (why?)

How do you think the academy helps you to develop these skills?

How could the academy do more to develop these skills?

### **Football Career / Transition**

What challenges do you expect to face going into the Scholarship phase?

What factors influenced your decision to take up the offer of the Scholarship? Did you consider any other clubs?

What do you think are the main barriers which will prevent you becoming a professional footballer?

If you could give others just starting out in a football academy advice to help deal with the academy experience, what would it be?

Is there anything further you would like to add about your experience?

## Appendix C: Staff interview schedule



College of Health and Life Sciences

Department of Life Sciences

### **Coach/Staff Interview Schedule**

Thank you for participating in this study about the talent development environment and psychosocial development in an elite football academy.

#### **Football experience / breaking ice**

Can I start by asking about your background in football / coaching?

How long have you been working with the academy?

Can you tell me a bit about your role in the academy?

#### **Environment (based on the ATDE model)**

##### *Microenvironment*

How would you describe your relationship with the other coaches in the academy?

How would you describe your relationship with the non-coaching staff in the academy?

How does the environment at the academy differ to any other clubs you have worked at?

Are there any aspects of the academy that you think could be improved?

What is your relationship like with first team staff?

##### *Macro environment*

What impact does the Premier league have on your role?

How do you feel the wider culture of English professional football influences your role?

How do you feel the wider culture of English professional football influences player development?

#### **Environment (based on the ESF model)**

Do you think the environment is a successful talent development environment?

What tells you that it is / isn't successful?

Are there any aspects of the academy that you think could be improved?

### *Preconditions*

What do you think of the facilities available at HFC?

### *Process*

What does your daily / weekly contact time with the scholars look like?

What do you think about the balance between training / education / life plan activities?

### *Org culture*

What does being part of HFC academy mean to you?

Does the academy have any specific traditions?

Does the academy have values? How are these lived?

### *Individual development*

Do you think that the academy provides a supportive environment for players' development both inside and outside of football?

### *Psychosocial development*

Which psychosocial skills do you think are important for a player to make it as a professional footballer? (why?)

Which psychosocial skills do you think are important for life outside of football? (why?)

How do you think the academy helps boys to develop these skills?

How could the academy do more to develop these skills?

### **Football Career / Transition**

What challenges do you expect players to face going into the Scholarship phase?

What do you think are the main barriers which will prevent a boy becoming a professional footballer?

Is there anything further you would like to add about your experience at the academy?

## **Appendix D: Player interview transcript (sample)**

### **Smithy 2nd interview sample: Small classroom (April 2019)**

NC: Just generally, how is everything at the minute?

JS: Yeah, it's good, I'm enjoying football and education, it's like quite a good time of year cause it's relaxing, not much pressure on us and like end of season's coming up so everyone's fine really, yeah

NC: Yeah, erm when you say it's relaxing do you think, as in there's not as much pressure in terms of stuff to play for?

JS: Yeah, basically, cause we can't win anything so, there's no pressure on us to perform.. but we still have to for personal pride if you like

NC: What would you say motivates you now then, that you haven't got like that pressure to perform? Is it hard to keep motivated?

JS: Just to make sure that next season, I'm starting, or maybe I'm playing up with the 23s basically just like pushing myself cause I always like to do better or look further in the future, I basically like, look what I can do now to make sure I'm like I've not signed that's where I want to be, so I sort of set goals for myself

NC: Yeah, yeah do you set your own personal goals then? As well as, so you got we spoke about the CLASS Targets and stuff

JS: Yeah, yeah I set my own goals

NC: Set your own, yeah, what are they?

JS: Erm, well for next season to be in the 23s team, erm I set others but I've already achieved them this season...so...that's the main one for me

NC: Yeah, yeah that's good, what were the main ones you set for this season?

JS: Erm, well...one of them I can't really tell you, it's classified but it's not been confirmed

NC: OK

JS: But it's just to do with contracts and that really, yeah and obviously, get in the 18s team which I've done this season, I've proved myself, it's just pushing on further really

NC: Yeah, yeah. So they're very clear goals in term of outcome and like say you either get a contract or you don't that's quite set isn't it

JS: Exactly, it's either a yes or a no sort of outcome

NC: Yeah. But then do you have any other goals in terms of like how you are going to get there? Or is that more where the CLASS targets come in?

JS: Erm, I do, it's just basically doing extras as much as I can and my diet, like I really care about that, cause then that will help me and obviously I sleep and them sort of things like, instead of staying up I will sacrifice, like go to be early just to play well on a Saturday, do you know what I mean, cause like I think it's important

NC: Kind of the day to day stuff you're doing? Yeah, yeah. With the extras, I know you said before you do extras, but is that still, do you do it as a little group, some of the other guys have mentioned doing it as well, are you part of that?

JS: Yeah, well sometimes I do it by myself but most of the time it's with a couple of other boys here

NC: Yeah, yeah and have you done that consistently throughout the season?

JS: Yeah, I have yeah

NC: Yeah. Do you like doing that...or..

JS: Yeah, I do actually. Or at the start I didn't, but now I see improvements it's good, I want to do it cause I know I can get better from it

NC: Yeah. Do you see improvements in terms of, obviously we just said about that run you've improved on, erm but like physically feel fitter and things?

JS: Yeah, I feel stronger and everything on the pitch, I've got better on my feet, both my feet so it is good.

NC: Yeah, yeah that's really good. Yeah, erm, cause you played for [national team] recently right?

JS: Yeah

NC: How has that been with like going away for that?

JS: Yeah good, the experience was good.. it is really good

NC: How does that compare in terms of like, maybe standard...

JS: To here?

NC: Yeah

JS: I reckon, well...I think the standards probably a bit better than here..as in every kid gives a 100%. Here you get like the odd kid that doesn't take it seriously or doesn't really care but like everyone, even though the players might not be better at [national team] everyone does always give 100% and that shows cause just you just feel more as a team but yeah I think here there's more talent as in skills, do you know what I mean

NC: Yeah more technical football

JS: Yeah basically

NC: But maybe not actually effort?

JS: Yeah basically yeah

NC: Do you train with [national team] as well? Do you get much time to train?

JS: Erm, not often if we're going away somewhere we'll train a couple of weeks before

NC: OK, so it's kind of limited but is that, is there quite a difference from what you said it sounds like the intensity is different?

JS: Yeah, it is yeah, like training we won't ever do anything hard, cause they don't want us to get injured for the game, so it'll just be tactical stuff really

NC: Yeah but do you notice the difference in attitude in that still?

JS: Yeah definitely yeah, cause if we was to do it here I reckon some of the boys wouldn't take it seriously like they'd get bored and that's what makes, obviously playing for a country it's the best players in the country and that's why they're picked because they always give 100% so you can see the difference

## **Appendix E: Staff interview transcript (sample)**

### **Dave interview sample: Small classroom (May 2019)**

NC: What would you say are the clubs priorities in terms of developing the boys?

DJ: Well I would have said one of the main things is the character side..and I don't think we've achieved that in the last 12 months as much as I would have liked to across the board, erm, now you can put that down to a few things, you know, did we get the recruitment right at the start..probably not if I'm being honest, erm, you know we have, how we view people you know we use CLASS and character is massive, and if you actually look across the academy, we've done a study of the last 2 years, the two main things that people have been released on have been lack of mobility/speed and character so if we're saying character plays a great part, I think we've really got to get on top of that next year and that's a priority for me, because erm, I saw a coach at Liverpool, Alex Inglethorpe who I respect a lot and he says ability gets you in at 16, character sees you through to 35 and there's never been a truer statement if I'm being honest, it's how you deal with being in that full time programme, you know, not being picked every week, more likely to be injured cause the intensity is greater, you're training everyday it is a job now, it is a job and I think some of them erm, find a great difficulty in understanding it is a job, obviously you come in as a scholar it's your job, you know you're still a trainee but you know you're expected to er, treat it as such really, and I think some of them find that very difficult.

NC: Yep, when...you mentioned there about the recruitment process, how much of that decision is made on character?

DJ: It, it's something we've used as retention throughout the age groups, it's something they're judged on, one of the 5 things and you're looking for them to have 3 of the 5, whether we've done it well enough with outside people coming in, I'd question that if I'm being honest whether erm, but we have made mistakes as well with people within the academy which you know that you know, you've been here for 2 years now so you know yourself and that is frustrating, I think it's frustrating you know, you do your best to try and improve people but unfortunately at the same time they can actually be affecting the morale and the erm, application of some of your other players and I think looking at modern society today I think that's more likely than ever, I think you've got less chance of changing em than you had, you know when I came, when I started doing this job which is 30 years ago, well 20, 25 years

ago, erm it was a lot easier job, you know if you looked at then, I think without any shadow of a doubt the most important voice was the coach for them erm but cause of social media, because of changes in things you find that now agents, parent have a definite role, which you have to accept, don't get me wrong but I think there's a lot more, voices in their head and white noise out there that effects them and I think when they come in, you've dealt with that age group between 16 and 18 predominantly haven't you?

NC: Yeah

DJ: When they are recruited at 16, they're very highly coveted, there's a lot of clubs will be interested, they won't get a club...when they having to be...if they're not kept on or once they get to U19s in that area, it's a different ball game, you know, you're lucky to get fixed up at that age group then, so you're better off making your mistakes at 15 than you are at 19. Because you will get another chance then, there will be a chance. It's...it's a tough road back from 19 I believe

NC: Yep. What do you think the...I know you said it's not been done as well as it could have been but what do you think has been done to develop character?...or what would that look like if it's done really well?

DJ: I...my challenge moving forward..if I ever have a conversation with a first team manager and we talk about a player, the first thing they ever bring up is experience, so I think as an academy moving forward we've got to create as many experiences as possible, you know, we've had one day this year where...I think we've become that rigid in our programme that they know what we're doing every day so once you throw a curve ball in, it's like "ugh, why are we doing this?" for an instance was, about 6 weeks ago, we had an u18 game on a Wednesday and [1<sup>st</sup> team manager] wanted a team to play against on the Thursday, so I made the boys, only for 30 minutes, but once they were told they were training on the Thursday, the day after the game "oh we never do this" one or two of them were like 2 children and then all of a sudden you know your staff over there get into a disagreement with people that...so... that probably brought it home more than ever to me that we've got to create as many experiences moving forward, not being rigid in what we're doing all the time, throw different things at them and see how they react, get them out of that comfort zone, cause oh we come in we do this...that's our week...we go home at, on a Wednesday at half past 2...well they won't be doing that next year, the whole idea it is it'll be a, you know a quarter past 8 to 4 o'clock programme and where that will differ is if we decide that they're

not doing something Wednesday afternoon...are you with me, and within it, within that I think we gotta factor certain...my job is to make sure that them experiences are factored in...

NC: Yeah, yeah. What sort of experiences?

DJ: Well, just er changing the programme, like Portugal I've decided we'll get up one morning and we'll train at 7 o'clock and we'll go for a run along the front, we will, you know, we will occupy their time more, there will be a fitness / speed development session on a Wednesday afternoon we will use that, but it won't be the same people every Wednesday, it might be, you 8 this week, it will get, we will get back to doing a programme that's a little bit more varied, but also more demanding and I think that will be the biggest thing, it will be based around demands, erm, we'll give them a little bit more of em, you know one of the things that really disappointed me this year you know from the staff was they've done no player lead things so where I introduced that 2 of the boys every Tuesday would have a topic from the game and would feedback to us, and I saw people took out of their comfort zone and some people were very good at it, some people diligent at it, a lot of people do it to the minimum, them little things we've got away from and erm, you know, probably blame myself really, for probably for not stepping in and saying this had to be done but I think you're hoping that.....you know this job is not and never will be, based around..90 minutes out on the grass. Cause if you work that out, what's that 90 minutes...so at best you're probably only doing less than what about 6 or 7% of your day on football, would that be fair? Something like that, yeah, 24 hour day...

NC: Yeah

DJ: So it is all the other things, it's the off the field things, it's doing the gym, doing the..it's the education..it's what you come in and do, it's what everybody does and I think what we've learnt from this group now...yours is an interesting one cause it was an area that I probably felt if we came in on the meetings it would be a little bit intrusive...where I don't know I'll take that..I'll listen to what you say in a minute if I'm honest but what I have realised that when they're doing their feedback erm from games, erm when they're in the gym...we have to have a member of staff in there from now on, just to make sure everything is on point cause I've found that you know our analysis staff that work so hard having to chase boys up to do it and that can't be right so I just think probably we got a little bit lazy and a little bit, we talked about..there's such a...talk about this interdisciplinary thing now, multidisciplinary whatever way you want to call it, where actually more becomes less, where your coaches are actually not talking to your players half as much as they used to, and erm, I think that, if there's one

thing I've always been good at it's that. Listen I can deliver a right hook and I can but...but I always do speak to them and I think that, that's...listen we got a lot of challenges, you know that yourself, you've been around here, I'd imagine, you know, it will have been interesting for you, but you'll have, you'll have similar things that the boys are diligent and want to get on and you get the ones that don't.

NC: Yeah...just as a specific example, is there anyone who you think has got the right character this year...From the first years, so if there's any in that first year group that you can say?

DJ: I think, I think Smithy has got that right character, I think Tazly has, he has these ridiculous moments, probably one or two a year where he's very, he gets something in his head and he's stubborn, but that's just the way he's made. He's never a problem with it but you know like cutting his thing off cause he got fed up of it, he's bordering on ridiculous cause it's there for a reason. Erm, Smithy you got to say he's applied himself excellently and pushed himself cause there's a difference cause you'll have someone like Alex who will apply himself but don't push himself

NC: Yeah, yeah, yeah

DJ: You know, really he shouldn't be here, cause he's marking time, he knows he doesn't want to be a footballer...so there's a difference, you know there's a difference between pushing yourself to excel but also being good around the players, you know if you had you know if you had (whispers) 20 Alex's who is a lovely lad but you wouldn't have a programme that would take you to the next level, you know smashing lad but doesn't push himself.

## Appendix F: Illustration of theme development

### Theme development: Psychosocial skills

Broad themes	Explanatory themes				
	Subthemes			Further sub themes	
Character	Discipline	Sacrifice	Necessary part of elite game	Missing out on normative teenage life  Moving away from home  Full time immersion to academy life	
			Willingness / professional football deemed worth it	Benefits of rest and recovery  Delayed gratification  Participation as a privilege	
			Conforming dedication	Obeying orders	Sanctions: (Impact on player development / inconsistency)
		On pitch production		Comply or face punishment (inconsistency)	
		Commitment	Academy goal setting process	Player engagement	Usefulness of process  Ability to take responsibility
				Staff engagement	Regularity of review meetings  Dictating targets for players  Need for SPP involvement
	Individual characteristic/ requirement			Motives	Intrinsic  Extrinsic  Social
			Strategically planned goals	Personal goals (variety in process goals & violation)	
			Engagement with quality practice behaviours	‘Extras’  Awareness  Maturity	
	Influenced by peers		Positive peer impact		Group extras  Competition for places
				Negative peer impact	Distraction in training  Dropped standards  Desire to impress peers/ social validation
				Verbal reminders	Life plan messages

		Influenced by coaches/academy environment		Positive reinforcement	
			Onus on players to drive themselves	Innate 'drive' of individual No direct teaching of motivation	
			Coach athlete relationship	Need to understand what may be causing a player to lack effort	
			'Bad group' narrative	Immaturity	
			Lack of consistency	Inconsistent sanctions and behavioural standards	
Resilience	Onus on the players	Personal qualities	Positive coping strategies	Persistence Emotional control Show professionalism Learn from mistakes	
				Confidence Trust in ability Positive outlook Bouncing back	
			Lack of understanding of how to develop	No direct teaching of resilience Lack of communication between departments	
			Acquired through experience	Need for demands / get players out of comfort zone	Playing up with 1 <sup>st</sup> team /23s Deselection Injury
					Supporting demands
			Essential for progress	Football is a tough industry	Adversity 'name of the game' Rollercoaster Preparation for the harsh realities of the professional game

## Appendix G: Weekly timetable (example)

SUBJECT TO CHANGE - 28<sup>th</sup> JAN - 3<sup>rd</sup> FEB 2019

<b>1<sup>st</sup> TEAM</b>							
	Monday 28 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 29 <sup>th</sup>	Wednesday 30 <sup>th</sup>	Thursday 31 <sup>st</sup>	Friday 1 <sup>st</sup>	Saturday 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sunday 3 <sup>rd</sup>
<b>AM</b>	Before 10 breakfast 1100-1230 training 1245 lunch (tbc)		Before 10 breakfast 1100-1230 training 1245 lunch (tbc)	Before 10 breakfast 1100-1230 training 1245 lunch (tbc)	Before 10 breakfast 1100-1230 training 1245 lunch (tbc)		REST
<b>PM</b>		<b>HOME GAME 1945</b>				<b>AWAY GAME 1500</b>	REST

<b>U23 Squad</b>							
	Monday 28 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 29 <sup>th</sup>	Wednesday 30 <sup>th</sup>	Thursday 31 <sup>st</sup>	Friday 1 <sup>st</sup>	Saturday 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sunday 3 <sup>rd</sup>
<b>AM</b>	0900 Breakfast 1000 Pre-activation 1030 Football	0900 Breakfast 1000 Pre-activation 1030 Football	0900 Breakfast 1000 Pre-activation 1030 Football	REST	0900 Breakfast 1000 Pre-activation 1030 Football	0845 Breakfast 0915 Pre-activation 1000 Football 1200 Lunch <span style="color: red;">(Cooked Please)</span>	0845 Breakfast 0915 Pre-activation 1000 Football 1200 Lunch <span style="color: red;">(Cooked Please)</span>
<b>PM</b>	1300 Gym	1300 Gym	1300 Gym	REST	REST	REST	REST

<b>U18 Squad</b>							
	Monday 28 <sup>th</sup>	Tuesday 29 <sup>th</sup>	Wednesday 30 <sup>th</sup>	Thursday 31 <sup>st</sup>	Friday 1 <sup>st</sup>	Saturday 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sunday 3 <sup>rd</sup>
<b>AM</b>	0815 Breakfast 0840 Education 0945 Pre-Activation 1030 Football	0815 Breakfast 0840 Education/Analysis 0915 Pre-Activation 1000 Football	0815 Breakfast 080 Education 0945 Pre-Activation 1030 Football	0815 Breakfast 0840 Education 0915 Pre-Activation 1000 Football	0815 Breakfast 0840 Education 0945 Pre-Activation 1030 Football	<b>U18 VS. [REDACTED] U18 1100 (H)</b>	REST
<b>PM</b>	1200 Lunch 1300 Education 1430 Gym	1200 Lunch 1300 Education 1430 Football	1200 Lunch 1300 Education/ Individual Careers Meetings with Toby French	1200 Lunch 1300 Education 1430 Gym	1200 Lunch 1245 Team Meeting	REST	REST

## Appendix H: Life plan schedule

### LifePlan Skill Sessions 2017-18 Season

Under 18 1 <sup>st</sup> Years	Employment Rights and Responsibilities with [REDACTED] (Monday 3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2017)	Safeguarding Induction with [REDACTED] (Wednesday 5 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	Health and Safety Induction with [REDACTED] (Friday 7 <sup>th</sup> July)	Equality of Opportunity with [REDACTED] (Tuesday 11 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	Well-Being with [REDACTED] (Monday 31 <sup>st</sup> July)	Drugs Awareness with [REDACTED] (Friday 4 <sup>th</sup> August 2017)
	FA Integrity Training with (Monday 25 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	Grenfell Tower Coaching Session (August 31 <sup>st</sup> 2017)	[REDACTED] 'My life in football and the Media' (27 <sup>th</sup> September 2017)	Thrive (Mental Health App) with [REDACTED] (16 <sup>th</sup> October 2017)	Fixture against our Foundation [REDACTED] (November 17 <sup>th</sup> 2017).	Coaching session and reading at [REDACTED] Primary School (November 22 <sup>nd</sup> 2017)
	Career Planning – [REDACTED] 1 <sup>st</sup> Nov 2017	'Giving Back' volunteering. Personal development session with Kaizen. 15th Nov 2017	Coaching session and reading at [REDACTED] Primary School (November 29th 2017)	'Giving Back' volunteering. Personal development final session with Kaizen. 13th Dec 2017	Drivers' awareness Pertemps & PFA (19/1/18)	'Trained Brain' Jamie Edwards (13 Feb '18)
	Introduction to Financial Planning Smith and Williamson. 19 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2018.	My Future Today Careers / Personal Development 21/2/18	CAREERS FAIR 6/3/18			
Under 18 2 <sup>nd</sup> Years	Safeguarding Refresher Training with [REDACTED] (Wednesday 5 <sup>th</sup> and Thursday 6 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	Why Athletes go broke! With [REDACTED] (Wednesday 5 <sup>th</sup> and Thursday 6 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	Leadership Training with [REDACTED] (Monday 10 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	FA Integrity Training with (Monday 25 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	[REDACTED] 'My life in football and the Media' (27 <sup>th</sup> September 2017)	Thrive (Mental Health) with [REDACTED] (16 <sup>th</sup> October 2017)

	Coaching session [REDACTED] (November 22nd 2017)	[REDACTED] Analysis u9 filming. 5 Oct 2017	[REDACTED] Sports journalism at CC v Derby C. 18 Nov 2017.	Career Planning – [REDACTED] 1 <sup>st</sup> Nov 2017	Drivers' awareness Pertemps & PFA (19/1/18)	'Trained Brain' [REDACTED] (13 Feb '18)
	My Future Today Careers / Personal Development 21/2/18	CAREERS FAIR 6/3/18				
Under 23's	FA Integrity Training with (Monday 25 <sup>th</sup> July 2017)	[REDACTED] Tax advice P11Ds 30 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2017.	U23s v [REDACTED] Walking football team. 19 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2017.	[REDACTED] INTEGRO Insurance talk. 1 <sup>st</sup> Jan 2018	CAREERS FAIR 6/3/18	

#### Parents:

PDP	1 <sup>st</sup> Years induction. 29 <sup>th</sup> June 2017	Seminar for Parents of talented Athletes. Smith and Williamson 16 April 2018 Central London				
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