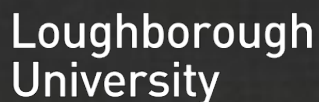


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# UEFA Research Grant Final Report

# Tim Kübel



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## **Project Information**

Developing Elite Footballers across Europe, is a one year comparative study of German and English youth development philosophies, conducted as part of the UEFA Research Grant Program 2024/2025.

## **Disclaimer**

Funded by the 2024/2025 UEFA Research Grant Program and endorsed by the DFB. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of UEFA or the DFB. Neither UEFA nor the DFB can be held responsible for them.

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## Executive Summary

Germany and England have rich histories of success in football and their respective youth development programs have produced many talented players over the years. However, the philosophies and approaches used by the two countries in their youth development programs have been different. This research identified the overarching objectives of German and English elite youth football academies (RQ1), based on insights provided from 17 senior staff members in German and English Youth Academy's objectives and definitions of success were largely consistent across country and gender and encompassed a) enabling personal growth; b) attracting, retaining, developing, and transitioning players into professional football; c) winning games and trophies.

A comprehensive exploration of the multi-level factors that impact youth development philosophies across countries (RQ2) revealed that a) the social-cultural context (i.e., "entry age"), b) National Association initiatives (i.e., *EPPP* and *Projekt Zukunft*) and c) regulations, significantly impact youth development philosophies on a national, regional, and local level.

Looking more closely at strengths and weaknesses of the German as well as English approach to youth development (RQ3), it became apparent that development of football across all levels is a strength of the German system, whereas financial strength and centralized control led by the premier league are advantages on the English side. As for weaknesses federalism and slow bureaucracy were considered the biggest weakness within Germany, and over-professionalization at a young age within the English framework.

Moreover, while youth development has been professionalized and rigorously structured on the men's side of the game for years, it is only recently that the FA as well as the DFB have started to review and establish clearer development pathways on the women's side. As such, this study explored to which extent development philosophies and national initiatives are comparable across male and female academies (RQ4). Findings suggest, that albeit there are some similarities across male and female academies there are some noteworthy differences. First, availability of resources. Second, lack of standardized development structures. Third, greater variation in selection niveau and athletic foundation.

The following recommendations for other UEFA member federations and clubs are offered (RQ5).

### Clubs

- Establishing clear and overarching philosophy from under 9s to first team
- Creating age-appropriate development structures
- A person-centred approach is essential for maximizing potential

### NGBs

- Different entities should govern different aspects of youth development
- Contextual audits and certificates ensure minimum standard of provision
- Accelerating innovation cycles and more periodic reflections are required

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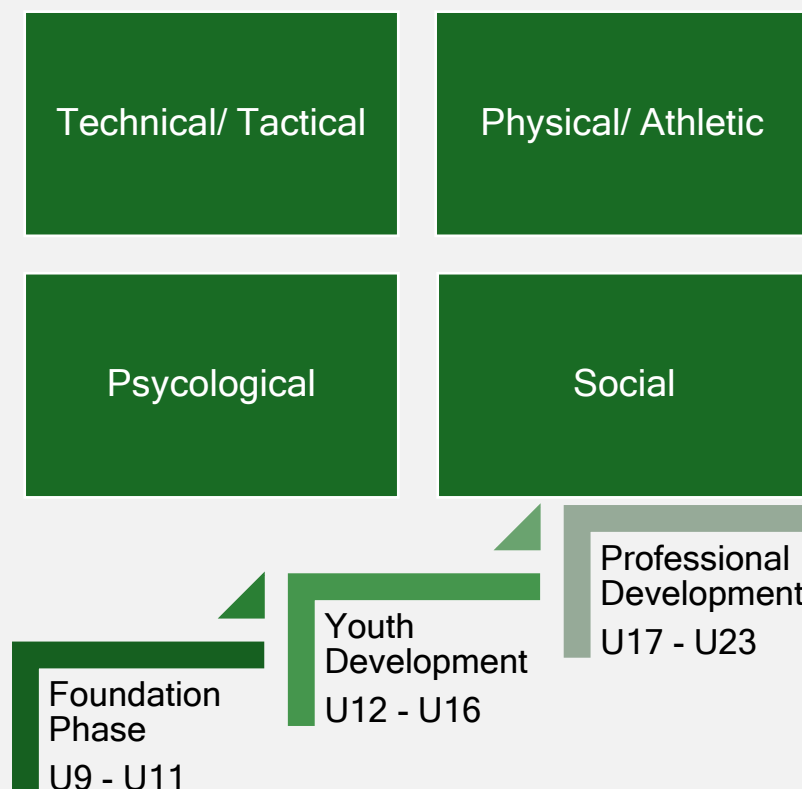


## 1. Introduction

Germany and England have rich histories of success in football and their respective youth development programs have produced many talented players over the years. However, the philosophies and approaches used by the two countries in their youth development programs have been different. While Germany allegedly has emphasized the development of tactical proficiency and game management skills, England appears to focus on individual player development through initiatives like the *Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP)*. That is, the *EPPP*, abandons traditional league structures until the under-18 age group, a shift that Germany is only starting to consider in the context of the professional development phase (PDP) up from the 2024/25 season (DFB 2023a; Premier League, 2012; 2022).

The *EPPP*, implemented in collaboration with the Premier League (PL) in 2012, aims to develop more and better home-grown players through their four-corner (technical, physical, psychological, social), three phase (foundation, youth development, professional development) model (Premier League, 2012).

**Figure 1**  
*English Youth Development Model*



Academies are independently audited and given a category status of one to four, with Category One representing the most elite accreditation. A variety of different factors are considered for the classification including, training facilities, coaching proficiency, education, and welfare provisions. The higher a club's category, the more funding the respective clubs receives from the PL and Football Association (FA). As of the 2024/2025 season there were approximately 120 professional academies accredited under the *EPPP* with 25 clubs having received the category one status.

**Figure 2**  
*EPPP Category One Accredited Clubs*



*Official Club Logos*

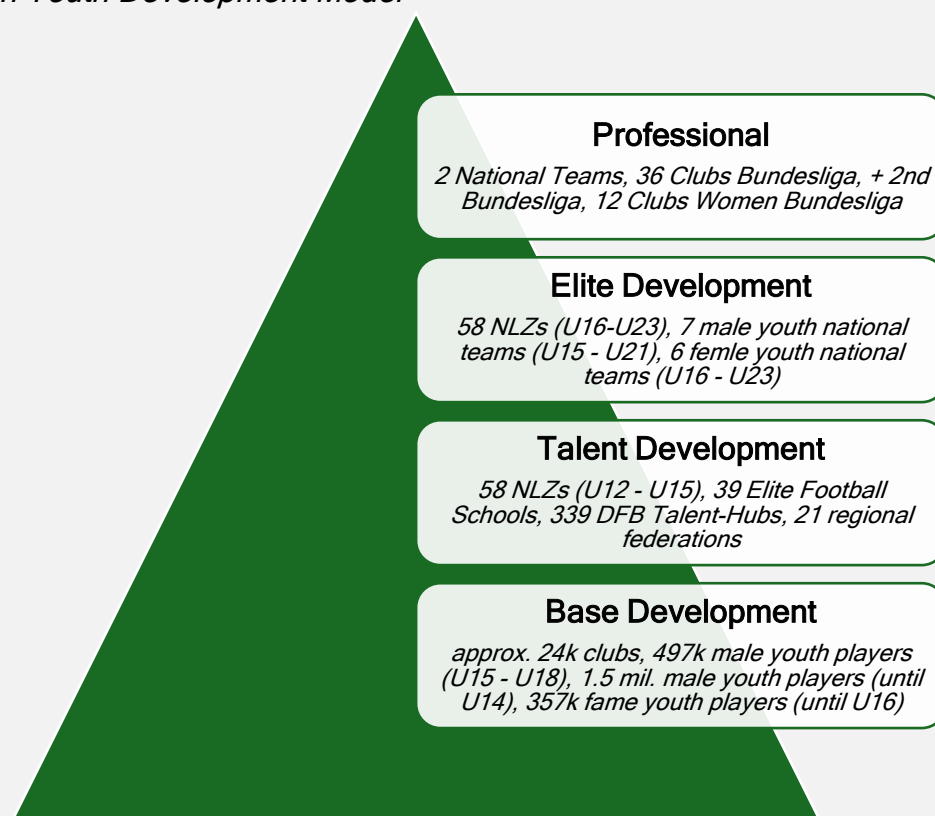
Since the inception of the *EPPP* England has seen more young English players in the PL and the national team (Premier League, 2022). England's commitment to and significant investment in youth development has resulted in climbing from 5th place in 2012/13 to first in 2022 for average value of u21 players of any nationality and an over 50% increase of the number of minutes played by u23 homegrown players (Premier League, 2022; Ernst & Young, 2022).



However, England has faced criticism for inefficiencies in youth-to-senior transitions, unlike Germany known as a country, that enables young players to progress and play at the elite senior level. The Bundesliga sees 61% more minutes played by players under the age of 21 compared to the PL, leading to young players like Jude Bellingham and Jamal Musiala using Germany as a steppingstone during their professional development phase (CIES, 2022). Moreover, in 2023/2024 68 homegrown players made their debut in the Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga (DFB & DFL, 2022)

Albeit the phases of youth development in Germany are similar to those in England, youth development in Germany operates within a four-level pyramid model, ranging from “*Basisförderung*” (German for: development at the base-level), over “*Talentförderung*” (German for: talent development), and “*Eliteförderung*” (German for: elite development”, to the highest level the “*Profibereich*” (German for: Professional Level).

**Figure 3**  
*German Youth Development Model*



*Adapted from DFB & DFL, 2022*



The DFB and DFL require all clubs competing in the Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga to operate a “*Nachwuchsleistungszentrum*” (NLZ; German for: Youth Academy), with clubs competing in the third league and regional league given the option to apply for an NLZ license. In 2024/2025 there were a total of 58 NLZs at the elite level of male youth development in Germany.

**Figure 4**

*Map of German Elite Male Youth Academies 2024/2025*



*Copyright DFB & DFL, 2022*

Recognizing that the development process of youth players is influenced by many different factors (e.g., school, coaches, accommodation, parents, competition structure), the German Football Association (DFB) launched “*Projekt Zukunft*” (German for: future project) in 2018 to investigate innovative ways to systematically improve the development process of young German footballers at the talent and elite level of the pyramid (DFB, 2018). While initially unsuccessful, it has led to the restructuring of academy football league structures starting in the 2024/25 season. The aim of the change is to focus more on development than results, particularly for teams fighting relegation (DFB, 2023a).

Whereas youth development has been professionalized and rigorously structured on the men’s side of the game for years, it is only recently that the FA as well as the DFB

have started to review and establish clearer development pathways on the women's side. Originally launched in 2020 the FA's "*Inspiring Positive Change*" strategy has seen the creation of 73 Emerging Talent Centres (ETCs) as well as 21 Professional Game Academies (PGAs) within England, hoping to remove barriers and widen access to talent systems at reduced costs (TheFa, 2024).

ETCs are the entry point for identifying and developing potential and focus on players aged 8-16. ETC replaced the existing regional talent centres as well as advanced coaching centres with the goal to increase the number of players in the talent pipeline, and to reduce the travel time for those talents (England Football, 2023a). Funding for ETCs is provided by the FA and the PL.



*PGA Banner*

PGAs focus on ages 14-20 and aim to develop and support female talents in their transition into senior football. PGAs were developed in collaboration with clubs in the Women's Super League (WSL) and Women's Championship and replaced the FA WSL Academies. PGAs are situated at the high-performance level and are awarded a category status of one to two. Category One caters for two age groups, and Category Two caters for one age group, with age groups boundaries selected in line with the respective club's development model (England Football, 2023b)

There are currently 21 PGAs (17 Category One, 4 Category Two) operating, but by the upcoming 2025/2026 season the FA has set the expectation that all 24 WSL and Championship clubs will be required to deliver a PGA. Even though clubs within the WSL as well as PL have to adhere to a rule mandating that at least eight players in their first-team squad are homegrown, (Womensleague, 2023), more than two-thirds of the players who have played a WSL Game in the 2024/2025 season were international. That is, of the 203 players in the WSL only 30.5% would be eligible to play for England, indicating that homegrown talent no longer gets as many

opportunities and meaningful minutes at the highest level of the game as they used to five years ago (TheGuardian, 2024).

**Figure 5**

*English Women's Professional Game Academies 2024/2025*

**Category 1**



**Category 2**



*Official Club Logos*

As for the German side, in 2021 the DFB launched their strategy “*Frauen im Fussball - Fast Forward (FF27)*”, with the aim to develop a holistic strategy for women’s and girl’s football from the grassroots to the top (DFB, 2022). As part of *FF27*, in 2023, the DFB launched their pilot phase for the “*Förder- und Leistungszentren weiblich*”(FLZW,

German for: Development and Elite Performance Centre Female), aiming to professionalize and standardize development pathways for girls by establishing licensing criteria for academies (DFB, 2023b). All clubs of the Frauen Bundesliga, 2. Frauen Bundesliga, and Regional League were eligible to apply for the pilot phase, with five clubs participating.

**Figure 6**

*German “Development and Elite Performance Centre Female” Pilot Clubs*



*Official Club Logos*

As of January 2025 for the first time, six clubs in the Frauen Bundesliga operate an officially accredited female youth development academy, with TSG Hoffenheim, SGS Essen, and FC Bayern Munich being awarded the “DFB Leistungszentrum” (LZw, German for: Elite Performance Centre) status and Eintracht Frankfurt, SC Freiburg, and VFL Wolfsburg being awarded the “DFB Talentförderzentrum” (TFZw, German for: Talent Development Centre) status (DFB, 2024). Accreditation is currently voluntary for clubs and requires an annual application.

**Figure 7**

*German Women Elite Performance and Talent Development Centre's 2025*



*Official Club Logos*



Interestingly, whereas the WSL has seen a steep increase of overseas talent, in the 2024/2025 season 197 players within the Frauen Bundesliga were German and played a total of 78,746 minutes depicting a significant majority of all players and minutes played within the League (Fbref.com, 2024). Considering that England's and Germany's national teams faced each other in the final of the 2022 UEFA Women's Euro, and that the WSL as well as Frauen Bundesliga are regarded as two of the "European Big 5", comparing youth development philosophies in these two countries close to their inception stage on the women's side of the game presents an invaluable opportunity.

To summarise, examining strengths, weaknesses as well as key influence factors on youth development within in England and Germany's will provide guidance to UEFA member associations in their development of elite youth footballers on both the women's and men's side of the game. By placing senior academy staff members at the centre, this comparative research project can dissect nuances in development philosophies across nations, culminating in the identification of principles that aid the development of youth footballers across Europe.

## 2. Questions to be Researched

The aim of this study is three-fold. First, to enhance current understanding of youth development in elite football, by identifying the strength and weaknesses of German and English elite youth academies. Second, to identify key (macro-level) factors impacting youth development, and third to provide recommendations for UEFA member federations and clubs aiming to integrate national youth development initiatives. These aims will be reached by answering the following five research questions:

*RQ1: What are the overarching objectives and definitions of success of German and English elite football academies?*

*RQ2: What are the (macro-level) factors that impact youth development in England and Germany?*

*RQ3: What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the German and English Youth development frameworks?*

*RQ4: To what level are youth development philosophies comparable across male and female elite football academies?*

*RQ5: What are key implementation challenges, learnings, and potential recommendations for other UEFA member federations?*

As the proposed research adopts a qualitative explorative design, the above research questions inform the data collection and analysis approach, and research hypothesis are not developed.

### 3. Literature Review

While historically research within this field has focused on the identification of talent (Williams et al., 2020) scholars have begun to acknowledge that it takes more than talent to break through in professional football (Westermarck, 2016). As such, a holistic ecological approach to talent development in Football has been proposed (Henriksen, 2010; Larsen et al., 2013) and academic investigations into the environmental conditions under which talent development occurs were conducted on a micro- (e.g., coaches, parents, peers; Santos et al., 2019), meso- (e.g., organizational culture; Westermarck, 2016), as well as macro-level (national culture, sport system; Vialli & Marcotti, 2006).

Macro-structural influencing factors include societal, economic, and political frameworks that operate as supra-individual forces and shape developmental processes at the institutional level. In talent development research, it is established that individual performance and development cannot be viewed in isolation from ecological influences but must be understood within the context of macro forces (Henriksen et al., 2010a; Larsen et al., 2021). The macro level represents the overarching societal structure within which organizational and individual processes are embedded, influencing the social participation and developmental opportunities of young people.

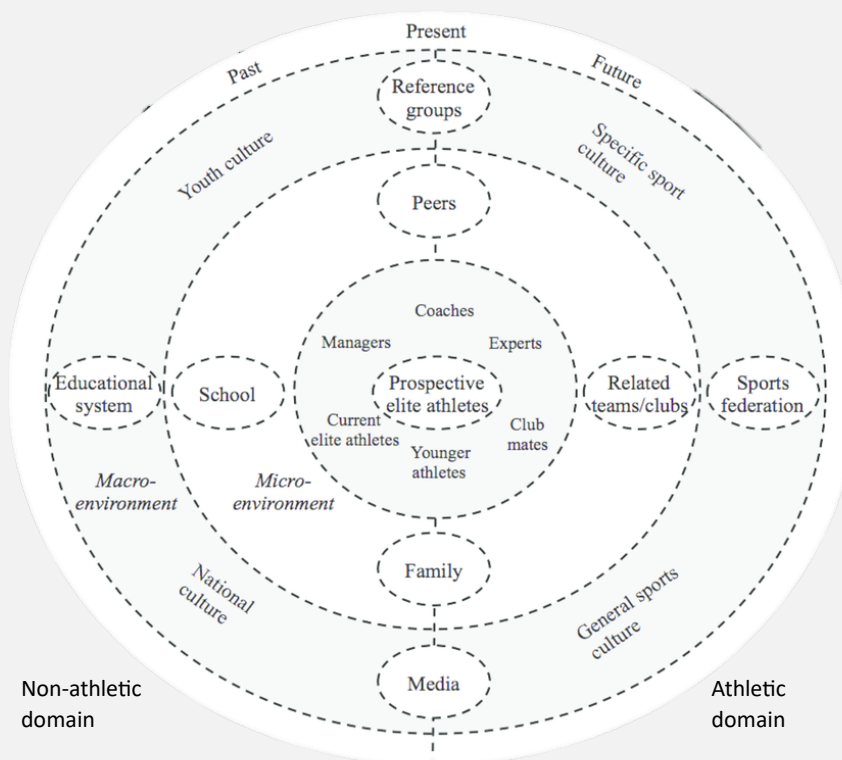
Particularly in elite sports, the role of macro-structural frameworks, such as governmental funding policies, education systems, or economic resources, remains underexplored. Which is surprising given their central role in the talent development process. A deeper understanding of these influencing factors, their associated

strengths and weaknesses, is essential in identifying systemic barriers and enabling contexts for the development of young athletes.

The holistic ecological approach to talent development in sport as established by Henriksen (2010) and applied to football by Larsen (2013) builds the theoretical foundation of this project. The approach is based underpinned by two key theories, namely Bronfenbrenners (1979) ecological model of human development on the one hand, and systems theory on the other (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Figure 8 depicts the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) model by Henriksen (2010) that is distinguished in the non-athletic (e.g., national culture), as well as athletic (e.g., sports federation) domain, encompassing macro as well as micro environmental factors.

**Figure 8**  
*Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE)*



*Figure adopted from Henriksen (2010)*

Notably, there are some weaknesses of the ATDE model, namely failing to include meso-level factors as well as omitting developments in Bronfenbrenner's work (2005) focused on the complex interrelationship between process, person, context, and time (PPCT model; Larsen, 2013). However, despite its limitations the ATDE provides an

overview of key stakeholders and depicts a good reference point for analysing the characteristics of English as well as German boys and girls football academies.

In a review of existing literature on the role of the environment on talent development in football across all three levels, Larson (2013), identified a limited amount of 17 sources on the topic. None of these studies investigated the role of national development strategies established by Football Federations or national culture, leaving a significant gap in the literature. Whereas Henricksen et al. (2010) suggest that sport federations are not an important stakeholder in the development of individual track and field athletes, and Westermarck (2016) suggest that the Swedish football federation is only visible through player's education plans, this research advocates for a more thorough investigation of the impact of national initiatives posed by federations on the development of youth players in Germany as well as England. Especially within Germany and on the women's side of the game national federations are the current governing body of development pathways and therefore can be regarded key stakeholder in the talent development ecosystem.

Moreover, the absence studies considering the impact of national culture on talent development is surprising, given that a nation's culture is assumed to affect various important components of development and play within professional football (Larsen et al., 2013; Vialli & Marcotti, 2006). To be precise, the influence of national culture, as well as different league structures, and available resources has led to various different priorities and objectives for the respective youth development programs across UEFA Member Federations, each with its unique strengths and weaknesses (North et al., 2014). Although the PL has recently published a report highlighting positive changes resulting from the implementation of the *EPPP*, academic research on objectives of different football academies' development philosophies has been scarce.

Despite differences in youth development philosophies across countries, there is consensus on creating a supportive and positive environment for player development (Mills et al., 2012), in line with a positive youth development (PYD) approach (O'Connor et al., 2019). PYD does not simply aim to develop elite athletes but is interested in the development of players in healthy, engaged, and productive members of society (Hamilton et al., 2004). Coaches and educators across UEFA member associations have started to adopt a more player-cantered approach in line with a PYD view (Santos et al., 2019), prioritizing long-term player development over winning



(Harwood & Johnston, 2016; Holt et al., 2018; Sagar et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2020). Even in Germany, a country that traditionally prioritized winning over player development, the DFB started to question whether the high competitiveness of their current model may hinder effective youth athlete development long-term (DFB, 2018).

More specifically, the desire for early success, meaning winning games and championships at youth level, could depict a hurdle for successful youth development on a systemic scale as well as leading to negative psychological effects (Harwood & Johnston, 2016; Reves et al., 2009). As such, research investigating recent and ongoing changes to the German development philosophy, and its implication on the holistic development depicts a highly valuable line of inquiry, both scientifically as well as practically.

Furthermore, as established by Gledhill and Harwood (2014) and Westermarck (2016) there continuous to be a lack of understanding regarding the development of female athletes in a team sport context (i.e., football). Whereas Westermarck (2016) adopted a case study approach to investigate talent development in Swedish female football, Gledhill and Harwood (2014) choose an interpretive approach in their investigation of the developmental experience of female elite youth football players in the UK longitudinally. In line with their respective objectives, both studies predominantly focused on players lived experience, and did not collect data from academy directors to investigate the impact of national football frameworks on their development philosophies. Moreover, neither study set out to explore similarities and differences in development philosophies across male and female academies, leaving a gap in the literature this study seeks to fill.

That is, even though there is no “one-size-fits-all” model of best practices for youth development (O’Sullivan et al., 2024), gaining a more in-depth understanding of strengths and weaknesses of different, yet successful structures can build a pathway for the development of male as well as female elite footballers across Europe. Consequently, this comparative study offers insights on how successful the respective development philosophies are in maximizing player potential, as well as fostering youth to senior team transition.

Finally, as argued by Relvas et al. (2008) the success of the respective youth development programs should be evaluated based on their ability to meet these objectives. As such, research that identifies the specific objectives, as well underlying

philosophies of four different approaches, opens a dialogue in which learnings and recommendations from the two countries in focus (i.e., Germany and England), and both genders (i.e., Boys, Girls Academies) can be offered to other UEFA member associations.

In summary, this research is based on and will expand contemporary literature in the youth development space, by conducting a comparative study of successful, yet different philosophies to player development. Findings will offer valuable insights for football stakeholders, including coaches, administrators, and policymakers across Europe. Insights will further emphasize the importance of holistic youth development philosophies in preparing both female and male players for life in football and beyond.

## 4. Research Design and Strategy

In order to answer the emerged research questions, the study adopts a critical realist ontology, a social constructivist epistemology and subsequently follows an explorative qualitative research approach (Skinner et al., 2024). Semi-structured interviews with senior staff members in German and English youth academies (i.e., academy managers, heads of youth development) were considered to be the most appropriate method to meet the aims of this research. It enables the interviewees to share their lived experience and offer in-depth insights into their perceptions of youth development schemes which are of key interest to this research.

The overall type of sampling adopted for this research can be defined as non-probability purposive sampling, as participants were selected from the network of the research team based on their specific characteristics and ability to offer relevant insights required to answer the research questions. Given that selected participants needed to fulfil pre-selection criteria (e.g., work as a senior staff member in a football academy, have English or German language proficiency), purposive sampling instead of random sampling was deemed more appropriate for this research (Skinner et al., 2024). A total of 17 interviews (Germany Men: 5; Germany Women: 5; England Men: 5; England Women, 2) were conducted by the bilingual research team using the most applicable interview protocol on each occasion. Figure 9 depicts a summary of participating clubs.

Figure 9  
Participating Clubs



Acknowledging that it is essential to ensure all interview questions have the same meaning in both English and German, translation techniques established by Brislin and colleagues (1970) have been applied to create a German version of the English interview protocol. That is, all four steps of the back-translation techniques by Brislin (1970) were followed, to allow the research to be conducted in both English and German depending on the interviewee's preference. Finally, a pilot interview was conducted to test the interview protocol and surface any potential issues in its design.

Minor adaptations to the protocol were made depending on the gender of the academy under investigation. That is, for example, notions of *EPPP* and *Projekt Zukunft* used for interviews with male academy directors were substituted with references to *PGAs* and *LZws* respectively on the women's side. Finally, questions regarding the comparison of development philosophies across male and female academies were only posed to academy directors on the women's side.

That is, a total of four interview protocols (i.e., England Men, England Women, Germany Women, Germany Men) were created based on relevant literature (i.e., Martindale et al., 2007; North et al., 2014; Relvas et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2020)

and revised based on obtained expert feedback and pilot testing. Exemplary the interview protocol for England Women can be found on Page I in the appendix

All conducted interviews were transcribed and thematic data analysis using the six-step reflexive thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2019) was conducted within Nvivo to develop themes around the five research questions. To further enhance the rigor and validity of the data analysis process, inter-rater reliability assessment was used (Brit et al., 2016; Doyle, 2007).

An abductive coding approach was utilised with research questions and literature giving guidance for deductive codes, with the majority of codes inductively emerging from the data itself (Skinner et al., 2024). As for the inductive coding, in the first step open codes were utilised to summary sentences or paragraphs by participants, before a hierarchy was created (axial) through re-reading and re-arranging of codes, and finally selective codes were captured in themes most representative of the study findings (Skinner et al., 2024). Results of the thematic analysis process are presented in the next section of this report.

## 5. Main Research Findings

Within the section of the report main findings linked to the respective research question will be introduced. It is to be noted that insights linked to RQ5 “*What are key implementation challenges, learnings, and potential recommendations for other UEFA member federations?*” are featured in Section 7 “Impact”.

### 5.1 **RQ1** –What are the overarching objectives and definitions of success of German and English elite football academies?

The first research question aimed to explore the objectives and definitions of success within elite youth football academies. Identifying what encapsulates success is a natural starting point for this project as objectives provide a framework for decision-making and guide employees in understanding their roles and responsibilities (Jacobsen 2023; Larsen et al., 2021).

Interestingly definitions of success were largely consistent across both countries and genders and all emphasised a) the importance of winning games and championships (see section 5.1.1); b) attracting, retaining, developing, and transitioning players into



professional football (see section 5.1.2); and c) providing life enriching experiences and enabling personal growth (see section 5.1.3). All three measures of success were described to interact with and influence each other, with personal growth representing the foundation for success in youth development. That is, providing life enriching experiences improves the development of players, and developing players will ultimately lead to more team success (i.e., winning trophies).

**Figure 10**

*Measures of Success in Elite Youth Football Academies*



### 5.1.1 The Importance of Winning Games and Championships

The importance of winning for youth development was highlighted in all interviews, *"Titles are very important here and are also part of the training. If you play for [Club Name], it's also about titles."* - English Male. Academy directors acknowledged that the history of success at their clubs impacts their academy culture, *"I do believe that in a club like [Club Name], which in the professional sector is ultimately very strongly defined by titles [...] there's also the aspect of conveying [the importance of winning] to the players somewhere"* -German Male.

One reason why winning or rather finding a way for players to win was crucial mentioned across interviews was that it provides players with opportunities to develop a winning mentality.

*"We naturally want the players to develop a winning mentality. And that's why we go out there. And that's why it's good and important to have competitions where you measure yourself. And I believe you should never completely take that away."* - German Female.

However, purely beating the opponent was not the true definition of success and winning trophies should only ever be a byproduct of the youth development process. Put differently, winning should be a result and not the focus of the development process as it could otherwise hinder the actual development and transition of players.

*"You have to be careful that this results-oriented approach doesn't take over in youth development. And still leaves some room for trying things out, working individually with the players, or possibly challenging players in a way that, unlike in the professional sector, it's not all focused on what happens at the weekend."* - German Male.

Instead, winning games and trophies should only ever be achieved through a developmental approach.

*"Our success is: We want to win games. It's important here that we also win titles. But we want to achieve that through the development of the players and not by having the coaches - and I'm making this very clear - focus on dominating the opponent in the match plan. Instead, we focus 100% on our own game based on the playing vision we have."* - English Male.

All participating academies understood winning as more than purely winning trophies. Winning in their eyes, also entailed recruiting and attracting the best talent, and then developing and transitioning that talent to the first team.

*"So, if we describe 'win the next trophy', win the next trophy means, in simple terms, attract, retain, and develop. [...] And develop means that you're getting players in the first team."* - English Male.

In summary albeit an important overarching objective of elite football academies, winning should not purely be achieved by beating an opponent, but rather as the result of successful player development.

### 5.1.2 Attracting, Retaining, Developing, and Transitioning Players into Professional Football

Academy directors across countries were aligned in that they believe winning trophies and developing players are actually not mutually exclusive but rather complementary to each other.

*"When I look at which teams we've developed the most successful players from, then it's always been those, or let me put it this way, the best players developed, the ones who reached the highest levels, were generally always from very successful teams."* - German Male.

However, development should always supersede winning at youth level.

*"So, we don't focus on winning titles, but our focus, regardless of whether you win a title or not, is that the player must make the step up to the next age group. So, the U15 can become champions. But that's ultimately useless to me if the players from these age groups don't make it into the U17."* - German Female.

Development of players is crucial in elite youth football as it is closely linked to the financial viability of the academies. Academy directors across both countries and genders stressed that the aim of elite youth academies is ultimately to produce football players for the first team, *"I think you're always going to be judged by producing football players."* - English Male. Only by producing players that transition to the first team a return on investment can be obtained.

*"The club doesn't give us 10 million pounds a year. They're not philanthropists. It's not there. It's a business. And therefore, we have to earn 100 million pounds back over 10 years. And we can do that in a variety of way [...]. The easiest way is to get someone into the first team [...]. The second easiest way is to have someone that will be in your squad. [...] If we've got three on the bench or three in the squad, that saves the club, it's straight away 75 million in buying plus whatever 60 grand a week is per year. [...] The third way of doing it is to have boys that are capable of being sold. [...] I think we've sold £180 million worth of talent in the last 10 years."* - English Male.

The financial perspective was also highlighted by female academy directors in both countries, *"At the end of the day, for the survival of this club, it's actually best that we develop as many players as possible to reach the Bundesliga."* - German Female. Therefore, in addition to winning trophies, success was often judged by progressing players to professional football and aiming to maximize their potential. One academy director stated that they can evaluate success at the end of each week instead of the results on the weekend.

*"The week is more important than the weekend when we talk about youth. It's like what we train, do we train according to our methodological principles? Do we train in accordance to our principles of play? And we sum it up usually in a sentence. 'At the end of the week, are they one week closer to the first team than they were at the beginning?'"* - German Female.

In summary, winning games and trophies were outlined to be the result of developing players, and thus the primary focus in elite youth football academies should be on developing players instead of winning games or trophies. In addition to winning and development, academy directors highlighted a third marker of success - providing life enriching experiences and caring for the person behind the player.

### 5.1.3 Providing Life Enriching Experiences and Enabling Personal Growth

While developing elite players was outlined as the central task of an academy, all academy directors agreed that they have a greater responsibility than merely developing football players.

*"You have to have a higher existence than sporting success, I believe. Our higher existence is being renowned as a world-leading learning and development community for players and staff that changes lives forever and for the better."* - English Male.

Study participants described that they believe enabling players to flourish after and outside of football was equally important to winning games and developing professional football players.

*"I think if you meet the boy who isn't a footballer, and you meet them in the supermarket, and they still want to keep in touch with you, they can reflect back*

*and say how amazing the experience was, how it's helped them. Then for me, that is as important as [developing players for 1st team or professional football]".*  
- English Male.

Academy directors acknowledged that they have a duty of care towards players.

*"I just think through the pursuit of excellence; it's our duty to make sure that we craft and help shape amazing young people."* - English Male.

The journey through an elite football academy also offers a great opportunity for personal growth, which in turn enhances the football potential of players.

*"It's a vicarious cycle of, I want to produce really good footballers. There's an opportunity to create amazing personal growth."* - English Male.

That is, enabling personal growth on the one hand is about preparing players with a plan B, and other the other hand about enhancing the players chances of success within professional football.

*"I actually think personal growth is actually what supports incredible footballers. So, I'm not preparing kids for failure. It's not about plan B. It's not about what happens if you are not successful. I just generally believe that success is more likely if you build it on a foundation of an incredible human."* - English Male.

In terms of preparing players with a 'Plan B', the provision of life enriching experiences through youth football development, can open vocational doors and additional career opportunity for players. College Soccer Scholarships, which require a high standard of both academic and football achievements were outlined as opportunities for players that may not have reached professional football, but through their personal growth, were able to play and study across the world.

The opportunity to study abroad would likely not exist for some individual players if it were not for the football academy experience, and the associated personal (and athletic) growth. As such, players attending college on scholarships, were also regarded as a measure for success of youth football development.

*"For example, boys going on scholarships, fully paid scholarships to America. We've got two boys that are out there at the moment trying to choose the*

*university they're going to attend. That seems like pretty significant success based on academic achievement and giving them a platform to go and explore other careers."* - English Male.

Attending US colleges was also highlighted on the female side.

*"[Success] doesn't always much look the same as getting a player through the academy programme and going to the US on a scholarship. Winning can look different."* - English Female.

Ultimately, success should be defined differently based on the specific context of each player (i.e., nature and nurture). The results outlined that the inherent pursuit of excellence (i.e., striving to do your best) in elite youth football academies, paired with considerations from clubs towards personal development, enables young footballers to create their own path and success, whether that's the first team or something outside of sport.

*"I think reaching your full potential is success wherever that may take you. But I'm also a believer that the pursuit of excellence brings about amazing opportunities for personal growth and development. In itself, the academy journey should be an amazing life enriching experience that creates incredible memories that promotes all the benefits of sport, such as friendships and connection and travel and developing skills like leadership and communication and should be memorable and amazing and life enriching."* - English Male.

In conclusion, academy directors across countries define success as a) winning games, b) developing professional football players, and c) providing players life enriching experiences. Winning was outlined as an often and easily visible indicator for success. However, this research emphasises that it should always be achieved through player development, based on the specific philosophy of each club. Furthermore, academy directors believe that caring for and developing the person behind the player is the foundation for success in football and beyond. Winning trophies will be the ultimate result if the right approach to youth development is pursuit.

*"We want to develop the person first. But if you do that right and then you attract, retain, and develop in the right way, then there will be the outcomes."* - English Male.



Therefore, the focus of elite youth football development should not be on the apex of the pyramid, and rather on the foundation and the centre of the pyramid, as they will ultimately, if done right, lead to the pinnacle. In the following section, key factors impacting youth development in England and Germany are identified.

## 5.2 **RQ2** –What are the macro-level factors that impact youth development in England and Germany?

The second research question aimed to identify the key macro-level factors that influence the development of youth players in elite academies. While various studies have already examined macro-level influences on individuals and society, this investigation focuses specifically on their impact on players through the perspective of academy directors of elite youth football academies. Three key factors that significantly impact youth development philosophies on a macro-level emerged, a) the social-cultural context of players in the foundation phase (see section 5.2.1), b) National Association initiatives (see section 5.2.2), and c) regulations (see section 5.2.3). It is to be noted that some of these influence factors are regarded a strengths or weakness and as such will be discussed in more depth in the following section.

### 5.2.1 *Socio-cultural Context of Players in Foundation Phase*

The interviews with club representatives revealed notable differences in the age at which clubs begin systematically promoting talent within their own academies. While some (English) clubs initiate formal training as early as the U9 level, others only establish their own youth teams at U11 or U12. Previous studies have regarded England's emphasis on early talent identification and specialized training as a promising and potentially accelerated development pathway for youth players (Champ et al., 2018).

Whereas on the German side clubs tend to begin structured in-club development at a later stage, often relying on partnerships with grassroots or regional clubs at the mini-pitch level.

*“In U9 and U10, when we only have two training sessions per week, we realize that we are simply not making efficient use of the time available to us.” - German male.*

However, even within a country the decision on entry age (e.g., under 9s vs. under 13s) is highly contextual and influenced by the location of the club and the city.

*"If I speak with my colleague from Freiburg, who says: In our rural region, with everything that entails, it makes relatively little sense [to have an entry age of u9]. That's understandable."* - German Male

Despite structural differences regarding the entry age, there was consensus on the importance of multisport participation as a vital contributor to youth development.

*"What we offer here in terms of movement activities forms a broad foundation for the children - they are developed in a more well-rounded way across multiple dimensions."* - English male.

Whereas German clubs tend to highlight the value of greater time flexibility for children outside the academy to engage in other sports, many English clubs prioritize early, internal access to talented players in order to provide structured multisport opportunities within the academy system.

#### *Play as a Developmental Factor*

Experts also emphasized the significance of play as a catalyst for informal developmental processes, promoting both intrinsic motivation and lasting enjoyment in sport and movement. According to one English academy representative, it is not primarily the system that produces talent, but rather the opportunities for children to practice and play independently.

*"That's also to do with the independent practice and exposure that the kids get away from academies. And that always needs to be understood. But also, if you're in an academy from a very, very young age and you're removed from your social setting, then it brings positives, but also there can be some trade-off that you get off the back of it."* - English male.

As such, it appears critical that clubs create environments in which children can play freely, without excessive instruction or structural barriers. At the same time, it must be ensured that young players also have sufficient time outside the club context to explore creatively and pursue self-directed play.

*"If you want to develop good people and you want children to have a good childhood, there's also... play is a very important part of that, and the ability to experiment and be creative."* - English male.

In addition, academy directors also saw a barrier in the current provisions in schools, where youth have not enough access to informal play.

*"One of my biggest aims, and I have been trying to do this for a while, but I will try even more in [city name], there are far, far too many children where the schoolyard has been removed from their suite of ability to play football. My two children are not allowed to play football in the schoolyard. They're losing five hours a week of informal playful activity."* - English Male.

Particularly in the current youth culture, where mental and physical health problems are widespread, sport was seen as a crucial part to help young people thrive.

*"I think in modern society with social media, health and safety issues, the playground is a protected space. It's a safe space. That would be one massive barrier for me."* - English Male.

### 5.2.2 Association Initiatives and Support

The research identified several core differences in the approaches to youth football development between Germany and England especially linked to association initiatives. Structurally, as mentioned previously England operates under the *EPPP*, introduced in 2012 in collaboration with the Premier League, which employs a four-corner (technical, physical, psychological, social), three-phase (foundation, youth development, professional development) model. Academies in England are accredited with a category status (one to four), based on factors like facilities and coaching quality, with higher categories receiving more funding from the Premier League and FA.

Germany, conversely, utilizes a four-level pyramid model, progressing from "*Basisförderung*" (base development) to "*Profibereich*" (Professional Level). Clubs in the top two Bundesliga divisions are required to operate a NLZ.

The two male focused initiatives also differ in focus; England's *EPPP* as indicated above, can be described as concentrating funding and efforts primarily at the elite level, while Germany's "*Projekt Zukunft*" (launched in 2018) aims for a broader system

reorientation, with the "*Trainingsphilosophie Deutschland*" component primarily benefiting grassroots football in the short term, rather than exclusively elite academies.

*"The DFB initiatives are not aimed at performance centres. They target the grassroots. These aren't programmes for Bayer Leverkusen or Borussia Dortmund. They're useful impulses for the younger age groups, but essentially, they're for the base. The Premier League supports the elite as well—it supports elite development directly."* - German Male.

As such, the different initiatives depict a key macro-level influence factors that are closely associated with the adopted youth development philosophies in the two countries, their associated strengths and weaknesses are reviewed in more depth under RQ3.

### 5.2.3 Regulations and External Influences

In both countries, the experts interviewed offered differing views on how current regulatory frameworks as well as external influences affect talent development. In addition to formal structures, experts from both countries identified various external influences as increasingly significant in shaping youth development. Parents and agents, in particular, were seen as exerting growing pressure on young players. The financial stakes in youth football, already high in some environments, were cited as a major reason for this development.

*"Most of them—not all, but most—are driven by money, not by development."* - English Male.

*"Many players are under extreme pressure here, because post-Brexit, good players are earning too much money too early. That puts them under a lot of pressure—especially because of the social pressure from parents and agents, who are only interested in one thing, and not in long-term development."* - English Male.

German interviewees shared these concerns. They stressed that young players who experience early financial success often struggle to cope when their careers do not progress as expected.

*“What happens to a boy who earns €10,000 at U19 level and then doesn’t make it—and ends up playing in the fourth tier for €1,200, plus a part-time job with a sponsor? What does that do to him? He’s lost.” - German male.*

*“When they’re really young, it’s the parents. As they get older, the circle around them grows, more stakeholders come in, like agents. Managing this environment is already a huge challenge”. German male.*

In summary, the social-cultural context (i.e., early vs. late entry; multisport vs. flexibility), the educational system, association initiatives as well as external influences were identified as the key factors impacting youth development philosophies in England and Germany. The next section of the report discusses resulting key strengths and limitations of the respective development frameworks in England and Germany.

### 5.3 **RQ3** –What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the German and English Youth development frameworks?

The third research question investigated perceived strengths and weaknesses of German and English Youth development frameworks. Strengths of the English approach are emphasised in section 5.3.1, whereas those of the German system are introduced in section 5.3.2. Weaknesses are highlighted in section 5.3.3 (England), and section 5.3.4 (Germany) respectively.

#### 5.3.1 *Perceived Strengths of the English Youth Development Framework*

There are three key strengths of the English Approach to youth development, a) clear and holistic development philosophy, b) financial power, and c) centralized control through national alignment.

##### *Clear and Holistic Development Philosophy*

Whereas a move towards a more holistic and overarching development focus was apparent in both countries, it became clear that both female as well as male academies in England had a strong(er) understanding of their respective development philosophies when compared to their German counterparts.

*A direction, clarity, clarity around where we want to go, who we want to be, who we are, how we demonstrate that...” - England Female.*

Previous research around elite youth academies have outlined the importance of having a shared and long-term club philosophy (Larsen et al., 2021; Solana-Sanchez et al., 2016), of which English academy directors were aware.

*"So, there's a very clear common thread running from the first team right down into the junior academy regarding the approach to how football is played, and broken down into how development and training are conducted. This is then documented in a session planner or session builder, ensuring that from the U9s up to the second team, the club clearly dictates what content is trained, in what percentage allocation, and how, when, and where. The coaches then ultimately bring this framework to life, but it all operates within this common thread, with a clear structure, a clear strategy, and clear processes. I believe that is the success, built on the foundation of this focus on the person. If you ask me what the secret to [our club's] success is, then it's this culture within the club." - English Male.*

Two key enablers that impact the development of an overarching club philosophy in English Academies were identified within the interviews, (i) club/ownership support, and (ii) integration with the first team.

(i) Club/Ownership Support

The first key enabler outlined was the support from the overall club leadership and club ownership group (where applicable).

*"In terms of support, I think the Premier League are supportive, the FA are supportive. But most importantly, I think [Club Name] are the most supportive. As an organization, as a business, they recognize the importance of the academy can play for them. So I think [...] most importantly, we're supported by [ownership group], who believe in what we're doing, over a period of time." - English Male.*

Larsen et al. (2020) described a similar shared philosophy at AJAX Amsterdam. The academy served a crucial role within the club, the financial backbone and therefore player development, particularly around the first and second team were supported by the overall club. Overall club support enables academy directors to implement an academy program that is designed with age-appropriate considerations that reaches



from the under 9s to the first team that is centred around individualized player development.

(ii) Integration with the First Team

The integration with the first team was outlined as the second crucial enabler for developing an overarching club philosophy.

*"When you see what many clubs invest but still don't manage to develop players, I believe it's the conviction in your own work and the trust in the talents to integrate them. When [first team coach] at that level gives between five and seven players the opportunity in every session to train against [captain of first team] and whoever else, and not just in pre-season or training camp until the professional's return. I still have that in my ear from a respected sporting director and colleague. 'The players can stay until the professional's return'. Then youth development is...it's not a vision of the club. Then it's a licensing requirement. And it can only work if[...] there's a consistent approach and that players then ultimately have their justification within that consistent approach and receive trust. When now, [...] five 16-year-olds are on the pitch at once in a competitive match, then that has a reason. Because [first team coach] also wants to win the games. But he also wants to develop players, and you only develop them if you throw them in and trust them, and not just on the PlayStation." - English Male.*

This in-depth understanding of each academy's unique philosophy across age groups through to the first team facilitated by strong support from the club/ownership can be regarded a key strength of the English system.

### *Financial Power*

One of the most recurring themes identified by senior academy staff is the unparalleled financial power of the Premier League. The *EPFP* and financial resources of English football clubs have substantial impact on infrastructure, staff quality, and training standards in England. Across the interviews, it was highlighted how financial resources translate into elite environments and thus enable holistic player development.

One prominent positive effect of the financial power is the qualification and seniority level of English academy staff.

*“There is a wide range of continuing education modules available for academy leadership - for coaches as well as for senior administrative staff.”- English Male.*

Or to put in in the words of another academy director the *“Premier League’s support in coach development is unmatched”* - England Male. In contrast, German clubs often rely on junior staff in youth academies.

*“When you look inside English academies, the qualification level of the staff is far higher than ours. We are very junior in Germany. We’re lacking seniority, and we also lack the willingness of people who have worked at the professional level to return to academy work and share their experience.” - German male.*

Aside from educational and qualification benefits, the EPPP’s financial power spreads beyond top-tier academies.

*“The level of support in the Premier League is like... honestly, when you compare it to the rest of Europe, even second-tier academies here are better equipped. We have psychologists, education officers, welfare teams... even some Cat 2 clubs have that now.”- English Male.*

*“Every second division club here has a top infrastructure. You go to Blackburn, or Sunderland, or even Rotherham, and you can multi-sport educate players... it’s a big difference to what I’ve seen in Germany”. - English Male.*

In contrast to many Bundesliga or second-tier German clubs, training facilities and infrastructure across academies in England are regarded superior and have frequently been classified as ‘state-of-the-art’.

*“Honestly, it’s like night and day. In Germany, even some Bundesliga clubs train at municipal grounds. In England, you walk into an academy and it’s like a performance institute.”- English Male.*

*“The Premier League clubs just have a different scale. I did a study visit to [German Club Name] and [German Club Name] – great people, strong philosophy, but the facilities don’t compare. Here, the players eat together, train on hybrid pitches, work with dedicated analysts from U12.” - English Male.*

In summary, the financial power of the English development system can be regarded their second key strengths as it underpins various structural advantages of the English youth development model such as qualification and infrastructure.

### *Centralised Control Through National Alignment*

The third and final strength of the English youth development model identified in this research is the centralised control through national alignment of clubs, federations, and league in the *EPPP*. This more centralised system ensures that elite academies across the countries operate with shared standards, performance benchmarks, and player care principles, offering consistency and direction at scale.

*“The EPPP was important. It made everybody in our system sit up and properly have a look at things. It gave us a framework, a standard, and a blueprint.”*- English Male.

As such, the *EPPP* was transformative in setting national expectations, and raising standards for player development. It enabled clubs to benchmark themselves against clearly defined development outcomes set by the league instead of the national federation avoiding tensions between developing players for the PL vs. the national team.

*“There’s a lot of structure around the boy’s pathway now[...] the Premier League and FA are involved at all levels, and the EPPP framework is reviewed constantly.”*- English Male.

Such integration and alignment on a national level provides clubs with clarity and coordination, enhancing long-term planning, decision making capabilities, and inter-club comparisons. Coaches and academy directors operate within a shared system, which reduced fragmentation and encourages best practice sharing.

*“In terms of alignment, I think we’re in a really strong place. The Premier League are very engaged, and so is the FA. Everyone knows what good looks like”*- English Male.

In summary, this centralised but shared approach to the governance of youth football within England is the third key strengths of the English model as it sets clear standards and enables quick decision making. In the next section perceived strengths of the German Youth Development Framework are emphasised.

### 5.3.2 Perceived Strengths of the German Youth Development Framework

In addition to the previously identified superiority in youth to senior transition (see p. 3), key strengths of the German development frameworks in the eyes of the academy directors are a) the development of football across all levels, b) a long-term sustainable logic, and c) the paradox of education and dual-career pathways.

#### *Development of Football Across all Levels*

A defining feature of the German youth development system is its commitment to developing footballers across all levels, not just those destined for elite professional careers. This broader developmental scope beyond the elite level is indicative of investment across the board with an emphasis on participation, education, and long-term growth of football from the base-up.

*"Our goal isn't just to develop elite senior players. We also see it as our mission to develop footballers for the region, for the third league, or for the reserve team". - German Male.*

The approach of developing football from the 'base-up' is central to "*Projekt Zukunft*" and had a significant impact on youth development philosophies adopted in NLZs as well as regional structures across Germany. Adopting a youth development philosophy that spreads beyond the elite level reduces the binary pressure of 'make or fail' that often defines elite youth football development systems in other countries.

*"If a player doesn't make it to the professional level but comes back in the regional league or as a coach, that's also a success for us." - German Male.*

By investing in the wider youth football environment and establishing holistic frameworks, Germany is able to nurture footballers across levels. In sum, Germany's dedication to develop football across all levels can be seen as a key strength of "*Projekt Zukunft*".

#### *Long-Term Sustainable Logic*

The second strength of the German youth development framework is their long-term orientation and patience in development reflecting their ability to place sustainable development over immediate results.

*“We plan for the long term [...] Player development over the years is more important than short-term results.” - German Male.*

Rather than focusing solely on short-term success or early professionalisation, the German framework enables clubs to adopt a more sustainable development philosophy that prioritises individual maturation, and graduation football progression.

*“[...] we don’t think in terms of U19 finals, but in terms of careers.” - German Male.*

The German development framework values progression and systemic support over time. Long-term thinking also shapes how players are integrated into the system. That is, German NLZs often focus on building technical and cognitive foundations that are adaptable over time. A more long-term sustainable logic helps to protect layers from burnout, and can reduce premature exits, as well as fostering greater resilience in the future. This approach to development is also apparent in female academies.

*“We don’t look at who is the fastest at 15... but rather who can be a good player at 20.” - German Female.*

As such, Germany’s long-term sustainable logic on both the men’s as well as women’s side of the game can be regarded the second key strengths of the German youth development framework.

### *The Paradox of Education and Dual-Career Pathways*

The link between education and football in Germany depicts a paradox. Whereas some academy directors considered it a strength of the German development framework, others regarded it as a key challenge. Within this section first, the integration of dual-career pathways through cooperation with regional schools are reviewed through a strength-based lens, before exploring it as a challenge.

Even though Germany is superior in youth-to-senior transition of footballers, these transitions continue to be the exception, requiring clubs to create ‘soft landings’ for players that did not progress to the final elite stage in football. Germany’s dual-track approach is deeply embedded in the culture of football academies and allows players to pursue both academic education and football simultaneously, but not at the same

place. The dual-career emphasis is particularly visible in female academies where more limited professionalisation makes academic preparation even more critical.

*“Only when school, football, and accommodation fit together we can speak of elite youth development.” - German Female.*

Directors of female football academies also emphasised the active coordination with regional academic institutions to ensure better coordination of training schedules around school hours and providing social stability.

*“We work closely with two partner schools - so we know that training times are taken into account.” - German Female.*

The integration of dual-career pathways can be regarded as essential for creating well-rounded individuals with life options beyond football. As such it is not surprising that male academies as well demonstrate a clear commitment to educational continuity. Education is seen not only as a fallback, but as a parallel path to their football career within Germany.

*“Graduating from high school is mandatory for us, regardless of talent. That's part of the responsibility of a NLZ.” - German Male.*

Different to English male football academies, education is not provided ‘in house’ but through collaborations with regional *“Eliteschulen des Fussballs”* (German for: Elite Football Schools). It is up for debate whether one considers the provision of education outside of the academy system a strength or limitation of youth development in football. For the purpose of this report, considerations of why the external provision of education through collaboration with regional schools might be regarded as a strength are emphasized.

Attending public schools alongside non-athlete peers offers critical developmental benefits for youth footballers, particularly in terms of socialization, identity formation, and psychological resilience. Early specialization in isolated sport environments such as those present in English football academies can restrict social development of players and can limit the construction of multidimensional identities (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). As Mitchell et al. (2014) further emphasize academy-based schooling risks fostering mono-identity formation, where the athlete’s self-worth becomes



entirely contingent on their athletic performance. This depicts a high risk particularly in case of setback or deselection.

Moreover, collaborations with regional schools expose the players to diverse social networks with support the development of interpersonal skills beyond the football context. As Holt and Dunn (2004) note, peer interaction outside of sport fosters greater adaptability, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution, all skills that are crucial for success in on and off the football pitch.

Finally, Christensen and Sørensen (2009) argue that football academies can reproduce hierarchical and competitive norms that reduce critical thinking and autonomy. As such, regional public schools provide a space for democratic participation, diverse friendships, and non-performance-based validation, thereby supporting healthy psychosocial development of youth players.

In summary, dual-career preparations through collaborations with regional schools are considered the third key strengths of the German youth development framework. The integration of education and preparation for a career outside of football enables a well-rounded development of youth footballers. It further offers youth athletes an opportunity to form an identity beyond football, and aids their development as autonomous, socially competent individuals.

Whereas the previous sections regarded dual-career pathways and education collaboration in Germany a strength, some academy directors held a completely opposing viewpoint demonstrating the complex relationship between education and football.

*"I believe there's hardly a place where school and sport are as difficult to reconcile as here. Firstly, because the school system is the most challenging, because in this school system there's the greatest arrogance within the school system, because they have such high standards and little understanding for competitive elite sport."*

- German Male.

*"I sometimes wish I could relocate the youth academy to [country] because I believe we would achieve much more there, simply because school and competitive sport go hand in hand much better. That's a huge problem. It's a general German problem."*

In the next section perceived weaknesses of the English Youth Development Framework are discussed.

### 5.3.3 *Perceived Weaknesses of the English Youth Development Framework*

Beyond the previously identified criticism that there are inefficiencies in youth-to-senior transitions within the English system (pp. 2-3), two weaknesses of the English youth development framework were identified a) early over-professionalisation, and b) commercial pressures overshadowing development.

#### *Early Over-Professionalisation*

A recurring concern raised across multiple interviews within the English youth development system is the early over-professionalization of young players. While the PL and *EPPP* have created sophisticated, well-resourced environments, several academy directors reflect critically on the unintended consequence of treating players as professionals too early.

*“The idea of putting more full-time people around young players has unintentional consequences. We don’t leave enough room for them to lead their own process.”* - English Male.

By surrounding players with staff from nutritionists to psychologists to data analysts, the system risks producing passive recipients of care rather than autonomous individuals. Players at a relatively young age are thrust into a highly professionalized setting that mimics first-team structures, with an increasing presence of performance technologies and lifestyle regulation which reduce space for play, experimentation, or failure, which are essential components of long-term learning and psychosocial development.

*“When they turn 15, it becomes more like a career, really. That’s the age where it shifts—suddenly you have GPS tracking, match reviews, nutrition sessions. It’s full-on.”* - English Male.

This high-stakes atmosphere at an early age leads to what has been termed *professional precocity*, the premature adoption of adult-like routines and mindsets.

That is the academy structure in England often regards conformity and early success instead of allowing space for failure and identity exploration.

*“There’s a real pressure now to be perfect at 13. The margins for error are so small because the systems are so structured.”* - English Male.

Concerns regarding the early over-professionalization extend beyond the football pitch ground into social and media domains. The early branding of players reinforces performance-based self-worth and accelerates the development of a mono-identity around football.

*“Players sometimes become professionals before they mature emotionally. It’s like the badge, the kit, the Instagram presence... it all gets there before the person does.”* - English Male.

Another facet of the early over-professionalization in England is reflected in the increasing number of competitive matches. Player overload might hinder long-term individual development.

*“What I don’t agree with is the games program for the older age groups. In my opinion, it’s too much. If players have already played 45 to 55 games by the age of 17 or 18, and there’s hardly any time for individual work because there’s always another match, and the coaches—unless we break the cycle, which we’re currently trying to do—always field the strongest team to win, then I believe that’s a bit excessive.”* - English male.

Finally, the large staff structures in English academies were occasionally seen as a sign of over-professionalization, whereas smaller staff units, as seen in Germany, were thought to benefit from more efficient communication and stronger team cohesion.

In conclusion, while England’s academy system provides a financially well sources and structurally well-aligned framework, its early over-professionalization constitutes the first key developmental weakness. The challenge is to retain high standards without losing the person-centered ethos that should underpin youth development in football growth.

### *Commercial Pressures Overshadowing development*

The second weaknesses identified in the English youth development system is the growing influence of commercial pressures, which at times begin to overshadow the pedagogical and ethical goals of youth player development. While the PL's financial power and media reach have elevated English football globally, several interviewees caution that the commercial logic shaping senior football has begun to distort priorities at youth level.

*“There’s commercial outputs... then it’s development. Sometimes that’s the wrong way around.”* - English Male.

This quote illustrates the widespread concern that youth development in England is increasingly framed as a means to a marketable end, rather than a process rooted in long-term growth. Academies, especially those tied to globally recognized brands, often experienced tensions between nurturing players and utilizing them for strategic or commercial value.

*“There’s a lot of pressure to make the academy visible. Whether that’s social media, branding, or media days... it takes time away from what we’re really here to do.”* - English Male.

The demand for visibility means that young players and academy staff are increasingly engaged in non-developmental activities. Branding exercises, media content creation, and institutional marketing divert attention and resources from coaching, mentoring, and educational development. For staff, it becomes harder to protect the developmental space from institutional performance metrics linked to reputation and commercial returns.

*“We’re trying to develop people, not just players. But sometimes, the business wants heroes—marketable success stories, quick results.”* - English Male.

That is a deeper ideological conflict emerges between an academy's person-centered holistic development philosophy on the one hand, and corporate storytelling and branding agendas on the other. The push to create marketable narratives around the next star can impose unrealistic expectations and distract from the incremental, uncertain nature of youth development.

*“The challenge is that in the Premier League, everything is a product—even our under-18 games are televised now. That shifts how people think.” - English Male.*

When matches are broadcast, and players are tracked by fans and brands alike, the underpinning logic of youth development changes. Performance becomes entertainment, and talent becomes an asset, potentially to the detriment of the individual's growth on and off the pitch.

In conclusion, while commercial success has funded England's infrastructural and organizational improvements, it also introduces conflicting priorities that can distort the academy's youth development philosophy and overarching objectives. Protecting developmental integrity in the face of branding imperatives remains a critical challenge for English youth football.

#### *5.3.4 Perceived Weaknesses of the German Youth Development Framework*

Two key limitations of the German youth development framework were identified by academy directors within this research a) bureaucratic inertia, and b) lack of national coherence and coordination.

##### *Bureaucratic Inertia and Slow Implementation*

While the German youth development system is widely respected for its long-term orientation, multiple interviewees from both male and female academies highlighted bureaucratic inertia as a significant weakness. This issue stems from the complex governance structures within German football, particularly the federalized nature, which results in delayed reforms, and frustration among club-level stakeholders.

*“Federalism and the speed of implementation are simply why Germany is screwed, and that's why German football is so screwed.” German Male.*

This pointed critique from a senior academy figure at a German elite academy reflects a deep frustration with the fragmented and slow-moving nature of decision-making at the national level.

*“What we need nowadays are completely different conditions—like I said before—much faster decision-making processes.” - German male.*

*"We have far too long processes until we've gone through all the regional associations, all boards, to implement anything, to bring things together, to even think beyond state borders, to think beyond that... [...] years go by, it's madness and it's simply a huge disadvantage compared to abroad"* - German Male.

That is, one of the biggest challenges in Germany is not a lack of ideas or strategic awareness, but the difficulty in moving from concept to practice. National-level reforms, such as changes to competition structures or academy licensing, often stall due to competing regional interests, complex approval procedures, or lack of implementation accountability.

*"The 'Projekt Nachwuchsliga' [German for: youth league project] could have started as early as 2020, but now in 2025 it is still under discussion."* - German Male.

*"We launched the 'Projekt Zukunft' just one month after the Russia debacle 2018. And when was the 'Nachwuchsliga' introduced? On July 1st, 2024. Six years later. That only happens in Germany. But that's another Germany-wide problem. We can't get anything else done anyway."* - German Male.

The quotes illustrate how major reform initiatives, such as the restructuring of youth leagues, or implementation of national initiatives are frequently delayed for years, reducing their relevance and impact. German academy directors praised the fast-decision-making process in England enabled through more centralized decision-making power.

*"Let's say in England, [it's] centrally controlled by the league, which is not the case with us and we simply don't have that direct influence. And that's our big problem."* - German Male.

Female academies echoed these frustrations, often pointing out that innovations in the women's game face even greater structural delay and under-prioritisation.

*"Reforms in the women's game take twice as long... there is simply a lack of will."* – German Female.



In sum, the German system suffers from a structural rigidity that limits responsiveness to emerging challenges. Despite widespread recognition of the need for reform, particularly around transition phases and competition calendars, implementation is slow and overly politicized, reducing the agility and innovation capacity of the entire youth development ecosystem. If German football is to remain globally competitive, it must confront its governance bottlenecks and establish faster, more collaborative mechanisms for reform, especially as the landscape of elite youth football evolves rapidly both in Europe and beyond.

### *Lack of National Coherence and Coordination*

Slow implementation and pace not only affect systemic changes but also impact the day-to-day cooperation between the DFB and clubs. Several interviewees identified the lack of national coherence and strategic alignment across the youth football ecosystem as the second and closely related weakness.

That is, despite shared values around holistic development from the bottom-up, the implementation of talent development pathways often suffers from disconnected governance and inconsistent coordination between the DFB, regional associations, and club academies.

*"There's a lack of integration between the NLZ and the association. Everyone works independently, but there's no common framework."* - German Female.

Senior staff members in German youth academies expressed their desire for an integrated framework that links national strategy to local academy practices. Rather than operating within a shared, goal-oriented system, clubs often felt they were left to implement development philosophies on their own, without a clearly articulated and practical national development framework, or effective coordination from the DFB.

*"If the DFB were to pay more attention to the overall environment... like scouting and match schedules, that would be helpful. Right now, everyone's doing things a little differently."* - German Male.

One particular area of concern is the transition phase from youth to senior football, which many interviewees identify as poorly coordinated and lacking systematic national support.

*"There's no overarching strategy for how we support players after the U19s. Each club has to find its own solutions."* - German Male.

The above quote emphasizes how the absence of a national progression plan creates gaps at perhaps the most critical developmental juncture. Female academies also feel the consequences of the fragmented system, especially at a moment in time where youth developmental structures are still emerging.

*"In the women's field, there's often a lack of direction. We have to write our own concepts because the DFB doesn't provide a clear line."* – German Women.

At the moment, women's football clubs within Germany feel they are often without central guidance, making it harder for them to build consistent, quality-controlled environments. In contrast to countries like England, where the *EPPP* provides a unified set of standards, monitoring systems, and aligned goals, Germany's youth football ecosystem remains decentralized and loosely connected, even within professional club environments. This undermines long-term planning, and national benchmarking.

In sum, the lack of national coherence in Germany's youth development model weakens system-wide effectiveness, particularly during critical phases of player progression. Addressing this fragmentation will be essential for ensuring that club efforts are supported, and not isolated, within a truly strategic, nation-wide football development ecosystem on both the men's and women's side of the game.

Overall, the development of football across all levels is a strength of the German system, whereas financial strength and centralized control led by the premier league are advantages on the English side. As for weaknesses federalism and slow bureaucracy were considered the biggest weakness within Germany, and over-professionalization at a young age within the English framework. In the next section the extent to which development philosophies are comparable across male and female academies are discussed.

#### 5.4 **RQ4** – To what level are youth development philosophies comparable across male and female elite academies?

The fourth research question aimed to explore the extent to which youth development philosophies are comparable across male and female elite academies. To provide a

in-depth answers to the question within this section of the report, similarities (section 5.4.1), and differences (section 5.4.2). across male and female elite football academies in England and Germany are highlighted

#### *5.4.1 Similarities in Development Philosophies Across Male and Female Elite Football Academies*

Despite notable structural and resource-based differences between male and female elite football academies in both England and German (see section 5.4.2), the underlying development philosophies depict a high degree of convergence. That is both male as well as female academies shared the philosophical foundation of a holistic, and person-cantered development approach.

*“It’s about them growing as individuals... not just getting better at kicking [a football]”*. - German Female.

The importance of developing the person, not just the athlete has previously discussed under RQ1, and is the fundamental shared base in male and female youth football development. Moreover, both male and female academies acknowledge the importance of tailoring the development approach to each-player (see section X).

*“Our goal is to support each player individually... we don’t have a one-size-fits-all solution.”*– German Female.

*“Our curriculum should be 180 different individuals... not a coaching curriculum that is one-size-fits-all.”* - England Male.

This pedagogical parity demonstrates an emerging philosophical coherence across male and female development philosophies, which is further echoed by clubs adopting the same philosophy across teams.

*“Our philosophy is the same for women and men - respect, game intelligence, personal responsibility.”* - Germany Female.

In sum, there is a high philosophical overlap between male and female youth development philosophies, but their implementation remains uneven. Key differences in the implementation of those philosophies and frameworks are identified in the following section.

#### 5.4.2 Differences in Development Philosophies Across Male and Female Elite Football Academies

Academy directors in English as well as German youth academies identified four key differences between the male and female side of youth development. Those are a) disparities in infrastructure and investment, b) weaker competitive exposure and match rhythm, c) less defined transition pathways, and d) narrower recruitment scope and talent identification.

##### *Disparities in Infrastructure and Investment*

Despite significant progress in women's football, interviews from both Germany and England reveal a consistent pattern of infrastructure and investment disparities between male and female youth academies.

*"We're basically building this from scratch... the resources just aren't there yet."*  
- Germany Female.

While male academies are typically embedded in high-performance environments with expansive budgets, specialist staff, and cutting-edge facilities, female academies often operate in resource-constrained settings that limit development opportunities.

*"When you come to the boys' NLZ, you have three pitches, an athletics center, and video analysis. We have to ask if we can train on the C pitch."* - Germany Female.

Such disparities manifest in every aspect of the academy environment: from pitch availability and locker room space to strength and conditioning support, as well as medical services. Even at clubs with strong men's programmes, the women's side often operates in physically and symbolically marginalised spaces.

*"The girls train on side courts and don't have their own changing rooms - that has nothing to do with equality."* - Germany Female.

In England, where the men's academies benefit from *EPPP*-driven investment and commercial revenue, similar gaps persist. While elite clubs have begun investing in their women's programmes, many female academies remain understaffed and underfunded compared to their male counterparts.

*“We have two physios between four teams. The boys have one per age group. That tells you all you need to know.”* - England Female.

*“We don’t have our own gym. We borrow slots from local schools.”* - England Female.

These limitations not only affect daily training but also the broader development environment, such as the ability to provide match analysis, nutritional support, or consistent competition exposure. The result is a structurally uneven system, where girls are expected to perform and develop under inferior conditions, despite increasing expectations at the elite level.

*“We’re asking them to be elite athletes, but we don’t give them elite environments. That’s the gap.”* - England Female.

In both national contexts, there is broad recognition of the problem, but solutions remain piecemeal. While several clubs are beginning to integrate women’s teams more fully into their central infrastructures, progress is uneven, and many female academies remain on the periphery of institutional priorities.

In sum, the disparities in infrastructure and investment between male and female football academies reflect a structural imbalance that hinders the growth of women’s football through challenges in youth development structures. Addressing these gaps will require not just symbolic gestures, but systemic resource redistribution, facility integration, and equity-driven planning across all levels of youth development.

### *Weaker Competitive Exposure and Match Rhythm*

Across both the English and German youth development systems, interviews reveal a shared concern about the weaker competitive exposure and inconsistent match rhythm available to players in female youth academies. While male players often participate in dense league systems with weekly fixtures and international tournaments, girls’ pathways are marked by fewer matches, irregular scheduling, and a lack of age-specific competition, undermining their tactical and psychological development.

*"We have 16 competitive games a year. That's not enough. The boys play almost twice as much. How can we develop a rhythm?" - Germany Female.*

*"We have twelve games a year... that's just not enough for development." - Germany Female.*

One of the consequences of this lack of rhythm can lead to female players being less developed in their game intelligence and decision-making under pressure, not due to a lack of talent, but due to fewer real-game situations.

*"The difference isn't just technical or physical—it's game intelligence. And that comes from playing, from repetition, from mistakes." - Germany Female.*

This issue is also strongly present in the English system. Despite increasing investment in women's football, competition structures for girls remain underdeveloped compared to the boys' *EPPP* pathway.

*"We go three or four weeks without a game sometimes. That wouldn't happen with the U15 boys. They're playing every weekend, in leagues, tournaments, friendlies." - England Female.*

The lack of international and inter-academy exposure further limits developmental benchmarks. Boys' teams are routinely tested against elite competition at both domestic and international levels; girls are not afforded the same level of comparison and stimulus.

*"We need more competitive games, not just regional friendlies. The boys go to Spain, France, play Ajax—our girls play the same three teams all year." - England Female.*

Overall, the inconsistent and limited match rhythm in female youth academies constrains not only performance development but also mental resilience, tactical maturity, and readiness for senior football. While progress has been made with the establishment of FLZW's and PGA's respectively, the competitive architecture for girls remains underbuilt, leaving significant gaps in experiential learning. Addressing this disparity is essential for building parity in development standards and supporting the long-term growth of women's football across both nations.

### *Less Defined Transition Pathways*

A recurring concern across both the English and German female football academy landscapes is the lack of clear and structured transition pathways from youth to senior football. While male academies often operate within highly formalised, national frameworks, including U21/reserve teams, loan programmes, and detailed succession planning, female players face a far more fragmented and uncertain route to the professional game.

*"There's no clear transition from the U17 to the adult level. Some simply jump in at the deep end, others we lose completely."* - Germany Women.

This contrast is particularly stark when compared to the boys' pathway, which is reinforced by institutional layers like the U19 Bundesliga, and extensive monitoring by senior squads. In the women's game, players often go from academy-level training to full senior environments with little buffer or phased integration.

"We don't have an U20 or second team where we can develop players who aren't quite ready yet." - Germany Female.

"There are hardly any U20 or real second teams - many players simply stop at 18" - Germany Female.

In the English system, while top men's clubs invest in U21 teams and multi-year transition planning, women's academies often face unclear role definitions, limited squad sizes, and an absence of long-term planning frameworks.

"The gap from our U16s to the first team is massive. You might train once or twice with the seniors, but there's no consistent stepping-stone." - England Female.

Moreover, without reserve leagues or comprehensive loan systems, many female players experience stagnation post-U17, particularly if they are not immediately ready for the intensity of senior football.



“Some of our best girls just stop playing after academy level. They’re not quite ready for the first team and there’s nowhere else to go.” - England Female.

The result is a development environment where even highly talented players may fall through the cracks—not due to lack of skill, but due to gaps in infrastructure and strategic planning. Without bridging mechanisms, such as U21 competitions, second teams, or protected integration phases, youth-to-senior transition in the women’s game remains unpredictable and underdeveloped.

In sum, the absence of well-defined transition pathways in female academies represents the third difference and major weakness in the women’s development systems of both Germany and England. To improve retention and maximise talent potential, transition phases must be formalised, resourced, and strategically embedded into the wider performance ecosystem.

#### *Narrower Recruitment scope and Talent Identification*

One of the consistent themes emerging from interviews across female academies in both England and Germany is the narrower recruitment reach and underdeveloped talent identification systems when compared to the male side. While male academies benefit from nationwide scouting networks, international reach, and structured partnerships with grassroots systems, girls’ academies often operate with limited regional visibility, smaller recruitment teams, and minimal strategic support.

*“We simply don’t have the scouts we have for men. If someone doesn’t live directly in the area, they often fall through the cracks.”* - Germany Female.

In many women’s academies, talent identification remains informal or opportunistic, dependent on local tournaments, word of mouth, or schools, rather than being embedded in a national or regional strategy. This limits both diversity and reach, excluding late developers, rural players, or those without access to recognised grassroots clubs.

*“The guys have fixed structures, trials, programs. With us, a lot of it is random. Too often it depends on whether someone knows someone.”* - Germany Female.

In England, the gap is equally visible. While boys' academies operate extensive scouting departments and outreach initiatives, even top-tier women's clubs report limited scouting resources and constrained geographical coverage.

*"We have one scout covering the whole region. The boys have teams—plural. That limits what we can find."* - England Women.

Furthermore, linked to the lack of competition depth and fewer grassroots opportunities for girls in certain areas means that potential talent often goes undiscovered or undeveloped before adolescence. This has implications not only for elite development, but also for diversity and inclusion, as girls from underserved communities are less likely to be identified and nurtured.

*"There's loads of talent out there that we'll never see—especially in schools and communities where girls' football isn't strong yet."* - England Women.

In contrast to male systems, where extensive databases, national frameworks, and analytics inform recruitment, female academies often lack systemic tools and institutional support to cast a wide net. This results in a narrower, less representative talent pipeline and places additional pressure on already overstretched coaches to act as scouts.

In summary, both German and English female academies face a significant disadvantage in recruitment and talent identification due to underinvestment, weak structural integration, and limited scouting capacity. Closing this gap requires not only financial investment but system-wide changes in policy, outreach, and visibility to ensure a broader, more equitable approach to discovering and developing talent in the women's game.

*"Female pathways often rely on regional scouting, school sport, or chance, contrasting the global talent pipelines in the male game."* - Germany Female.

As women's football professionalises further, alignment in philosophy provides a strong foundation for equitable structures. However, the challenges now are to ensure that the equal values are backed by equal systems and investments. That is NGBs are

faced with the task to increase the implementation capacity of women's academies by increasing resources, competitive intensity, and establishing more clearer structures.

The next section of the report introduces the limitations of the research before demonstrating the impact of the work through tailored recommendations for NGBs and Clubs.

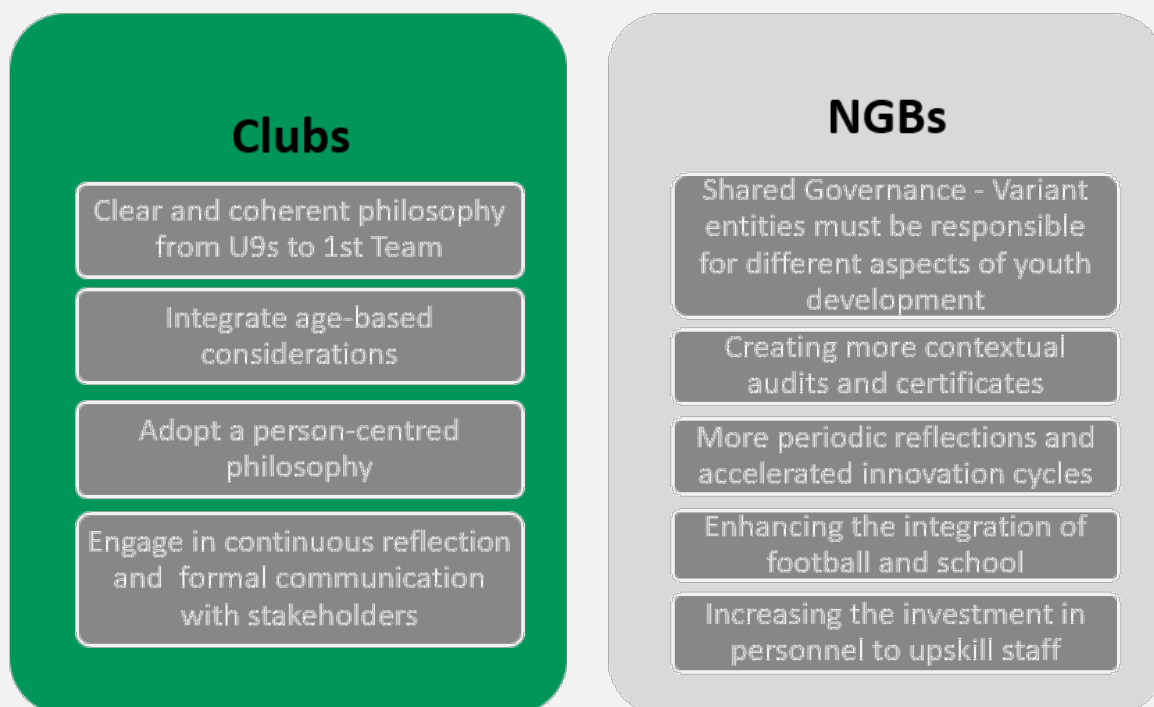
## 6. Limitations

Despite its strengths and contribution to youth development scholarship and football development practice, there are some limitations and directions for future research that should be acknowledged. First, future research should aim to get a more in-depth understanding of female academies in England as generalisations of findings from this report should only be made with caution given the study's somewhat limited sample size ( $n = 2$ ). Second, this research focused on previously often omitted viewpoint of senior academic staff, however, future research might want to include the perspective of football associations to get a more holistic overview especially regarding the implementation challenges of national youth development initiatives on a macro-level. Finally, youth development in football and beyond is a constantly developing field and as such the validity of findings of this research should be periodically reviewed to ensure their continuing applicability.

## 7. Impact

The findings of this study provided valuable insights into the youth football development philosophies and objectives of Germany and England (RQ1), their respective strength and weaknesses (RQ2), gender differences (RQ3), and influence factors (RQ5). Within this section key points from the previously introduced research questions are brought together to outline practical recommendations for clubs (see section 7.2), and federations (see section 7.3), to maximise the impact of the project. Figure 11 provides a visualised summary of key recommendations which are elaborated upon in the following sections.

**Figure 11**  
*Summary of Recommendations*



### 7.1 Every Environment is Unique

Before the recommendations are provided and future directions discussed, one disclaimer must be emphasised, the context specificity of each environment. Academy directors often prefaced their statements with describing their specific context, and explaining differences between clubs, regions, and countries, to state that what works for them, may not work elsewhere.

*"I think every environment is unique and you have to understand the context in a lot of detail to have a true opinion."* - English Male.

This means that every club needs to continuously evaluate their environments or rather development contexts and ask the question "what works, for whom, under what circumstances", akin to what O'Sullivan et al. (2025) postulate in their recent publication.

*"The wonderful challenge here is for what's right in a club in London, Chelsea or Arsenal, may not be right in Manchester United or Manchester City. Can't just take a model and then drop it into somewhere else."* - England Male.

One academy director therefore suggested that while their practices are grounded in validated research, it must always include experiences and empirical evidence from the context they are working in.

*"I would say [practices need to be] evidence-informed. I would not say just evidence-based, because when you have this depth of research, the empirical side is very important as well. But I think the approach that we try to implement here is to have, let's say, an evidence-informed, that the decisions that we make are based on science. But at the same time, we talk a lot nowadays about complexity. That we understand the different interactions between different fields." - German Female.*

Therefore, understanding your context and continuously evaluating what works in the environment was seen as important. Embracing the uniqueness of each context (i.e., history of city or surrounding area, people, etc.) has two described benefits. First, it offers players different options to choose from and find a club that fits best to them.

*"I want to be in that environment because I really want to work with [coach name], or I want the history of the Neuer's, and the Draxler's, and all the rest who have come through there. Or I go to Dortmund and get something completely different - More money, bit more structure. Harder to get into the first team because they're now buying lots of young talents all over the place. But you have a choice. It's about with the school, as a parent, you can say, I want to go to that school or that school, depending on what they prioritise and what they like." - English Male.*

Secondly, having heterogenic development philosophies across clubs contributes to the beauty of football, as they enable the development of unique player types, playing styles and overall identities.

*"Ultimately, that is the beauty we all love in football, many different styles and philosophies trying to beat the other styles. It'd be boring if everyone was the same. I think it's the same in playing styles. If we all play like Guardiola, I'd turn off football and wouldn't watch it. Not because I don't admire it, but I just don't want to see that. I want to see City play that type of football. And then I want to see Liverpool play a different type of football. And then I want to go and play Inter Milan and see them play a different type of football." - English Male.*

In conclusion, all principles below should be viewed through the lens of each context and practitioners must carefully evaluate what can be transferred and how. Socio-cultural factors should be embraced as they will lead to positive outcomes for players, clubs, and ultimately football. In line with recent research, player development frameworks (i.e., systems and philosophies) cannot be copied and pasted (O'Sullivan et al., 2024). When transferring principles from this research, practitioners and coaches must be cognizant of their context and identify what works in their specific context.

## 7.2 Recommendations for Clubs

The key recommendations for clubs that emerged from this research are

- Creating a clear and overarching philosophy from the under 9s to the first team (*see section 7.2.1*)
- Integrating age-based considerations in the development philosophy (*see section 7.2.2*)
- Adopting a person-centred approach (*see section 7.2.3*)
- Engaging in continuous reflection and formal communication with stakeholders (*see section 7.2.4*).

The four recommendations can be seen as enablers for success, as they increase the chances of achieving the objectives of developing players for the first team and professional football as well as winning trophies.

### 7.2.1 Clear and Coherent Philosophy from the under 9s to the First Team

Participants from both countries and genders outlined the importance of having a clear idea of what football in their club needs to look like, both in terms of playing style and players. The results suggest that every academy, or rather club should have an overarching philosophy from the youngest age group to the first team. Yet, age specific considerations regarding the psychological, social, technical, tactical, and physical development (i.e., content and amount of each area across age groups) must be made in the design of the academy program. Two enablers (i.e., integration with the first team; club/ownership support) were identified and are assumed to help successfully operationalize an overarching philosophy.

### 7.2.2 Integrate Age-Based Considerations

Even though English academies had more of an overarching philosophy across the club than German clubs, all academy directors acknowledged the importance of having a shared philosophy across their academy, through which players are developed. An overarching philosophy however does not mean that youth development should not be adjusted to suit the different age groups/ teams within the club.

This research in line with Layton et al. (2023) also investigated the (potentially) changing importance of key factors of youth development, technical, tactical, physical, and psychological/social. While there were some differences in terms of what academy directors believed should be taught at different age groups across academies, there was a shared understanding that the beginning of the academy journey should be primarily about fun.

*"Youth football is about learning about to love the game, a player should be leaving the club thinking this was a great time in my life, weather they make it to the next stage or not" - English Female.*

Academy directors were consistent in that they believed youth fall in love with football because of the competitive aspect inherent in the game, and that we must foster this love by allocating plenty time for play instead of rigid structured and deliberate practice.

*"I don't want the 9-14s to feel like the boys are having to have a career before a career, if that makes sense. You want to keep the spirit of the game alive. You want the fire to burn. You want them to remain in love with it. You want the children to be relatively free. You want the level of it being unstructured. They've got to explore the game." - English Male.*

In addition to ensuring youth players enjoy their time at the academy, the results indicate that the ages up until 12-14 (exact age varied across interviews) should be for developing a technical foundation.

*"In the foundation phase. We prioritise the hard drive. We prioritise technical understanding. And it's still got to be fun. I still want it to be the best Sunday League club you could possibly sign for. Little or no instruction tactically. Just*



*stay on the ball a bit longer. Fine. It's frustrating, but you benefit from it."* - English Male.

Once players have developed a technical foundation, they can be introduced to tactical aspects of the game relating to team and individual tactics. Accounts diverged when the focus should shift towards team tactics (i.e., 11v11) with some suggesting as early as 12 and others not until 15. What most academy directors agreed on was the importance of developing position specific skills (technical and tactical).

*"I think when they get to 12, 13, 14, 15, start looking at which position they might have. Start trying to help with an identity. I don't need them to have a number tattooed on their back, but I like them to have an idea of what their identity could be."* - English Male.

For the professional development phase (starting at age 16), the key focus was on physical development as well as psychological development and finding the best opportunity of development for each player. The psychological aspect was outlined as important during that time.

*"In the PDP phase, it's about the mentality. It's about creating a mindset that's going to be capable of playing professional football and withstanding the pressures of it. So, I think in the final phase, it's about psychological stamina, knowing that somewhere between 17 and 23, you might be lucky enough to get your chance."* - English Male.

However, other academy directors stated that they have begun to implement psycho-social foci at earlier times than the PDP to ensure players have a psycho-social foundation when they arrive in the PDP.

*"We're starting, for example with sports psychology. That's a new topic for us, we had to completely rethink it: How do we build that up from the bottom? What are the steps? And that should all build on each other in the end, so that at the end of the day, there's clearly an overall philosophy above it, but we have to adapt it for the different age groups."* - German Female.

Finally, the transition phase where players transition from youth to senior received a big consideration in English elite academies, as this was seen as a crucial time to get right, as it is still part of the development process.

*"The transition phase, that's often where player development stops, because clubs lack a clear idea, lack the courage, and also lack trust in their own homegrown players. Unfortunately, as a result, playing time is often no longer allocated accordingly, and the opportunity is missed to continue shaping the player at the highest level through loan deals. This is approached much more aggressively here in England - the sheer number of players loaned out here and the strategy behind it. And this awareness of where players are loaned to, under which coach, in which league, viewing it specifically as a development option."*

- English Male.

This re-emphasises the importance of having a good integration between the youth and senior teams within a club, which has been outlined in previous research (Larsen et al., 2020) and previous sections of this report.

To summarise, in addition to having an overarching club philosophy, different aspects of youth development should be emphasised depending on the status in the youth development journey. The third recommendation for club's links to the importance of individualized development, based on the person behind each player, which will be explored in the next section.

### 7.2.3 Adopt a Person-Centred Philosophy

Results indicate that youth development philosophies should not only be age appropriate but also must be centred around the personal growth and development level of players. In RQ1, it was highlighted that focusing on the personal growth of individual players, will enhance the chances of success for players and clubs.

*"What's really important to me is to accompany the girls in their personality as well. So, it's really important to me that you convey to the players that football isn't just about the technical skills you have on the pitch, but also about what happens in your mindset. And only when all the aspects come together, only then can you make the leap."* - German Female.

In order to accommodate to the personality of each player and adapt to their needs, there must be a continuous assessment of what a player needs at what time.

*"Player development is understanding who the right person to connect to the player, it's the right time to administer technical, tactical, physical needs, mental, social, all of those pieces. Is it pitched at the right level?" - English Male.*

Academy directors acknowledge that when working with players, the primary aim should not be to develop football players but rather connect with the person behind the player.

*"The person comes first. That's also the question I always need to have answered. When I talk about new players or new staff, the first thing I want to ask about is the person behind the player or employee. And that is the foundation at [Club Name]." - English Male.*

#### 7.2.4 Continuous reflection and communication between stakeholders

In order to provide staff with correct information regarding the development needs of players, there must be continuous reflections and formal communication between stakeholders. In order to create the best development environment for players, periodic examinations of the development program as well as continuous interdisciplinary communication between different stakeholders around player's individual development needs were outlined as crucial.

*"The most important thing in player development in a professional environment is the formal communication channels." - England Male.*

Particularly English academy directors described that they have implemented mechanisms that put individualized player development in the center. It was highlighted as important to periodically evaluate (i.e., end of every season) the development environment academies create for players as well as the individual development processes of players to ensure effective development.

*"Always know who is in front of you. We've dealt a lot with different generations ourselves. How do players learn? Which sensory channels? Which knowledge? Which methods? Which technologies? Use of artificial intelligence? How? When? Where? Why? All with the aim to develop the player optimally." - English Male.*

In addition to annually evaluating the wider development environment, it was highlighted as crucial to continuously evaluate the development processes of all players. Periodic meetings that discuss players holistically through an interdisciplinary group of stakeholders around the player were one mechanism in how academies institutionalize individualized development.

*"So, it's an interdisciplinary, not multidisciplinary, because I see it as an equal model. If you look at the four corners, technical/tactical, physical, social, psychological. There's going to be times of that player's journey where their needs are different, but also what they're going through is very different. - English Male.*

### 7.3 Recommendations for National Governing Bodies

The key recommendations for National Governing Bodies (NGBs) based on insights obtained as part of this research are:

- Shared Governance - Variant entities must be responsible for different aspects of youth development (see section 7.3.1)
- Creating more contextual audits and certificates (see section 7.3.2)
- More periodic reflections and accelerated innovation cycles are required (see section 7.3.3)
- Better aligning the macro-environment by enhancing the integration of football and school (see section 7.3.4)
- Increasing the investment in personnel to upskill staff (see section 7.3.5).

The five recommendations should be seen to complement the previously discussed recommendations for clubs and are of value not only for the two participating NGBs but also for other UEFA member federations.

#### *7.3.1 Shared Governance – Variant Entities must be Responsible for Different Aspects of Youth Development*

One key question that emerged throughout this research was 'who should govern which aspects of youth development?' As explained throughout this research player development is influenced by various micro-, macro-, sporting-, and non-sporting factors (see Figure 8, Henriksen et al., 2010). Results of this study suggest that

variant entities should govern different aspects of youth football, all aligned to the same objective of developing more (focused on grassroots) and better (elite talent development) football players.

In order to holistically improve youth football development from a systemic level, it requires key stakeholders to effectively work together, the clubs, the domestic professional league, the football federation, and wider policy makers. A great example where different stakeholders have come together to enhance the development of elite youth football players was the implementation of the *EPPP*.

But to enhance elite youth football development long-term, the focus should not only be on elite development but also include development at the basis. The new part of *Projekt Zukunft* deliberately targets all levels of the football pyramid. However, it is important to be patient as grassroots initiatives do not immediately help the elite to get better in the short-term but rather raise the level of players in the future.

### 7.3.2 Creating more contextual audits and certificates

Audits and certifications were widely regarded as crucial to ensure a minimum standard of provision. However, results indicated areas of improvement to the current audit and certification process. Several years after the implementation of the *EPPP*, both the English FA and the EPL have then come together to create the *Professional Game Academy Audit Company (PGAAC)*, to provide independent quality assurance to club academies (Premier League, 2020). Despite the positive benefits of ensuring a minimum standard of provision, there is one main flaw with the *PGAAC* audits

*"the support which they offer and how they govern in line with the audit is not contextual enough."* - English Male.

Even though the German certification system is different, a similar sentiment emerged.

*"There's so many regions in Germany. There's different cultures, and the clubs have different identities. And I don't think that the DFB should dictate what is their way that people should play football."* - German Female.

Participants agreed that adapting processes to the unique features of their environment will enhance the chances of success.

*"I believe that we would be better off trying to consistently implement stringent philosophies within the individual clubs that are a good fit for that club." - German Male.*

In conclusion, academy directors agree that there should be periodic checks for the minimum provision across academies, but it must be more contextualized and acknowledge that different processes can lead to success in the respective environment.

This is in line with the key notion of "everything works somewhere, but nothing works everywhere" (O'Sullivan et al., 2025). Audits that aim to create one solution for all academies, fail to maximize the potential that each environment holds through their unique identity.

### *7.3.3 More Periodic Reflections and Accelerated Innovation Cycles are Required*

In addition to the annual / biennial audits, academy directors highlighted the importance of periodic re-examinations to evaluate the overall development structures in a country. English academy directors mentioned that they believe that now would be a perfect time to reflect on all changes the *EPPP* has brought and what needs to be adjusted going forward.

*"What I believe is we're 15 years into EPPP, the chart for quality in England was in 1998. We've got some amazing people in this country who've lived through both iterations. I don't put myself in that. I'd be more than happy to get involved in a group of people far better than I am more experienced. But it feels like a lovely moment to say, what are the bits that actually we've lost now and we would benefit from bringing back." - English Male.*

Particularly the over professionalization of young players, a previously discussed weakness of the English system, was highlighted as an area that should be seriously re-evaluated.

*"No one can tell me we'd want to monetize kids in the way that we have. No one would tell me that we want to over professionalize them." - English Male.*

Therefore, it is recommended that periodic evaluations of practices should be implemented to ensure it still enables the development of elite youth footballers. Furthermore, as a second step, once areas of improvement are detected, they must be acted upon - quickly. It was underscored that in order to speed up innovation cycles, the German system must be revamped to ensure the elite development environments can innovate faster, without having to pass new ideas through regional associations, amateur clubs, and other entities.

In conclusion, periodic re-examinations of current practices are important to understand what has gotten lost and what could be improved going forward. Then, innovation must happen quickly in order to keep up with evolving practices.

*"Logically, if you implement something quickly, there will be a few problems. Well, of course. But [...] then identify where we haven't considered something properly. And then immediately adjust, adjust, adjust."* - German Male.

#### *7.3.4 Better Aligning the Macro-Environment by Enhancing the Integration of Football and School*

The integration of school and football was outlined as crucial as it either supports or hinders the development of players in academies. Albeit challenging a more effective integration of school and elite sport is of high importance (Larsen et al., 2020). Achieving a good integration between school, sport, and private life where youth can flourish academically, athletically, but most importantly personally has long been known and was re-emphasized in this research. Therefore, investing in the wider youth environments, such as schools, and improving the integration of football and school, will likely yield long-term an even greater return. However, NGBs and Clubs should reflect in the opportunities and threats of providing education within the academy system on the one hand, or by collaborating with local public schools on the other.

#### *7.3.5 Increasing the Investment in Personnel to Upskill Staff*

Academy directors in both countries emphasized that each philosophy is brought to life by the people working within the academy. Therefore, having skilled and experienced staff is crucial to operate a successful academy and develop elite youth footballers.



German academy directors reported that the lack of investments and incentives from the DFB to hire more senior staff is a barrier compared to England.

*"For example, in England, I find it good that a lot is controlled by the premier league. [...] let's say we need a social worker to fulfil the certification [from the DFB], you have to hire them. What do you do intuitively? You get a cheap student. They can't help it, they have no experience with the topics. And in England, for that position... the premier league provides the money, and then you also know that you're getting expertise." - German Male.*

Therefore, financial incentives from NGBs were seen to significantly enhance the quality and qualification of employees, in turn enhancing the delivery of the youth development program in the academies.

In addition to financially investing in recruitment of more senior staff, NGBs must also ensure staff members continuously engage in training and development. Only upskilled staff members will be aware of recent developments and thus will be able to most effectively deliver the respective programs. It was outlined that albeit the financial incentives from the English FA have increased the number of senior staff members in the English academy system, this does not always directly link to the quality of these employees and their openness for continued learning and education.

*"The challenge we have, a little bit like in the academy system now, is you need very talented people to deliver those programmes. When you put 4,000 staff into the academy system in England, by the nature of saying there's 4,000 people, they can't all be super talented. It's impossible. Then if you make more and more development programmes, you have to be careful that you have the right people delivering them." - English Male.*

Therefore, a recommendation is to foster the connection between practice (i.e., football academies) and education institutions (e.g., universities, schools). Through university courses and alternative qualifications (i.e., coaching licences, leadership certificates), contemporary topics and issues from elite youth development can be shared with a wider population to educate them about best practices. This knowledge can then be integrated in the academy system at a local, regional, or even national level, depending on the position of the employee.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol - England Women

- I. Participant Information & Informed Consent
  - a. Adult Participant Information
  - b. Informed Consent
- II. Warming-Up (emphasize that this should be brief)
  - a. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your current role.
    - i. Have you played football yourself?
  - b. Since when have you been at the club/ your current position?
  - c. (Where have you been before/ what roles did you hold previously?)
- III. Personal (Development) Philosophies in Football
  - a. What does elite youth football mean to you? How would you describe it?
    - i. What should elite youth football be about in your opinion?
    - ii. *Is this the same for girls as well as boys' football?*
  - b. What would you regard as key influences that have shaped your view on and approach to youth football?
  - c. In your opinion, what role should PLAYER DEVELOPMENT play in the philosophy of football academies?
    - i. *Next to winning games/championships*
  - d. In your opinion, should there be a unique or similar philosophies/strategies applied to the development of male as well as female football players?
    - i. What are similarities/key differences between male and female development philosophies and practices in your opinion?
- IV. Club Development Philosophies
  - a. How would you describe your academy philosophy to a new staff member joining your club?
    - i. *Is there a different philosophy for different age groups / phases or is there one overarching philosophy?*
    - ii. *When do you start having teams and what teams do you currently have? What is the justification for doing it that way?*
  - b. How do you define success in your Girl's Academy?
    - i. In other words, what are the main goals of your Girl's Academy?
      1. *Probe: Do those goals change across age groups? If so, how.*
    - ii. How do you go about achieving those various goals?
    - iii. How do you deal with potential tensions resulting from competing goals and expectations?
      1. *Probe: Individual vs. Club.*
  - c. How would you rank the different goals/objectives of your academy from the highest/lowest priority?
    - i. *Prompt: competition vs development (technical, tactical, physical, psychological, and/or social development?)*
    - ii. Does this hierarchy change across the age group, if so, how and when?
    - iii. Within development how would you rank technical, tactical, physical, psychological, and/or social development in terms of their importance?

1. Again, do you feel this hierarchy changes depending on the age of players, if so, how and when?
  - d. What would you say are the biggest strengths and weaknesses of your Girl's Academy philosophy?
  - e. What are the key challenges and barriers your club faces regarding the development of football players?
  - f. In terms of your club, what would you say were the key influence factors that impacted the implementation of the current youth development philosophy?
- V. Comparing Youth Development Philosophies
- a. To what extent would you say the youth development philosophy adopted by your academy are comparable to those of other girl's academies/ professional game academies in Germany/England?
    - i. What are key differences/similarities?
      1. Can you give a specific example from one of your previous clubs to demonstrate this point?
    - ii. Are there any other clubs that have a different philosophy? What makes them unique?
- VI. National/Regional Programs and Influences
- a. What support/incentives do you currently receive for your professional girl's academy and from whom?
    - i. Are you happy with the support you receive? How/Could this be enhanced?
  - b. What is your understanding of *the FA's Inspiring Positive Change Strategy 2023*?
  - c. What/has there been on impact of the *FA's Inspiring Positive Change Strategy* on your philosophies and practices on the girls/women's side?
    - i. *Prompt: Strengths/Challenges*
  - d. On the other hand, which regulations/sanctions from national federations impact the development of youth players in your academy?
  - e. In your opinion, how could the impacts of national strategies such as *Inspiring Positive Change* on player development be maximized?
    - i. What support would you like to receive to enhance the success of your youth development programs?
- VII. Cooling Down
- a. (What are key personal learnings that in your opinion contribute to operating a successful youth academy?)
  - b. Finally, what do you think the future holds in terms of the successful youth development of female football players in Europe? What key changes/challenges do you anticipate/foresee?
  - c. Is there anything else you'd like to add on this topic?
  - d. Do you have any questions?