

UEFA Research Report

**The Working Practices and Operational Environments of Referees from a
Transnational Comparative Perspective**

Prepared by

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March 2018

1. Executive Summary

This report considers the working practices and operational environments of referees in both France and the Netherlands, utilising a cross-sectional design. There are issues within football related to referee recruitment and retention, and there is a requirement to better understand the wider behaviour of referee populations across transnational boundaries. The data were collected through a self-reporting online survey, distributed through the federations in both countries, obtaining 3,408 responses from referees in France and 1,209 responses from referees in the Netherlands. The qualitative data have been inductively analysed utilising a thematic analysis, providing an open-ended narrative from referees, whilst the quantitative responses have provided supporting descriptive statistical data. This has created a mixed methods design with the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, through concurrent mixed method data collection strategies.

Findings show a high level of satisfaction with training events, although referees also believe that more could be done to further improve training and education as well as the development opportunities afforded to them in both countries. High numbers of referees stated that they received verbal abuse in both France and the Netherlands, with the qualitative responses reporting specific episodes and a significant number of incidents which led to the generation of ‘aggression and abuse’ as a higher order theme. Referees identified that abuse is more likely at lower levels of the game, although referees believed that both physical and verbal abuse in France and the Netherlands occurs less frequently than in England, a significant number of referees are still considering leaving the game within the next 12 months.

Additional research is required to further develop understanding of the cultural differences in other countries around Europe. The development of this understanding should also consider implications of abuse upon the individual referee, players, coaches and spectators who witness abusive incidents, which could present negative mental health implications and affect the well-

being of those involved. This further work would lead to research informed interventions through educational provision and training mechanisms aimed at referees, players, coaches and spectators to improve the working conditions for referees and the operational environment for everyone concerned.

2. Introduction

The working practices of match officials and the environments in which they function are important for the effective operation and scheduling of association football matches at all levels of competition. However, it has been documented that refereeing has struggled to keep pace with the rate at which association football has grown over the last fifty years (Goddard & Sloane, 2014; Webb, 2017). This is demonstrated through the fact that until the 1960s there was no clear increase in attention or structure of the training, promotion and assessment of referees, with instructions related to fitness also minimal (Webb, 2014). In the 1980's information was released with regards to fitness and nutrition, yet even in the 1990's the training of elite level referees was still self-governed (Webb, Dicks, Thelwell & Nevill, 2016). As the early 2000's approached there was a considerable effort to professionalise refereeing to mirror the activities of professional footballers.

Recently FIFA, through Pierluigi Collina, Chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee, identified that a potential global shortage of referees will become evident if abuse is not addressed (see <http://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/10810551/pierluigi-collina-warns-of-a-global-shortage-of-referees-if-abuse-is-not-acted-upon>). Association football in particular has ongoing issues related to the retention of referees (Cleland, O'Gorman, & Webb, 2017; Webb, Cleland & O'Gorman, 2017), and there are suggestions that the level of verbal and physical abuse is a significant contributory factor (Dell, Gervis, & Rhind, 2016). The English Football Association (EFA) recognised that poor behaviour (i.e., abuse from players and spectators) was having a negative effect on the game at every level (The FA, 2008), as evidenced by a loss of 17% (5,000 active referees) from the 2007-08 to 2008-09 season, due in part to the abuse experienced

(Brackenridge, Pitchford, & Wilson, 2011). Therefore, insufficient consideration of the support, development and management of referees could lead to further declines in participation numbers in sport (Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016; Webb, Rayner & Thelwell, 2018).

More recently, this abuse has forced the EFA to act, and the Respect programme was launched as an attempt by the EFA to minimize or eradicate the exposure to abuse (both physical and verbal) for referees (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017). In launching the Respect programme, the EFA appealed to the sensitivities of all stakeholders (e.g., County FAs and English leagues), to positively influence historically and culturally entrenched attitudes, with referee respect also described as something which is ‘a value close to UEFA’s heart’ (UEFA, 2015), with the desire of the UEFA referee education programme to, ‘improve the quality of match officials at all levels of the game in the UEFA members associations’ (UEFA, 2006, p. 3).

The present research has considered the current working practices and operational conditions of referees in France and the Netherlands. The research provides UEFA with important findings into the progression that has occurred since the UEFA refereeing convention in 2006. This research also provides UEFA with the unique opportunity to gain some direct feedback from referees in relation to a wide range of different topics, and has identified several topics that are of great importance to UEFA and significant implications for the wider sporting community.

3. Research Question, Aims and Objectives

The aims of this project were to investigate referee working practices and environments, especially concerning referee development, support systems and the abuse encountered officiating. The central concept was to build on the work that has been undertaken in England (Cleland et al., 2017; Rayner et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2017), and comparatively analyse results in France and the Netherlands with reference to previous research undertaken in England, also including comparisons between countries (Webb & Thelwell, 2015). The research also examined the extent of referee satisfaction, in relation to different elements of refereeing such as the support received from their

respective federations, the opportunities for personal development and progression and the training and education available. Furthermore, the study aimed to determine the level and type of abuse that referees receive, the frequency of this abuse, and whether they are considering leaving refereeing as a result of any of these factors.

The research was explorative, due to the under researched nature of the subject matter, and also inductive with the following six research areas central to the project: (1) the experience of officiating since they initially qualified; (2) the frequency, type and setting of any verbal and physical abuse that referees may have experienced; (3) the level and type of support provided by local, regional and national associations and organisations; (4) The development opportunities available to help referees progress; (5) The training and education that is available to improve referees; (6) future directions and recommendations for improving the current experiences of referees in different countries. These research questions advanced original research from England (Cleland et al, 2017, Rayner et al., 2016; Webb, 2017; Webb et al., 2017; Webb & Thelwell, 2015) and extend our limited understanding of this under researched area.

4. Literature Review

Presently little is known about the reasoning behind football referees discontinuing their role. Research has been conducted utilising basketball referees and Australian Rules football umpire populations to better understand strategies which might increase match official recruitment and encourage referee and umpire retention (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner, Tingle & Kellett, 2013). Findings identified the importance of community and social interaction, in addition to issues concerning administration and training as particularly pertinent aspects. Moreover, Australian Rules football umpires have identified that they routinely received abuse and that this abuse was a 'normal' part of their role, but they also demonstrated that the socialization and interaction of umpires can assist in retaining these umpires within Australian Rules football (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007)

Match officials have also been shown to experience stress in and around their working environment, which contributes to pressures inside and outside the playing area (Selcuk, 2009). Stress as a direct consequence of officiating, has also been found to have a profound impact on mental health, performance of match officials and dropout intentions, amongst other things (Belkacem & Salih, 2018). The principal aspects of officiating which scored highly in terms of stress were ‘conflict between officiating and family demands,’ ‘making a controversial call’ and ‘conflict between officiating and work demands’ (Voight, 2009). Furthermore, research conducted with ice hockey match officials considered the source and intensity of their experience of stressful events. The three stressors which were consistently evidenced by the match officials were ‘making a controversial call’, ‘difficulty working with a partner official’, and ‘confrontation with coaches’. However, verbal and physical abuse and fear of mistakes were also found to exist and differ across different levels (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007).

Stress is also being placed on the capacity of sports systems. With demands placed on the number of appropriately accredited match officials and with declining numbers of officials, particularly younger match officials, organisations are facing pressures concerning the retention of existing officials. Results highlighted the need for further research as well as insights for developing organisational support and retention strategies for sports officials, as well as a requirement for sporting organisations and governing bodies to provide a duty of care for their employees, volunteers and participants (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Moreover, in recent times there has been research which has looked at the concept of providing officials with training opportunities to help deal with the stress that they experience. Work conducted by Blumenstein and Orbach, (2014) looked at the idea of providing referees with a preparation programme prior to them officiating in matches, finding that the preparation programme gave referees more self-confidence to cope with competitive stress. Furthermore, Dell et al (2016, p. 110) argue that there is a need for ‘qualitative research to explore the subjective experiences of referees’,

in order to better understand the challenge-faced by match officials in modern sport and also wider society.

All these factors vary in relation to the level of competition at which referees officiate, due to the fact that there are different pressures associated dependent on the level of the referee (Page & Page, 2010). Thus, it is essential that referees are given clear objectives, effective leadership and a sufficient support system, irrespective of the level at which they officiate (Mathers & Brodie, 2011).

In the modern game there are a wide range of different issues that impact upon refereeing, with one such issue related to the cultural differences between countries in relation to the way that football is played (Webb, 2017). The differences between cultures results in the application of the rules and laws of football being open to interpretation as wells as subject to cultural influence (Webb, Wagstaff, Rayner & Thelwell, 2017). Referees are aware of this and realise that they need to change performance to be able to recognise the differences that are being demonstrated by the players, in order to achieve a more standardised level of refereeing performance (Webb, 2017; Webb & Thelwell, 2015). However, trying to create a more uniform and standardised level of refereeing is difficult to achieve due to the embedded cultural differences across leagues and countries (Webb & Thelwell, 2015).

5. Research Design and Strategy

a) Design Justification

To explore the working practices and operational environments of referees in football, a cross-sectional study utilising a self-reporting survey was implemented. The survey was completed online using the software, 'Bristol Online Survey'. This software is widely used for academic research across departments and universities. An invitation email containing a URL link to the survey was emailed through contacts at the national football associations in France and the Netherlands to their database of referees.

The survey was adapted from that utilised in England and has led to publications on the working practices of referees and the levels of abuse to which they are exposed (Cleland et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2017). The survey was translated into French and Dutch in conjunction with contacts at the national associations and other universities in each country. In this case the survey included multiple-choice, Likert scale and ‘open’ or free text format questions. The inclusion of ‘open’ or free text format questions was designed to give a greater understanding of respondents’ experiences than could be provided by purely quantitative data (Silverman, 1999). The emphasis of qualitative data within the survey design enabled more opportunity for the referees to comment on the type (if any) of abuse to which they had been subjected, as well as the opportunity to address the research areas described earlier by reflecting on their experiences in refereeing.

b) Justification of the measurement approach

The use of online surveys to collect large-scale quantitative and qualitative data has been an increasingly successful methodological tool for sport scholars (Cleland & Cashmore, 2014, 2016). One of the advantages is that it affords researchers the opportunity to not only receive large-scale data at the convenience of the participant (i.e. to be completed in their own time), but it also allows for frank and honest accounts from respondents. There have been several research papers concerned with refereeing that have also utilised this approach (Cleland, et al.2017; Rayner et al., 2016; Webb, et al., 2017; Webb, et al., 2018). All four of these studies were specifically focused around the experiences of match officials and therefore it was beneficial to utilise this method for the current study.

Online surveys typically achieve a 5-10% response rate of the population being surveyed. The present study achieved a total of 1,209 responses from referees in the Netherlands (above a 25% response rate given that there are just over 4,000 referees in the Netherlands) and a further 3,408 responses from referees in France, equating to a 13% response rate (also above the expected 5-10% response rate given that there are approximately 26,000 referees in France). Qualitative data

has also been utilised in the present study as it allows researchers to source well-grounded and rich explanations and meaning that derive from human processes and experiences (Grbich, 2012).

Strong qualitative data allows researchers to ‘broaden their horizons’ and go beyond the initial conceptions and begin to generate and revise conceptual frameworks (Bazeley, 2013). This was a crucial aspect of this study as although the quantitative data provided an initial insight into the working practices of referees, the qualitative data helped to enhance this understanding and compliment the quantitative responses by adding significant depth to the data set.

c) Concepts and Dimensions Examined

Given the exploration of the related literature in the previous section/s, further research is required pertaining to the experiences of match officials. Therefore, the experience, working practices and support networks of match officials are considered within this research to analyse the current, experiences of match officials across both countries, ultimately intended to address wider issues regarding referee recruitment, retention and training in football.

This research is intended to be a starting point in the comparative analysis of referee working practices and support networks between different countries. Although some research has been conducted in England there is still little currently known about the issues surrounding the retention of referees in football. Thus, by developing the research further and involving other countries it will potentially enable improvements to be made regarding the retention of referees. Furthermore, it will also help to identify cultural comparisons as well as differences between countries, whilst also highlighting specific areas which referees feel that their respective federations can improve. Therefore, this research project also provides potential future areas of research to understand these concepts further.

d) Sample size

The online survey was sent via email to active and non-active referees in France and the Netherlands. The survey was disseminated through the national FAs in each of the country’s

involved in this research process. Each association holds a database of qualified referees (whether active or inactive) and this has been used to obtain the samples from each country. Therefore, the sampling is purposive as it involves a nonprobability sampling method aimed purely at football referees because of the unique position they hold in addressing the research questions identified below (Byrne, 2004; Schutt, 2009).

The minimum required number of participants was set at 1000 referees per country. It was hoped that this is an achievable figure given that similar studies have received high response rates. The surveys were not limited to a maximum number of responses given the data collection tools being employed. As previously mentioned, both surveys achieved this with the responses from the Netherlands totalling 1,229, with the French survey gaining 3,408 responses.

e) Study aims and objectives

Primary objective

(1) Experiences of officiating since referees initially qualified.

Secondary Objectives

2) The frequency, type and setting of any verbal and physical abuse that referees may have experienced.

3) The level and type of support provided by local, regional and national associations and organisations.

4) Future directions and recommendations for improving the current experiences of referees in different countries.

The qualitative data collected for this study has been inductively analysed utilising a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the process of acknowledging, analysing and interpreting meaning and themes which can be discovered within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke 2014).

Moreover, thematic analysis is not necessarily within a particular theoretical tradition, thus allowing for flexibility across both ontological and epistemological approaches (Braun, Clarke & Weate,

2016). For thematic analysis to be conducted to a good standard the researcher needs to ensure that they take an open-minded approach, thoroughly considering any questions and assumptions that arise when analysing the data (Finlay & Gough, 2008). This method of data analysis was applicable for the current study as it allowed for a greater level of theoretical flexibility and analysis, which is derived from a creative process, involving engagement between the data set and a researcher's analytical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach permitted the data to be analysed in relation to a variety of differing themes, linked to the aims and overarching research question of the study which in turn allowed for a greater understanding of the working practices and operational environments of referees from a transnational comparative perspective.

Quantitative responses were also utilised to support the open responses. Online surveys lend themselves to the integration of both thematic and statistical data in the data analysis process and the present survey adopted this process (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The subsequent analysis presented below addresses each of the four research objectives by focusing on the descriptive statistical data and open-ended narrative provided by the referees. The presentation of this data includes figures to depict the relevant quantitative data alongside a qualitative commentary, supported by quotes from the data set which also contain demographic details of each referee or umpire, with their level and the years they have been a match official included in order to provide a context and setting to their experiences.

f) Validity and Reliability

Principal aspects of validity concerning traditional survey-based design tend to relate to random error, measurement error and reliability. Specifically, random error occurs with sampling techniques and to lower this error large samples or populations can be selected. This research works with a large target population from France and the Netherlands ensuring that any random error is minimised. In terms of reliability, test-retest reliability is commonly used, and can be measured by two sets of respondents completing the survey at two different points in time (Litwin, 1995). This

was undertaken as part of the pilot survey testing and also for the main data collection in both France and the Netherlands. The online survey utilised for this research is non-traditional in construction, with a concerted balance between the descriptive quantitative responses and the qualitative responses. The survey responses were in French and Dutch and were translated back into English for the purposes of data analysis and reporting.

Mixed methods research can be used to refer to procedures related to the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in the context of a single study (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib & Rupert, 2007). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), concurrent mixed method data collection strategies have been employed to validate one form of data with the other, and in several cases the same respondents provide both qualitative and quantitative data responses in one data collection tool. This research included qualitative and quantitative responses within the online survey to draw out the best of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data were collected in this way due to the extensive geographical area in which the respondents were located, with the wide physical reach of web-based surveys enabling the possibility of creating a representative sample of match officials as a snapshot of a national picture (Toepoel, 2016).

6. Research findings

The findings demonstrated a number of common themes from the data set. These themes encompass a wide range of different issues and have been categorised into higher and lower order themes outlined in Figure 1:

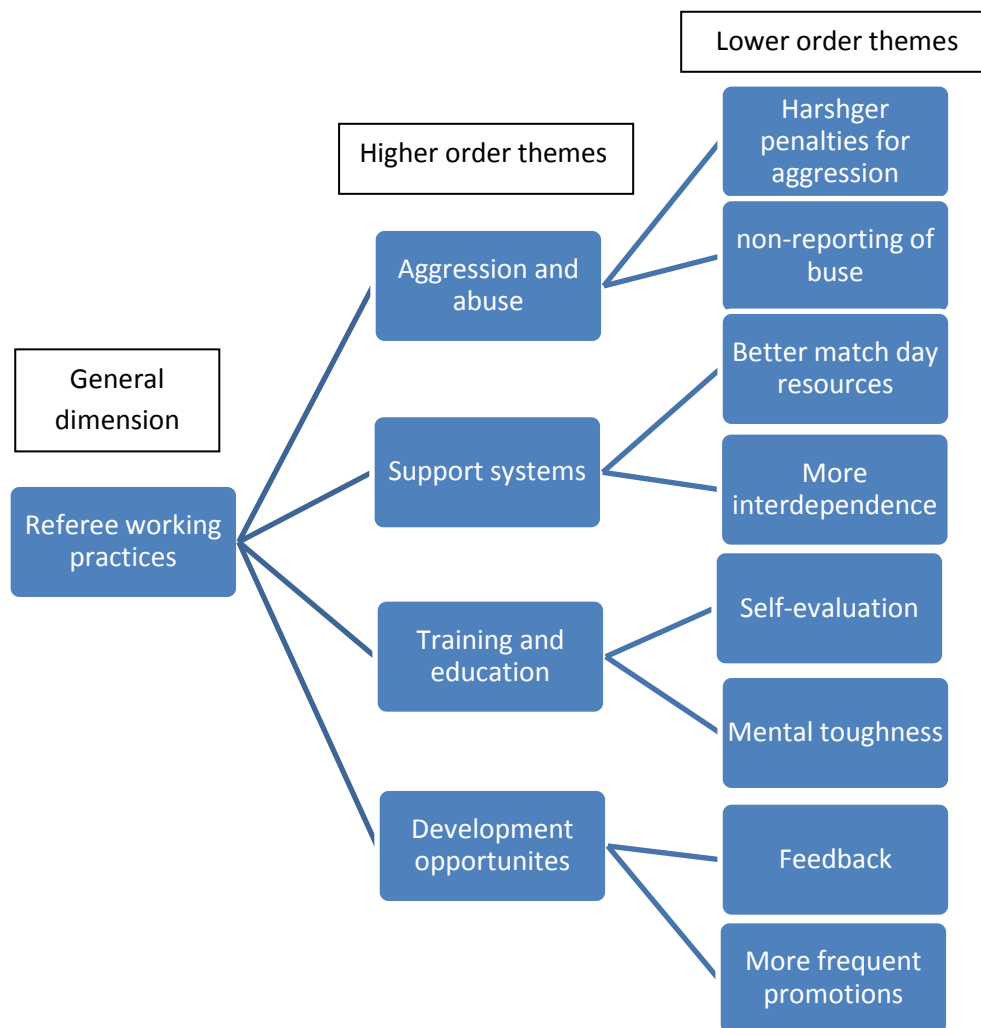


Figure 1: Tree diagram displaying the higher and lower order themes from the survey data

The results from this study are presented and discussed in relation to the four higher order themes displayed above; aggression and abuse, support systems, training and education and development opportunities. This was to ensure that the results stayed focused and relevant to the four higher order themes that referees highlighted as being most important. This in turn provides UEFA with the greatest opportunity to gain an insight into the working practices of referees in France and the Netherlands, whilst highlighting differences, as well as common themes between the two countries. Demographic information has also been included (see figures 2 and 3) in support of the qualitative quotes to provide further context to the findings.

Dutch Referees (Level of officiating)	Sex Ratio	Years Officiating (M)	Victim of Verbal Abuse	Victim of Physical Abuse
Senior (N=166)	100% Male (N=166)	3-5 years	38.6% Yes (N=64) 62.4% No (N=102)	12% Yes (N=20) 88% No (N=146)
Junior (N=61)	96.7% Male (N=59) 3.3% Female (N=2)	3-5 years	37.7% Yes (N=23) 63.3% No (N=38)	13.1% Yes (N=8) 86.9% No (N=53)
Masterclass (N=5)	100% Male (N=5)	6-10 years	80% Yes (N=4) 20% No (N=1)	0.0% Yes (N=0) 100% No (N=5)
Talented Beta Football (N=6)	83.3% Male (N=5) 16.7% Female (N=1)	6-10 years	66.7% Yes (N=4) 33.3% No (N=2)	16.7% Yes (N=1) 83.3% No (N=5)
Amateur national (N=107)	97.2% Male (N=104) 2.8% Female (N=3)	6-10 years	54.2% Yes (N=58) 45.8% (N=49)	18.7% Yes (N=20) 81.3% No (N=87)
Amateur regional (N=258)	99.6% Male (N=257) 0.4% Female (N=1)	21+ years	57% Yes (N=147) 43% No (N=111)	17.8% Yes (N=46) 82.2% No (N=212)
Referee development (N=34)	100% Male (N=34)	6-10 years	58.8% Yes (N=20) 41.2% (N=14)	3% Yes (N=1) 97% No (N=33)
Amateur football (N=296)	98.9% Male (N=293) 1.1% Female (N=3)	21+ years	52% Yes (N=154) 48% No (N=142)	18.2% Yes (N=54) 81.8% No (N=242)

Youth rural (N=68)	95.6% Male (N=65) 4.4% Female (N=3)	21+ years	54.4% Yes (N=37) 45.6% No (N=31)	16.2% Yes (N=11) 83.8% No (N=57)
Youth regional (N=187)	99.5% Male (N=186) 0.5% Female (N=1)	3-5 years	46% Yes (N=86) 54% No (N=101)	7% Yes (N=13) 93% No (N=174)
Juvenile development referee (N=8)	100% Male (N=8)	3-5 years	75% Yes (N=6) 25% No (N=2)	0.0% Yes (N=0) 100% No (N=8)
Association referee (N=33)	97% Male (N=32) 3% Female (N=1)	21+ years	72.7% Yes (N=24) 27.3% No (N=9)	15% Yes (N=5) 85% No (N=28)

Figure 2: Demographic data of referees from The Netherlands

French Referees (Level of officiating)	Sex Ratio	Years Officiating (M)	Victim of Verbal Abuse	Victim of Physical Abuse
Professional (Ligue 1 or 2) (N=16)	93.8% Male (N=15) 6.2% Female (N=1)	21+ years	88% Yes (N=14) 12% No (N=2)	18.8% Yes (N=3) 82.2% No (N=13)
National league 1 and 2 (N)	97.6% Male (N=40) 2.4% Female (N=1)	11-15 years	95% Yes (N=39) 5% No (N=2)	22% Yes (N=9) 78% No (N=32)
Female leagues 1 and 2 (N=12)	33.3% Male (N=4) 66.7% Female (N=8)	11-15 years	91.7% Yes (N=11) 8.3% No (N=1)	25% Yes (N=3) 75% No (N=9)
Youth championships (U19 and U17) (N=61)	96.7% Male (N=59) 3.3% Female (N=2)	3-5 years	70.5% Yes (N=43) 29.5% No (N=18)	18% Yes (N=11) 82% No (N=50)
Regional league (N=1015)	96.5% Male (N=979) 3.5% Female (N=36)	6-10 years	74.2% Yes (N=753) 26.8% (N=262)	20% Yes (N=198) 80% No (N=817)
District league (N=2238)	96.7% Male (N=2165) 3.3% Female (N=73)	Less than 2 years	64.8% Yes (N=1449) 36.2% No (N=789)	14.3% Yes (N=319) 85.7% No (N=1919)
Auxiliary referee (N=25)	88% Male (N=22)	3-5 years	52% Yes (N=13) 48% (N=12)	12% Yes (N=3) 88% No (N=22)

	12% Female (N=3)			
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Figure 3: Demographic data of referees from France

Aggression and abuse

The results from the study demonstrate that there is a high-level of abuse being experienced by referees. When asked whether they had ever experienced any form of verbal abuse during their refereeing career 51% of respondents reported that they had received verbal abuse.

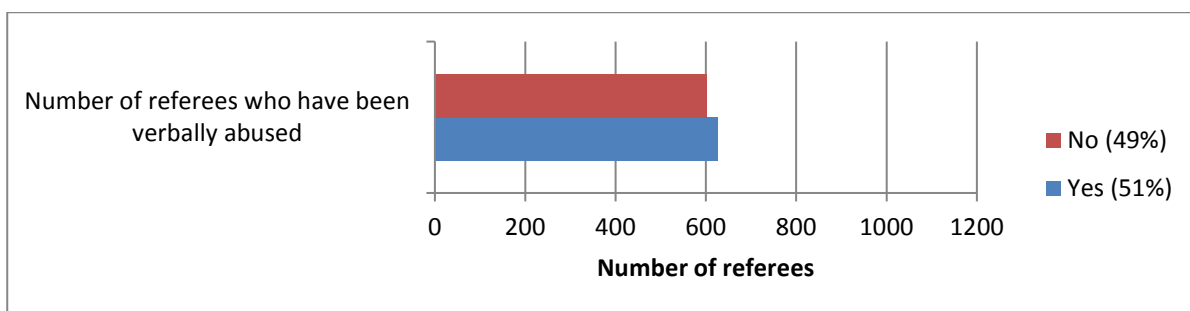


Figure 4: Percentage of referees that have received some form of verbal abuse during their career (The Netherlands)

In addition, 14.6% of referees stated that they had been a victim of some form of physical abuse during their refereeing career, whilst 86.4% stated that they have not received any physical abuse.

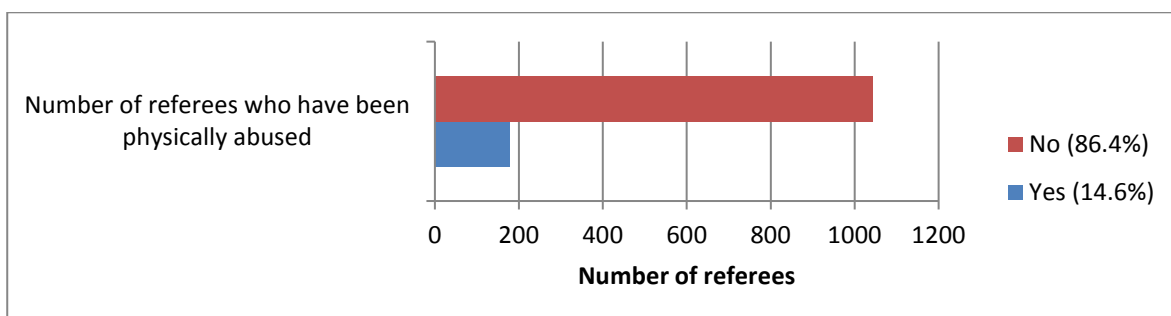


Figure 5: Percentage of referees who have experienced some form of physical abuse during their career (The Netherlands)

The open answer questions revealed issues with the aggression and abuse to which referees are exposed. It is clear that referees received abuse at different levels of the game regardless of age

or experience. Referees have reported receiving abuse before the game had even begun and issues with parents of players at youth level:

“I was just walking over to the pitch and a group of around ten people began to gesture towards me and were stood in an aggressive manner. Throughout the duration of the game they would aggressively dispute every decision that went against their team, with many derogatory comments aimed in my direction”.

(Male, aged between 18-24 with 3-5 years’ experience refereeing at regional level)

“When I was still a youth referee, a father with raised fists approached me after a match. The father was still spitting on the floor in my direction after the altercation had occurred and had to be escorted away by the coaches on the side lines”.

(Male, aged between 18-24 with 6-10 years experience refereeing at regional level)

These results are relatable to results from a study with English referees conducted by Webb et al (2017) who found that nearly two thirds of referees in England have experienced some form of verbal abuse during their career as a referee. A further 18.9% of referees reported that they had received some form of physical abuse throughout their refereeing career in England. The results from the present study have begun to emphasise common trends with work conducted in England in relation to referee experiences, working practices and abuse.

Following analysis of the French survey responses the results highlighted that referees were suffering from some form of abuse. The findings indicate that 68.1% of referees have been a victim of some form of verbal abuse, a considerably larger percentage than referees in the Netherlands.

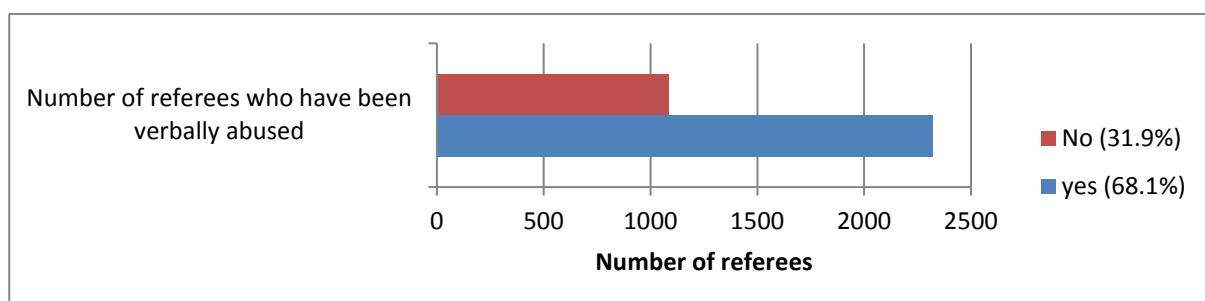


Figure 6: Percentage of referees who have been verbally abused (France)

In addition to referees suffering from verbal abuse, a further 16% of referees reported that they had been physically abused at some stage in their career, also comparable to previous findings from England, as well as the data collected from The Netherlands.

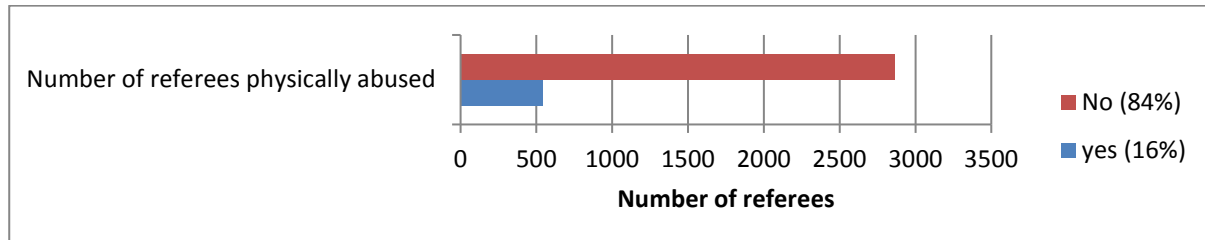


Figure 7: Percentage of referees who have been physically abused (France)

The open answer responses provided a further insight into the issues that referees experienced in relation to both verbal and physical abuse. There are examples of both physical and verbal abuse being directed towards referees, and there is also issues associated with the subsequent reporting of abuse, where referees felt that abuse is so common in the game that it is not worthwhile to report it to the relevant organisations.

“Verbal aggression is commonplace, whether it is players or club members or spectators. Physical aggression in particular scarred me. I reported this to my designator who filed a report which was not followed up, because I was asked if I knew the name of the individual (spectator coming towards me with a knife in their hands at the end of a match!!) I was not going to ask him his name!!!”

(Male aged between 55-64 with 16- 20 years’ experience refereeing at district level)

Yes, the so-called "verbal" attacks are commonplace for many referees. Personally, I suffered during a league game in U19 league in 2012 someone spitting on my back after the match.”

(Male aged between 18-24 with 11-15 years’ experience refereeing at regional level)

The responses are comparable with work conducted in England (see Cleland et al, 2017), where many coaches and spectators had stated that both verbal and physical abuse is still an issue, and referees in England expect to receive abuse and consequently accept that it is part of the game. These quotes also show that referees are not being supported adequately when they do report the abuse to the relevant organisation, leading to issues of non-reporting.

Support systems

The support that referees receive throughout their career has always been seen as a fundamental factor in ensuring that referees can be successful and achieve their potential (Nevill, Webb & Watts, 2013). Previous work conducted by Ridinger, Warner, Tingle and Kim (2018), found that 20% of match officials were considering leaving officiating as a result of a lack of support from administrative authorities. The findings of the present research demonstrate that there is a mixed response regarding the contentment of referees towards the level of support they are receiving. For example, in some cases in the Netherlands referees had reported the abuse they had received to the KNVB, and their individual case had been reviewed satisfactorily and the players involved had received retrospective bans as punishment. However, findings also imply that a number of referees are unhappy with the way that the KNVB handled the abuse reported. One referee commented that reporting abuse to the KNVB was the equivalent of “Carrying water out to the sea”, highlighting that referees felt that even if they wanted to report abuse, it would either be dealt with ineffectively or even ignored completely. When asked if there were any additional opportunities that would help to improve them as a referee, responses referred to a greater level of support from the KNVB and their union. It is clear that referees believed that they did not receive enough guidance and support, in contrast to the players. This is reflected in a number of different quotations that were drawn from the open answer questions.

“You learn that you are alone and the union / KNVB is not really there for you as a referee and the daily routine has priority and you as a referee have no shelter, guidance, no feedback and the players concerned walk around happily at their clubs to play.”

(Male, aged between 55 and 64 and has over 21 years’ experience)

Another referee who is also male, aged between 55 and 64 with 21 years’ experience stated that, “I reported the abuse and after that nothing was heard; only a lot of comments after a newspaper interview.” This shows that referees perceived that there is a lack of support, even with

a newspaper highlighting the incident there were still no repercussions for the offender. Therefore, it is understandable why referees were concerned with the current support systems available to them and why many are neglecting to report the abuse to which they are subjected.

This is emphasised further when considering responses from France. It is clear that there was also an issue with the support that referees felt that they have from the FFF, although there are additional issues in France meaning referees are having reports reversed and finding themselves as the individuals on trial:

‘ I reported it through an incident report. I am not supported by anyone and worse, during the disciplinary commission for the punishment of the culprits, the notion of aggression disappeared and I was the accused!’
(Male aged between 35-44 with 11-15 years’ experience, refereeing at district level)

There were also issues reported when colleagues have offered support for a fellow referee, with one referee reporting that, “we have very little support from the federation, and when a league official has supported me, he has himself been suspended, as well as the aggressor” (Male aged 18-24 with 6-10 years’ experience, refereeing at regional level). Evidence show that when a referee has reported the abuse and it is brought to a disciplinary committee, the punishments that the offenders have received were not been considered effective enough, “... the physical and verbal attacks were handled by the Disciplinary Committee ... the sanctions were not dissuasive [to the offenders] and weak” (Male aged 55-64 with 6-10 years’ experience, refereeing at district level).

A concern is that these experiences are also evident when considering young, inexperienced referees, relatively new to officiating. One referee reported that due to the amount of abuse, he did not report the abuse he received, and as a consequence also had some self-doubt about his performance, whilst others explain the abuse further and also the support that is available to referees in some situations:

‘Not reported ... it was my second match and I did not know how to react. Thinking I did something wrong ... that I get insulted because I was not good. At first we doubt, and without support it is difficult to separate things.’

(Male aged between 25-34 with 3-5 years' experience, refereeing at district level)

“I am a member of the UNAF Association, which protects the referees in case of problems, I did not need to send the information back because I have my official colleagues and I manage it ... it is very common for a referee to be insulted in the stands or to be threatened at the end of a match. We learn to be deaf and if the words go too far or are offensive, we report to the appropriate committee. It is also possible to ask the local team officials to maintain order in their stands at the risk of reporting against the club. This kind of aggression is becoming more and more rare.”

(Female aged between 25-34 with 11-15 years' experience, refereeing in the female divisions 1 and 2)

“UNAF has given me all its support, through the message of support but especially by the provision of a lawyer.”

(Male aged between 18-24 with 3-5 years' experience, refereeing in the National Youth Championships, U 19, U 17)

These quotes demonstrate differences between the support that referees receive relevant to the level at which they are officiating. The female referee, who is refereeing at a higher level in France, feels like she is well supported by the relevant organisations. Additionally, the referee from the under 17 and 19 national championships also felt that he received a satisfactory level of support, with the provision of a lawyer cited as a particular strength of the support network. Conversely, those who are refereeing at district and regional level believed that they need to receive a greater level of support and that the punishments need to be stricter and more regularly enforced in order to really make an impact. Of the total number of responses to the statement concerning whether incidents of abuse make referees consider if they wish to continue officiating, referees from regional leagues totalled 16.4% who either strongly agree or agree, with only 8.5% of referees disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement; whereas 38.1% of district referees that responded also either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement and only 15% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggests that increased support structures are required for referees that have experienced abuse in France, in order to prevent them considering leaving the game.

Training and Education

The present study determined whether referees were content with the current training and educational opportunities that are available to them. In the Netherlands, the themed KNVB events to which referees had access were well received. 74.8% of referees stated that these events were either very good or good and only 3.9% of referees reported that they believed the training events were poor or very poor.

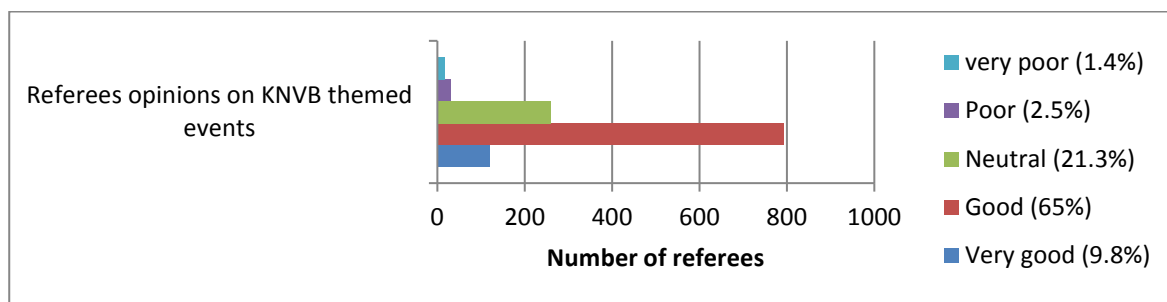


Figure 8: Referee opinions of KNVB themed training events

Moreover, 73.8% of referees stated that the training opportunities that they had access to were either very good or good and only 5% expressed that the training opportunities available to them were either poor or very poor. The descriptive statistics, therefore, give an overview of a broadly satisfied workforce in terms of their perceptions of the training available to them.

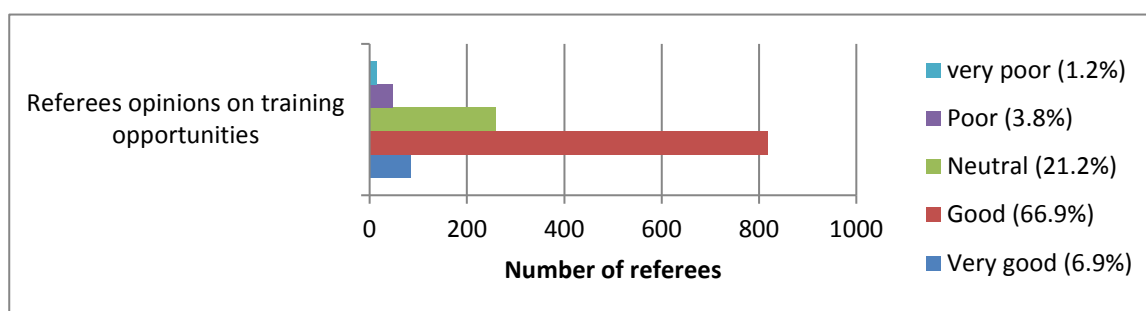


Figure 9: Referee perceptions of training (The Netherlands)

However, the responses gathered through the open answer questions responses made reference to the fact that although referees perceived the training to be effective and beneficial, they would like to see more training and educational opportunities made available. Referees observed

that further training, and in particular situation specific training, is required in order for them to develop fully and achieve their potential:

“These themed events that the KNVB provide are great up to a point. However, once you have begun to develop as a referee they are far too generic and I personally feel that many referees would benefit from situation specific training.”

(Male aged between 25 and 34, with 3 to 5 years’ experience)

This view was supported by another referee who also identified that there is a desire among referees for additional opportunities for self-improvement;

“... the current courses and meetings are compulsory. Possible in-depth meetings (for example about mental resilience, non-verbal communication) on an optional basis would be a nice addition for referees who would like to develop further.”

(Male, aged between 25 and 34 with 6 to 10 years’ experience)

Referees believe that it would be beneficial if they were able to have more access to training opportunities, especially considering that the demands associated with refereeing are increasing simultaneously with the pace and complexity of the sport (Samuel, Galily & Tenebaum, 2015). Referees also believe that there have been some barriers created between them as a workforce, and the KNVB, with referees reporting that more could be done to bring together the relevant organisations, “collaboration with other governing bodies and partners must be improved. The distance between the KNVB and referees is becoming too big.” (Male aged between 25-34, with 11-15 years’ experience, amateur football level). Another referee also identified that this support network requires further consideration:

“Better connectivity between different groups, more reports, having rapporteurs assess themselves in practice, making contact with the rapporteur to learn from it, allowing KNVB to be a real listener, KNVB and COVS should be partners and strengthen each other.”

(Male aged between 45-54, with 11-15 years’ experience, regional level).

When considering the responses in relation to the training opportunities provided by the

FFF, 68.7% of referees felt that these training events were either very good or good.

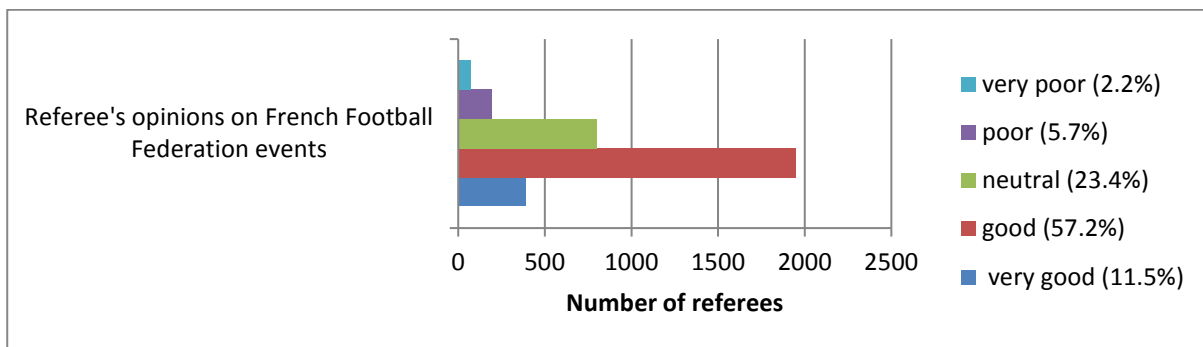


Figure 10: Referee opinions on FFF training events.

Although it is positive that referees are happy with the training opportunities that are available to them, and also comparable to the responses from referees in the Netherlands, the open answer questions identified that there are still areas which can be improved. For example, 7.9% of referees stated opportunities are poor or very poor and 23.4% of respondents were neutral, highlighting that referees believe that improvements are possible, ‘... issues that need to be more carefully considered are; conflict management, collaboration with assistants, positioning in the field to make better decisions and physical preparation’ (Male aged between 45-54 with 11-15 years’ experience, refereeing at district level). Another referee identified that more support and training is required given the issues that referees face when dealing with player and supporter behaviour:

‘‘Yes, already working in the sport I would like in the medium term to reconcile the two and propose personal training for aspects such as stress management and decision making etc. We are by no means helped on this subject. The only bases we are taught are the importance of the physiological aspects of the game but nothing about behaviour’’.

(Male aged between 25-34, with 6-10 years’ experience, refereeing in the League of New Aquitaine)

Similar to the responses from The Netherlands, there is a desire from referees for access to more training and education in order to improve themselves. In addition there is also a perceived lack of collaboration between the FFF and referees, with referees reporting that individual unions can be more effective:

‘‘Yes, although I have been a referee for only a year, I have not been officially offered additional training to improve myself. I feel that I have had to learn a lot from myself or through the union of which I am a member.’’

(Male aged between 25-34 with less than 2 years' experience, refereeing in the league of Brittany)

“ ... more regular training would help to improve oneself. As an arbitrator we always want more. Opportunities are quite rare compared to players who benefit from the advice of their coach, also more personal monitoring would allow young referees to progress much more quickly. Increasing the number of observers could be a solution. This opens the door to new opportunities for former referees who can no longer practice. Finally, the professionalisation of arbitration in France is a good thing and participates in the development of this activity but its emergence is only a beginning.”

(Male aged between under 18 with 3-5 years' experience, refereeing at regional level)

These quotes demonstrate both positive and negative aspects. Referees want to improve and advance through training and engagement with the FFF, although they believed that the opportunities could be more regular and that there was a gap between the FFF and the refereeing community.

Development Opportunities

The final higher order theme derived from the data was the development opportunities that are available to referees. Figure 11 demonstrates that 56.4% of referees felt their personal development opportunities were either very good or good, 34.6% stated that they felt they had moderate personal development opportunities, and 9% of referees believed that their development opportunities were either poor or very poor.

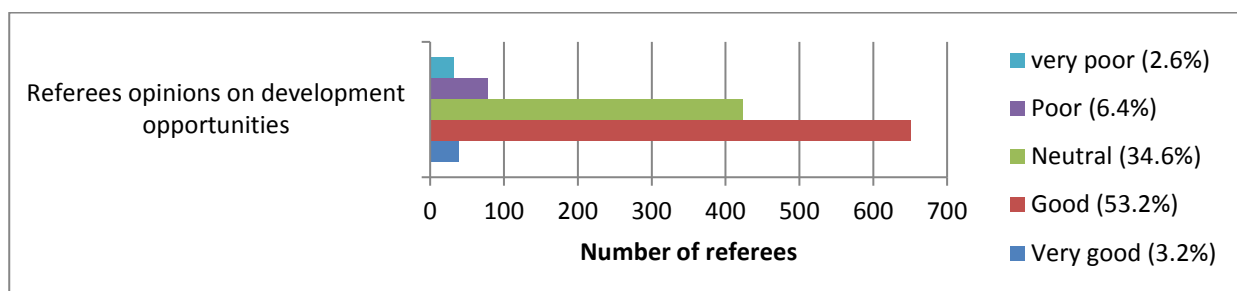


Figure 11: Referee perceptions of development opportunities (The Netherlands)

Despite 56.4% of referees stating that their development opportunities were either good or very good, the open responses indicated that these development opportunities could be further

improved. One referee, aged between 18 and 24 with 3 to 5 years' experience, made reference to the fact that there are only two assessments each year, and this is the only chance you get to progress:

“Throughout the entire year there are only two opportunities that you get to progress. Personally I do not feel that this is a fair system, I have not progressed before due to the fact that I was refereeing a particularly difficult derby fixture. I now have to wait until the next assessment point to be able to progress even though I am clearly accomplished enough to referee at a higher level”.

Another younger referee also identified that there should be more opportunities for referees, and that the exposure to further talent development would lead to significant improvements and progression amongst the wider refereeing community:

“I have been a youth referee for a long time at my own amateur club and over the last 2 years for the KNVB. I think I have more in me than what I can show at the level where I now referee. I would find it tremendously instructive to participate in the development trajectory / talent trajectory”.

(Male, aged under 18, with 2 years' experience, senior level)

These responses show that although there is a good level of satisfaction with the current development opportunities, there is also a desire from referees to develop further. Therefore, it can be argued that more resources and development opportunities should be made available to those that wish to further their refereeing careers.

It was also evident from the data that referees were generally satisfied with their development opportunities in France. The results showed that just over 50% of referees felt that their personal development opportunities were either very good or good, drawing similarities between the figures reported in The Netherlands.

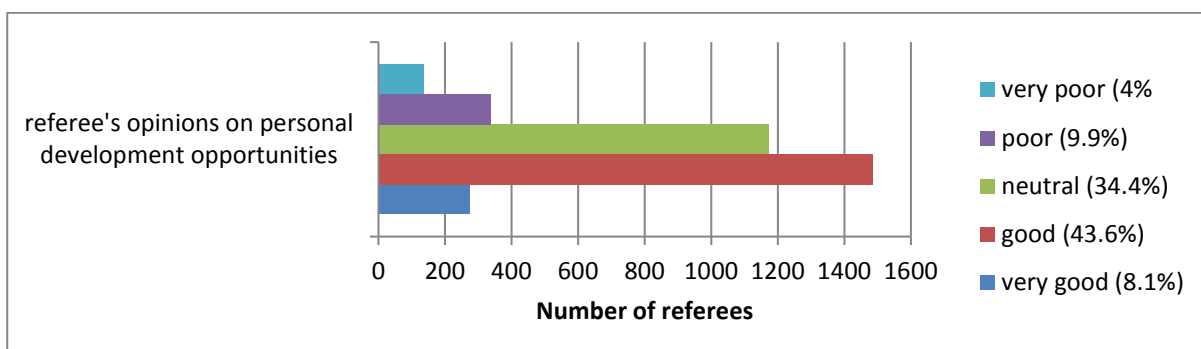


Figure 12: Referee opinions on development opportunities (France)

Moreover, a further 41.8% of referees believe that the opportunity for promotion is either very good or good in France, nevertheless 19.3% also believed that opportunities were either poor or very poor.

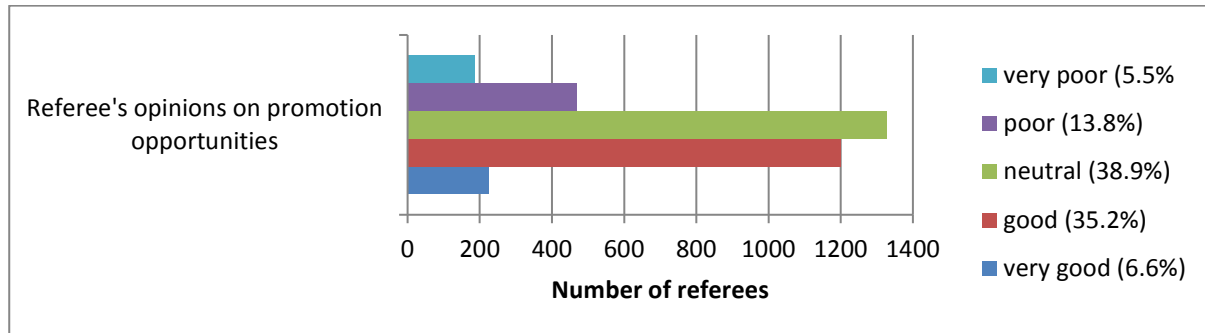


Figure 13: Referee opinions on promotion opportunities (France)

Referees are generally happy with their development and promotion opportunities, although the open answer questions did identify a number of areas which would help improve these opportunities. For example, young referees felt that more needed to be done to support them, with some mentioning the possibility of “fast tracking” those referees who are particularly talented or show ambition. This is something which does occur in England, although it is also not evident in many other countries in European football presently (Webb, 2017), but it is an area which referees have identified as an area which could be improved or investigated further:

“Highlighting young referees who arrived late on the job like me (aged 22) to be able to be trained and reach a high level of refereeing via internships or intensive training courses for those who are passionate and want the same opportunity as those who started early at age 15 in referee schools.”
(Male aged between 18-24 with less than 2 years’ experience, refereeing at district level)

“I wish I could progress to the elite level of the French league and if necessary I would give all necessary means. However, since I am a student and the scheduling of refereeing courses is not adapted, I encounter difficulties that no one helps me to overcome. I find it unfortunate that I cannot move forward on organizational issues that should not be insurmountable.”
(Male aged between 18-24 with less than 2 years’ experience, refereeing in The League of the Great East)

Clearly referees in these positions must also demonstrate the required skills and potential to be in a position to undertake the fast tracking opportunities to which they refer, although this could

also assist with the increased retention of referees. Referees also believe that having age limits is prohibitive to development, and that any promotion should be linked to ability and core competencies, rather than anything to do with age.

“I would like to see the promotions attributed much more according to the competence of the referees and not according to their age. The age limit for joining the federation is a little severe: there are many referees over 30 who have a better physical condition than 20 year olds, so the best for refereeing is to give a chance for people who get noticed and who have passed the legal age for one reason or another (especially starting the late arbitration).”
(Male aged between 25-34 with 3-5 years’ experience, refereeing at district level)

“Yes I would like to follow additional training. But since I started refereeing at 42, I was always told that since I was over 40 at the start of my initial referee training, my fate was frozen. Today I am 51 years old so I have to be one of the oldest referees in my District. For all that, I am very sporty; much sportier than most young league referees. I am also a very good writer; so I make excellent written reports as soon as necessary. But given my advanced age and despite my excellent physical and editorial qualities (qualities related to my profession), my District has never allowed me to progress beyond the 1st Division, the division to which I have also acceded very quickly. It is really harmful that neither additional training, nor any access to the league has ever been proposed to me.”
(Male aged between 45-54 with 6-10 years’ experience, refereeing at district level)

Referees have identified the importance of promotion, and have cited barriers related to age as a particular concern, with another referee outlining that some of the processes which the FFF employ not potentially providing equal opportunities for referees:

“As early as the first 6 months, the notion of equal opportunities for progress in the hierarchy is removed. The current system (selection of target groups, accompaniment of some young referees by the organisations such as the FFF, leagues and districts) is absolutely not governed by equality or equity. It is now too late for me to access these courses, but I would have liked to have them during my first 2-3 years of refereeing. These courses are those dealing with reflections of game situations, learning the laws of the game, physical development.”
(Male aged between 18-24 with 6-10 years’ experience, refereeing in the Regional league)

The data also makes clear that there is a lack of correlation between satisfaction with training opportunities when compared to satisfaction with the development opportunities. Referees reported that they are generally pleased with the training opportunities available to them, however

they also felt that this does not equate to enough development opportunities. Therefore, there is the potential for growth and development of the referee workforce by ensuring that the training opportunities lead into development opportunities, to avoid a loss of motivation, and the potential stagnation of referees are certain levels of the development continuum.

Comparative Analysis

The four higher order themes; aggression and abuse, support systems, training and education and development opportunities have been discussed in depth with figures and quotes from the data utilised to highlight the pertinent findings and associated issues. This section of the report further develop a number of the key points previously identified, whilst considering potential effects and implications upon the refereeing working practices and operational environments.

In relation to the training and education of referees, as well as the subsequent development and promotional opportunities, the results demonstrated that there are similar levels of satisfaction across France and the Netherlands (see figures 8 and 9). However, referees from both countries still believed they would benefit from increased development opportunities, identifying the potential positive benefits of a more collaborative approach from the governing bodies towards the development opportunities available. Referees have suggested that increasing the number of tutors for young referees would be beneficial and provides further opportunities for referees to develop:

“The setting up of a "tutor" as soon as a young referee can be considered as promising whether it is at the regional or federal level but this in order to better help him progress. Methods sheets to better learn the laws of the game, and not just analyse a book of 300 pages. An awareness of deviant behaviour as a player could only help the work of the referees, it would greatly enhance the image of the refereeing body.”

(Male, aged between 18-24 with 3-5 years' experience, refereeing at the National Youth Championships, U 19, U 17)

Referees also asked for refereeing to be more open to reform and collaboration, both within their own country and also with referees from other countries, in order to further increase standards:

‘‘It would have been wise to reform the system. Today, refereeing is constantly closing in on itself rather than opening up to others. Arbitration should be organized around clubs / players and try not to become a closed community, this will only be a negative for the profession of refereeing.’’
(Male aged between 25-34 with 16-20 years’ experience, refereeing at regional level)

‘‘For the homogeneity of the arbitration and therefore the decision making, I think it would be very instructive for us (female federal referees) to reunite all with the FFF referees of other neighbouring countries. We could thus exchange, compare, debate and agree on certain points which remain unclear and subjective. This is often what is criticized by the arbitrators elsewhere; decision instability.’’

(Female, aged between 25-34 with 11-15 years’ experience, refereeing in the female divisions 1 and 2)

These suggestions from are aimed at increasing the level of quality amongst referees.

However, a significant barrier to referees developing is the abuse to which they are subjected.

There are some quite noticeable differences in relation to the level of abuse that referees from

France and The Netherlands are receiving and the subsequent issues which this abuse is causing.

First, when considering how often referees are suffering from abuse 2.2% of referees from the

Netherlands said that they were abused either every game or every few games. Contrastingly,

14.4% of French referees stated that they received abuse either every game or every few games.

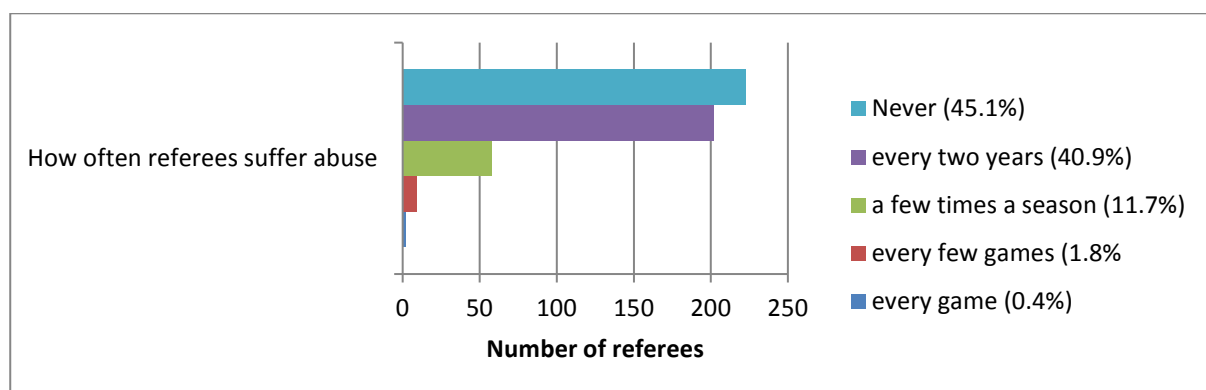


Figure 14: How often are referees suffering from abuse, both verbal and physical (Netherlands)

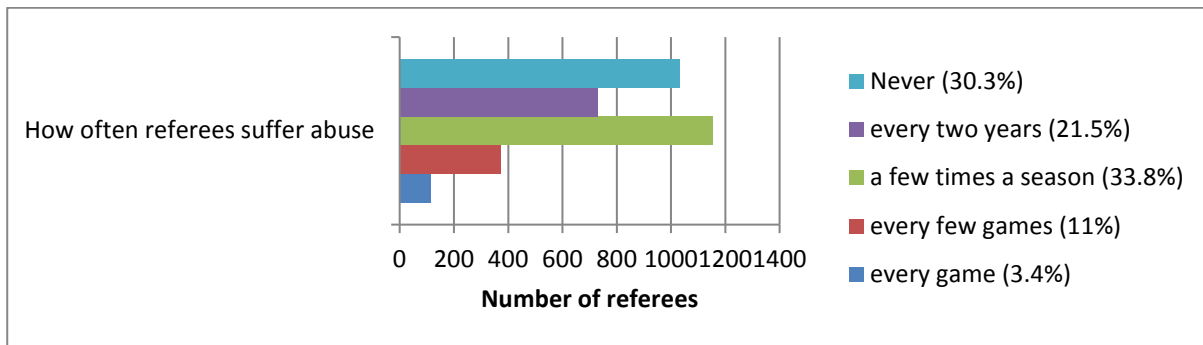


Figure 15: How often referees suffer abuse, both verbal and physical (France).

The open answer responses elaborate upon this, with referees reporting that the abuse is occurring with regularity and that something needs to be done quickly in order to change the current situation, ‘‘we have means of sanction and then reports, for my part, I find that there are more and more files of this kind. It is necessary to act and act very, very quickly’’ (Male aged between 45-54 with more than 21 years’ experience, refereeing at district level). It is the scale and level of abuse in France, particularly from supporters, which has been identified as an issue by referees, ‘‘the physical aggression went into discipline and the player was sanctioned, verbal attacks are almost weekly, mainly from supporters’’ (Male aged between 25-34 with 6-10 years’ experience, refereeing at regional level).

Referees in both France and the Netherlands identified that they are more susceptible to forms of abuse if they officiate at the lower levels of the game. In France 65.8% of referees strongly agree or agree that abuse is more prevalent at lower levels of football and in the Netherlands 66.8% of referees either strongly agree or agree that abuse is more prevalent at lower levels of football. However, there are noticeable differences between France and the Netherlands, when considering whether the level of abuse that referees receive has increased in recent years. The responses from referees in the Netherlands indicated that they felt violence has not particularly increased in recent times (26.5% of referees), whereas nearly two thirds (68.5%) of French referee respondents specified that the level of abuse which they had experienced recently had increased.

There were also differences between the two countries in relation to the impact that the abuse has on referees. When asked whether the abuse they experience has made them unsure on continuing their career as a referee, 19.9% of Dutch referees either totally agreed or agreed. This is a concerning development, particularly as when extrapolated from the present data to the wider refereeing population, this equates to approximately 800 of the 4,000 active referees in the Netherlands.

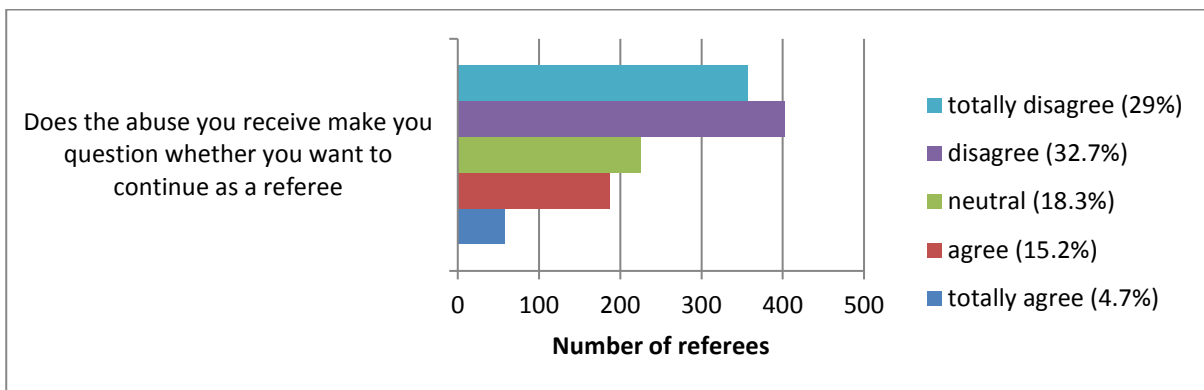


Figure 16: Percentage of referees considering leaving due to abuse (The Netherlands)

Conversely, when asked the same question, 56.6% of French referees said that they either totally agreed or agreed that the violence to which they are exposed has made them unsure whether to continue refereeing.

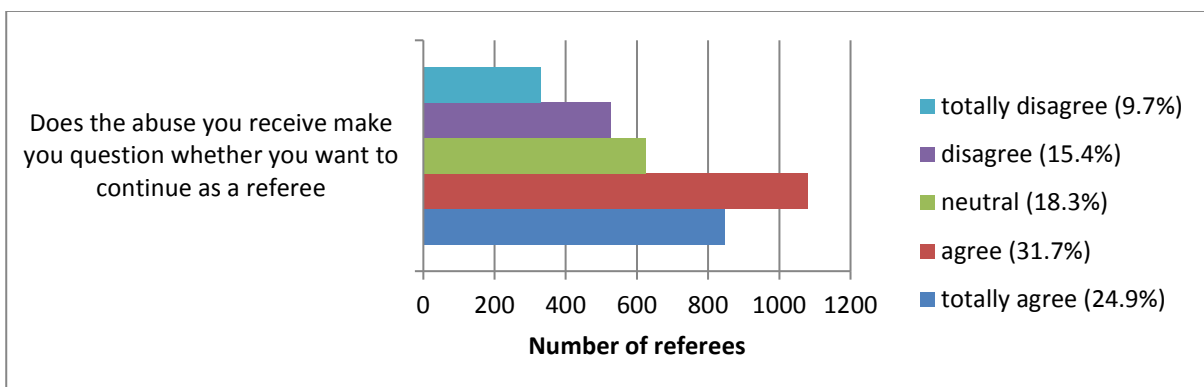


Figure 17: Percentage of referees considering leaving due to abuse (France)

The underlying issue of abuse is a contributory factor when considering why referees are considering leaving the game. Therefore, support from governing bodies and referee associations

and societies is essential in order to assist referees when they receive abuse. However, referees have indicated that these networks require further streamlining and thought, ‘... disciplinary Committee of the League (at the time NPDC) + Youth District + AFAF. Only AFAF contacted me; deafening silence on the part of the official authorities’ (Male aged between 18-24 with 3-5 years’ experience, refereeing at district level).

Related to this issue, and an area which requires urgent attention by the governing bodies is the fact that a significant proportion of referees were considering leaving within the next twelve months, with 21.6% of French referees and 11.7% of referees from the Netherlands, stated that they were considering walking away from the game. This is a concern, which requires further thought and investment in the support networks and also in targeting the reduction of abuse towards referees. The loss of a significant proportion of referees could have a substantial impact upon the football systems in either country, a shortage of referees meaning that fixtures cannot be completed, and the quality of referees of paramount importance for the functioning and organisation of successful football systems around the world (Wicker & Frick, 2016).

The fact that there is a proportion of referees from both The Netherlands and France who are considering finishing their role as a referee, means there are potentially wider implications for the general populations of both countries. Referees can be seen as facilitators of physical activity, meaning that they provide the general public with the opportunity to play sport and football as a form of physical activity. If the percentages of referees who have answered that they have considered stopping do stop, this will result in less people being able to exercise due to matches not being played. This could, conceivably, result in a barrier to accessing organised physical activity or sport, which would have a related effect on the health and well-being of the general population of people that play football (i.e., if they are less physically active), placing greater strain on the healthcare systems of both France and The Netherlands.

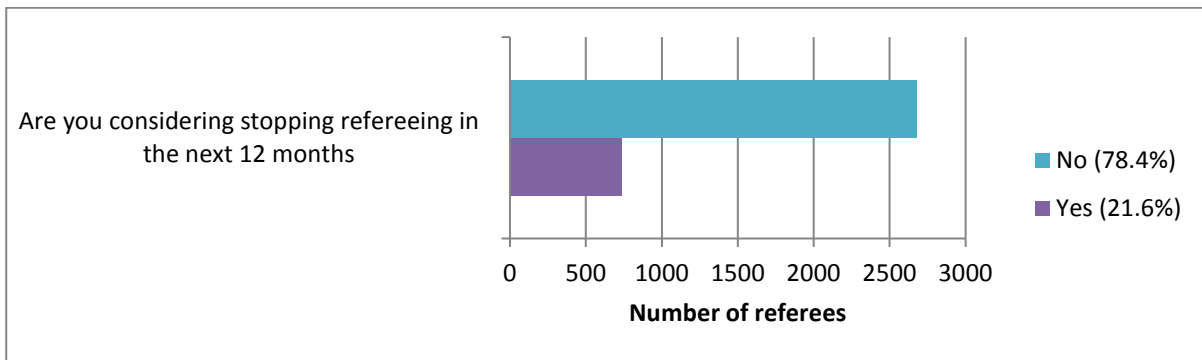


Figure 18: Percentage of referees considering stopping within the next 12 months (The Netherlands)

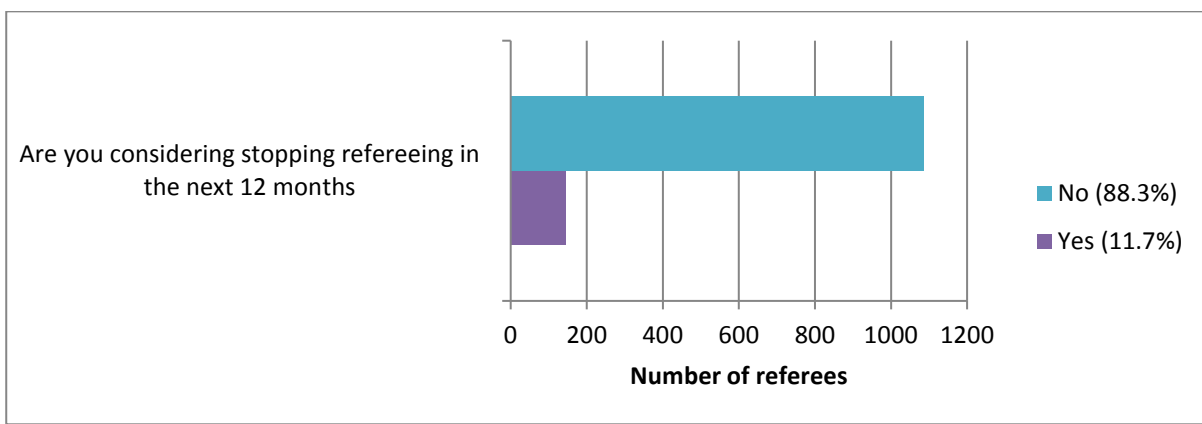


Figure 19: Percentage of referees stopping leaving within the next 12 months (France)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this report was to provide UEFA with the pertinent findings from the data collected from the online surveys, providing an insight into the current working practices and operational environments of referees in France and the Netherlands. The findings have demonstrated that referees are satisfied with aspects of training and development in both countries, as well as the specific themed events from the respective football federations, although referee satisfaction with personal development opportunities is less supportive. Furthermore, referees in the Netherlands are content with their career progression opportunities, although in France referees are more circumspect with regard to their promotional opportunities. However, despite the relative satisfaction expressed by referees in these areas, there are also areas of concern which have been identified through both the descriptive statics and the qualitative open responses.

Perhaps the most pressing issue is the verbal and physical abuse that referees are continuously receiving. This abuse is having a significant impact on both countries, and as a result there is a possibility that a significant number of referees will not be retained within the next twelve months. The findings related to abuse show that referee retention is an issue across transnational boundaries. Further research is required in other countries around Europe to better understand these complex issues, leading to the ability to intervene through educational provision and training mechanisms aimed at referees, players, coaches and spectators. Specific recommendations and policy implications are outlined further in the 'Future Research and Recommendations' section.

Overview of Findings:

- Federations demonstrated good levels of referee satisfaction related to referee training events and areas of personal development.
- Referees were content with promotion opportunities in the Netherlands and although satisfied in France, were less positive in their responses.
- There were differences in the demographic makeup of the referee population responses, with a larger number of the respondent population in the Netherlands refereeing for 21 years or more (31.2% compared to 10.5% in France), with less new referees evident in the Netherlands (4.1% had officiated for 2 years or less) than in France (20.3% had officiated for 2 years or less).
- High numbers of referees stated that they received verbal abuse (68.1% in France and 51% in the Netherlands) and physical abuse (16% in France and 14.6% in the Netherlands). The qualitative responses reported a significant number of incidents and the generation of 'aggression and abuse' as a higher order theme following thematic analysis.
- Referees believed that abuse is considerably more likely at lower levels of the game, and that there are issues with spectators (particularly in France).

- The frequency of both physical and verbal abuse in France and the Netherlands is comparable to that in England, although both countries demonstrated that incidents occur less frequently than in England:

The Netherlands – every match (0.4%), every couple of games (1.8%), a few times a season (11.7%), every few years (40.9%), never (45.1%).

France – every match (3.4%), every few matches (11%), a few times a season (33.8%), every few years (21.5%), never (30.3%).

England – Every match (21.8%), every couple of games (37.1%), a few times a season (29.9%), every few years (3.8%), never (6.2%).

These findings are contradicted by the scale of the incidents reported in the open responses. Clearly advances have been made, however there may also be underlying issues associated to the normalisation of abuse within referee populations and lack of reporting of incidents.

- A greater number of referees stated that they are considering leaving in the next 12 months in France (21.6%) than the Netherlands (11.7%), although both numbers are significant in terms of referee drop out.

Future Research and Recommendations

The research has produced some significant recommendations and areas for essential future research. The present study has developed understanding associated to referee working conditions and experiences in two European countries, however following the success of this pilot research, we now need to extend our understanding to other countries around Europe to obtain a bigger picture of the occurrences in other countries. Once this understanding is obtained we can identify areas of educational support and interventions to improve referee retention, an area identified as a continuing issue within this report. It would also be advantageous to conduct interviews to further support and interrogate initial findings, and elaborate upon the open responses from the survey responses.

Furthermore, as abuse towards referees continues to be an issue in football, we do not understand subtle cultural differences in other European countries, or the implications of this abuse upon the individual referee, or the players, coaches and spectators who witness these incidents. Occurrences of abuse could have negative mental health implications and affect the well-being of those involved. Further research is required to better understand the mental health literacy of referees, and also players, coaches and spectators in football.

Therefore recommendations are as follows:

- Increased support networks for referees related to the reporting of abusive incidents
 - Increased correspondence with referees once an incident of abuse has been reported
- Educational information disseminated regarding abuse, and coping with incidents of abuse
- A coordinated, Europe wide, whole game strategy and approach to reducing abuse, increasing recruitment and improving retention rates – the above points will assist in addressing dropout rates and also recruitment issues
- Consideration of the referee pathways, opportunities for promotion, fast track schemes, and additional development opportunities – evidence suggests that failure to do this could lead to a more disenfranchised workforce, and greater dropout rates
- Further research in other European countries is required to better understand referee working conditions and operational environments and the differences between countries
- Introduction of interviews into the research design to add further depth and a mixed method approach to the findings
- Research building on the work and findings related to abuse and the importance of support networks, on referee mental health and well-being
 - This would also lead to associated work and interventions with players, coaches and spectators
- Comparisons with other sports through similar research designs

- These recommendations can build on the good work related to training and development of referees and the trust fostered between the federations and the referees, evident throughout this report

This research and report have sought to explore and analyse the working practices and operational environments of referees from a transnational perspective. Findings have been compared and contrasted across the two countries, and also compared to recent findings in England where appropriate. The online survey has uncovered some areas of strength for the federations, such as satisfaction with training events, and lower frequencies of abuse, particularly in the Netherlands, although abusive situations and exposure to abuse still exists, proving that work and attention is still required. We do not know the associated implications of abuse on the individual referee, as well as the players, coaches and spectators, and therefore underlying mental health issues may exist. There are also concerns about the number and scale of referees that are considering leaving the game in both countries. Better understanding of the causal issues is required in order to tackle challenges in this area, and subsequently provide educational material and interventions. This report has demonstrated that work conducted utilising the methodological approach employed here can and does work effectively, and also that further research and engagement with federations and UEFA is required in order to further develop understanding of this population of referees.

Annex 1 - References

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